GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS,
2026, VOL. 1, NO. 1

Journal Description

Global Geopolitics (ISSN 2977-8271, e-ISSN 2977-828X) is a London-based quarterly journal dedicated to exploring the evolving dynamics of geopolitics in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. With its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, *Global Geopolitics* publishes articles in English while welcoming submissions in Spanish, French, Chinese and Turkish to ensure global participation in critical discussions.

As an open-access and peer-reviewed journal available in both print and online formats, *Global Geopolitics* is dedicated to disseminating high-quality research widely, reflecting its mission to redefine the study of geopolitics through a globally inclusive lens. By bridging traditional and non-traditional approaches beyond disciplinary boundaries, the journal highlights global connectivity and cooperation alongside conflicts and rivalries, encouraging innovative scholarship that deepens our understanding of international relations, power dynamics, and pressing global challenges. *Global Geopolitics* is owned and operated by Global Geopolitics Ltd.

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Keywords

geoculture; geoeconomics; geopolitics; international cooperation; international relations; international security

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Aims and Scope

In recent times, geopolitics has gained renewed significance, driven by the intensification of geostrategic rivalries and a surge in conflicts arising from non-traditional security concerns. This journal aims to address these contemporary challenges by offering a platform for a more globally-oriented perspective.

Global Geopolitics is not just about rehashing established geopolitical narratives; rather, it seeks to supplement them with fresh viewpoints and interdisciplinary approaches. We invite a diverse array of contributions from scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and activists. These contributions are pivotal in transcending traditional boundaries, offering insights that reflect the interconnected nature of global challenges and the necessity for collaborative solutions.

"Global Geopolitics" as a journal title encapsulates our dedication to redefining the study of geopolitics in a way that is inclusive, forward-looking, and reflective of the complex tapestry of global interactions in the modern world. It signals our aim to be at the forefront of academic discourse, where diverse global voices converge to shape a more nuanced understanding of international relations and global affairs. Most importantly, the inclusion of "Global" before "Geopolitics" intentionally shifts the focus from the traditional confines of geopolitical analysis, which often centers on geostrategic rivalries, conflicts, and wars. Instead, it emphasizes a broader, more interconnected perspective. Furthermore, the term "Global" symbolizes our commitment to transcending regional and national boundaries in our approach. It reflects our ambition to incorporate and mobilize the rich intellectual legacies and accumulated knowledge from various countries across all seven continents. This global approach is vital in fostering a diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive understanding of geopolitical dynamics, offering insights that are informed by a multitude of perspectives and experiences.

While acknowledging the enduring significance of traditional geopolitical challenges, such as territorial disputes, power dynamics, and diplomatic relations, *Global Geopolitics* endeavors to broaden the scope of analysis by integrating non-traditional

issues and multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approaches invested in studying competition, rivalry, and cooperation among states and non-state actors by reference to their geographical features. Therefore, we also address a range of pressing global issues such as transnational crime, the repercussions of the Great Recession, the escalating challenges of climate change, and the global migrant crisis.

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Editorial

MAPPING THE FRONTIERS OF A TRANSFORMING WORLD ORDER

Efe Can Gürcan

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.006

The launch of *Global Geopolitics* comes at a moment when the international system is undergoing profound and irreversible transformation. The certainties that once underpinned a unipolar or even loosely bipolar order have eroded, giving way to a landscape defined by fragmentation, competing projects of world-making, and the assertive return of geopolitics across every domain, from energy and migration to language, identity, and normative authority. As power diffuses, so too does the terrain of global analysis. Understanding the emerging world demands not only new empirical insights but also new conceptual tools, methodological imagination, and a willingness to engage critically with the structures that shape global political life.

This inaugural issue reflects that ambition. The five articles gathered here examine the shifting parameters of global order through diverse but convergent analytical lenses. What unites them is that they show how global power is being reconfigured in an increasingly contested world order across refugee protection, strategic partnerships, energy infrastructures, language regimes, and regional actorness. Each contribution, in its own way, reveals how

states and institutions renegotiate hierarchy, autonomy, and legitimacy under these changing conditions.

Marika Jeziorek's article, "The Theatre of Protection: Performing Refugee Protection in a World of Stratified Compassion," conceptualizes refugee protection as a geopolitical performance. By critically analyzing Canada's CUAET and the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, she shows how selective humanitarianism sustains racialized and gendered hierarchies even as states project moral leadership.

In "Strategic Appeal of Multipolarity: The Intersection of Realpolitik and Normative Tensions in Sino-French Relations," Ahmet Gedik traces how France's Gaullist legacy of strategic autonomy shapes its ambiguous stance toward China's rise. The article reveals both the strategic opportunities and the credibility risks of France's current balancing act within an emerging multipolar order.

Turning to debates over global polarity and the future architecture of international order, Wang Zhen and Tian Hong'yu examine how Chinese scholarly and policy discourse engages the renewed bipolarity thesis, while articulating a distinctive vision of an "equal and orderly" multipolar world. Using conceptual analysis, they clarify the relationship between polarity and world order, evaluate claims about a nascent Sino–U.S. bipolar structure beyond purely economic indicators, and highlight the limits of static hard-power comparisons by emphasizing institutional influence, alliances, and ideational power. The article situates China's evolving multipolar outlook within deeper historical, philosophical, and diplomatic traditions.

Shifting the global focus to the Middle East, Vrushal T. Ghoble's "Strategic Repositioning of the Middle East: Energy Infrastructures, Security Imperatives, and Multipolar Geopolitics" examines how changing global energy patterns, new corridors, and securitized maritime routes are recalibrating the region's geopolitical role, even as they heighten exposure to rivalry and conflict.

Finally, in "The European Union as a Geopolitical Actor: Towards a Pragmatic-Normative Agenda," Krzysztof Sliwinski

analyzes the EU's evolving identity as a hybrid civilian–military actor. Drawing on classical and neoclassical geopolitics, he proposes a "pragmatic-normative" approach to reconcile the Union's value-based aspirations with the constraints of a turbulent strategic environment.

Together, these contributions underscore the urgency of rethinking geopolitics for a world in flux. They remind us that power today is exercised not only through territorial competition or military capability, but also through humanitarian regimes, energy infrastructures, and competing claims to normative legitimacy. As *Global Geopolitics* embarks on its mission, we hope to cultivate a space where such multidimensional analyses can flourish—where established paradigms are challenged, emerging voices are amplified, and the complexity of global transformation is met with intellectual rigor and critical openness. We invite scholars, practitioners, and readers to join us in this endeavor as we continue to map, question, and interpret the shifting frontiers of world politics.

The Theatre of Protection

PERFORMING REFUGEE PROTECTION IN A WORLD OF STRATIFIED COMPASSION

Marika Jeziorek

Received: 29 July 2025 | **Revised:** 26 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 26 November 2025

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.001

Abstract

How do temporary refugee protection frameworks reflect and reproduce broader global hierarchies of race, gender, and geopolitical belonging? What alternative frameworks could be envisioned for refugee protection that resist performativity and prioritize justice, accountability, and refugee agency? This article conceptualizes contemporary refugee protection as a geopolitical performance, revealing that mechanisms like Canada's CUAET and the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) operate less as rights-based guarantees than as dramaturgical acts of statecraft. Drawing on a feminist international relations and intersectional theoretical framework, the article develops a four-part dramaturgical lens —script, staging, audience, and temporality—to analyze how refugee responses are choreographed to reaffirm state virtue while maintaining racialized, gendered, and imperial hierarchies. It situates the performative logics of CUAET and the TPD within the historical legacy of the post-WWII refugee regime, showing how moral leadership is performed through selective humanitarianism. Through close textual and policy analysis of

Canadian and EU protection measures, the article reveals how states simultaneously enact compassion and exclusion, offering refuge to some while rendering others invisible. The article concludes by proposing an intersectional feminist framework for non-performative refugee protection rooted in justice, accountability, and refugee agency.

Keywords
temporary protection; performative humanitarianism; feminist international relations; refugee governance; intersectionality

Introduction

As the international community reflects on the legacy of the Second World War and confronts fears of a looming World War III, this article examines how the institutional frameworks born in the ashes of WWII have evolved into a geopolitically selective regime of temporary protection, shaped by patriarchal, racialized, and performative humanitarian logics. The modern refugee protection regime emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, institutionalized through the 1951 Refugee Convention and the creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UN, 1951, 1967; Barnett, 2011). Framed as a moral response to the horrors of the Holocaust and mass displacement in Europe, this postwar architecture enshrined international responsibility to protect the forcibly displaced.

Yet more than seventy years later, with global displacement reaching a record 100 million people (UNHCR, 2023), the promise of refugee protection increasingly operates not as a mechanism of justice, but as a theatre of protection. This theatre entails a dual performance: one in which states publicly enact moral authority through gestures of humanitarian care, while displaced people are expected to perform vulnerability, gratitude, and compliance to access aid (Benslama-Dabdoub, 2024). Like any theatre, it involves scripts (of rescue and victimhood), staging (through policies and public spectacle), an audience (both domestic constituencies and international observers), and temporality (where protection is often

limited to a moment of geopolitical expediency). This dramaturgy of care serves not only to reassure global publics of benevolence but also to obscure the conditional, racialized, and patriarchal structures underpinning humanitarian governance.

Building on performance theory and feminist IR, this article conceptualizes the refugee regime as a dramaturgical apparatus composed of four key elements: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Scripts refer to the normative narratives that structure who appears as the righteous protector and who as the grateful victim, often echoing colonial, racial, and patriarchal tropes. Staging entails the institutional, legal, and visual arrangements, such as visa policies, media spectacles, and public rituals, through which protection is made visible and legible. Audiences include both domestic publics (who must be reassured of state virtue) and international observers (whose recognition enhances geopolitical legitimacy). Temporality highlights the time-bounded nature of protection, which is frequently framed as exceptional, provisional, and subject to political withdrawal. Together, these elements help expose how refugee protection functions less as a system of rights than as a geopolitical performance calibrated for moral resonance, not structural change.

This study reveals that contemporary refugee protection regimes function as a geopolitical theatre in which states perform humanitarian benevolence to assert moral authority, while displaced people, especially those who are racialized, feminized, and geopolitically peripheral, are compelled to perform vulnerability and gratitude to access aid. Rooted in the post-WWII humanitarian order, these performances uphold global inequalities under the guise of care. By interrogating this dual performance, the article shows how mechanisms like the European Union's (EU) Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and Canada's Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program legitimate exclusion while staging select moments of compassion. In response, it calls for an intersectional feminist reimagining of protection as a rights-based practice rather than a conditional, performative act.

Grounded in feminist international relations (IR) theory, and

particularly Iris Marion Young's (2003) concept of the logic of masculinist protection, this article draws from intersectional approaches to reveal how gender, race, and geopolitical status co-constitute the norms and practices of global refugee policy. Governments position themselves as moral protectors in ways that echo patriarchal and colonial power dynamics, while recipients of protection, especially those marked by racialized and gendered difference, are expected to display deference and compliant gratitude. In this sense, refugee protection is not simply about shelter or safety; it is a stage-managed process through which global inequality is both obscured and reproduced.

The article develops this concept of protection-as-theatre through four sections. It begins with a theoretical framework grounded in feminist IR, intersectionality, critical humanitarianism, and performance studies to conceptualize the gendered and racialized dimensions of refugee protection. It then turns to two contemporary case studies—Canada's CUAET and the European Union's invocation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)—to examine how states perform humanitarian benevolence through scripted, highly visible, and selectively racialized responses. These performances are analyzed using four dramaturgical tools: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Building on these cases, the article reflects on the post–World War II origins of the refugee regime, arguing that contemporary protection mechanisms inherit selective moral logics rooted in Eurocentric and patriarchal foundations. In the final section, the article outlines what a non-performative, feminist, and intersectional approach to refugee protection might require, one that centers refugee agency and rights over state spectacle.

Intersectional Feminist Perspectives on the Patriarchal Logic of Protection

The concept of protection has long occupied a central, if underexamined, place in international relations. Traditionally framed as a sovereign duty or humanitarian imperative, protection is often imag-

ined as apolitical: an altruistic response to vulnerability. Feminist scholars have challenged this assumption, arguing that protection is deeply entwined with racialized, gendered, and geopolitical hierarchies (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This article adopts an intersectional feminist lens, drawing on feminist IR, Black feminist thought, and postcolonial critique, to analyze how refugee protection regimes function not merely as shelters from violence, but as instruments of global stratification.

Intersectionality, as theorized by Crenshaw (2006), reveals how systems of power such as racism, patriarchy, and legal precarity intersect to produce differentiated experiences of marginalization. Structural intersectionality captures how multiple axes of subordination (e.g., race, gender, immigration status) compound to produce systemic disadvantage. Political intersectionality exposes how dominant policy discourses often erase those situated at the intersections. Both forms are salient in refugee governance: displaced women of color often face heightened barriers to protection, while dominant humanitarian scripts render them legible only through performances of suffering and gratitude.

A foundational account of this asymmetry comes from Iris Marion Young's (2003) concept of masculinist protection. Young argues that the protector–protected relationship is not one of mutual obligation, but of dominance and dependence. The protector—cast as rational, virtuous, and sovereign—is masculinized, while the protected is feminized, passive, and dependent. Transposed to global refugee governance, states perform as benevolent saviors, while displaced people, especially women from the Global South, must perform compliant vulnerability to receive aid. This performance reproduces colonial scripts of rescue and reinscribes patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of care.

Humanitarianism, as Barnett (2011) argues, has long functioned as a form of paternalistic governance rooted in imperial logics, casting aid as a gift from morally superior protectors to passive recipients. De Lauri (2019) extends this critique by theorizing "humanitarian militarism," the fusion of aid and security logics. These dynamics manifest in the visual, legal, and symbolic staging

of refugee protection: visa policies, media spectacles, and "rescue" rituals operate as props in a geopolitical theatre that reaffirms the authority of powerful states while depoliticizing displacement.

This moral economy of deservingness demands that refugees, especially women, perform vulnerability in ways legible to host societies. Expressions of trauma, humility, and gratitude are often prerequisites for support (Crawley, 2022; Lê Espiritu & Vang, 2024). Those who deviate by asserting agency or dissent risk erasure or sanction (Omata, 2024). States, too, perform: their humanitarian gestures serve not only displaced people but also domestic and international audiences, reinforcing claims to moral legitimacy while obscuring the racialized and temporary nature of their commitments (Ticktin, 2011).

The post-WWII refugee regime was never neutral. Its early focus on white Europeans fleeing Communism excluded gendered and colonial forms of persecution (Chimni, 2009; Freedman, 2007). Despite reforms, refugee women remain cast as symbolic figures, grateful victims whose protection is conditional, temporary, and depoliticized. Feminist IR scholarship (Enloe, 2004; Tickner, 2001; Young, 2003) shows that international institutions privilege masculinized and militarized notions of security, sidelining justice- and care-based alternatives. Within refugee governance, this translates into expectations that displaced women conform to feminized scripts of passivity and gratitude to access protection (Crawley, 2022; Lê Espiritu & Vang, 2024). Protection is thus extended not as a right, but as a favor, selectively distributed and dependent on legibility within dominant narratives.

Building on these insights, this article advances a dramaturgical framework to interrogate how refugee protection is enacted, recognized, and strategically withdrawn. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) foundational work, and later developments in international relations and cultural sociology (Weber, 2006; Alexander, 2006; Wilcox, 2014), the dramaturgical lens allows us to read refugee governance as a performance. Migration and security scholars have long noted the performative dimensions of border control and humanitarianism, where states stage moral authority through rituals of aid and

exclusion (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011; Aradau, 2008). More recent critiques emphasize the role of affect, spectacle, and deservingness in shaping protection practices (Crawley, 2022; Schwöbel-Patel & Özkaramanli, 2017; Omata, 2024).

This article builds on and systematizes those insights by offering a dramaturgical framework composed of four interrelated tools: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Scripts refer to the normative narratives that cast states as protectors and refugees as victims. Staging captures the institutional, legal, and visual arrangements through which protection is made legible. Audiences include domestic publics and international observers whose recognition legitimizes the performance. Temporality reveals how protection is framed as exceptional and provisional—offered in crisis, withdrawn in normalization. These tools, grounded in intersectional feminist theory, enable a critical reading of refugee protection as a geopolitical spectacle: one that legitimizes exclusion even as it appears to offer care.

Performing Protection: Racialized and Gendered Scripts in Humanitarian Governance

The international refugee regime operates as a "theatre of protection," in which both states and displaced people perform predefined roles. States enact the part of benevolent protector, projecting humanitarian virtue through staged policy gestures and symbolic acts, while refugees are expected to perform vulnerability, passivity, and gratitude in order to access aid. This dynamic extends the patriarchal logic of masculinist protection: as Young (2003) argues, the protector–protected relationship is not one of reciprocity, but of dominance and dependence. In the global humanitarian order, states appear as rational saviors, while refugees, particularly women and children from the Global South, are cast as feminized, helpless victims.

This performance is deeply racialized and gendered. As Crawley (2022) notes, white Western narratives routinely depict "women

from the Global South" as disempowered and in need of saving, a framing that casts their male counterparts as threats and reinforces colonial imaginaries. The resulting binary, white masculine protector versus vulnerable non-Western woman, legitimizes selective compassion and structures who is seen as "deserving." These scripts persist in humanitarian practice, shaping both policy responses and public perceptions.

The post-Holocaust humanitarian order, institutionalized after World War II, contributed to this dramaturgy by aligning refugee protection with moral redemption and geopolitical strategy. The 1951 Refugee Convention, while a landmark in international law, was grounded in Eurocentric assumptions and initially applied only to Europeans (UN, 1951, 1967; Barnett, 2011; Chimni, 2009). As Western states extended protection to those fleeing Communist regimes, humanitarianism became a performance of liberal virtue, selectively enacted to affirm political identity. This logic endures: as Ineli-Ciger (2022) argues, the European Union's embrace of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 contrasted sharply with prior pushbacks of Syrians and Afghans, revealing a racialized hierarchy of suffering. Humanitarian benevolence thus functions as geopolitical statecraft, elevating certain groups as sympathetic victims while rendering others invisible or threatening.

Canada's response to Ukrainian displacement reveals a parallel script. Hyndman (2023) conceptualizes it as humanitarian nationalism: a state-led performance of compassion that fuses national identity, geopolitical allegiance, and emotional spectacle. Through banal but affective symbols (e.g., flags, commemorative stamps, public messaging), the Canadian state staged itself as a morally righteous actor, offering refuge (albeit temporary) to white European civilians while excluding those subject to securitized scrutiny, such as Afghans, Syrians, or Tamils (Hyndman, 2023). Humanitarian nationalism, in this sense, reinforces the theatre of protection not as a universal ethic but as a racialized script calibrated to generate domestic approval and international acclaim. As in all theatre, audiences matter: domestic publics and global observers do not passively

watch but provide the moral validation that gives the performance its political utility.

This dramaturgy also scripts the behavior of refugees, particularly women, who are expected to perform legible vulnerability and compliant gratitude. International organizations frequently present "Refugee Women" as a homogenous category defined by suffering and dependency (Crawley, 2022, p. 368). While this framing may reflect genuine compassion, it also serves strategic purposes: it renders refugees legible as apolitical victims and helps depoliticize humanitarian action. Visibility is staged through media imagery, legal classifications, and humanitarian infrastructures that choreograph who qualifies for care and how. Women who embody trauma, humility, and appreciation are more likely to receive aid, while those who express dissent or agency may be labeled ungrateful or uncooperative (Omata, 2024).

The expectation of gratitude plays a central role in this performance. As Nayeri (2017) observes, refugees are often expected to repay protection with deference, even at the cost of silence. This demand is particularly acute for women, whose social legitimacy within humanitarian spaces depends on their performance of both need and humility. Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024) describe "ungratefulness" as a form of political refusal, an act that disrupts the savior narrative but risks sanction. Aid organizations frequently interpret deviations from expected behavior, such as using aid in unexpected ways, as failures of character rather than expressions of agency. Refugees who improvise or resist are often pathologized, with terms like "refugee syndrome" invoked to reframe dissent as dysfunction, or even a threat (Omata, 2024; Gatter, 2023).

Humanitarian imagery further reinforces this moral economy. As Malkki (1996) argues, refugees are often portrayed as "speechless emissaries," whose suffering authorizes humanitarian intervention but whose voices are excluded. Otto et al. (2013) and Schwöbel-Patel and Özkaramanli (2017) note the contradictory demands placed on refugee women: they must be simultaneously grateful and entrepreneurial, passive yet resilient. This neoliberal fantasy—the figure of the deferential but self-sufficient refugee—serves host states

by justifying generosity while maintaining control and deflecting critique.

An intersectional feminist perspective reveals that refugee protection is not only unevenly distributed but also regulated through scripts of identity and moral legibility. Women who fail to embody acceptable femininity or who articulate politicized grievances may be denied aid or rendered invisible. As Crawley (2022) emphasizes, protection is extended not as a universal right but as a conditional favor, granted to those who align with racialized and gendered expectations. Even well-intentioned humanitarian programs thus reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to redress.

These dynamics are not incidental, but instead foundational to the dramaturgy of the refugee regime. Protection operates not as a neutral instrument of justice, but as a staged performance: scripted by states, enacted through policy and spectacle, sustained by audience recognition, and bounded by a temporality of crisis. This section has shown how protection is extended through racialized and gendered scripts of deservingness. The next section turns to the empirical staging of these performances, examining how Canada's CUAET and Europe's TPD rearticulate post-WWII humanitarian ideals in ways that both reaffirm and recalibrate global hierarchies.

Methodological Framework

To examine how the "theatre of protection" operates in practice, this article adopts a qualitative case study approach grounded in feminist, intersectional, and critical humanitarian analysis. Two contemporary cases of temporary protection are selected for close examination: the European Union's activation of its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainians and Canada's launch of the Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program. These cases were chosen because they represent highly visible and politically celebrated responses to displacement following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Their prominence offers a revealing contrast between the performative embrace of select refugee groups and the routine exclusion or neglect of others.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on a purposive selection of policy documents (including Council of the European Union decisions and Government of Canada communications), official statements from political leaders (such as those by Ursula von der Leyen), and public media reporting (e.g., CBC News, Global News). The analysis also incorporates insights from relevant academic literature and NGO reports to situate these materials within broader critiques of humanitarian governance. These sources were selected for their visibility, rhetorical centrality, and their role in shaping public and institutional understandings of protection.

The article employs critical discourse analysis to trace how protection is framed through dominant narratives of rescue, moral duty, and gratitude. Particular attention is paid to how these discourses activate racialized, gendered, and geopolitical tropes that cast certain groups as inherently more "deserving" of care. This approach aligns with feminist interpretive methodologies, which prioritize the interrogation of symbolic structures and power-laden narratives rather than positivist measures of effectiveness. Building on critiques of humanitarianism as a form of paternalistic governance (Barnett, 2011) and its entanglement with security and state power (De Lauri, 2019), the article treats refugee protection not as a neutral policy instrument, but as a historically embedded and ideologically saturated practice of managing mobility and difference.

Guiding the analysis is a dramaturgical framework composed of four interrelated conceptual tools: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Scripts refer to the moral narratives through which states are positioned as benevolent protectors and refugees as passive victims. Staging captures the institutional, visual, and legal arrangements, such as visa policy, border rituals, and public displays, which make protection legible as a humanitarian act. Audiences include both domestic publics and international observers, whose recognition reinforces the legitimacy of these performances. Temporality highlights the crisis-bound and provisional nature of protection, which is often framed as temporary, exceptional, and strategically reversible. Together, these elements enable a critical reading of protection not as a rights-based entitlement, but as a

geopolitical spectacle calibrated for moral resonance and political expediency.

In what follows, each case study is examined to illustrate how these performative logics materialize in concrete policy contexts, and how they reproduce hierarchies of race, gender, and global belonging even in moments of apparent generosity.

Europe's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainian Refugees

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest refugee exodus in Europe since WWII, and European states responded with an unprecedented invocation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). Within days of the invasion, EU Justice and Home Affairs ministers signaled unanimous support for activating the long-dormant 2001 TPD, which was formally approved on 4 March 2022 (Ineli-Ciger, 2022).

This measure gave immediate, collective protection to Ukrainians fleeing the war, granting them residency rights, access to jobs, education, and welfare across the EU without undergoing individual asylum processes (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Since March 2022, over 4 million people from Ukraine (overwhelmingly women and children) have received shelter and support in Europe under these provisions (Council of the European Union, 2025). On the surface, this swift and unified action was a triumph of humanitarian goodwill, a demonstration that Europe stands by those in need of protection and that "all those fleeing Putin's bombs are welcome in Europe" (European Commission, 2022). The outpouring of aid and solidarity, from volunteers at border train stations to rapid policy coordination in Brussels, projected a powerful image of the EU as a compassionate protector of the vulnerable (Saito, 2022; Sikorska, 2022). This carefully orchestrated response functioned as a dramatic staging of humanitarian virtue: press conferences, public declarations, and train station aid scenes were not only policy outcomes, but acts in a larger performance designed for both domestic and global audiences. In this sense, the TPD activation was not only a

legal mechanism but also an opening scene in a geopolitical theatre meant to affirm Europe's role as a moral actor on the world stage.

This swift embrace of Ukrainian refugees also echoes the post-World War II legacy of selective humanitarianism that shaped the early refugee regime. Just as Cold War-era policies centered white, anti-communist Europeans as the archetypal refugee (Chimni, 2009), the TPD's activation reanimates this racialized and geopolitical script. The moral redemption of Western states after the Holocaust depended in part on showcasing care for "deserving" victims whose identities aligned with dominant Euro-Christian norms. In this sense, the TPD is not a break from past refugee politics but a continuation of the postwar performance of virtue through the protection of those seen as racially and culturally proximate: white, Christian, and European.

Analyzing the TPD through a dramaturgical lens makes visible how refugee protection was activated not just as a legal measure but as a carefully staged performance. Scripts of innocence and deservingness, symbolic staging through border rituals and official messaging, the presence of domestic and international audiences, and the short-term temporality of "emergency" response all worked together to produce a spectacle of European virtue. These four tools —script, staging, audience, and temporality—reveal how the politics of protection were orchestrated for strategic recognition and moral legitimacy.

Yet the TPD's activation was not a radical reimagining of refugee law: it was a carefully de-limited, reversible legal script. As Carrera et al. (2023) describe, the TPD was not designed as a permanent protection mechanism, but as a short-term crisis management tool. Its invocation thus allowed the EU to perform generosity while maintaining legal distance from the more permanent, rights-based commitments required under international refugee law (Carrera et al., 2023). This flexibility was key to its political acceptability: by granting temporary status en masse, the EU could offer immediate protection without opening the door to future claims of permanence or full integration.

Nevertheless, as feminist and postcolonial critics point out, this

very spectacle of solidarity revealed a double standard in who is deemed worthy of protection (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). The enthusiastic embrace of predominantly white, Christian Ukrainians starkly contrasted with Europe's fortressed approach to refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia in recent years. Observers noted that the same Polish border forces cheerfully assisting Ukrainian women and children, carrying their luggage, offering hot drinks and warm smiles, had only months before been brutally pushing back Syrian and Afghan asylum seekers into the frigid woods on the Belarus border (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Across Europe, politicians and media openly acknowledged the special status of Ukrainian refugees in language laced with Eurocentrism. Ukrainians were described as civilized, like us, European people with blue eyes and blonde hair, and therefore not the normal kind of refugee who would be met with suspicion (Mayaleh et al., 2025). This racialized hierarchy of suffering, in which war and displacement are seen as aberrant and intolerable when experienced by Europeans, but as quasi-normal for Others, underpinned the moral theatre of the TPD response.

European leaders performed the role of principled protectors rallying to save their "neighbors." The EU's official messaging stressed pan-European kinship and duty: "We will provide protection to those seeking shelter and help those looking for a safe way home," declared European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (European Commission, 2022). Such rhetoric evoked the patriarchal trope of gallant Europe rescuing women and children from the (male) aggressor's violence, casting the EU in a heroic light on the world stage. At the same time, this generosity was geopolitically selective. The Temporary Protection mechanism, long dormant, had pointedly never been activated for prior refugee crises, which means that the script of European generosity is not consistently applied, but selectively performed. Its sudden deployment for Ukraine suggests a rehearsed script lying in wait, ready to be enacted when the right protagonists appeared: white, Christian, proximate. Notably, the TPD was never activated for the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals or the Syrian civil war, despite years of pleas as boats of Syrians arrived on European shores (Ineli-Ciger, 2022).

Only when "displacement from Ukraine," a conflict directly impacting Europe's strategic interests and involving victims who "look like us," occurred did all EU members unanimously agree to open their arms. Critical analysis suggests the reason is plain: Ukraine is acknowledged as a European country and the Ukrainians are white Christian Europeans, factors which instantly galvanized sympathy and political will for protection that other groups have been denied. Furthermore, the geopolitical interests of EU member states only reinforced the need to help with the forced displacement from Ukraine. In a way, Europe's performance of humanitarianism was dependent on a racialized construction of the "deserving" refugee. This is further evident in the fine print of the TPD decision itself: the Council's eligibility criteria mainly covered Ukrainian nationals and a narrow category of others, excluding most third-country nationals who had been resident in Ukraine (such as migrant students and workers from Africa or South Asia). Those excluded, many of whom also fled bombs and violence in Ukraine, fell through the cracks, left to seek asylum through regular channels or face return, revealing how even in moments of inclusion, legal exclusions are embedded by design. The activation of the TPD for Ukrainians simultaneously entailed the deliberate exclusion of most third-country nationals residing in Ukraine, particularly migrant workers and students from the Global South, thereby institutionalizing a racialized hierarchy of mobility (Carrera et al., 2023).

From an intersectional feminist lens, the TPD case illustrates how protection is staged as both benevolent and hierarchical. The public narrative centered on sheltering women and children (implicitly vulnerable and grateful), reinforcing a gendered script that helped rally support for the policy. Indeed, because Ukrainian men of military age were largely barred from leaving Ukraine, the refugee flow was overwhelmingly female and underage, making it easier for host states to present their efforts as "saving innocent women and children." This spectacle of virtuous masculinity in international politics, with European countries acting as chivalrous guardians, burnished the EU's moral credentials. But it simultaneously obscured ongoing structural violence at Europe's borders. As

numerous human rights reports documented, even as Ukrainians flowed in, refugees from the Global South continued to be detained, pushed back, or left to drown at sea, far from the TV cameras (Carrera et al., 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2025, pp.163-170). The EU's temporary protection for Ukrainians thus operated as a political performance with a dual audience: domestic European publics, who witnessed a virtuous tableau of care that affirmed national values, and the international community, to whom Europe restaged its post-WWII role as the moral guardian of human rights. These audiences were crucial to the success of the performance: without them, the humanitarian script loses its geopolitical utility.

This is a textbook case of humanitarianism as alibi: showcasing mercy toward some as a way to legitimize the exclusion of others. In sum, Europe's response to Ukraine has been both laudable in scale and laden with contradiction. It shows how quickly protection can be extended when beneficiaries fit a preferred profile, and how precarious that protection becomes when the political script shifts. Plans are already underway to phase out the TPD by 2025–2027, encouraging Ukrainian refugees to either integrate via other visas or return once the war subsides (Council of the European Union, 2025). This planned wind-down reflects the TPD's design as a form of "temporary exceptionalism," not a pathway to durable reform. The temporality of the response (emergency-based, time-limited, and politically contingent) reveals the fragility of protection when it is performed rather than institutionalized. The policy was never meant to restructure Europe's approach to displacement: it was a geopolitical spectacle, carefully staged for resonance and short-term legitimacy. The protector's magnanimity, it seems, comes with an expiration date. Like a limited-run production, the TPD response was always meant to be dismantled once the audience's applause faded and strategic interest waned.

Canada's CUAET: Emergency Embrace of Ukrainians

Across the Atlantic, Canada's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis offers another telling example of performative protection. Traditionally celebrated for its refugee generosity, Canada's asylum system is also marked by deep structural selectivity (Epp, 2017; Hathaway, 1988). The CUAET initiative, while framed as a humanitarian success, offers a revealing case of what this article terms performative protection: a carefully staged display of compassion that obscures racialized exclusions, economic interests, and patriarchal scripts.

Analyzing CUAET through the dramaturgical lens introduced earlier reveals how Canada's gesture was not simply a bureaucratic mechanism, but a performance. It relied on racialized and gendered scripts of deservingness, was staged through symbolic and policy gestures, targeted both domestic and international audiences, and was defined by a temporary horizon calibrated to crisis. Each of these four tools—script, staging, audience, and temporality—exposes how emergency refuge was choreographed to maximize moral authority while minimizing structural change.

Canada's selective embrace of Ukrainian refugees is not new, but part of a longer postwar arc in which humanitarianism has functioned as a tool of moral self-fashioning. In the decades following World War II and the Holocaust, Canada rehabilitated its global image by selectively offering refuge to white, European, anti-communist refugees, while excluding racialized and colonized populations (Epp, 2017; Hathaway, 1988). The CUAET program echoes this legacy: a highly visible gesture of moral leadership that aligns protection with whiteness, geopolitical alliance, and cultural proximity. In this sense, CUAET is not a departure from past refugee policies, but an updated script in a post-Holocaust performance of benevolence.

In the face of Ukraine's plight, the Canadian government moved with uncharacteristic speed and generosity to create the Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) in

March 2022. Less than three weeks after the invasion, Canada opened this special program, which allowed any Ukrainian national (and their immediate family) to enter Canada as a temporary resident for up to three years, regardless of whether they had pre-existing ties to Canada (Government of Canada, 2023a). Non-Ukrainians without ties to Ukrainian nationals were excluded from this visa program (Falconer, 2022, p. 7). This extraordinary response also echoed a longer arc of Canadian humanitarian self-fashioning rooted in post-Holocaust moral responsibility, a legacy through which white, European victims are more readily embraced as worthy of rescue, allowing Canada to reaffirm its liberal identity without confronting the structural exclusions embedded in its asylum system.

Officials implemented extensive support measures for those admitted. According to Government of Canada sources, CUAET beneficiaries were offered free charter flights from Europe to Canada, temporary accommodation, and immediate access to work permits, health care, language training, and income assistance, including a one-time cash payment of $3,000 per adult and $1,500 per child through a dedicated support initiative (Government of Canada, 2024a, 2023b). In short, Canada constructed a parallel fast-track system to fast-forward Ukrainian evacuees into safety, bypassing the often years-long processing that refugees from elsewhere endure (Hagigi, 2024). The political messaging around CUAET highlighted compassion and "extraordinary measures" for a European ally in distress. Ukrainians were often depicted as model refugees: resilient, eager to work, and profoundly grateful. This reflects a racialized and gendered script: a group composed largely of women, children, and the elderly, performing the role of innocent victims of war.

The impact of CUAET has been massive. Over a two-year period, Canada received nearly 1.2 million applications from Ukrainians under the program, of which 962,000+ were approved (an approval rate of about 81%) (Hagigi, 2024). By April 2024, approximately 298,000 Ukrainian refugees had arrived in Canada, a scale of intake unprecedented in modern Canadian history (Gov-

ernment of Canada, 2024b). This remarkable wave was achieved not through formal refugee resettlement quotas but via the ad hoc emergency pathway that effectively invited an unlimited number of Ukrainians to come temporarily.

In performative terms, the public celebration of arriving Ukrainians was striking: media coverage featured tearful airport reunions, government press releases highlighted Canada's leadership, and ministers posed for photo-ops with Ukrainian newcomers (McSheffrey, 2022; Edwards, 2025). Many families were indeed met with warmth and tangible support, often facilitated by community volunteers and personal networks, reflecting the strength of Canada's Ukrainian diaspora (Hyndman, 2023). Yet these material gestures, while undoubtedly meaningful, reinforced a protection regime grounded not in rights but in conditional access. The welcome was a temporally bounded performance, leaving the underlying asylum infrastructure intact. These events were not merely acts of care but elements of a broader staging of humanitarianism. The audience was dual: domestic publics, for whom the spectacle reaffirmed national values of compassion and multiculturalism, and international observers, to whom Canada reasserted its image as a liberal humanitarian leader.

The CUAET was framed not as conventional asylum but as an extraordinary, time-bound gesture: application fees were waived, requirements streamlined, and no intake cap imposed (Government of Canada, 2023a; Hyndman, 2023). This fast-tracked protection was staged as exceptional virtue, yet its legal architecture was tightly constrained by temporality. Temporary protection confers no permanent residency and often leaves refugees in precarity (Jeziorek, 2024). By designating CUAET as a temporary residence pathway, and not a refugee stream, Canada maintained strategic control while avoiding long-term obligations (Bejan & Bryan, 2023). Had Canada waived visa requirements, Ukrainian nationals could have arrived independently and claimed asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention, thereby accessing permanent protections. Instead, the logic underpinning CUAET was not durable refuge but provisional-

ity, a scripted embrace calibrated for symbolic effect and policy flexibility.

The racialized script was further evident in the near-total absence of securitization. As Hyndman (2023, p. 4) observes, Ukrainian displacement was treated as an "exceptional case" in which refugees were "unencumbered by securitization considerations". Unlike Afghan, Syrian, or Tamil claimants, frequently framed through discourses of fraud, extremism, or threat, Ukrainians, as white, Christian, and predominantly female, were presumed innocent. As Crenshaw's (2006) notion of structural intersectionality reminds us, multiple axes of identity—race, religion, gender, geopolitical affiliation—interact to shape access to protection. Where some bodies are read as safe and sympathetic, others are preemptively cast as deviant.

Critical analysis reveals that Canada's extraordinary embrace of Ukrainians also casts a spotlight on those left outside this circle of care. The selectivity in Canada's humanitarianism became evident when comparing the response to other contemporary refugee groups. While virtually any Ukrainian fleeing war had unconditional access, refugees from crises like Afghanistan or Palestine faced far more restrictive measures. In late 2023, amid the Gaza war, Canada initially offered only 1,000 slots (later modestly raised to 5,000) for Palestinians, and even those came with stringent eligibility criteria (such as family ties to Canada) and a mere 16% approval rate (Hagigi, 2024). By October 2024, fewer than 300 Palestinians had been admitted to Canada, versus nearly 300,000 Ukrainians (Hagigi, 2024). These contrasts expose how Canada's humanitarian stage privileges certain groups while others remain in the wings, excluded from the performance entirely.

From an intersectional feminist perspective, the CUAET case reinforces the notion of refugee women as symbolic actors in a national narrative. Ukrainian women were empathized with and celebrated for their labor contributions, but under a tacit bargain: safety in exchange for gratitude, adaptability, and silence. Their roles were clearly scripted: be diligent, deferential, and temporary. The program's temporality ensured a state of contingent belonging,

welcomed but not entitled. As the emergency phase passes, the curtain is closing. Applications ended in July 2023, with the final arrivals required by mid-2024 (Government of Canada, 2023b). Benefits have been extended to 2026, but the stage is being dismantled.

In effect, Canada's grand humanitarian gesture was a time-limited show. The red carpet for Ukrainians and the barricades for others support the article's central claim: refugee protection today operates as a geopolitical theatre. Canada's CUAET policy reveals how compassion is scripted, staged, and timed for strategic ends, producing a performance of care that reaffirms, rather than disrupts, global hierarchies.

Beyond the Theatre: Toward an Intersectional Feminist Refugee Protection

To conclude, the case studies of Europe's TPD and Canada's CUAET exemplify how refugee protection today often amounts to a stage-managed performance, well-intentioned in appearance, but selective and conditional by design. Understanding protection as "theatre" is not meant to cynically dismiss the tangible aid some refugees receive. Rather, it exposes how protection becomes a performance, one that privileges certain lives, demands staged gratitude, and reaffirms the authority of benevolent patriarchs on the global stage. Crucially, these theatrical dynamics did not arise in opposition to the postwar refugee regime, but were seeded within it. The early architecture of protection, built on Eurocentric and patriarchal foundations, offered a template for selective moralism disguised as universal care. Dismantling this structure requires not more compassion, but a rethinking of the very scripts that govern protection. Having unveiled the patriarchal, racialized, and performative logics at work, the pressing question is: how might we move toward a non-performative, intersectional feminist approach to refugee protection? In other words, what would it take to transform the system from one that stagecraft compassion to one that institu-

tionalizes justice for all displaced people, across gendered, racialized, and geopolitical lines?

A starting point is to center refugee rights and agency rather than state beneficence. An intersectional feminist protection paradigm rejects the notion of refugees as passive wards grateful for rescue, and instead recognizes them as rights-bearing agents with situated knowledge. This implies designing policies that are accountable to refugees themselves and not to the audiences of humanitarian spectacle. Practically, this means meaningfully involving marginalized refugees in decision-making about assistance programs, camp governance, and resettlement criteria: treating them as partners, not props in others' narratives. It also means protecting space for dissent, critique, and refusal without jeopardizing access to aid. As Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024) argue, the radical act of ungratefulness, a refusal to perform gratitude or deference for conditional refuge, can function as epistemic disobedience, disrupting the colonial and racialized scripts that underwrite humanitarianism. Embracing these refusals requires reorienting aid cultures to welcome protest and leadership from refugees, not just compliance. In a non-theatrical protection regime, those who flee violence would not need to perform despair or docility to prove worthiness; their human rights to safety and dignity would be reason enough.

Another key element is the consistency and universality of protection. Moving beyond performance demands dismantling the racialized and geopolitical hierarchies of deservingness that currently dictate who receives refuge. An intersectional feminist vision of global justice would advocate for non-selective humanitarianism. For instance, applying emergency protection or expedited entry procedures equally to civilians fleeing conflict in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East, not just Europe. This calls for a reckoning with the racism, neo-imperial assumptions, and securitized discourses embedded in refugee policy. It also means confronting how terms like "risk" and "security" are often weaponized to exclude racialized others, and reformulating protection frameworks to de-militarize borders and expand safe, regularized pathways to mobility.

The patriarchal logic of protection, as Young (2003) theorized, rests on an asymmetry between the strong protector and the vulnerable protected. While her analysis centers gender, it offers a broader invitation: to challenge all hierarchical logics—gendered, racialized, and imperial—that structure global displacement. Protection must be reconceived not as a performance of charity or a tool of statecraft, but as a relational obligation rooted in solidarity and shared responsibility. Internationally, this means strengthening legal commitments, such as expanding the refugee definition to include gender-based and intersectional forms of persecution, gaps still glaringly absent from the 1951 Convention (Freedman, 2007). It also requires formal mechanisms for equitable responsibility-sharing: automatic triggers for protection, rather than discretionary political gestures, so that refuge is not dependent on proximity, whiteness, or geopolitical value. Feminist IR scholars emphasize ethics of care and interdependence: protection must be institutionalized not as dramatized virtue but as an ongoing, collective duty rooted in our shared humanity (Enloe, 2004; Robinson, 2011).

Crucially, a non-performative approach requires accountability from those who claim to protect. In the current theatre, powerful states claim moral credit for offering refuge even as they perpetuate the very conditions that force people to flee—through arms exports, extractive development, and militarized interventions. Research has shown that these practices have displaced tens of millions globally and contributed to environmental degradation, land dispossession, and civilian harm (Vine et al., 2020; Scheidel et al., 2023; Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2020; Amnesty International, 2024). An intersectional feminist lens insists on linking protection to prevention and structural justice. This means asking: Are we addressing the root causes (e.g., armed conflict, patriarchal violence, climate catastrophe) that compel displacement? Are we holding accountable those, including ourselves, who benefit from and reproduce displacement economies? Without such interrogations, protection risks becoming a moral façade for maintaining the global status quo. A truly principled protection regime would integrate with broader efforts to resolve conflict, advance social and environmental justice,

and undo the global inequalities that render some lives eminently movable while others are shielded from disruption. This also means resisting the tendency to treat refugees as a temporary inconvenience: instead, host societies must recognize them as neighbors and equals, entitled to long-term inclusion when return is not viable. Temporary protection must not become indefinite limbo. Refugees' long-term futures should be shaped by their own needs and aspirations, not the political optics of host states.

Finally, embodying an intersectional feminist approach means transforming the narrative terrain of protection itself. Humanitarian stories should not center saviors and victims, but justice and shared political agency. This includes amplifying refugee voices not just as survivors of trauma but as organizers, caregivers, and knowledge-holders. It also means recognizing and valuing the everyday forms of care, resistance, and protection enacted within refugee communities themselves—what Malkki (1996) called the "speechless emissaries" must become audible political subjects. In this spirit, the goal is not simply to take the stage away from states but to reimagine who gets to script protection, and to build systems rooted in participation, mutual care, and structural change. This might mean expanding community-led initiatives, participatory policy design, and transnational solidarity networks led by displaced people.

In conclusion, the "theatre of protection" metaphor shines a harsh light on the precarious façade of the current refugee regime. The selective embrace of Ukrainian refugees illustrates both the height of humanitarian possibility and the depth of its inconsistencies. Far from an aberration, such spectacle reflects a longer genealogy in which humanitarianism has functioned as both moral performance and geopolitical strategy, legitimizing global hierarchies under the guise of care (Barnett, 2011). Today, these performances are increasingly enacted through securitized rituals of control, what De Lauri (2019) describes as "humanitarian militarism," the fusion of benevolence and border enforcement. This paper has shown how the dramaturgical elements of protection—its scripts of rescue and deservingness, its staging through law and spectacle, its audiences both domestic and international, and its

temporality of strategic exception—work in concert to uphold systems of racialized, patriarchal, and imperial domination.

An intersectional feminist approach calls us to dismantle this performance piece by piece. It means rewriting the scripts that cast refugees as passive victims and states as benevolent saviors; transforming the stage by embedding care and justice into institutional design, not emergency optics; de-centering the audiences of humanitarian recognition in favor of refugee-led priorities; and rejecting the temporality of conditional refuge in favor of sustained, rights-based protection. From performance to practice, from conditional charity to universal justice, and from patriarchal saviorism to egalitarian solidarity, the path forward demands more than inclusion: it demands structural transformation. Dismantling the logics of performative protection is essential if we are to honor the post-WWII promise of "never again"—not through selective acts of compassion, but through a radically inclusive protection regime that refuses to subordinate rights to gratitude or safety to spectacle.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Strategic Appeal of Multipolarity

THE INTERSECTION OF REALPOLITIK AND NORMATIVE TENSIONS IN SINO-FRENCH RELATIONS

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Received: 08 May 2025 | **Revised:** 03 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 26 November 2025

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.002

Abstract

How is France positioning itself within a multipolar order, and more specifically in relation to China's global rise? What strategic opportunities and constraints emerge from this relationship? And, ultimately, how might Sino-French relations develop within the broader framework of an increasingly multipolar international order? To address these questions, this article adopts a historical-institutionalist approach, examining the historical development of Sino-French relations, their strategic interactions, and the normative tensions that have emerged between them. Overall, France's engagement with China in a multipolar world is shaped by its Gaullist legacy of strategic autonomy, shifting ideas toward pragmatic accommodation, and structural pressures from a fragmented international order. In economic terms, the France–China partnership has brought clear gains through market access and technological collaboration. Strategically, France's strategic partnership with China offers Paris a broader

geopolitical manoeuvring space. Moreover, France has sought to balance engagement and caution, especially in the Indo-Pacific, without fully aligning with either the U.S. or China. However, if France truly views multipolarity as both a strategic and ethical goal, it must adopt a more innovative and coherent foreign policy. Otherwise, its current stance of strategic ambiguity risks undermining its global credibility in an increasingly complex world order.

Keywords
French foreign policy; Gaullism; international politics; multipolarity; Sino-French relations

Introduction

Following the Second World War, France's integration into the Western bloc, particularly through its participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its alignment with U.S.-led strategic priorities, generated structural asymmetries that deeply influenced its foreign policy trajectory. The dominance of the United States in transatlantic affairs frequently relegated France to a secondary role, prompting successive French governments to rethink the country's international posture. This strategic reconsideration culminated in the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958, a constitutional reform that significantly enhanced presidential authority and provided the institutional foundation for a more assertive foreign policy. Under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, France articulated a distinct vision of international politics rooted in national sovereignty, strategic independence, and global influence. De Gaulle's approach was not merely a reaction to Cold War bipolarity but a proactive assertion of France's historical mission as a civilizational and diplomatic actor in its own right. This doctrinal shift often referred to as "Gaullism" laid the groundwork for a foreign policy orientation favourable to multipolarity. Rather than accepting a subordinate status within a bipolar world order, France sought to cultivate a role as a third force capable of mediating between power centres while asserting its own normative and

strategic preferences. As Portes et al. (2008) observe, this orientation has been particularly visible in France's engagement with emerging powers, including the People's Republic of China, which Paris has approached as both a strategic partner and a site of geopolitical recalibration. Against this backdrop, the primary aim of this article is to examine France's foreign policy through the conceptual prism of multipolarity, with specific reference to China's economic and political ascent over the last four decades. This rise, marked by sustained growth, technological innovation, and global ambition, has positioned China not only as a vital economic actor but also as a challenger to established international norms posing complex dilemmas for states like France that seek both engagement and value-based diplomacy.

Accordingly, this article seeks to answer three interrelated questions: How is France positioning itself within a multipolar order, and more specifically in relation to China's global rise? What strategic opportunities and constraints emerge from this relationship? And, ultimately, how might Sino-French relations develop within the broader framework of an increasingly multipolar international order? In its pursuit of a balanced global order, strategic autonomy vis-à-vis U.S. hegemony, and increased leadership within the European Union, France has actively cultivated bilateral relations with China. This has included large-scale economic collaborations, participation in international multilateral platforms such as the G20, and rhetorical support for reforming global governance institutions. However, this strategic rapprochement has frequently clashed with France's normative discourse, which continues to emphasize a Western-centric interpretation of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The coexistence of these often-contradictory impulses pragmatic engagement and normative assertion lies at the heart of France's contemporary foreign policy dilemma.

This paper unfolds in four sections. The first lays out the theoretical framework and methodological approach to studying multipolarity, whereas the second traces the historical evolution of Sino-French relations from the Cold War to the present. The third section analyses contemporary strategic dynamics, economic interdepen-

dence, and diplomatic tensions, and the final section explores how France attempts to reconcile its normative foreign policy identity with the challenges and opportunities of a multipolar world.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework: Theoretical Approaches to Multipolarity in International Relations

In the conventional international relations literature, multipolarity refers to a system in which multiple great powers simultaneously exert influence over the functioning of the international order. In such a configuration, no single state can establish hegemonic dominance; instead, power is distributed among a plurality of actors (Gürcan, 2019; Gürcan, 2020; Gürcan & Otero, 2024).

Multipolarity has been considered a crucial structural feature for the maintenance of peace and stability, particularly within the frameworks of classical and structural realism (D'Aoust & Grondin, 2015). According to Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, the greater the number of poles in the system, the more complex the balancing dynamics among major powers become, thus simultaneously increasing both the risk of conflict and the opportunities for diplomacy (Waltz, 1979). From a neorealist perspective, states seek to maximize their security in an anarchic international system, and mutual balancing among powerful actors can provide the structural conditions necessary for a stable multipolar order. However, offensive realists such as Mearsheimer argue that multipolar systems inherently involve greater levels of uncertainty and threat perception, thereby raising the probability of conflict (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Beyond the framework of power balancing, multipolarity can also be discussed in terms of cultural and normative pluralism. English School theorists, notably Hedley Bull, emphasize that international order is shaped not only by military and economic capabilities but also through shared norms, institutions, and conceptions of order (Wilson, 2016). In this sense, multipolarity is not only defined by the number of powerful states but also by the value systems these states promote and embody. For example, the rise of

China has brought forth an alternative vision of global order that challenges Western-centric liberal norms, creating a tension for actors like France whose foreign policy rhetoric strongly emphasizes normative commitments. Post-structuralist and critical theories, by contrast, associate multipolarity with the erosion of hegemonic norms and the emergence of new imaginaries of global order. As Amitav Acharya has argued, the increasing role of non-Western actors as norm entrepreneurs suggests that multipolarity entails not only a redistribution of power but also a diversification of normative authority (Acharya, 2017). From this perspective, China's rise represents not merely an economic ascent but a foundational challenge to the existing international normative order.

Marxian approaches, most notably articulated through Gürcan's (2019; 2020) post-hegemonic multipolarity thesis, reframe the dominant discourse on multipolarity by moving beyond discursivity as well as the security-centric logic of realism and liberal institutionalism. This thesis draws on historical materialism to analyse how the global order is shaped not just by state interests or institutional norms, but by the contradictions of global capitalism, such as uneven development, dependency, and the hegemonism of core capitalist states. From this standpoint, the current shift toward multipolarity is not merely geopolitical; it reflects a crisis of neoliberal hegemony and the emergence of new centres of power challenging imperial hierarchies. Rather than viewing multipolarity as a precarious distribution of power prone to conflict and instability, moreover, this perspective suggests that today's multipolar order holds strong potential to foster more inclusive forms of global governance and multilateralism, where discursive practices such as "Asian values" and the "Shanghai spirit" also play a crucial role in mobilizing South-South cooperation. As such, this perspective emphasizes the role of South–South cooperation as a key underlying dynamic, whereby emerging powers in the Global South forge strategic alliances and institutional frameworks that contest hegemonic dominance and promote alternative visions of development and international solidarity. In this view, multipolarity is not merely a redistribution of power, but a transformative opportunity for

constructing a more equitable and cooperative world order (Gürcan, 2019; Gürcan, 2020; Gürcan & Otero, 2024). From this lens, China's rise is seen less as a revisionist threat than as a pivotal force in restructuring global power relations and creating space for alternative developmental and governance models. Likewise, France's pursuit of multipolarity can be interpreted as a pragmatic yet ambivalent attempt to navigate and influence this post-hegemonic transformation, rebalancing its historical alignment with other Western core powers against the backdrop of an ever-deepening hegemonic crisis and emerging opportunities for strategic autonomy.

While these theoretical perspectives help illuminate the broader structural and normative implications of multipolarity, they require grounding in a concrete empirical context to fully grasp their relevance and application. France's evolving relationship with China offers such a context, serving as a revealing case through which to examine how competing ideas, interests, and institutional constraints interact within a post-hegemonic multipolar landscape. To analytically bridge theory and empirical inquiry, this study adopts a historical institutionalist approach that integrates the structural insights of realism, the normative concerns of the English School, and the critical sensibilities of post-structural and Marxian perspectives.

Historical institutionalism, with its integrative focus on institutions, ideas, and agents study (Bannerman & Blayne Haggart, 2015), offers a methodological framework capable of bridging the rational-choice orientation of realism with the culturally informed analyses of the English School and poststructuralism as well as the holistic approach of Marxism. Broadly speaking, the historical institutionalist method involves six steps: selecting case studies and time periods; identifying relevant institutions, actors, and ideas; analysing the mechanisms that strengthen or weaken these elements; and, finally, assessing who benefits or loses from the institutional arrangements under study (Bannerman & Blayne Haggart, 2015). Accordingly, this research focuses on the case of France–China relations across the postwar to contemporary period, identifying the relevant institu-

tions such as the French Fifth Republic's presidential system and bilateral strategic partnerships; analysing the primary actors including French and Chinese leaders and diplomatic elites; and examining the core ideas of multipolarity, strategic autonomy, and normative diplomacy. The study then explores mechanisms of continuity and change, and evolving alliance strategies, before finally addressing distributive outcomes, particularly how France navigates between normative commitments and strategic interests, revealing tensions and trade-offs in its foreign policy identity. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how institutional legacies, ideational shifts, and international structures collectively shape France's engagement with China in a multipolar setting.

Historical Background: A Brief Overview of Sino-French Relations

For France, multipolarity has long constituted both a historical aspiration and a strategic imperative, forming a cornerstone of its foreign policy vision. This approach, shaped largely during the leadership of De Gaulle, is based on the ideal of France asserting itself as an independent power rather than aligning with either unipolar or bipolar systems (Romano, 2017). Accordingly, France perceives its relations with emerging powers such as China not merely as avenues for commercial and strategic engagement, but as instruments to promote a more balanced distribution of power within the international system (Hellendorff, 2017; Testard-Vaillant, 2021; Boniface, 2019). Indeed, the rise of China and France's responses to it reflect not only the trajectory of bilateral relations but also broader questions concerning the future configuration of global order in the 21st century (Jones & Smith, 2019).

To fully grasp the foundations of this strategic orientation and its implications for contemporary multipolarity, however, a more historically grounded perspective on Sino-French relations is necessary. Although the roots of Sino-French interactions can be traced to intellectual and cultural exchanges as early as the 17th and 18th centuries with Jesuit missionaries, Enlightenment philosophers, and

French travellers producing significant bodies of knowledge on Chinese civilization, the political substance of Sino-French relations only acquired a distinct strategic dimension in the latter half of the 20th century. During the Qing Dynasty, French Jesuits such as Joseph-Marie Amiot and intellectuals including Voltaire and Montesquieu expressed fascination with the Confucian model of governance and the administrative sophistication of the Chinese empire. China was perceived not only as a cultural other but also as an object of emulation within French elite circles (Cabestan, 2015). However, these intellectual engagements remained largely abstract and disconnected from the geopolitical realities that would come to define France's official stance toward China in the modern era.

In the early stages of the Cold War, while France was formally embedded within the Western bloc under the NATO umbrella, it increasingly distanced itself from a U.S. centric foreign policy model. De Gaulle's tenure as president (1959–1969) marked a turning point in French diplomacy. His insistence on la grandeur de la France (France's national greatness) translated into a vision of foreign policy that rejected binary Cold War logic and sought to reassert French sovereignty on the world stage. In this context, France's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1964 was both bold and symbolic: it made France the first major Western nation to extend diplomatic recognition to communist China well before the United States or most of Western Europe (Bari, 2021). This moves simultaneously legitimized Beijing in the international system and challenged the dominance of Taiwan's representation as "China" in Western diplomatic forums. It also signalled France's commitment to shaping a more pluralistic global order that moved beyond bipolar constraints (Zanier, 2016).

The 1970s saw a cautious yet persistent development of bilateral ties, constrained by the ideological rigidity of the Cold War. Economic cooperation remained limited but strategically important, with France being among the few Western countries to maintain diplomatic consistency during China's more isolated years (Heng-Lim, 2014; He & Jacquemin, 2016). The transformative moment, however, arrived in the 1980s with Deng Xiaoping's sweeping

economic reforms and his policy of gaige kaifang (reform and opening). Having personally spent time in France as a young man during the 1920s, Deng harboured a deep familiarity with French culture and political traditions, which helped facilitate warmer diplomatic exchanges and an ideological bridge between Paris and Beijing (Vogel, 2011). While the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident led to a temporary diplomatic freeze and a wave of moral condemnation from Western capitals, including Paris, the broader momentum of engagement was not permanently derailed. By the mid-1990s, bilateral relations had not only recovered but entered a new phase of formalized cooperation. Under President Jacques Chirac, France became the first Western power to establish a partenariat global (global partnership) with China a framework that reflected strategic convergence on issues such as multipolarity, global governance, and resistance to U.S. unilateralism (Wellons, 1994; Védrine, 2006). France increasingly viewed China not as a rival to be contained but as a counterbalancing force that could help dilute American preeminence in the international system. Chinese leaders, in turn, saw France as a gateway to broader European influence, and as a valuable interlocutor with an independent voice in global affairs. Throughout the 2000s, Sino-French relations diversified across economic, technological, and cultural domains. Major French corporations such as Airbus, Alstom, and EDF signed landmark agreements with Chinese counterparts, while China became a key partner in joint ventures involving nuclear energy, aerospace, and high-speed rail. Politically, France expressed qualified support for the "One Country, Two Systems" principle in Hong Kong and often refrained from openly challenging China on its "core interests," including Tibet and Taiwan. Yet this approach drew domestic criticism, particularly from human rights organizations and segments of the French public who viewed such policies as an erosion of France's normative commitments (Bensacq-Tixier, 2008; Hellendorff, 2017). The duality of strategic cooperation and normative ambivalence became a structural feature of the bilateral relationship.

During Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (2007–2012), this delicate balance was severely tested. France's re-entry into NATO's inte-

grated military command and its arms sales to Taiwan triggered sharp rebukes from Beijing, resulting in diplomatic setbacks and suspended summits. Nevertheless, the Hollande administration (2012–2017) re-engaged with China on more stable terms, emphasizing mutual respect and strategic coordination. Under Emmanuel Macron, France's approach evolved further. While Macron has emphasized European strategic autonomy, he has also stressed the need for a "sovereign and united" Europe in its engagement with China suggesting a shift from bilateralism toward a more coordinated EU-level China policy.

Today, Sino-French relations are shaped by a complex dual logic. On one hand, there is a strategic convergence rooted in a shared preference for a multipolar international order that resists U.S. hegemony. On the other hand, there remains a normative distance shaped by France's liberal democratic identity and its principled stances on human rights, freedom of expression, and global governance reform. Contemporary French discourse often oscillates between cautious partnership and normative critique, particularly in response to issues such as Xinjiang, civil society organizations, and China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific (Lincot, 2021; Liang, 2023; Bärschneider, 2025). This evolving relationship underscores a broader truth: multipolarity is not merely a redistribution of material power but a contested architecture of values, institutions, and worldviews. For France, navigating the Sino-French axis involves constant negotiation between geopolitical interest and ideological integrity. The ability to sustain this balance will shape not only the future of bilateral relations, but also France's broader role in defining a stable and pluralistic global order.

Strategic Partnership or Strategic Ambiguity

The relationship between France and China has evolved from the diplomatic rapprochement initiated by France's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1964 into a policy domain that increasingly embodies the vision of a multipolar world in the 21st century. For France, this relationship is not only a response to

China's economic rise, but also a strategic effort to create alternative power balances in opposition to U.S. dominance. For China, France represents a privileged partner in Europe due to its historical status, nuclear capabilities, and permanent membership in the UN Security Council (Cabestan, 2004).

As mentioned in the previous section, the establishment of a "partenariat global" in 1997 under President Jacques Chirac marked a turning point in this multidimensional cooperation, laying the institutional foundation for closer economic and geopolitical ties. This partnership materialized particularly in sectors such as aviation (Airbus), nuclear energy, infrastructure development, and high technology. Compared to the EU's more cautious stance toward China, the Sino-French partnership has often followed a pragmatic and flexible path, aligning with France's vision of European strategic autonomy. However, this strategic convergence has frequently drifted into a realm of strategic ambiguity. France's foreign policy principles, anchored in universal human rights, freedom of expression, and international law, stand in contrast to China's political structure. The pro-Tibet protests in Paris prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the visit of the Dalai Lama to France were perceived by Beijing as interference in its internal affairs, leading to a serious diplomatic rift. In such moments of tension, French political elites have often sought to maintain a "delicate balance" between values and interests (Fayet, 2024). As Cabestan (2010) aptly puts it, "La France est condamnée à une diplomatie d'équilibriste entre principes et pragmatisme" (France is bound to pursue a tightrope diplomacy between principles and pragmatism). This observation encapsulates the core dilemma at the heart of France's foreign policy, especially in its bilateral relations with rising powers such as China. The persistent tension between normative discourse anchored in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law and pragmatic considerations driven by strategic autonomy, economic opportunity, and geopolitical relevance has compelled France to maintain a precarious balance. This balancing act becomes particularly evident in the Sino-French relationship, where the desire to preserve national and European influence in a multipolar world

often coexists uneasily with the need to uphold liberal-democratic values. Cabestan's (2010) characterization thus provides a succinct yet powerful lens through which to interpret the structural contradictions of France's global engagement.

While the Chinese market offers vast opportunities for French businesses, perceived problems such as violations of intellectual property rights, lack of transparency in public procurement, and restrictions on foreign investments have led to growing protectionist sentiments in France. President Emmanuel Macron's statement during his 2019 visit to China, "L'époque de la naïveté européenne est révolue" (The era of European naivety is over), reflects a notable shift in attitude (Bloomberg, 2019). These words signaled that the strategic partnership with China could no longer be viewed through rose-coloured glasses. Multipolarity, in this context, entails not only the emergence of alternative centres of power but also the multiplication of new risk domains. Furthermore, France's relationship with China is also tested in the context of its transatlantic alliances. During the Sarkozy presidency, France's reintegration into NATO's military command, its arms sales to Taiwan, and Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama were interpreted by China as a drift toward Atlanticism. As such, France continues to strive for a dual role: to act as a counterbalance to U.S. hegemony while simultaneously championing Western normative values. Yet, this duality renders France vulnerable to criticism from both Chinese and Western publics for inconsistency and lack of strategic clarity.

Table 1. France-Taiwan Arms Sales in the First Half of the 1990s
(SIPRI, 2025; Singh, 2000; Cabestan, 2004; Grimmet, 1999; Taipei Times; 2020)

Year	Weapon System	Estimated Value (Billion €)
1991	Mirage 2000 Fighter Jets	2,5
1992	La Fayette-Class Frigates	0,8
1993	Magic-II Missiles	0,4
1994	Combat Training Aircraft	0,6
1995	Underwater Assault Systems	0,4

One of the most critical turning points in Sino-French diplomatic relations was France's arms sales to Taiwan during the 1990s. In 1991, France sold approximately 60 Mirage 2000 fighter jets to

Taiwan, followed by the delivery of La Fayette-class frigates in 1992. These actions were regarded by the People's Republic of China as a direct violation of the "One China" policy. In response, the Chinese government suspended diplomatic relations with France and issued threats of economic sanctions. Under mounting pressure, the French government decided in 1995 to halt major arms sales to Taiwan, initiating a process of normalization in its relations with Beijing. Since then, there has been no record of large-scale, publicly acknowledged French military exports to Taiwan. This shift reflects France's broader effort to pursue a more balanced foreign policy in line with its strategic partnership goals with China (Cabestan, 2010).

France's strategy of proximité contrôlée (controlled proximity) with China has also echoed within the European Union. While France employs a hybrid discourse that frames China as both a partner and a systemic rival, other EU member states, such as Germany, tend to adopt more cautious, trade-focused approaches. Ultimately, France's ambivalent stance complicates the EU's attempts to articulate a coherent and unified strategy toward China.

Multipolarity and Normative Dilemmas: Strategic Interests Tested by the Burden of Ideals

France's vision of a multipolar world is rooted in a historical Gaullist tradition that emphasizes strategic autonomy and independence in foreign policy (Vratimos, 2023; Gaffney, 2013). However, this vision increasingly encounters normative tensions when applied to strategic relations with non-Western states such as China. The Sino-French relationship is not merely a matter of power balancing; it constitutes a complex nexus where international norms, cultural worldviews, and economic interests intersect. In this context, France's China policy reflects a delicate oscillation between normative commitments and strategic calculations.

Table 2. Sino-French Foreign Trade Data
(Eurostat, 2023; INSEE, 2023; United Nations, 2023, World Bank, 2023)

Year	Exports (€ Billion)	Imports (€ Billion)	Trade Balance
2010	14.2	27.8	-13.6
2011	15.1	30.2	-15.1
2012	16.0	32.7	-16.7
2013	17.4	36.1	-18.7
2014	18.3	39.4	-21.1
2015	19.5	42.6	-23.1
2016	20.1	45.7	-25.6
2017	21.3	49.1	-27.8
2018	22.6	53.4	-30.8
2019	23.8	56.2	-32.4
2020	24.5	58.8	-34.3
2021	25.3	61.6	-36.3
2022	26.1	63.9	-37.8

The establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1964 marked a turning point through which France, distinct from the rest of the Western bloc, materialized its long-standing vision of a multipolar order (Jia, 2023). This decision was not merely geopolitical but laid the foundation for deepening economic and cultural engagement with China. Over time, these relations intensified, especially in terms of economic interdependence. France's exports to China rose from €14.2 billion in 2010 to €25.3 billion in 2022, while imports from China surged from €27.8 billion to €61.6 billion during the same period, significantly widening the trade deficit. As visual data and graphs demonstrate, this imbalance has become structurally entrenched. As Kucera and Jiang (2018) notes, the growing volume of China–EU trade has served as a major engine of growth for both sides, but it has also exerted pressure on the EU to adopt greater normative flexibility as dependence on China increased.

The Sino-French relationship is shaped not only by macroeconomic indicators but also by cultural codes and institutional interactions. As Badiane et al. (2024) emphasize, cultural differences and distinct business practices play a critical role in bilateral cooperation. France's universalist diplomatic discourse often clashes with China's collectivist cultural logic. Nonetheless, both parties have adopted strategic patience and a form of "pragmatic cultural accommodation" to overcome these differences, which refers to an

approach that prioritizes mutual interests, avoids direct conflict, and develops flexible accommodation strategies to sustain long-term cooperation between two different cultural and ideological systems.

The strategic nature of this relationship is further reinforced by cooperation in defence and technology transfers. In the 1990s, France's €4.7 billion arms sales to Taiwan led to a diplomatic crisis with China. However, by the 2000s, France had openly endorsed China's "One China" policy, leading to a normalization of relations. Projects such as the establishment of Airbus's fourth assembly line in Tianjin exemplify the two countries' deepening high-tech cooperation. As of 2023, Airbus's aircraft delivery contract to China amounts to €20 billion for 160 units (Airbus, 2023). Furthermore, the French nuclear giant EDF has shared technological know-how in the development of EPR reactors in China. Nevertheless, such strategic rapprochements increasingly test France's normative foreign policy identity. On matters such as Xinjiang, the expansion of China's digital influence, and Hong Kong, France has largely opted for "quiet diplomacy" over direct condemnation. This stance has sparked criticism that France's normative credibility is eroding. As Fisman et al. (2014) suggest, in times of heightened nationalist reflexes, economic relations with non-Western countries such as China are especially fragile.

Meanwhile, France's Indo-Pacific strategy is reframing its strategic cooperation with China. As Nguyen and Vo (2023) argue, France seeks not only to act as a regional counterbalance to China but also to promote strategic autonomy through regional alliances. This indicates that France views its engagement with China not as boundless alignment, but as a form of "calibrated partnership". The Sino-French relationship thus embodies a pattern oscillating between the opportunities afforded by multipolarity and the constraints of values-based foreign policy. How France manages this relationship will be decisive not only for the coherence of its foreign policy but also for assessing whether multipolarity can yield an ethically and politically sustainable world order. Multipolarity implies not only the multiplication of power centres but also an escalation in normative complexity and diplomatic tensions.

After more than half a century, the Sino-French relationship should be regarded not simply as a historic diplomatic achievement, but as a strategic model that helps define reorientations in the multipolar world of the 21st century (Van der Putten & Shulong, 2011; Hellman, 2023). As China continues its steady ascent in economic and technological domains, France is not only striving to maintain geopolitical balance but also confronting the challenge of redefining its foreign policy identity. In this regard, the future of Sino-French relations will continue to revolve around three core axes: strategic positioning, economic resilience, and normative governance identity.

The first axis, strategic positioning, pertains to France's balancing act between transatlantic alliances (particularly with the U.S. and NATO) and new power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific. France's Indo-Pacific strategy exemplifies this approach. Deepening ties with China could enhance France's economic and diplomatic presence in the region, yet excessive closeness risks undermining its relationships with key transatlantic allies. Therefore, France's China strategy may evolve into a model of "constrained proximity" defined by a balancing-power logic. As Nguyen and Vo (2023) note, France aims to expand its regional influence through "soft power" policies.

The second axis, economic resilience, concerns managing dependence on China. As the trade data demonstrate, France's trade deficit with China continues to grow. Moreover, excessive integration with China in areas such as technology transfer and critical infrastructure (e.g., 5G, nuclear cooperation) could compromise France's strategic autonomy. In line with the EU's agenda sector-specific protectionist tendencies (Pajon et al., 2024; Duggal, 2022). Limiting collaboration with China in defence industries and digital infrastructure may become a persisting policy shift by 2030.

The third axis involves the reconstruction of France's normative foreign policy identity. France seeks to be viewed not only as a strategic actor but also as a producer of global norms. While "quiet diplomacy" may yield short-term commercial benefits, it risks undermining France's international image and the coherence of its

diplomatic discourse (Pajon et al., 2024). If this silence persists, more normatively proactive European actors, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries, may replace France as discursive leaders.

At the intersection of these three axes lies the central question confronting France: Can Paris maintain normative coherence while exercising leadership in a multipolar order, or will it settle for the role of a pragmatic "balancer" in global affairs? The answer to this question will determine not only the trajectory of Sino-French relations but also whether multipolarity can generate a values-based global order. If France believes that multipolarity is not only strategic but also ethical, it must reflect this conviction more decisively in its foreign policy practice (Keerle, 2023). Otherwise, its current stance of "strategic ambiguity" may relegate France to the position of a global actor incapable of taking clear stances in an increasingly complex international system.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Sino-French relations offers a revealing case study for understanding the inherent tensions and contradictions embedded within the evolving architecture of 21st-century multipolarity. As this analysis has shown, France aspires to project itself as both a strategically autonomous power and a normatively principled actor. This dual ambition, however, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in the context of deepening ties with a geopolitical actor such as China, whose global rise is accompanied by markedly different political values, governance models, and strategic interests. From an economic standpoint, the France–China partnership has yielded tangible benefits, particularly in terms of market access, large-scale industrial projects, and technological cooperation. Flagship collaborations with firms like Airbus, EDF, and Total Energies have not only bolstered France's industrial presence in the global economy but also embedded it more firmly into the complex fabric of Sino-centric economic networks. Yet, this growing interdependence has engendered critical structural vulnerabilities. The

widening trade deficit with China, illustrated clearly by statistical trends, signals a shift in economic equilibrium, in which France's relative leverage is diminishing. Moreover, dependence on Chinese manufacturing and supply chains raises significant concerns regarding national economic sovereignty, especially in critical sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and digital technologies.

Strategically, France has attempted to walk a tightrope between confrontation and accommodation. Its Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a desire to assert influence in a geopolitically sensitive region without falling into the binary logic of U.S–China rivalry. In this regard, France's Indo-Pacific presence, marked by military deployments, strategic partnerships with India, Japan, and Australia, and policy coordination with the EU, serves as a spatial and strategic buffer that allows Paris to engage with China without appearing fully aligned or antagonistic. Nonetheless, such a balancing act remains fragile, particularly as tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait escalate and the international system becomes increasingly polarized. The most profound contradiction, however, lies not in the realm of economics or strategy, but in the normative dimension of foreign policy. In its diplomatic dealings with China, France has adopted what may be termed a normative flexibility, an adaptive framework that permits selective engagement and quiet diplomacy in lieu of open confrontation.

At first sight, France's Gaullist tradition of strategic autonomy, especially its efforts to balance between the U.S. and China, seems to align well with the realist logic of power balancing in an anarchic system. Yet, this framework downplays France's normative tensions and cultural-historical engagements with China. It treats France's actions as materially driven, ignoring the ideological ambivalence and normative dilemmas that are central to the case, which can be better understood within the framework of the English School's concern with legitimacy, institutions, and diplomacy.

However, the Sino-French relationship cannot be adequately explained through either a purely realist lens, focused on national interest and power maximization or an idealist paradigm that foregrounds values and cooperation. Rather, it reveals a layered and

dialectical process in which France must continuously negotiate the contradictions between normative posturing and geopolitical expediency. This dialectic exposes the limits of France's capacity to serve as both a moral compass and a strategic player in a rapidly transforming global order, which offers an illustrative case for what Gürcan (2020) calls "post-hegemonic multipolarity". Rather than framing multipolarity as a stable or normative alternative to U.S. hegemony, Gürcan conceptualizes the current international order as post-hegemonic in the sense that it is structurally unsettled, marked by ambiguous alignments, overlapping alternatives, and the erosion of singular hegemonic authority. From this perspective, France's pursuit of multipolarity—grounded in Gaullist traditions of strategic autonomy—resonates with the post-hegemonic condition: it seeks room for manoeuvre between major poles of power, notably the U.S. and China, without fully committing to either. Yet, France's oscillation between liberal-democratic values and pragmatic engagement underscores the normative and strategic incoherence that characterizes post-hegemonic multipolarity. In this view, France's role is less that of a counter-hegemonic power and more that of a post-hegemonic middle power navigating a transitional, uncertain global landscape, where the rules of engagement and hierarchies of influence are increasingly fluid and contested. Ultimately, one could conclude that whether multipolarity evolves into a more just and stable international framework will greatly depend on how middle powers like France manage such contradictions. If France succeeds in reconciling its strategic ambitions with its normative commitments, through innovative diplomacy, alliance-building, and institutional leadership, it could help shape a form of multipolarity that is not merely about the redistribution of power, but about the re-articulation of global governance along more ethical, pluralistic, and cooperative lines. However, failure to do so may consign France's foreign policy to a position of incoherence, diminished influence, and normative inconsistency.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Bipolarity or Multipolarity?

CHINESE PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF WORLD ORDER

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Received: 30 July 2025 | **Revised:** 05 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 12 January 2026

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.007

Abstract

How do competing frameworks of bipolarity and multipolarity shape contemporary debates on the future of world order? In what ways does China's historical experience, cultural philosophy, and foreign policy practice inform its vision of a multipolar world, and how does this vision contribute to global debates and interact with broader international theoretical debates on polarity? In recent years, the unipolar order that emerged after the Cold War under U.S. hegemony has come under mounting strain. With China's rapid rise—particularly after it became the world's second-largest economy in 2010—debates within the international community over whether the United States and China are moving toward a new "bipolar" configuration in global politics have intensified. Our conceptual analysis demonstrates that such assessments rely predominantly on economic indicators and lack a comprehensive evaluation of overall national power. From a multidimensional perspective, China continues to face significant structural constraints, suggesting that the "new bipolarity thesis" has neither fully materialized nor gained broad acceptance internationally. At the same time, China consistently advo-

cates a vision of a multipolar world order grounded in equality and stability, seeking to advance a fairer and more just international system—a community with a shared future for humanity—anchored in "true multilateralism" as its institutional framework. This position is deeply rooted in China's historical experience, cultural traditions, and philosophical foundations, while also reflecting its contemporary international standing and strategic interests.

Keywords
bipolarity; Chinese foreign policy; conceptual analysis; multipolarity; world order

Introduction

The world is undergoing a major change that has not been seen in a century, with profound adjustments in the balance of international power and evolution of the international structure. Thus, the debate on whether the future international structure is "bipolar" or "multipolar" has lately become one of the hottest topics in the international relations community. This debate not only informs perceptions of the current international environment but also shapes the diplomatic strategies and policy choices of states. In this context, one should highlight that China's role on the international stage is becoming increasingly prominent as an emerging global power, and this ascendance is of great significance to the rethinking and reshaping of the world order.

In the early years following the end of the Cold War, the United States had emerged as the sole superpower due to its overwhelming strength, with the "unipolar" thesis dominating the international discourse. However, with China's rapid development, the rise of other emerging economies, the "multipolarity" thesis has gradually replaced the "unipolarity" thesis, becoming the mainstream understanding of the future international pattern in the international community. In recent years, moreover, as the gap in strength between China and the United States in economic and military fields has narrowed further, coupled with the increasingly evident

competitive nature of US-China relations after 2017, the "bipolarity" thesis has once again entered the public eye, challenging the understanding of the multipolar trend.

In this context, conducting an in-depth exploration of the connotations, characteristics, and developmental trends of "bipolarity" and "multipolarity" undoubtedly holds significant theoretical and practical significance. Using the method of conceptual analysis, this study aims to address the following questions: How do competing frameworks of bipolarity and multipolarity shape contemporary debates on the future of world order? In what ways does China's historical experience, cultural philosophy, and foreign policy practice inform its vision of a multipolar world, and how does this vision contribute to global debates and interact with broader international theoretical debates on polarity? Here, conceptual analysis is understood as a methodological approach that investigates the meaning and application of abstract terms by breaking them down into their defining features and examining the different ways they are interpreted. Rather than generating new data, it sharpens how concepts—such as multipolarity—are understood, distinguished, and used in intellectual debate (Foderaro, 2023; Gürcan, 2022). Therefore, conceptual analysis is applied to the core concepts of polarity and world order by specifying their defining attributes and tracing how "bipolarity" and "multipolarity" are interpreted and operationalized across Chinese and international scholarship and policy discourse, thereby clarifying the terms on which China's role in the emerging global configuration can be evaluated. Within this framework, the present study first clarifies the conceptual relationship between polarity and world order, then revisits the emergence of the new bipolarity thesis, assesses China's material and non-material capacity to act as a pole, critically examines the limitations of bipolar interpretations, comparatively evaluates bipolarity and multipolarity within broader international debates, and finally situates China's evolving vision of multipolarity within its historical, cultural, and policy trajectories.

"Polarity" and the World Order

Before discussing the "bipolar" or "multipolar" world orders, it is essential to define "polarity" and "world order," and then clarify the logical relationship between these concepts.

The concepts of "polarity" and its root word "pole" in the context of international relations are concepts borrowed from physics by scholars of international relations. A "pole" usually refers to the specific endpoint of an object such as the Earth, a magnet, or a charged object. In the context of international relations, it carries the connotation of the "highest," referring to major powers that occupy a dominant position in the international power structure. These major powers behave in ways that are distinct from those of other states.

Jack Levy (1983, pp. 11–19) argues that great powers differ from other states in three key respects: (1) their high levels of military capability render them strategically self-sufficient and capable of projecting power beyond their borders; (2) their expansive conception of security entails close attention to regional and/or global balances of power; and (3) they enjoy greater discretion than weaker states in defining and defending their interests. In this context, polarity not only reflects the positive and negative attributes of electromagnetism but also denotes "mutual exclusion" in the context of international relations, used to describe the form of the international system. Specifically, it refers to the number of actors and the distribution of their power, reflecting the structure of the international system. Therefore, it is also commonly used to describe the international structure during periods of transition or when the international system has not yet been established.

Neorealist or structural realist theorists believe that only the distribution of national power can explain the issue of war and peace. In other words, only the most powerful states can determine whether the international structure is "unipolar," "bipolar," or "multipolar." For example, Edward Mansfield (1993) argues that major powers are typically not symmetrical in terms of power, and if there is an imbalance of power among the major powers, war may break

out. Therefore, the number of poles and the power gaps between them are decisive factors in determining war and peace.

Although the concept of "polarity" has long been used to describe the international system, there is still no consensus among academics on the criteria for measuring "poles." Chinese scholar Yan Xue'tong (2008, p. 42) believes that the academic community has not clearly defined whether "poles" should be calculated based on individual countries or groups of countries (such as the EU and NATO). Liang Shou'de and Hong Yin'xian (2004, pp. 142-143) explicitly oppose the use of "pole" to describe the international system, citing the following reasons: (1) it overemphasizes the role of major powers while neglecting the strength of smaller ones; (2) it overemphasizes opposition and conflict while ignoring dialogue and cooperation; (3) it overemphasizes military means while downplaying the competition of comprehensive national power. Nevertheless, in most cases, the academic community still regards dominant great powers that hold a dominant position within a certain timeframe as "poles".

Another Chinese scholar, Xu Lan (2013), defines world order as "the relatively stable structural configuration formed by major actors in international relations—such as states or groups of states—that play a pivotal role within a given historical period through their mutual relationships, constraints, and interactions." The basic elements constituting the world order include actors, their mutual strategic relationships, and the relatively stable relational structures between these actors. Among these structures, "the balance of power between major powers and groups of major powers constitutes the basic structure and core of the international system, determining the fundamental content of international relations, such as war and peace, peace and development (Xu, 2013)." The significance of these structures lies in their concrete influence on, and constraints upon, the world order within a given historical period (Xu, 2013).

In short, polarity reflects the distribution of power among the main actors, while world order refers to the regular patterns of relationships that arise from this power distribution. Therefore, polarity

is a structural prerequisite for world order, but not its complete determinant. In this study, we define a "pole" as a group of states or nation-state actors that play a dominant role in international relations during a certain period. The relatively stable balance of power and interdependence structure formed by these dominant states constitutes the international pattern, and the rules, norms, and mechanisms that ensure the functioning of this international pattern constitute the international order or interstate order of that period. This includes both regional order within a certain scope and global order on a larger scale.

Revisiting the New "Bipolarity" Thesis

For most of the period following the end of the Cold War, the debate over "unipolarity versus multipolarity" was seen as the primary contradiction and focal point in conceptualizing the international system. With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries embarked on a difficult process of development and transformation. At that time, emerging economies such as China and India had not yet risen to prominence. The United States thus became the world's sole superpower in the world, with national strength far surpassing that of any other country.

At the same time, liberalism gained widespread popularity globally, not only in the West but also in many other developing countries around the world. Multipolarity was merely a marginal issue at the time, appearing to be far removed from the realities of international politics. Given the United States' firmly established hegemonic position, the international system was widely perceived as unipolar, a perception reinforced by notions such as "Pax Americana" and the theoretical framework of hegemonic stability.

With the turn of the new century, the rapid rise of China, the reemergence of Russia as a major power, and the continued growth of other emerging economies increasingly challenged U.S. hegemony, rendering the unipolar configuration of the international system progressively more difficult to sustain. As a result, debates

over unipolarity and multipolarity re-emerged as a central focus of scholarly inquiry into the future of the international system.

However, the emergence of the "bipolar theory" soon broke this. With the collective rise of a group of emerging non-Western countries in the post-Cold War era, the share of the United States and its allies in the global economy began to decline steadily. In 1994, the G7 countries accounted for 67% of the world's GDP, but by 2024, this proportion had fallen to 44%. (CFR, 2025) As the economic strength of developing countries rapidly increased, they also began to demand a greater role in global governance and international politics. In this process, China's rapid development has put it far ahead of other countries, especially after China's GDP surpassed Japan in 2010, making it the world's second-largest economy. Against this backdrop, more and more scholars began to focus on how to deal with this new historical phenomenon of the rapid rise of non-Western countries, particularly China, whose historical and cultural traditions are vastly different, and began to discuss the possible "bipolar world" of the future and related theories.

The concept of a contemporary bipolar structure between China and the United States first emerged around 2010. This assessment was based on the rapid rise of China, primarily using hard power indicators, particularly China's enormous economic size. In 2007, Ferguson and Schularick (2007) proposed the concept of "Chimerica," arguing that a "symbiotic economic relationship" existed between China and the United States, where abundant Chinese labor increased the global return on capital. This was one of the earlier attempts to address the issue of Sino-US relations and the global order from an economic perspective. In his 2011 book *On China*, Kissinger proposed the idea of building a Pacific community, exploring a Sino-US-led international relations framework from the perspective of regional order. In Chinese academia, Yan Xuetong was one of the earlier scholars to propose the bipolar structure perspective. Similarly, Lin Limin and Wang Xuan (2019) began to explore the economic conditions necessary for the formation of a bipolar structural world. In their research, they proposed that a bipolar world is formed when the sum of the economic output of

the two largest economies exceeds twice the economic output of the third largest economy.

Does China Possess the Capacity to Act as a "Pole" Power?

At the core of debates over the perceived bipolarity lies the assessment and comparison of national power, a task that has long posed significant challenges in international politics. From a hard-power perspective, a bipolar configuration appears to exhibit some preliminary features, a pattern that becomes more evident when comparison focuses on three core variables: economic capacity, technological capability, and military strength.

Economically, the gap between the economies of China and the United States has narrowed substantially and has become comparable. In 1984, China's GDP was only 7.7% of the United States, 24% of Japan, 43.3% of West Germany, 67.6% of the United Kingdom, and 59.8% of France. By 2024, this proportion has risen to 64.4% of the United States, 4.5 times that of Japan, 4 times that of Germany, 5.3 times that of the United Kingdom, and 6.3 times that of France. China's growth rate in the past two decades has been particularly outstanding. In 2004, China's GDP was 16.5% of that of the United States. 20 years later, China's GDP rose to more than 64% of the United States. This shows that China and the United States, as the world's first and second largest economies, have a total economic output far exceeding that of other economies. In 2024, the world's economic scale has reached about 109.4 trillion US dollars, of which the United States accounts for about 26% and China accounts for about 17%. The total economic output of China and the United States accounts for about 43% of the world; In international trade, China's total import and export volume in 2024 will be about 6.54 trillion US dollars, accounting for 21.51% of global trade, and the United States will account for 20.5%. The total trade volume of the two countries accounts for more than 2/5 of the total global trade (General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of

China, 2025; World Trade Organization, 2025; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025).

In the field of science and technology, especially in the new round of technological revolution, China and the United States are also leaders in the world. Taking artificial intelligence as an example, the number of artificial intelligence talents and enterprises in the United States and China ranks first and second in the world respectively (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, 2024). China ranks second in the world after the United States, but the number of artificial intelligence patents in China is six times that of the United States (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2024). In the field of digital economy, China and the United States account for much higher proportions in blockchain, Internet of Things, cloud computing and other fields than other countries. In 2024, all the top ten Internet companies in the world are American and Chinese companies, of which 7 are from the United States and 3 are from China (S&P Global Market Intelligence & Definitive, 2024). The new technological revolution shapes the direction of world economic development and will also become an important way to increase world wealth, indicating that the status of China and the United States in the future world economic landscape will be more prominent.

In the military field, China and the United States maintain the largest and most advanced military forces. In terms of military expenditure, China and the United States are far ahead of other countries. In 2024, the United States will spend $996 billion on its military, while China will spend $296 billion, followed by Russia at $109 billion, India at $84.9 billion, Saudi Arabia at $76.8 billion, the United Kingdom at $74.8 billion, Germany at $73.6 billion, Japan at $59.7 billion, France at $59.3 billion, and South Korea at $48 billion (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024). In terms of military industry and equipment, China and the United States also maintain a large naval force and have the most advanced new generation of stealth fighters and unmanned combat systems.

However, such a comparison remains fundamentally static.

While it may capture the growth of China's material capabilities, it is insufficient for assessing China's relationship to a prospective bipolar system. There are several reasons for this. First, a hard-power–centered assessment overemphasizes material factors while overlooking the United States' substantial advantages in international institutions, global agenda-setting, and discursive influence. Second, although China's military capabilities have developed rapidly, it remains the only major power that has not yet achieved complete national unification, meaning that its military priorities are primarily oriented toward domestic territorial consolidation rather than the assumption of expansive international obligations or interventionist roles. Third, whereas the United States maintains an extensive global network of military bases and alliances, China continues to pursue an independent, non-aligned foreign policy and lacks a comparable alliance system. Fourth, while static measures of hard power may be useful for assessing past and present capabilities, their value for evaluating future trajectories of national power is inherently limited. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, China itself demonstrates limited interest in becoming a pole or hegemon, a position shaped by its historical experience, cultural traditions, and diplomatic philosophy. For these reasons, hard power indicators alone offer limited insight into China's willingness or behavior with respect to participation in a bipolar system.

Beyond New Bipolarity: Assessing the Structural Limits of Sino–U.S. Power in the Contemporary International System

Even if one sets aside disputes over how to assess the relative power of the "two poles" and the empirical identification of such a structure, the new bipolarity thesis still confronts a series of unresolved questions. These include: (1) whether China's capabilities are sufficient for it to constitute one of the two poles in a future world order; (2) whether a Sino–U.S. bipolar configuration would exert enough influence to become the dominant framework of the international system; and (3) whether such a bipolar arrangement would push

Sino–U.S. relations toward a Cold War–style confrontation akin to that between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Regarding the assessment of China's power, the factual basis of the new bipolarity thesis mainly relies on static hard power analysis. However, in addition to the three core indicators of economy, technology and military, the comprehensive power of a country is also reflected in its ability and influence to realize its international political intentions. Although China has developed rapidly in recent years, there is still a certain gap compared with the United States. For example, China currently lacks a universal value system that is broadly appealing to the world, a stable and reliable system of partners and allies, and its international discourse power is very weak. It also lacks institutional influence in most international organizations. It is worth noting that due to the arbitrary hegemonic and bullying behavior of the United States, and the double standards of some Western countries in areas such as human rights, climate change, and free trade, the main value system of the Western world is currently facing a serious credibility crisis. In contrast, China's peaceful diplomacy, development initiatives, and Oriental wisdom are receiving increasing attention.

Because of some historical reasons, the headquarters of the world's most important multilateral mechanisms are located in European and American countries. In the International Monetary Fund, although China's share rose from 3.996% to 6.394% after the reform in 2016, jumping from the original sixth place to the third place, the United States has a voting right of 17.4%, and also has a veto right within the organization (International Monetary Fund, 2024b). In international currency reserves, the US dollar accounts for as high as 58%, and the RMB accounts for only about 2% (International Monetary Fund, 2024a). In addition, measured by the United Nations Human Development Index, China's level is not very high. In the 2023 United Nations Human Development Index, China ranks 78th among 193 countries and regions (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). It can be seen that China's domestic development task is very arduous, and this will also be a major challenge facing China in the long run. In addition, for many

newly wealthy Chinese people, their interest and concern in their own livelihood issues far exceeds external affairs, and it is difficult to imagine that they will support actively intervene in foreign affairs for the sake of international influence.

The degree of influence of China and the United States on the world is naturally a key factor in determining whether a new bipolar system is established, but the core issue is whether the bipolar system is the only center of international relations today, or the dominant pattern in the international system. Most people are accustomed to using the US-Soviet bipolarity during the Cold War as a reference. In contrast, the status of the Sino-US bipolarity in the international system is significantly lower, and its influence on the world is also significantly smaller.

Under the bipolar system between U.S. and Soviet Union, almost the entire world was divided into two halves or coerced by it. The world revolved around the two power of poles, and the two poles influenced the whole world agenda. Whether from the perspective of constructive or destructive impact on international affairs, Sino-US relations have the greatest impact on the international community. However, the Sino-US bipolarity does not represent the world, nor can it lead the world. The current Sino-US bipolar structure has not yet reached such a height. Sino-US relations are undoubtedly one of the most important bilateral relations in the world today, but it is completely different from the zero-sum relationship of mutual isolation and confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the West, some people often portray themselves as the ultimate winners of the Cold War, so they may have the historical and psychological inertia of restarting the Cold War to obstruct China's development. However, the Chinese people's memory of the Cold War is often about war, poverty, isolation and backwardness, and they do not believe that there will be any real winner in a Cold War. Therefore, they have no interest in participating in any Cold War confrontation and are highly vigilant about it.

In this sense, what currently exists is a bipolar configuration in terms of the relative international status of China and the United

States, rather than a fully formed bipolar world order. Sino–U.S. relations have not divided the world into opposing camps, nor do they constitute the organizing principle of the global system. Claims in some Western media of a China–Russia–Iran alliance amount largely to speculative exaggeration. To date, none of the three countries has expressed any intention to form a formal alliance; on the contrary, each has publicly stated that its cooperation with the others is not directed against third parties. While China and Russia do engage in cooperation in various forms, both are major powers with strong traditions of strategic autonomy. A reconstruction of the Cold War–era Sino–Soviet alliance is therefore highly unlikely.

Compared with the Cold War period, today's world is markedly more diverse. The distribution of international power is flatter and more decentralized, with multiple centers of influence pursuing distinct identities and interests. Moreover, the international system now encompasses a wider array of actors—including regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations—all of which play increasingly significant roles in global affairs. Small and medium-sized states have likewise become more autonomous and self-reliant, and are no longer willing to function merely as passive objects of great-power politics.

Bipolarity or Multipolarity: A Comparative Assessment

The prospect of a bipolar trajectory in the future world order would pose a significant challenge to the concept of multipolarity. In this context, the emergence of the new bipolarity thesis has fundamentally reshaped debates over the international configuration in the post–Cold War era. The central theoretical contention in international system analysis is no longer between unipolarity and multipolarity, but rather between bipolarity and multipolarity.

Multipolarity emerged as the Cold War was nearing its end and became a widely accepted trend after its conclusion. Therefore, efforts to pursue multipolarity have, from the outset, carried the connotation of opposing hegemony and seeking equality and

democracy in international politics. It is both a manifestation of the democratization of international relations and a reflection of the interests of emerging nations. Therefore, for most countries, multipolarity holds greater political appeal in a certain sense. Additionally, the overall trend in the post-Cold War international pattern has been a gradual shift from unipolarity toward multipolarity, which has further consolidated the international community's perception of multipolarity as a dominant mindset regarding the realities of international politics.

At its core, the multipolarization of world politics is not primarily a matter of normative justification or moral preference; rather, it concerns the distribution of international power. By rejecting unipolar hegemony and expanding the range of choice and influence available to other major powers or groupings of states, multipolarity can enhance their international standing and agency, thereby incorporating elements of fairness and democratic pluralism. Nevertheless, multipolarity does not constitute an inherently equal system. It remains a power configuration centered on a limited number of major actors, even as the number of such actors expands beyond a single dominant power. As a result, the normative justifiability associated with multipolarity is necessarily relative rather than absolute.

To secure a position within a multipolar system, a country must first qualify as a pole in the international system. In today's global order, actors considered capable of attaining "pole" status include not only the traditional Western industrialized states and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, but also a range of emerging powers and regional actors, such as India, Brazil, Türkiye, South Africa, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Although most medium-sized and smaller states are unlikely to become poles on their own, a multipolar international system nonetheless offers them comparative advantages. In principle, such a system expands the political space available to medium and small states, granting them greater autonomy as well as increased flexibility in diplomatic choice and maneuvering.

In a multipolar system, although the number of major powers is

not fixed, the system ultimately consists of a limited set of relatively powerful states and cannot encompass all countries. A multipolar world without numerical boundaries would, in effect, be a world without the power of poles, rendering the concept of multipolarity analytically meaningless. While multipolarity may suggest greater fairness, rationality, and democratic potential, it does not constitute an inherently equal international society. Although all states are formally equal in principle, stronger and weaker states inevitably assume differing responsibilities and obligations in international affairs according to their relative power. Functionally, a multipolar configuration may help constrain hegemonic behavior and contribute to systemic balance and stability. Nevertheless, multipolarity offers no automatic guarantee of international peace, nor does it provide a panacea for global problems—a lesson underscored by the tragic historical experiences surrounding the First World War.

There is no single, absolute standard or paradigm for multipolarity. Whether bipolar or multipolar, such configurations are analytical abstractions and interpretive frameworks rather than direct representations of reality. In general terms, multipolarity refers to the existence of multiple centers of power. More importantly, however, the character of the international system depends on the relationships among these power centers, as these interactions determine whether a multipolar structure is orderly or conflictual. The structural form of the international system does not exert a linear or deterministic effect on its political character or on global outcomes. A multipolar configuration is therefore not inherently cooperative; under certain conditions, it may also intensify strategic competition among major powers. At the same time, relative balance and mutual restraint remain core features of a multipolar system, though these do not necessarily imply equal power among individual states. Power asymmetries may instead encourage weaker actors to form alliances in order to counterbalance stronger ones. Consequently, even in the presence of significant power disparities among major states, a multipolar system can still emerge and endure through dynamic processes of balancing and mutual constraint, albeit with persistent internal tensions.

As summarized by Gürcan and Otero (2024), the literature on multipolarity reflects a wide spectrum of perspectives, ranging from realist and liberal to critical and Global South approaches. Huntington's (1999) uni-multipolarity highlights U.S. primacy tempered by secondary powers, while Kupchan's (1998) notion of regional unipolarity envisions American decline offset by regional stabilizers. More differentiated accounts include Geeraerts's (2011) multilayered polarity, dividing the system into global and regional tiers, and Kausch's (2015) competitive multipolarity, where regional rivalries and non-state actors fuel instability. In contrast, liberal and reformist views, such as Efstathopoulos's (2016) reformist multipolarity and Hadano's (2020) multilateral multipolarity, emphasize cooperation and rule-based governance. Critical and globalization-oriented accounts—Pieterse's (2018) multipolar globalization, Weaver's (2011) balanced multipolarity, Acharya's (2009) regiopolarity, and Garzón's (2017) decentered multipolarity—stress structural shifts in trade, norms, and regional agency beyond Western dominance. One should also add that Gürcan and Otero's (2024) critical- Global South framework also seems to lend support to this assessment that multipolarity reflects a distribution of power among several major states that can expand opportunities for smaller countries, while its stability and fairness depend on the dynamics between power centers and may foster either balance or conflict.

Chinese Version of a Multipolar World

Chinese perspectives on multipolarity are less familiar in Western academia, which is why it is worthwhile to extend our discussion to the case of China, which stands as a key agent of multipolarity. After the gradual breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1960s, China not only began openly opposing US and Soviet hegemony and the bipolar order pattern they represented, but also independently put forward its own vision of international order.

At the end of February 1974, Chairman Mao, in a conversation with African revolutionary leaders such as Kenneth Kaunda and Houari Boumédiène, first proposed the concept of the "three

worlds" (Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2013). In April of that year, Deng Xiaoping, in his speech at the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly, defined the term superpower as an imperialist country that perpetrates aggression, interference, control, subversion, and plunder against other countries, seeking world hegemony. He pointed out that the United States and the Soviet Union were two superpowers that "want to dominate the world. They each seek, in various ways, to bring the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America under their control, while also bullying less powerful developed countries." According to him, China is a developing country belonging to the Third World, and "China is not and will not be a superpower." If China ever changes its color and becomes a superpower, bullying, invading, and exploiting others, then the people of the world should "expose it, oppose it, and, together with the Chinese people, overthrow it (Deng, 1974)." Thus, the opposition of Chinese leaders to the US-Soviet bipolar system during this period was driven primarily by the desire to oppose hegemony, imperialism, and colonialism. The methods and language used in their opposition also bore the very radical characteristics of the Cultural Revolution.

After China began its reform and opening-up policy, criticism of hegemony, imperialism, and colonialism gradually declined. Until the 21st century, China's focus remained on domestic economic development. During this period, China began to emphasize fostering a favorable external environment for its modernization drive, consistently adhering to the principle that "peace and development are the two main themes of our times." For example, in his report to the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, President Jiang Zemin (1992) stated: "We must adhere to an independent and peaceful foreign policy and strive for a favorable international environment for our country's modernization drive." He also stated: "Opening up to the outside world is indispensable for reform and construction. We should absorb and utilize all the advanced civilizations created by countries around the world, including developed capitalist countries, to develop socialism. Isolation can only lead to backwardness (Jiang, 1992)."

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese economy has entered a period of rapid growth, and China's interest in and demand for the outside world has gradually increased. During the Hu Jintao administration, the Chinese government clearly formulated a "going global" strategy, encouraging Chinese companies to enter international markets and integrate with the international community. In March 2013, during his visit to Moscow, President Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind," and subsequently proposed the renowned "Belt and Road" initiative. In a sense, both the "community with a shared future for mankind" and the "Belt and Road" initiative are not simply economic development plans, but rather China's initial vision for the future world order and global governance.

On September 26, 2023, China officially released the white paper "Working Together to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: China's Initiatives and Actions," which systematically expands on China's vision for "building a community with a shared future for mankind." China explicitly opposes the Cold War or a "new Cold War," believing that "small-circle multilateralism" constitutes bloc politics, "national-first multilateralism" is unilateral thinking, and "selective multilateralism" is double standards. This means that China does not support the bipolar pattern of the Cold War system. Regarding the issue of "pole," it advocates that "major powers should prioritize the future and destiny of humanity and shoulder greater responsibility for world peace and development, rather than relying on their power to monopolize regional and international affairs." In the area of great power relations, it advocates "practicing true multilateralism" and "promoting the democratization of international relations and promoting global governance in a more just and reasonable direction." At the same time, China's vision for the future international order remains grounded in the existing post-World War II international system. For example, China advocates upholding "an international system with the United Nations at its core," "an international order based on international law," and "the basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter (The

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023)."

In December 2023, Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of "equal and orderly multipolarization" at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference of the Communist Party of China (Cao, 2023). In his speech, he stated: "In response to a series of major issues and challenges facing the world today, we advocate equal and orderly multi-polarization and inclusive economic globalization. An equal and orderly multi-polarization means upholding the equality of all countries, big or small, opposing hegemony and power politics, and effectively promoting the democratization of international relations. To ensure the overall stability and constructiveness of the multi-polarization process, we must jointly abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, uphold the universally recognized basic norms of international relations, and practice true multilateralism (Cao, 2023)." In September 2025, Chinese leaders officially put forward an initiative on global governance, this is the fourth global initiative proposed by China in recent years. In a sense, these four global initiatives are a further refinement and extension of the concept of a community of shared future for mankind, demonstrating that China is becoming more proactive in presenting its vision for the future world order to the international community. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2025).

These policy statements and the ideas behind them not only demonstrate China's vision for the future world order, but also express China's specific policies regarding the future international system and global governance. Although, in terms of hard power, China will have sufficient strength or immense potential to become a true "pole" power in the future, while in terms of international governance and cooperation, China remains committed to pursuing a multipolar world order. This is not only because China has long opposed hegemonism and has no intention of becoming a new hegemon, but also because a multipolar world is more conducive to the democratization of global governance, which is more consistent with China's historical and cultural traditions and diplomatic practices.

Conclusion

As China rises as a global power in recent years, the international community is increasingly interested in its vision of the future world order. The Chinese understanding of a "multipolar" or "bipolar" world is deeply rooted in their own historical experiences and cultural philosophies. For most external observers, however, accurately grasping China's vision of the future international order remains challenging. Differences in language, culture, political thought, historical experience, philosophical traditions, and social structures—combined with the absence of clear and systematic public articulations of this vision—have constrained the international community's understanding of China's prospective worldview.

The Chinese vision of a multipolar future has complex ideological roots. First, the traditional Chinese worldview of "Tianxia" (all under heaven, 天下) is a crucial foundation of Chinese political thought. The concept of "Tianxia" represents a Chinese-style inclusive universalism, which refers to a political world with universally effective institutions, governed by these institutions for universal peace and cooperation (Zhao, 2011, p. 57). Furthermore, the deeply ingrained concept of "harmony in diversity" in traditional Chinese philosophy also makes it difficult for the Chinese to accept a confrontational "bipolar" pattern.

Second, modern Chinese revolutionary thought, particularly the egalitarian ideals formed during the socialist revolution, is also an important source in China's view of world order. The pursuit of relatively thorough, even somewhat radical, social equality was an important goal in early Chinese social revolutions, and has now evolved into a tradition and ideology in Chinese society. Reflected in foreign policy, since 1949, China's diplomacy has consistently adhered to the principle of "all countries, regardless of size, are equal." In fact, the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," based on this principle, remain a core value of China's current foreign policy. Regardless of national strength, since 1949, China has not initiated provocations or aggression against other small or medium-

sized countries. Unless it perceives itself to be under serious threat, China will not proactively provoke or attack other countries for pure ideological reasons.

Third, China's semi-colonial history and diplomatic practices since modern times have also influenced the Chinese perspective on the international order. On the one hand, it has made Chinese people extraordinarily sensitive to and protective of their sovereignty and independence. To this day, most Chinese people have a very profound memory of the humiliating history of that period. On the other hand, the diplomatic experience accumulated by China through continuous contact with Western countries since modern times, particularly since 1978, has enabled Chinese policymakers, while continuing to adhere to the aforementioned more idealistic principles, to clearly recognize that international politics is a differentiated system with unequal power distribution. Therefore, China has had to pragmatically address these differences and accept the necessity of certain compromises.

Finally, discussions about the relation between China and the world order cannot be separated from the evolving process of the current international order and the broader international debate. On the one hand, for both China and other countries, China's resurgence in the world in recent years and its impact on the global landscape are entirely new phenomena. Therefore, factors such as China's unique historical experience, philosophical traditions (e.g., the concept of "Tianxia" and the idea of harmony in diversity), revolutionary egalitarian ideals, and pragmatic diplomatic practices, which have a profound impact on the future multipolar world, deserve greater attention. On the other hand, due to the West's immense advantage and dominant position in media and academic discourse, international academia has not adequately studied the influence of Chinese traditional culture, philosophical thought, and diplomatic traditions. These aspects are often overlooked or misinterpreted through the lens of Western cultural and historical philosophies, which often very different from China's own historical and cultural traditions. In this sense, China's evolving vision of an "equal and orderly multipolar world" demonstrates that multipo-

larity is not only a geopolitical state but also a controversial process influenced by social factors—it both reflects and reinforces the crisis of hegemony and the search for a more inclusive and equal global order.

As a global power, China's interdependence with the outside world has reached an unprecedented level. Consequently, China's demand for knowledge about the outside world, including its awareness of how to respond to the other countries' concern, is also growing. From Mao's "Three Worlds" theory to Xi Jinping's proposals for a "community of shared future for mankind" and "an equal and orderly multipolar world," China's understanding of international order is constantly evolving. China has shifted from its earlier focus only on domestic economic development to a more confident and proactive engagement in shaping the future international order. However, it is clear that China is not an experienced and well-prepared major power. Therefore, when understanding China's discussions on "bipolarity" and "multipolarity," we need not only patience but also a thorough understanding of its historical, cultural, and logical foundations underlying China's view of the future world order.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Strategic Repositioning of the Middle East

ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURES, SECURITY IMPERATIVES, AND MULTIPOLAR GEOPOLITICS

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Received: 16 May 2025 | **Revised:** 07 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 26 November 2025

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.004

Abstract

How are changing patterns of global energy supply and demand reconfiguring the Middle East's geopolitical position in an increasingly multipolar world? What implications do new energy infrastructures and shifting security imperatives hold for the region? To answer these questions, the study examines the strategic repositioning of the Middle East within global energy geopolitics using descriptive case study methodology. Long anchored at the heart of international energy politics due to its vast hydrocarbon reserves, the region is now navigating a new era shaped by changing patterns of demand and supply. As global energy consumption rises, the emergence of alternative suppliers—particularly U.S. shale production—has reduced Western dependence on Middle Eastern oil, contributing to a broader transition toward multipolarity in global power relations, where major energy importers such as China and Russia is reshaping regional alignments and introducing new sources of influence.

Two critical developments stand out in this context: the securitization of maritime routes and energy installations, and the expansion of energy corridors across politically volatile zones. These factors, while essential for sustaining energy flows, simultaneously intensify the region's exposure to geopolitical rivalries and armed conflict. The study argues that ensuring secure, diversified routes for energy transportation is central to both regional security and global energy governance. Ultimately, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the Middle East's evolving role at the intersection of energy, security, and a multipolar environment.

Keywords
energy security; geopolitics; Middle East; multipolarity; resource corridors

Introduction

The Middle East's persistent relevance in global affairs is not a new phenomenon. The region has long played an important role on the global stage due to its ideal geographical location and vast natural resources. Initially, Western countries were drawn to the region because of its strategic importance, prompting the establishment of protectorates and military bases in the area. During the period from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, the colonial empires expanded their trading portfolios to include more resources and goods, deepening their ties with the region. As energy resources, especially oil, were increasingly integrated into regional countries' foreign policy objectives, energy emerged as a non-traditional global security problem. With the expansion of international trade, moreover, these nations' attention progressively shifted to other regions of Asia, which is now seen as a rising economic powerhouse in the changing world order. Meanwhile, strategic trade routes such as the Horn of Africa and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca continued to serve as critical arteries for global trade, including energy trade.

This paper aims to examine the new Middle East as a highlight of an increasingly globalized world order, owing principally to its energy availability, access, and trade within the context of multipolarity. The admission of major Middle Eastern countries, such as

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, to BRICS marks a new era of multilateral engagements, marking a classic shift from sole US dependency to multipolarity, resulting in a shift away from a unipolar setting in terms of energy geopolitics (Gürcan, 2023). This realignment underscores the growing relevance of "multipolarity" as an analytical lens for understanding contemporary global transformations. The literature offers numerous definitions of "multipolarity" (see Gürcan and Otero, 2024 for a literature review on multipolarity), but it is generally understood as an international system dominated by three or more powers, as different from bipolarity conceived as an international system of two great powers and unipolarity as an international system with one dominant power (Stein, 2015). This being said, contemporary multipolarity is no longer defined solely by competition among states, but also by the rise of global governance frameworks—such as the United Nations—which increasingly challenge and limit state power (McGlinchey et al. 2024, Gürcan & Otero, 2024). Importantly, the majority of European powers are increasingly engaged in commerce with Asian countries, resulting in a multipolar geo-economic structure.

Descriptive case study can be defined as a research method that involves a detailed historical investigation of a single event or phenomenon, with the aim of documenting its trajectory, preserving insights for future policy use, and generating analogies that can guide practitioners in recognizing effective strategies (Odell, 2001; Gürcan, 2022). Using descriptive case study methodology, this article is structured in four sections. The first section analyzes the enduring centrality of the Middle East in global energy geopolitics, emphasizing how oil and gas reserves have historically anchored both regional security dynamics and international power competition. It traces the evolution from U.S.-led unipolar dominance—shaped by Cold War imperatives and the petrodollar system—to a more contested multipolar landscape marked by rising Asian powers, and de-dollarization. In the second section, the article focuses on the intensification of pipeline politics under multipolarity. Through examples ranging from the Syrian crisis to the Strait of Hormuz, this section also illustrates how energy infrastructure has

become both a strategic asset and a source of geopolitical vulnerability. It analyzes the strategic role of new transnational energy infrastructure and corridor diplomacy (e.g., IMEC and BRI) in reconfiguring regional alignments and investment flows. In the third section, economic diversification in the region and an outlook beyond oil is presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a section devoted to how Middle Eastern countries are actively pursuing long-term economic diversification to reduce dependence on oil, foster sustainable development, and reshape their identities through reform-driven modernization. Amid a global shift toward multipolarity and U.S. strategic retrenchment, the region is forging deeper economic and technological ties with rising Asian powers—most notably China, India, Japan, and South Korea—through investment, cooperation, and trade realignments, which reflects another aspect of multipolarization in the region.

Re-Situating the Middle East in Global Energy Geopolitics: From U.S. Unipolarity to Multipolarity

Given the abundance of Middle Eastern hydrocarbon (oil/gas) resources, international actors have exhibited strong interest in the region. A closer look at the Middle East's economic profile highlights the region's heavy reliance on natural resources, especially oil and gas. Countries in the region with significant oil reserves include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen, among others. Meanwhile, countries like Qatar and Iran have vast natural gas deposits. Historically, the establishment of OPEC in 1960 had greatly contributed to the balancing of worldwide oil markets. These institutions were essential in shaping the global oil market while keeping the oil crisis under control. As a result, oil became a supranational commodity and an integral part of every state's foreign strategy. Furthermore, the formation of regional organizations became an important component of regional integration and security. For instance, the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 ushered in the trend of

regional securitization interacting with foreign powers. Bahrain, for example, is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, n.d.). Indeed, the GCC was originally formed to enhance the economic and military security functionalities.

Traditionally, Europe had played a tangible role in the Middle East by establishing trade agreements with the region. With European powers playing a dominant role in the early phases of industrialization, they sought to assert a unipolar influence over the Middle East—shaping the region through protectorates and resisting nationalist movements. A key example is the joint UK-French opposition to Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. These dynamics were later altered when the Cold War powers (the United States and the Soviet Union) expanded their influence in the region, forcing Europe out. Yet, the end of the Cold War witnessed an expansion of US policy. Thus, the US emerged as a unipolar power in the Middle East, providing security to the region's trembling regimes. While Europe established trading relations with other regions, the US stimulated its ties with the region and developed a welcoming and friendly affiliation with the Middle East, with oil and security at its foundation. As Gause (1994) argues, "royalties from oil exploration concessions and then from the sale of oil provided a steady (and steadily increasing) source of revenue to the rulers of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharja (in what would become the UAE) from 1930s through the 1960s (Gause, 1994, p. 45)."

Indeed, natural resources (hydrocarbons) constitute a central pillar in the global security architecture, which are also crucial to the vitality of manufacturing. Thus, the US-led securitization arc was originally designed to prioritize these resources, ensuring their quick and easy transfer to approved clients. The United States became the main importer of Middle Eastern oil after World War II, forming a lasting partnership that impacted the political and economic development of the region. Moreover, the establishment of the petrodollar economy was facilitated by the enormous revenue

created for the area by the influx of Middle Eastern oil into US and European markets (Tran, 2024).

Historically, the Industrial Revolution had already caused global energy consumption to surge, laying the foundation for a petroleum-driven world. As modern technologies such as automobiles, transistors, and computers became widespread, the demand for oil grew even further. In response to this rising demand—and amid the gradual decline of U.S. unipolarity—several emerging economies later began strategically positioning themselves as future industrial powerhouses. Asian countries like China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Singapore made large investments in technological advancement and the training of skilled and semi-skilled labourers in order to take part in the global industrial boom in the longer term. China's remarkable transformation into a global manufacturing hub is particularly noteworthy (Gürcan, 2022). A key component of its strategic expansion was the acquisition of reliable energy supply, particularly from the Middle East. Beijing employed a deliberate and often sophisticated diplomatic approach to progressively develop ties with the region's key oil-producing countries. This new dynamic has sparked significant worries about Asia's expanding influence in regional security. China's place as a stable and important regional leader was solidified in March 2023, when it brokered a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Cafiero, 2024).

These events highlight the larger global trend towards a multipolar world system. For decades, the United States was a net oil exporter, now shifting its position in the global energy system. As the United States assumed the role of a crucial security guarantee, particularly for Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, and the larger Middle East region, this transactional relationship developed into a longer-term strategic engagement, but the emergence of the shale oil boom in the late 2000s marked a dramatic shift in this long-standing relationship. The US was able to maintain relative energy self-sufficiency thanks to the development of sophisticated extraction technologies and the subsequent relaxation of the oil export ban. America's energy policy and, by extension, its geopolitical interests in the Middle East were drastically

altered by the shale oil boom. Therefore, the conventional oil-for-security paradigm that had long defined U.S.-Middle Eastern ties has been successfully undermined by the shale revolution. Washington's strategic engagement in the region sparked a process of recalibration with greater energy independence, raising serious questions about the viability of its long-standing security commitments.

Indeed, petroleum has historically occupied a central and indispensable role in the formation and maintenance of ties between the United States and the Middle East. The influx of petrodollars had helped fuel economic development across the region. At the same time, oil trade became increasingly securitized — and at times weaponized. A key example is the 1973 oil embargo, when Arab members of OPEC halted exports to the US and others in response to their support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War. The move triggered a global energy crisis and sent oil prices soaring, demonstrating the geopolitical power of energy. There are numerous other examples throughout history where energy conduits were secured through militarization. Oil tankers were attacked in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), which seriously disrupted the economy. The ongoing fragility of these crucial chokepoints was highlighted in 2024 when US Navy personnel escorted commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz after Houthi strikes. As described by Pradhan (2024),"the recent involvement of the Houthis in the war against Israel has further escalated tensions in the Red Sea, creating significant maritime security challenges for Saudi Arabia. …In response to the deteriorating security situation in the Red Sea, a US-led military coalition has launched Operation Prosperity Guardian to ensure maritime security in the region."

Similarly, the US-led involvement during Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait was a calculated effort to safeguard Saudi Arabia and larger regional oil flows in addition to being a reaction to regional aggression. These incidents highlight the Middle East's ongoing significance in US energy policy, beginning with Saudi Arabia, which has long been seen as a crucial "swing producer" due to its exceptional capacity to raise or lower output. Riyadh has gained significant

clout in international diplomacy and the energy markets thanks to this role (Colgan, 2013).

On the one hand, the economic development of today's developing Asian countries cannot keep up with the military influence of the West, particularly the United States. On the other, US unipolar power in the region is under strain as other Asian nations, like China, are significantly expanding their economies in the Middle East. Middle Eastern oil and gas (LNG) transactions are moving away from dollars and towards alternative currency options like the Yuan, Ruble, Euro, and Rupee due to impending issues. For instance, India and Saudi Arabia signed a currency exchange deal for trade (including oil) in 2021. India-Russia oil commerce is conducted in rupees. Moreover, China and Russia agreed on oil-for-loans arrangements in 2016 for the next 25 years. Saudi Arabia and China also reached a currency swap arrangement. Similarly, in 2023, China and Saudi Arabia entered into a local currency swap arrangement valued at $7 billion, aimed at enhancing bilateral trade through the use of their national currencies and diminishing dependence on the U.S. dollar (Bhaduri, 2024). That same year, Iraq permitted the settlement of trade transactions with China in yuan for the first time, marking a significant shift in regional financial practices. In March 2023, China conducted its inaugural liquefied natural gas (LNG) purchase from the UAE using yuan (Chang et al., 2024). In Iran's case, approximately 45% of payments for oil imports were settled in Indian rupees and deposited into an account held at UCO Bank in Kolkata, while the remaining balance was disbursed in euros via Türkiye (Ramdas, 2013).

In this environment, the global recognition of risks undermining the regional security architecture prompted the involvement of multiple actors to fill the resulting power vacuum. As a result, emphasis is placed on the Middle East's stability and security to guarantee the safe flow of energy from these high-risk waters. The involvement of other stakeholders has become more conducive to the changing geopolitical environment. This can be viewed through the lens of pipeline politics as a contributor to the Syrian crisis, as well as Russia's military participation in Syria after 2014. Conse-

quently, the new energy geopolitics has become a complex game with several contestants, pushing multipolarity to the forefront. In addition to extra-regional powers, non-state actors such as Hamas, the Houthis, and Hezbollah are also competing for influence and access to oil revenues. Put differently, a growing number of less powerful regional actors—often adversarial to the U.S. and ideologically distinct—are nonetheless asserting themselves and increasingly challenging American dominance in the Middle East. Nevertheless, no other state has yet matched the United States in providing the same level of strategic security and protection.

Corridor Geopolitics: Energy, Infrastructure, and New Routes of Global Power in the Multipolar Era

The Cold War era, a corollary of World War II, had opened the way for a bipolar order between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US. During this era, oil inevitably became the backbone of military-industrial complexes that produced new armaments, fighter jets, choppers, and submarines. While the Cold War solidified the strategic importance of Middle Eastern oil, the evolving global energy landscape has introduced new dynamics that continue to make the region central to geopolitical competition. Many argue that the future of oil looks bleak, as the coming era is expected to be increasingly dominated by alternative and renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, hydro, nuclear, and, to a lesser extent, liquefied natural gas (LNG). Even in the most pessimistic forecasts, however, hydrocarbons remain the backbone of manufacturing and will continue to drive global economic development. This is where the Middle East retains its strategic significance.

Worthy of special emphasis in this regard is that regional suppliers such as Qatar have been active in the LNG market. Controlling the flow of resources means shaping the very rules of the game, which is why energy pipeline projects often compete with one another. Syria is a typical example of how pipeline geopolitics may be used to contribute to major conflicts, where external powers

strive to maintain influence in the region by leveraging internal divisions and strategic dependencies (Gürcan, 2019). As Hinnebusch further explains, "when there is a hegemonic power (UK, USA) able to 'lay down the law' on behalf of the world capitalist system (in the Middle East ensuring its access to cheap energy), and especially if the regional system is simultaneously divided (the usual condition), it is easy for external powers to exploit local rivalries to sustain their penetration of the region (Hinnebusch, 2003, p. 4)."

The projected natural gas pipelines therefore provide a clear example of the competitiveness in the Middle East's energy sector. For example, a proposed pipeline that would start in Iran, go via Syria, and end at ports in Europe directly threatened Qatar's ambitions to increase its natural gas exports to the rich European market (Gürcan, 2019). Being a large and energy-intensive economic union with 27 member states, the European Union is a highly sought-after location for gas exports. The fact that opposing coalitions of countries supported these competing pipeline projects emphasizes even more how the dynamics of a changing, multipolar world order are changing. According to Rettig, "now that the Assad regime has fallen and relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia have warmed, Turkey is again interested in advancing the Turkey-Qatar gas pipeline project (Rettig, 2025, p. 2)."

The extensive network of Russian gas pipelines that currently supplies much of Europe's energy needs offers another compelling example supporting the narrative of growing multipolarity. Particularly, the Nord Stream pipeline, which directly channels Russian gas to Europe, has fostered a situation of increasing energy reliance on Russia for numerous European states. On the other hand, the United States aggressively backed the construction of the Nabucco pipeline, a project designed to deliver natural gas from Central Asia to European markets, in an attempt to lessen Europe's reliance on Russian gas supplies. This initiative effectively demonstrates that pipeline politics in the Middle East are not isolated phenomena but rather integral components of broader energy strategies on a planetary scale, within which the Middle East region continues to occupy a pivotal position. Moreover, traditional maritime channels such as

the Suez Canal and straits such as Hormuz and Malacca have survived to bear large chunks of the global maritime energy traffic. A quarter of global oil trade goes through the Straits. Yet, traditional vessels have restricted access due to two factors: the limited depth of these routes/channels and their deterioration due to extensive usage.

The status of high seas has been jeopardized in recent decades as a result of terrorist activities, wars, piracy, and other non-state activities. These several issues make the Middle East geo-economically susceptible to instabilities while preserving their relevance. Due to pipeline sabotage by various terrorists and non-state actors, meanwhile, the land infrastructure that delivers enormous amounts of gas and oil resources is in danger. In a similar vein, Middle Eastern countries like Iran are unable to sell their gas to many other countries due to certain limitations, but they do supply these resources to some neighboring countries like Türkiye. Much of this interruption has been caused by the continuing Hamas-Israeli conflict since the October 7, 2023 attacks. Furthermore, several factions seek to control these corridors, which are critical for the survival of global trade. One of the grounds for the Houthis' attack on the Red Sea was control of the Bab-al-Mandeb trade route. These wars have compounded the region's economic turmoil, forcing its people to flee neighbouring countries and resulting in economic disparities and suffering. For example, as reported by Malek (2024), "Iran's natural gas pipelines were attacked last month (in February 2024), disrupting flows to the provinces of Chaharmaha - Bakhtiari and Fars."

In this context, non-Western powers were able to fill the power vacuum created by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the emergence of ISIS, and the ongoing instability in the area. After 2011, Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East accelerated. The United States' slow withdrawal from Iraq and Syria due to changing priorities and internal issues made room, not only for Iran and Russia, but also for India and China to project regional influence, which strengthened the broader trend towards a multipolar world order.

India's larger goals to increase connectivity across regions are reflected in its strategic initiatives, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). By connecting New Delhi with important allies like Tehran and Riyadh, these initiatives aspire to expand India's reach to as far as Europe. A smooth commerce and transportation route from India through the Middle East and into European markets is what IMEC specifically envisions, highlighting the geopolitical and economic significance of corridor diplomacy in a world that is becoming more and more multipolar. Through the Mediterranean Sea, it links Greece (and other European nations) with Saudi Arabia, Israel, India, and the United Arab Emirates. The rail line links Jebel Ali (UAE) to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and Haifa (Israel), while the maritime route runs from Mumbai to Jebel Ali (UAE) and Haifa (Israel) to Piraeus (Greece).

China's economic corridors, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), express similar aspirations. As highlighted by Siddiqi (2022, p. 74), "the Khalifa port in UAE, Duqm port in Oman, Jizan port in Saudi Arabia, Port Said in Egypt and Ain Sokhna port in Djibouti all form part of Chinese ongoing projects in the region under BRI." These corridors are transnational and pass through many countries and regions. China's Silk Road cuts through Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Türkiye, to Russia, finally reaching the European touchpoints of France and Belgium, with further scope for expansion. The Maritime Silk Route passes through the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, into the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, touching the coasts of Greece and Italy. Such alternative routes increase the buoyancy of global trade while addressing issues such as piracy and other attacks on shipping routes.

Indeed, corridor strategies and pipeline geopolitics are inextricably linked. This being said, the building of pipelines is frequently motivated by factors other than financial gain, and they might be national, regional, or worldwide in scope. Fundamentally, they are geared towards guaranteeing that energy will always be available, reasonably priced, and plentiful for the people who rely on it. Cross-border collaboration is also crucial since the nations that these

important infrastructures pass through are ultimately responsible for their upkeep and security. The strain on existing networks gradually lessens as new pipeline routes are designed and constructed. The transportation of petroleum and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Middle East is likely to account for a large portion of the traffic that passes through these new corridors. This change could lessen Europe's reliance on established vendors like Russia.

In this changing landscape, energy geopolitics is no longer just about supply and demand. It is also about the strategic realignment of alliances and the adoption of new frameworks to navigate a world shaped by evolving energy corridors and interconnected interests. These new corridors compete and operate as a deterrent to the opposing influence (for instance, IMEC vs. BRI), and they also serve as alternate ways to a safe business channel for the shipment of oil and LNG, both of which are endangered by acts of militancy and terrorism. For example, in 2019, Houthi forces launched coordinated attacks on key Saudi oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq, significantly disrupting the country's oil output (Hubbard, Karasz, & Reed, 2019). They took control of an oil storage facility in Jeddah once more in 2022, which for several months raised questions regarding the safety of Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2022). In the meantime, tensions in the region have also focused on a crucial oil pipeline that connects to Israel's Red Sea refinery and passes through the Negev Desert close to the Israel-Gaza border. Critical pipeline infrastructure has been the subject of recent Hamas and Houthi conflicts, thus endangering Israel's energy security.

These events demonstrate how vulnerable energy corridors are in conflict areas and how crucial multilateral cooperation is to their planning and protection. In order to maintain security and stability, the concept of a multipolar energy landscape requires the participation of numerous stakeholders in addition to varied supply and demand. The economic fortunes of many Middle Eastern countries were also permanently impacted by the volatility of world oil prices after the Arab Spring in 2011. Long stretches of low prices compelled numerous governments to enact tax and fiscal changes in

order to control widening budget deficits, even while price spikes were advantageous for oil-exporting nations that depend on petroleum earnings to finance their national budgets.

A Future Beyond Oil? Economic Transformation and Strategic Diversification in the Middle East

When weighed against the flaws and challenges of an oil-based economy, the non-oil economic model appears to make sense, considering that it is being built with the grand goal of sustainability, job creation, and contribution to the state's coffers, all while striving to establish a new identity that is both modern and rooted in Islamic traditions. Nevertheless, economic diversification plans and other transformative socio-economic programs launched by Middle Eastern nations is expected to be a long-term strategy that will boost the region's financial capabilities while also making it less dependent on fluctuating oil prices. Furthermore, many regional countries propose privatizing only a tiny fraction of their public enterprises under this strategy. For example, in 2016, Saudi Arabia proposed privatizing a tiny portion of its national oil business, the Saudi Arabian Oil business (Saudi ARAMCO) (Macalister, 2016).

The changing status quo in the Middle East has created opportunities for boosting foreign investment, particularly from Asia including India, China, Japan, and South Korea. Today, virtually every sector of the economy — from manufacturing and healthcare to services, tourism, real estate, renewable energy, desalination, education, and agriculture — has been opened up to investments (Hertog, 2017). Energy, however, continues to be at the center of most economic activity and to attract most of the attention and capital despite this wide diversification. Nevertheless, Asian countries may play a significant role in promoting technical innovation in all these sectors. This responsibility has grown more prominent in light of the United States' increasingly restrained global posture. Since the beginning of President Trump's second term, there has been a visible trend of the U.S. scaling back its commitments to

long-standing allies, including those in Europe. While its position towards international organizations, including repeated threats to leave the WTO, UN, and the Paris Agreement, has cast doubt on its dependability as a partner, the nation's foreign policy has become more focused on problems like Taiwan, Ukraine, and support for Israel.

In the Middle East, this changing dynamic is particularly noticeable. Instead of depending solely on Washington, major regional powers—especially Saudi Arabia—are now actively expanding their diplomatic and strategic alliances. The tendency towards a multipolar world order, in which power is shared by multiple international actors rather than concentrated in one superpower, is reflected in this evolution. As an alternative to the West, the Middle East is making a 'Pivot to Asia', with the give-and-take relationship principally rooted in the Oil for Technology plan, which is fitting for the demands of the time. Asia's emerging techno-hubs, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, can act as potential investors in Middle East growth if they meet their investment conditions. For example, Japan and Saudi Arabia have signed numerous Memorandums of Cooperation (MOCs) to boost the Saudi hydrocarbon (oil/gas) industry (Japan Oil, Gas & Metals National Corporation, n.d.). India's ONGC Videsh Ltd., a national oil firm (NOC), has energy assets in several Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the UAE (ONGC Videsh Limited, n.d.). Beijing's China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has assets in Iraq, Oman, and the UAE, while China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) has stakes in Iraq in the Middle East. Beijing also has invested more than forty billion dollars in energy-related areas in the region (Reuters, 2024). As another Reuters report highlights, "Abu Dhabi's state-owned Mubadala Investment Company [MUDEV.UL] has acquired a 44 percent stake worth at least $271 million (203 million pounds) in an oil subsidiary of gas giant Gazprom (Reuters, 2018)."

Meanwhile, in many Middle Eastern countries, societal dynamics are also changing dramatically. The Gulf area is a prime example of how global trends are changing and how communities

engage with their governments. These adjustments are part of a larger social and economic reform agenda that aims to meet calls for increased social, political, and economic equality. Equal rights for men and women as well as larger social spaces that promote cooperation and public engagement are increasingly being pronounced. Thus, similar to social systems in the West, the social contract between the state and its citizens is changing to provide more chances for democratic participation. For a larger portion of the population, this new framework seeks to convert economic progress into human development. Many of the most important economic changes in the region are occurring in this part of the Middle East (Goldani & Asadi Tirvan, 2024).

Accordingly, several nations, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain, have published extensive Vision Documents detailing their long-term economic goals (International Monetary Fund, 2023). The continuous transition away from reliance on oil earnings and towards new industries including tourism, real estate, and agriculture stands as the main aspiration in these strategic documents. This aspired change is a component of a larger economic diversification strategy, which is essential to the region's attempts to create economies that are more resilient and sustainable in the long run. The area has been dominated by a handful for several decades, but as it opens its doors to many new and growing powers, competition is expected to heat up. Since World War II, the shortage of energy (oil/gas) sources has been more obvious, since there were fewer suppliers and more consumers. However, consumers now enjoy easier access to energy supplies thanks to increased production from the Middle East, Central Asia, Russia, Africa, the United States, Australia, and the growing availability of LNG from Asia. With a number of new producers entering the market, the tension and competitiveness for oil and gas resources that existed a few decades ago have decreased. Notably, consumers now have more negotiating leverage as businesses compete for market share.

According to Ghoble (2023), the current situation in the region reflects a broader shift from a bipolar world order dominated by the U.S. and the Soviet Union to a more multipolar landscape that

includes emerging powers like China. U.S. shale-based LNG, with its flexibility and lack of destination constraints, allows the U.S. to supply markets globally. Both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are vying to expand their reach into major consumer markets, positioning themselves as rivals in the LNG sector. This puts them in direct competition with Russia and other LNG exporters, likely intensifying geopolitical tensions and fueling a growing sense of insecurity (Ghoble, 2023, pp. 87–88). As a result, importer nations enjoy a competitive advantage over producers. The US shale oil revival has resulted in new alignments. It became clear when Washington lifted its oil export ban and became a net exporter of oil to numerous countries across the world. This had a significant economic impact on Middle Eastern oil exports, particularly Saudi Arabia, which was the main exporter to the United States. It also undermined the strength of the 1945 Oil-for-Security agreement between the two countries. Yet, the United States continues to dominate the global energy arena—not just as a key supplier, but as the only country with the capacity to safeguard energy flows and mitigate risks linked to trade routes and terrorism (Pant, 2008).

Conclusion

The Middle East has long occupied a central position in the architecture of global energy geopolitics, and this role remains critical despite accelerating global shifts toward alternative and renewable energy sources. As this article has shown, the region's strategic value continues to derive not only from its vast oil and gas reserves but also from the broader geopolitical leverage these resources afford. In the meantime, the traditional framework of U.S. unipolar dominance—rooted in Cold War alignments, the petrodollar economy, and security-based partnerships—has been increasingly challenged by emerging powers and reconfigured by new patterns of energy trade, infrastructure development, and diplomatic engagement. While the United States retains an unmatched capacity to secure energy flows through its military reach and strategic partnerships, its energy independence through shale gas and its shifting foreign

policy priorities have significantly altered the foundations of its engagement with the Middle East.

In this evolving landscape, multipolarity has emerged as both a structural condition and a guiding logic of contemporary global energy politics. New entrants—including China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Russia—have not only deepened their economic involvement in the region but also actively sought to reshape its energy geography through strategic investments, local currency agreements, and long-term corridor projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). These initiatives illustrate how pipeline geopolitics and maritime trade routes now function as key instruments of soft power, infrastructure-led diplomacy, and geo-economic rivalry. The competition among these corridors reflects not just market ambitions but also competing visions of global order, with the Middle East serving as both a node and a gateway between continents, resources, and ideologies.

At the same time, Middle Eastern states themselves are no longer passive arenas of great power influence but increasingly assertive agents in their own right. Through national development strategies such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and similar initiatives in Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE, the region is embracing a model of economic diversification aimed at reducing vulnerability to oil price volatility and aligning with long-term sustainability goals. These strategies reflect a dual aspiration: to modernize and globalize domestic economies while maintaining political continuity and cultural identity. The selective privatization of state-owned enterprises, the expansion of non-oil sectors such as tourism, logistics, and green energy, and the active courting of Asian investment all indicate a regional shift toward strategic autonomy within a multipolar framework.

Yet, this transformation is not without its contradictions and constraints. The geopolitical competition over energy transit routes, the militarization of critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, and the persistent threats posed by non-state actors underscore the region's enduring fragility.

Episodes such as the 2019 and 2022 Houthi attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure, the vulnerability of Israel's pipeline network during the Hamas conflict, and disruptions to Iranian exports all reveal how energy corridors remain exposed to political and military contestation. Moreover, the increasing number of energy suppliers —from Central Asia to Africa and North America—has intensified global competition, offering consumers greater leverage but putting downward pressure on traditional exporters, particularly those whose economies remain undiversified.

Nevertheless, despite this rising competition and global energy diversification, the Middle East's hydrocarbons continue to serve as a cornerstone of global industrial output and economic growth. Even under the most ambitious energy transition scenarios, oil and gas will retain a significant share of the global energy mix for decades to come. This reality ensures that the region will continue to play a key role in shaping the future of global energy security and geopolitics—albeit one that is more contested, multipolar, and structurally complex than in the past.

In sum, the re-situation of the Middle East in global energy geopolitics reflects a convergence of old continuities and new departures. While fossil fuel wealth remains the bedrock of the region's strategic importance, the actors involved, the mechanisms of influence, and the frameworks of engagement have all shifted profoundly. The emerging multipolar order is not merely redistributing power across new corridors and alliances—it is also redefining the norms, priorities, and vulnerabilities that shape energy governance in the 21st century. Understanding the Middle East's evolving role requires moving beyond static binaries of dependency or dominance, and instead recognizing the region as a dynamic space where global transitions in energy, power, and development are unfolding in real time. The stakes of this transformation—economic, environmental, and geopolitical—will continue to reverberate far beyond the region itself.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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The European Union as a Geopolitical Actor

TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC-NORMATIVE AGENDA

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Received: 20 July 2025 | **Revised:** 26 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 26 November 2025

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.003

Abstract

This study employs a qualitative analytical methodology grounded in a comprehensive review of policy documents, strategic statements by European political leaders, and relevant literature to examine the European Union (EU) as a multifaceted geopolitical actor. It applies a geopolitics-as-method-of-analysis framework, drawing particularly on Jakub J. Grygiel's conceptualization of geopolitics as the environment within which states operate, and Nuno Morgado's neoclassical geopolitics model, which highlights how systemic stimuli are filtered through the perceptions and capacities of decision-making elites. This dual theoretical lens is used to explore the EU's strategic priorities, value-driven identity, and diverse foreign policy instruments. As such, the study innovatively integrates theoretical perspectives on EU power identity, tracing its evolution from the framework of "Civilian Power Europe" to the notions of "normative power", "ethical power", and "militarization", thus offering a

nuanced understanding of the EU's hybrid civilian-military role. Through a systematic mapping of the EU's geopolitical focus on key regions—Europe (notably Ukraine), the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and global partners—alongside an examination of its normative values and policy toolkit, the study advances EU studies by bridging theoretical discourse with practical developments. Its critical engagement with tensions between ideals and pragmatism, as well as coordination challenges among member states, provides fresh insights into the EU's capacity and constraints as a global actor. This work contributes to the evolving scholarship by proposing a "pragmatic-normative" approach that accommodates the EU's unique post-Westphalian, hybrid nature in international relations.

Keywords
EU, actorness, instruments, values, identity

Introduction

Not long ago, the notion of geopolitics was not well-received in the chambers of academics or among policymakers navigating the halls of Western powerhouses. It smacked of a negative connotation with World War II and the Nazi-led foreign policy, and worse still, with the tragic consequences of some of the Third Reich's policies that led, among others, to the Holocaust. Yet, the European Union (EU) recently launched a website titled The EU as a Global Actor (EUStrategic Communications, 2023), which reads: "The European Union and its Member States are engaged around the world to promote peace, security and prosperity and the interests of European citizens. To this end, the EU works to prevent and resolve conflicts, to foster resilient democracies, to promote human rights and sustainable development, and to bolster a cooperative and rules-based global order". In a similar context, Youngs (2022) observes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has widely been perceived as pushing the EU toward greater geopolitical cohesion and assertiveness, with developments in foreign and security policy advancing

more rapidly in a few months than over previous decades. As highlighted by Youngs (2022), Josep Borrell even described this situation as "the awakening of geopolitical Europe". Yet, while member states have displayed greater unity in some areas, divisions remain in others. Despite a notable shift in external action, there is little indication so far that the EU is projecting a fundamentally stronger or different kind of international power than before the war. At present, no radically new European geostrategy has emerged (Youngs, 2022). According to Youngs (2022), the war also forces a far less reassuring reflection on the EU's international role and identity. Despite some optimistic rhetoric, Russia's invasion marks a profound policy failure for the Union, one that has cost tens of thousands of Ukrainian lives. Youngs further stresses that analyses of EU external action must shift in light of the conflict, as it raises conceptual questions that are almost the reverse of those typically posed in this field. Supplementing these observations, Table 1 here offers a detailed breakdown of recent statements and actions by European political leaders, organized by country and role, talking about the EU as a "geopolitical actor".

Table 1. Geopolitical Discourse and Strategic Attitude of European Leaders, 2022–2025
(Source: Author)

Leader	Country/Role	Date	Action/Discussion	Details
Keir Starmer	UK	March 2025	Hosted "Securing Our Future" summit	Announced "coalition of the willing" for Ukraine, 4-point plan, $2B air defense missiles, emphasizing European security
Friedrich Merz	Germany	March 2025	Announced defense spending overhaul	Exempted military spending above 1% GDP from debt brake
Emmanuel Macron	France	March 2025	Gave national address on Europe's security needs	Emphasized Ukraine's role, rejected abandonment, called for national and European defense reinforcement, nuclear deterrent discussion
Ursula von der Leyen	EU (Commission President)	March 2025	Outlined ReArm Europe initiative	Proposed joint borrowing for defense, adapting debt rules, mentioned "indigestible steel porcupine" for Ukraine
Josep Borrell	EU (High Representative)	2022	Declared "awakening of geopolitical Europe"	Highlighted EU's need to assert itself as a global actor, part of broader strategic discussions

These examples illustrate a concerted effort by European leaders to position the EU as a geopolitical actor, particularly in response to external pressures. Particularly, Starmer's summit and Merz's defence spending proposals reflect national contributions to EU-wide goals. At the same time, Macron and von der Leyen's statements underscore the need for a unified European approach to security. Indeed, Borrell's earlier declaration provides historical context, showing a continuity in the discourse

In this context, the present study examine the EU as a multifaceted geopolitical actor, focusing on its strategic priorities, core values, foreign policy instruments, and evolving power identity. The first section establishes the conceptual framework by positioning geopolitics as a method of analysis, drawing on Grygiel's (2006) emphasis on geography as an external environment that imposes constraints and Morgado's (2020; 2023) neoclassical model that highlights how systemic stimuli are filtered through leaders' perceptions and institutional capacities. Within this framework, the subsequent section explores the EU's strategic regional priorities, focusing on Europe—especially Ukraine—as well as the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and global partners. Following this section, the study critically synthesizes the major analytical debates on the EU's identity and examines the core values underpinning EU foreign policy, including democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. Against this backdrop, the fourth section then outlines the core values—such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, multilateralism, sustainable development, peace, solidarity, and social justice—that the EU promotes globally, showing how they shape its identity and guide its foreign policy actions. The final section examines the diverse instruments through which the EU translates its values into action—ranging from sanctions, trade policy, strategic partnerships, mediation, and development aid to energy, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance, defence, enlargement, neighborhood policy, and multilateral engagement—highlighting how these tools collectively enable the Union to project influence, pursue strategic interests, and uphold its normative commitments on the global stage.

Conceptual Framework: Geopolitics as a Method of Analysis

Geopolitics has been used as an analytical tool since the 19th century. Its reputation was tarnished as a consequence of the policies of the Third Reich, both before and during World War II. However, it remains a valuable approach for explaining the nexus between states' foreign and security policies and their geographical location within a historical context. Geopolitics is therefore accepted as one of the grand theories of international relations (Sloan, 2017). Fundamentally, rather than treating states as separate, alienated geographical entities, geopolitics enables us to view a broader picture, encompassing regions or even the entire globe, thereby making it possible to account for interactions between multiple states and other actors operating within specific systems defined by geographical criteria.

Defining geopolitics is complex, as its meaning varies depending on the context and the user's perspective. It can be understood in several ways. For instance, the study of international relations in terms of geographical factors encompasses the influence of geography on political power, international relations, and the distribution of resources. This perspective often emphasizes the role of physical geography, such as location, terrain, and natural resources, in shaping political outcomes (Tuathail, 1994). Another way of looking at geopolitics is to describe it as a specific set of political beliefs or ideologies that often focuses on the importance of territorial expansion, national power, and strategic competition between states. This understanding of geopolitics can be associated with particular historical figures and movements, and it has sometimes been used to justify expansionist or aggressive foreign policies (Tuathail, 1994). Geopolitics can also be seen as a method of analysis. Geocriticism, for example, uses geographical space to understand literature and culture. Bertrand Westphal explains that geocriticism "incorporates the study of geographic space (as cited in Sárdi, 2015, p. 18)" in literary analysis. This approach emphasizes how geographical factors shape cultural and artistic expression.

This study adopts the "geopolitics as a method of analysis" framework with a specific reference to Jakub J. Grygiel and Nuno Morgado's works. According to Grygiel (2006), geopolitics exists outside the state; it is the environment within which, and in response to which, the state must act. The central thesis of Jakub Grygiel's book, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, is that geography and geopolitics play a crucial role in shaping international relations and US foreign policy. Grygiel argues that the physical facts of geography—specifically, resources and trade routes—create objective constraints that influence the foreign policy of states, which he refers to as geostrategy, focused on territorial security. He seeks to reassert the importance of geography in political discourse, suggesting that understanding geopolitical factors is vital for contemporary foreign policy despite the changes brought about by globalization and technology. Similarly, our analysis also engages with Nuno Morgado's work, particularly in the context of "neoclassical geopolitics", which operates within a "soft positivist" framework. Morgado (2020; 2023) argues for the consolidation of geopolitical studies under the label of neoclassical geopolitics, which he defines as a descriptive-analytical approach that explains how geography and other elements of state potential, filtered through the perceptions and capacities of decision-makers, shape foreign policy and international politics. Unlike classical geopolitics, which often leaned toward determinism, neoclassical geopolitics incorporates possibilism—the idea that geography provides opportunities and constraints but does not dictate outcomes—and stresses the importance of leaders' interpretations and strategic choices. The model rests on three sets of variables: systemic stimuli and material potential as independent variables, geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities as intervening variables, and foreign policy outcomes, particularly geopolitical design, as dependent variables (Morgado, 2020; 2023).

Accordingly, this study's discussion of the EU's prioritization of Ukraine in response to Russia's 2022 aggression reflects the type of systemic stimulus that Morgado (2020; 2023) highlights in his neoclassical geopolitics model: an external shock that compels the recalibration of foreign policy. The European Commission's 2025

work programme, which foregrounds the creation of a European Defence Union, exemplifies how institutional capacities and elite perceptions filter this stimulus into concrete geopolitical design. This also aligns with Grygiel's (2006) view that geopolitical realities—here, the need to secure territorial borders and ensure stability in Europe's eastern neighborhood—create objective pressures to which political actors must respond. Similarly, the EU's initiatives in the Mediterranean and Western Balkans illustrate how broader geopolitical environments, such as migration flows and enlargement dynamics, constrain and shape policy, while decision-makers' strategic framing—through instruments like the Mediterranean Pact and the New Growth Plan—mediate these pressures. In this sense, the paper implicitly applies Grygiel's (2006) notion of geopolitics as an external environment imposing constraints, while operationalizing Morgado's (2020; 2023) emphasis on the interaction between structural stimuli, elite perceptions, and institutional capacities in producing foreign policy outcomes.

The European Union as a Geopolitical Actor: Regional Priorities and Global Engagement

Building on this conceptual framework, it is now possible to situate the EU as a unique supranational entity that seeks to project influence in specific regions of strategic importance. Broadly speaking, geopolitical actors often concentrate their activities in specific regions, reflecting their strategic interests, the availability of resources, and historical ties. In the case of the EU, the first and most obvious region is the European continent. Indeed, Ukraine stands out as a top priority due to Russia's ongoing aggression, which began in 2022. The European Commission's work program for 2025 also highlights Ukraine, focusing on building a European Defence Union in response to the war (European Movement International, 2025). This strongly reflects Ukraine's role in European security and the EU's efforts to ensure stability in its eastern neighbourhood.

Additionally, the Middle East and the Mediterranean are crucial

for addressing conflicts and managing migration. The Commission's work program for 2025 also includes a new Pact for the Mediterranean, aiming to deepen cooperation with the southern neighborhood. These efforts underscore the strategic importance of managing security challenges and migration flows in these areas (European Movement International, 2025). In a similar vein, the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighborhood are strategically crucial for EU enlargement and influence. The European Parliament's agenda for 2025 calls for supporting enlargement countries, particularly those in the Western Balkans, through initiatives such as the New Growth Plan. As Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas' priorities include a more strategic approach to the neighborhood, focusing on candidate countries and the Eastern Neighborhood (European Parliament, 2025). This reflects the EU's aim to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity in these regions, aligning with its broader enlargement strategy. Indeed, global partners such as India, South Africa, Brazil, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia are also important for the EU's international standing. Relatedly, Kaja Kallas' (2025) speech at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2025 highlights the significance of these countries, noting their perceived increase in EU influence over the next decade. Moreover, the EU's focus on economic statecraft and digital partnerships, as seen in discussions around the International Digital Strategy for 2025, further emphasizes the importance of these regions for strategic cooperation (European Commission, 2025), which aligns with the EU's goal to be a strong global player in security and foreign policy.

To summarize this section, the EU faces many challenges in these regions, including ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, migration pressures in the Mediterranean, and the need for consensus on enlargement in the Western Balkans. In this regard, experts and officials emphasize the importance of navigating transatlantic relations and responding to hybrid threats, which impact the EU's strategic approach to these regions (Marinova et al., 2024). Worthy of note is that several measures are underway to address these priorities. The EU is pushing for a European Defence

Union, increasing defence spending, and enhancing cooperation with NATO, particularly in response to the threats posed by Russia. For the Middle East and Mediterranean, the EU is fostering partnerships through the Mediterranean Pact and supporting reconstruction plans in Gaza. In the Western Balkans, the New Growth Plan aims to support economic development and integration. Finally, regarding global partners, the EU seems to be mostly focusing on financial and digital cooperation.

Analytical Approaches to the the Evolving Nature of EU Power: Between Identity and Material Interests

Having identified the regions in which the EU seeks to assert its influence in response to systemic stimuli, the next step is to follow Morgado's analytical sequence by examining how these external pressures are mediated through the perceptions and capacities of EU elites and institutions. To fully grasp these contemporary debates on perceptions, however, it is necessary to situate them within the deeper, historically rooted discussions on the EU's evolving identity.

In recent history, it is Francois Duchene's idea of "Civilian Power Europe" (CPE) that once dominated debates about the role of Europe and European institutions in the world. Duchêne's concept of CPE refers to a particular role for Europe in the world that emphasizes non-military means of influence and the promotion of international values. Duchêne's original idea, articulated in the early 1970s, suggested that Europe could play a distinctive role based on low politics, non-state actors, ideational influences, and international interdependence rather than traditional military power. The CPE concept highlights Europe's potential to exercise considerable non-military power, combining the power dimensions akin to a "European Trading State", with a normative foreign policy perspective aimed at promoting values such as equality, justice, and concern for people with low incomes abroad (Orbie, 2006).

Fast forward to the 21st century, and Ian Manners proposes

another equally influential concept, namely "normative power". Ian Manners' main argument is that the EU should be understood not only in terms of traditional conceptions of "civilian power" or "military power" but rather as a "normative power" in international relations. He contends that the EU's international role is fundamentally based on its ability to shape norms and define what is considered "normal" in world politics. This normative power stems from the EU's unique historical context, hybrid political structure, and constitutional basis, which predispose it to act normatively by promoting principles such as peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Manners argues that this normative dimension is crucial for understanding the EU's identity and influence internationally, as exemplified by the EU's active pursuit of the international abolition of the death penalty. He emphasizes that the EU's power lies less in its military or economic capabilities and more in its capacity to diffuse norms and reshape international standards, making the concept of "normative power Europe" not a contradiction but a significant form of power in world politics (Manners, 2002).

Shortly afterwards, Lisbeth Aggestam proposed yet another concept regarding the nature and role of the EU in the world: "ethical power". The concept of "ethical power Europe" (EPE) in EU foreign policy represents a shift from focusing on what the EU "is" to what it "does". It articulates the EU's ambition to be a proactive global actor that not only serves as a positive role model but actively works to change the world in the direction of a "global common good". This involves the EU taking on new tasks in crisis management, peacekeeping, state-building, and reconstruction of failing states, complementing its existing roles in development aid and humanitarian assistance. The EU positions itself as a "force for good" and a peacebuilder in the world, justifying its acquisition of both civilian and military power capabilities in these terms (Aggestam, 2008).

EPE encompasses both civilian and military power, as well as social and material power, thereby broadening the scope beyond

earlier concepts, such as civilian power in Europe, as proposed by Duchene, and normative power, as emphasized by Manners, which primarily focused on civilian and normative influence. The EPE concept also reintroduces the international and national dimensions into the analysis of the EU's role, recognizing the importance of member states' interests and acknowledging that material interests and ethical considerations often overlap.

Importantly, EPE is not presented as an empirical reality but rather as a concept that opens new lines of critical reflection on the EU's role, motivations, and ethical dilemmas in foreign policy. It recognizes the complexity of ethical foreign policy, given competing visions of order and justice in the world and the challenges of translating ethical ambitions into practice. The concept invites analysis of the ethical values the EU promotes, the relationship between ethics and interests, the just use of power (including military force), and the problems inherent in pursuing a consistent ethical foreign policy.

Conversely, Karen Smith asserts that CPE is definitively dead, and the EU now finds itself somewhere along a spectrum between civilian and military power, like most other international actors. Rather than debating whether the EU is a civilian power, the focus should be on critically analyzing what the EU does and what it should do in international relations (Smith, 2005). According to Smith, the implications of the EU employing military means are significant and multifaceted.

Firstly, the EU's acquisition and use of military instruments challenge the notion that the EU remains a purely "civilian power". Clinging to the civilian power label stretches the term beyond its breaking point, as military means are fundamentally non-civilian. Peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, often considered civilian activities, frequently involve military personnel and can evolve into military operations, thereby further blurring the distinction between civilian and military roles. Secondly, by using military instruments—even as a "residual" tool to safeguard other means—the EU complicates the clear-cut distinction between civilian and military power.

This leads to fuzzy interpretations about when the EU ceases to be a civilian power, making it difficult to establish a clear cut-off point or assess changes along the civilian-military spectrum. Thirdly, employing military means signals a shift from a post-modern, law-based international identity toward a more traditional power politics approach. This militarization risks discrediting the EU's earlier vision of transforming international relations through law and civilian influence alone. The EU moves closer to a "Hobbesian" model where military force backs diplomacy, which may undermine its unique post-modern identity and soft power. Fourthly, the use of military force raises complex questions about the EU's ends and means, including the justifications for intervention, the legitimacy of coercion, and democratic control over foreign policy decisions. Finally, the continued use of military means necessitates moving beyond simplistic categorizations of civilian power to a more nuanced analysis of what the EU does in international relations. The EU, like most actors, falls somewhere along a spectrum between civilian and military power, and its military capabilities must be critically assessed rather than dismissed or downplayed.

Overall, it is possible to argue that all of these concepts are limited in their explanatory power and do not present the whole picture of the complexity of the EU as a geopolitical actor and its character. They should be treated as helpful and yet highly focused and therefore biased. In this context, one could consider a concept articulated by Damro, who asserts that the EU should be fundamentally perceived as a "market power Europe" (MPE). This perspective suggests that the EU's identity is primarily derived from its status as a large single market characterized by significant institutional features and competing interest groups. This identity enables the EU to exert influence in international affairs through the externalization of its economic and social market-related policies and regulatory measures. Damro contends that this exercise of power can be both intentional and unintentional, employing both persuasive and coercive means to influence global actors. He contrasts this conceptualization of the EU with the more prevalent "normative power

Europe" (NPE) approach, which emphasizes the EU's normative identity. Instead, Damro highlights the material basis of the EU's power, rooted in market size, regulatory capacity, and interest group contestation (Damro, 2012).

Values of the EU as a Geopolitical Actor

The EU has consistently positioned itself as a unique international actor, driven by a set of core values that guide its foreign policy. These values are not only enshrined in the EU's founding treaties but are also reflected in its external actions, policies, and strategies. This section explores the central values underpinning EU foreign policy.

Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are central to the EU's identity and foreign policy. The EU is often described as a "normative power" that seeks to promote these values globally. Therefore, the promotion of human rights is a cornerstone of EU foreign policy. The EU actively advocates for human rights in international forums and through its bilateral and multilateral relations. For instance, the EU has been a vocal critic of human rights violations in non-Western countries, where it has called for greater respect for civil and political rights (Balducci, 2008). Overall, the EU's human rights promotion efforts are guided by its commitment to the universality and indivisibility of human rights, as enshrined in international human rights law. This approach is reflected in the EU's support for human rights defenders and its opposition to practices such as capital punishment and torture.

Importantly, the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, as outlined in its 2021 strategy, highlights its commitment to democracy and human rights as part of its geopolitical leadership (Michalski & Parker, 2024). In a similar vein, the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions emphasize the promotion of human rights and the rule of law in conflict zones (Khan, 2023). The EU's dedication to these values is also evident in its enlargement policies. As part of the accession process, candidate

countries are required to respect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as stipulated in Article 49 of the Treaty on EU (TEU) (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016).

The EU is also a strong advocate for multilateralism and a rules-based international order. It actively supports international institutions and agreements, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Paris Agreement on climate change, to address global challenges (Obacz, 2023). The EU's commitment to multilateralism is rooted in its belief that a rules-based system is essential for maintaining global stability and prosperity. In its foreign policy, the EU often prioritizes cooperation over unilateral action. For example, its response to the war in Ukraine, including the imposition of sanctions on Russia and the provision of support to Ukrainian civilians, demonstrates its commitment to upholding international law and multilateral norms (Bosse, 2022).

In this regard, one should highlight that good governance and the rule of law are essential components of EU foreign policy. The EU promotes these principles in its external relations, particularly through its neighborhood policy and enlargement process. For instance, the EU requires candidate countries to demonstrate progress in combating corruption and ensuring judicial independence as part of the accession process (Niezen, 2017). The EU's emphasis on good governance is also reflected in its development cooperation policies, which prioritize transparency, accountability, and the fight against corruption to ensure that aid is used effectively and efficiently.

Additionally, sustainable development and climate action are key components of EU foreign policy. The EU has been at the forefront of global efforts to combat climate change, as evidenced by its leadership in the Paris Agreement and its ambitious climate-neutrality targets under the European Green Deal (Michalski & Parker, 2024). The EU's external policies, including its development cooperation and trade agreements, are increasingly aligned with sustainable development goals (SDGs) to ensure that economic growth is environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, for instance, emphasizes the importance of sustain-

able connectivity and green transitions, reflecting its commitment to integrating climate action into its foreign policy.

Moreover, peace and security are fundamental objectives of EU foreign policy. The EU has been actively involved in peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts around the world, particularly through its CSDP missions and its support for transitional justice mechanisms (Khan, 2023; Davis, 2013). The EU's approach to peace and security is rooted in its commitment to human rights and the rule of law, as well as its belief in the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict. The EU's engagement in peace processes, such as its support for the two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict, highlights its dedication to promoting peace and stability in volatile regions.

Human dignity and solidarity are also core values that underpin the EU's foreign policy. The EU's response to the war in Ukraine, including its decision to grant Ukrainian nationals the right to live and work in the EU, reflects its commitment to protecting human dignity and upholding solidarity with affected populations (Bosse, 2022). This approach is also evident in the EU's humanitarian aid policies, which prioritize the protection of vulnerable populations in crisis situations. The EU's emphasis on human dignity is closely linked to its promotion of human rights and its opposition to practices that violate these rights, such as torture and the death penalty (King, 1999).

Finally, equality and social justice are integral to the EU's foreign policy. The EU promotes gender equality and women's empowerment in its external relations, as reflected in its development cooperation policies and its support for gender-sensitive peacebuilding initiatives (Bharti, 2024). The EU also advocates for social justice in its trade and investment agreements, ensuring that economic activities contribute to equitable development and do not exacerbate inequalities. The EU's commitment to equality is further evident in its support for the rights of marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals, in its neighborhood and enlargement policies (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016).

The Instruments of the EU as a Geopolitical Actor

If values represent the guiding principles of the EU's external action, then its foreign policy instruments constitute the practical means through which these principles are implemented and projected on the global stage. The EU has developed a diverse array of tools to conduct its foreign policy, reflecting its role as a geopolitical actor. This section of the article will examine most of these tools, starting with sanctions through energy policy and ending with crisis management. Importantly, sanctions have emerged as a cornerstone of EU foreign policy, particularly in response to geopolitical crises. The EU has increasingly relied on targeted sanctions to influence the behavior of third countries, as seen in cases such as Russia, Iran, and Myanmar. These sanctions are often designed to support human rights, democracy, and non-proliferation objectives. For instance, the EU has imposed comprehensive trade bans and asset freezes in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, demonstrating the scale and scope of its sanctions regime (Portela, 2014).

Indeed, the effectiveness of EU sanctions depends on several factors, including the level of support from regional powers, the presence of United Nations (UN) legitimation, and the robustness of enforcement mechanisms. While the EU has made efforts to develop targeted sanctions, challenges remain, particularly in terms of enforcement and coordination among member states. Despite these challenges, sanctions remain a critical tool for the EU to project influence and uphold its values on the global stage.

Trade policy is another key tool in the EU's foreign policy arsenal. The EU utilizes its economic influence to promote its strategic interests, whether through trade agreements, market access, or targeted restrictive measures. The EU's trade policy is closely tied to its geoeconomic strategy, which seeks to blend economic and security concerns. A case in point is how the EU uses trade restrictions and market access to influence the behavior of third countries, as part of its broader geoeconomic toolkit (Bauerle Danzman & Meunier, 2024).

The EU's trade policy is also closely linked to its development agenda. Through initiatives such as the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, the EU provides preferential access to its market for developing countries, while also promoting human rights and sustainable development. However, the effectiveness of EU trade policy as a foreign policy tool is constrained by institutional factors, such as the autonomy of the Directorate-General for Trade (DG Trade) and the influence of member states with divergent interests (Bossuyt et al., 2020).

Adding to sanctions and trade policy, strategic partnerships are a relatively new and evolving tool in EU foreign policy. These partnerships are designed to foster cooperation with major global actors on issues of mutual interest, such as climate change, trade, and security. The EU has established strategic partnerships with countries like China, India, and Brazil, as well as with regional organizations such as the African Union. These partnerships reflect the EU's commitment to multilateralism and its desire to address global challenges through collaborative efforts (Grevi, 2013).

While strategic partnerships have the potential to enhance the EU's influence on the global stage, their effectiveness is often hampered by a lack of coordination among EU institutions and member states. Additionally, the EU's strategic partnerships are often criticized for their lack of concrete outcomes, raising questions about their impact on the EU's foreign policy goals. Despite these challenges, strategic partnerships continue to be a valuable tool for the EU to engage with key global actors and advance its strategic interests.

Besides strategic partnerships, the EU has also emerged as an important international mediator, leveraging its diplomatic capabilities to broker peace and stability in conflict zones. For example, the EU has played a key role in mediating conflicts in the Western Balkans, particularly in the case of Kosovo and Serbia. The EU's mediation efforts are often supported by its ability to offer economic incentives, such as accession prospects or financial assistance, to encourage compromise and cooperation among conflicting parties (Růžek, 2022). Yet, the EU's effectiveness as a mediator has much to

do with its ability to project "smart power", which combines elements of hard and soft power. By leveraging its economic and diplomatic resources, the EU can influence the behavior of conflict parties and contribute to the resolution of disputes. However, the EU's mediation efforts are not without challenges, particularly in cases where the conflict parties are unwilling to compromise or where external actors undermine the EU's efforts.

One should add that the concept of smart power has become increasingly important in EU foreign policy, especially regarding security matters. Smart power refers to the combination of hard and soft power resources to achieve desired outcomes in international relations. The EU has sought to leverage its innovative power capabilities to address a range of challenges, from conflict resolution and crisis management to the promotion of democracy and human rights. For example, the EU has used its smart power to support democratic transitions in the Southern Neighborhood, combining economic incentives, diplomatic pressure, and support for civil society with military assistance and humanitarian aid (Matthiessen, 2013).

Development aid is another critical tool in the EU's foreign policy arsenal. The EU is one of the largest providers of official development assistance (ODA) in the world, and it uses this aid to promote development, reduce poverty, and foster stability in developing countries. The EU's development policy is closely aligned with its foreign policy objectives, particularly in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. For example, the EU has used development aid to support democratic transitions in the Southern Neighborhood and to address the root causes of migration and instability in Sub-Saharan Africa (Panchuk & Bossuyt, 2014). However, the effectiveness of EU development aid as a foreign policy tool is influenced by several factors, including the level of coordination among EU institutions and member states, the alignment of aid with the needs of recipient countries, and the ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of aid programs. While the EU has made progress in improving the effectiveness of its

development aid, challenges persist, particularly in ensuring that aid is utilized efficiently and contributes to sustainable development outcomes.

The EU has also experimented with lead groups and differentiated cooperation as tools for advancing its foreign policy objectives. Lead groups are informal coalitions of member states that take the initiative on specific issues, such as nuclear negotiations with Iran or conflict management in Ukraine. These groups have been effective in generating consensus and spurring action within the EU, particularly in cases where unanimity is difficult to achieve. For instance, the Franco-German duo played a key role in brokering a truce between Russia and Ukraine, demonstrating the potential of lead groups to give initiative and content to EU foreign policy (Alcaro & Siddi, 2021).

Differentiated cooperation, on the other hand, involves the participation of a subset of member states in specific policies or initiatives. This approach has been used in areas such as defence and security, where not all member states are willing or able to participate. While differentiated cooperation can enhance the effectiveness of EU foreign policy by allowing for more flexible and targeted action, it also risks undermining the unity and coherence of EU policy, particularly if it is not aligned with common EU values and positions (Siddi et al., 2022).

The concept of resilience has become an increasingly important tool in EU foreign policy, particularly in the context of its external action. The EU has sought to promote resilience in its neighborhood, particularly in regions characterized by limited statehood and contested orders. Resilience is understood as the ability of societies to withstand and recover from external shocks, whether these are related to conflict, economic instability, or environmental degradation. The EU has mobilized a range of instruments, including diplomacy, economic aid, and military means, to promote resilience in its neighborhood (Bargués et al., 2020).

The EU's approach to resilience is characterized by multiple, sustained, and indirect actions. By way of example, the EU has

provided long-term support to countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood to strengthen their institutions, promote economic development, and enhance their ability to withstand external pressures. While the EU's resilience approach has shown promise, its effectiveness is often constrained by the complexity of the challenges it seeks to address, as well as the need for greater coordination among EU institutions and member states.

In a similar context, the EU's comprehensive approach to security is another key tool in its foreign policy arsenal. This approach seeks to integrate the EU's various instruments, including diplomacy, development aid, humanitarian assistance, trade, and crisis management capabilities, into a coherent and effective response to security challenges. The comprehensive approach was formalized in the Lisbon Treaty and has been applied in a range of contexts, from conflict prevention and crisis management to post-crisis intervention. For example, the EU has used its comprehensive approach to address the security challenges posed by the conflict in Ukraine, combining sanctions, humanitarian aid, and support for reforms with military assistance and diplomatic engagement (Matthiessen, 2013). The effectiveness of the EU's comprehensive approach mostly concerns its ability to coordinate its various instruments and to ensure that they are used in a joined-up manner. While the EU has made progress in developing its comprehensive approach, the main challenge is to ensure that the different components of EU policy are aligned and mutually reinforcing.

Another important tool in EU's foreign is democracy promotion. The EU has sought to promote democracy and human rights in third countries through a range of instruments, including sanctions, development aid, and diplomatic engagement. For example, the EU has used its EuropeanInitiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) to support civil society organizations and human rights defenders in countries such as Belarus and Cuba. The EU has also used its Partnership Agreements and Association Agreements to promote democratic reforms and the rule of law in countries such as Ukraine and Tunisia (Panchuk & Bossuyt, 2014). The effectiveness of EU democracy promotion is influenced by several factors,

including the level of political will among EU member states, the alignment of EU policies with the needs and priorities of recipient countries, and the ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of EU initiatives.

Energy policy has also emerged as a crucial tool in EU foreign policy, especially regarding its efforts to promote energy security and reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels. The EU has sought to use its energy policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly with countries such as Russia and the Gulf States. For example, the EU has used its energy policy to promote the diversification of energy supplies, the development of renewable energy sources, and the enhancement of energy efficiency. The EU has also sought to use its energy policy to promote its values, such as sustainability and climate action, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). The effectiveness of EU energy policy as a foreign policy tool is closely tied to its ability to project influence through its energy markets and to promote its values and interests in international energy governance.

Cybersecurity has also become an increasingly important tool in EU foreign policy, particularly in the context of its efforts to protect its critical infrastructure and to promote its values in the digital domain. The EU has sought to use its cybersecurity policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to countries such as China and Russia. For example, the EU has used its cybersecurity policy to promote the development of a secure and resilient digital environment, to protect its citizens and businesses from cyber threats, and to promote its values, such as privacy and data protection, in international cybersecurity governance (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). The impact of the EU's cybersecurity policy as an instrument of foreign policy rests on its capacity to leverage digital markets while advancing its values and strategic priorities within global cybersecurity governance.

Humanitarian aid is no less important in EU foreign policy, which is directed at responding to humanitarian crises and to promote its values, such as solidarity and compassion. The EU has sought to use its humanitarian aid to advance its foreign policy

objectives, particularly in relation to countries such as Syria and Yemen. For example, the EU has used its humanitarian aid to provide assistance to refugees and displaced persons, to support the delivery of emergency relief, and to promote the respect for international humanitarian law. The EU has also sought to use its humanitarian aid to promote its values, such as human dignity and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Matthiessen, 2013).

Climate and migration policies are closely linked to the humanitarian dimensions of EU foreign policy. Climate policy is crucial in the context of the EU's efforts to promote its core values, such as sustainability and environmental protection. The EU has sought to use its climate policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly about countries such as China and the United States. For example, the EU has utilized its climate policy to promote the development of renewable energy sources, enhance energy efficiency, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The EU has also strived to use its climate policy to promote its values, such as sustainability and environmental protection, in international climate governance (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). Similarly, the EU is also using its migration policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly about countries such as Türkiye and Libya. For instance, the EU has utilized its migration policy to manage migration flows, support the protection of migrants' rights, and enhance the security of its external borders. The EU has deployed its migration policy to promote its values, such as human dignity and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

The humanitarian focus of EU foreign policy goes hand hin hand with policy responses to conventional threats, particularly when it comes to defence policy. The EU has instrumentalized its defence policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly about countries such as Russia and China. By way of example, the EU has used its defence policy to promote the development of its defence capabilities, to enhance its military cooperation, and to support its crisis management operations. The EU has also sought to use its defense policy to promote its values, such as peace and

stability, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

This being said, one should highlight that responding to threats is not the only preoccupation of EU foreign policy. A case in point is the EU enlargement policy. The EU has used its enlargement policy to promote the accession of candidate countries, to support their democratic reforms, and to enhance their integration into the EU's political and economic structures. The EU has also sought to use its enlargement policy to promote its values, such as democracy and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

In a similar vein, the EU uses its neighborhood policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to countries such as Ukraine and Morocco. The EU has used its neighborhood policy to promote the development of its neighborhood countries, to support their economic and political reforms, and to enhance their integration into the EU's political and economic structures. The EU has also sought to use its neighborhood policy to promote its values, such as democracy and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). Yet, one should add that neighborhood also comes with problems, hence the significance of the EU's efforts at crisis management, which are used to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in countries such as Syria and Libya. For example, the EU has utilized its crisis management to promote the delivery of humanitarian aid, support conflict resolution, and enhance the security of its external borders. The EU has also sought to use its crisis management to promote its values, such as human dignity and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

Beyond enlargement and neighbors, the EU's engagement is also extended to multilateralism at the global level. The EU has instrumentalized its commitment to multilateralism to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to global challenges such as climate change and pandemics. For instance, the EU has used its multilateralism to promote the development of international agreements, to support the work of international organizations, and

to enhance its cooperation with other countries and regions. The EU has also made use of multilateralism to promote its values, such as peace and stability, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

Conclusion

The EU has emerged as a multifaceted geopolitical actor that blends strategic interests, core values, and a diverse set of instruments to address global challenges. Its primary focus remains on Europe—especially Ukraine amid Russia's 2022 aggression—while also engaging in the Middle East, Mediterranean, and other parts of the world with countries like India and Brazil. Central to its identity are values such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, multilateralism, and sustainable development, which the EU promotes globally as a normative power. In this context of systemic stimuli and inherited identity, the EU's toolkit includes sanctions, trade policies, strategic partnerships, mediation, development aid, resilience-building, and a comprehensive security approach combining hard and soft power. Its evolving power identity has shifted from Duchêne's "Civilian Power Europe" toward a broader concept of "ethical power" that integrates market and military capabilities, reflecting a more complex civilian-military spectrum.

One could therefore conclude that the EU's geopolitical role challenges traditional International Relations theories by hybridizing realism's security concerns with liberal institutionalism's emphasis on cooperation and constructivism's focus on norms. This positions the EU as a post-Westphalian actor that bridges ideals and power realities. Going forward, the EU must navigate internal divisions and hybrid threats to maintain its influence, which also suggests that IR theory should adapt toward more pragmatic and normative frameworks to better capture the EU's unique role in global politics.

An important complication in the EU's geopolitical actorness concerns decision-making processes. These processes in member states and the EU itself differ fundamentally due to their distinct

nature as geopolitical actors. States are sovereign entities with supreme authority over their territories, characterized by clear territorial boundaries, institutional capacity, and monopoly on the use of force within their borders. Decision-making in states is typically centralized, with governments exercising authority through established institutions such as legislatures, executives, and judiciaries, enabling relatively swift and cohesive policy implementation aligned with national interests. In contrast, the EU is a hybrid supranational and intergovernmental entity composed of multiple member states, each retaining sovereignty but sharing competencies in various policy areas. Its decision-making is inherently complex, requiring consensus or qualified majority voting among member states and institutions like the European Commission, European Parliament, and Council of the EU. This multi-level governance structure often leads to slower, more deliberative processes to accommodate diverse national interests and values. The EU's foreign policy decisions involve balancing these interests, fostering cooperation, and promoting shared values such as democracy, human rights, and multilateralism.

Moreover, while states often prioritize hard power tools like military force, the EU emphasizes normative power, blending hard and soft power instruments such as sanctions, trade policies, and diplomatic engagement. The EU's decision-making reflects this hybrid identity, navigating between civilian and military power and integrating ethical considerations in foreign policy. Thus, the divergence in decision-making stems from the EU's collective, multi-actor governance versus the centralized sovereignty of individual states, influencing their geopolitical actorness and strategic behaviors.

While the EU positions itself as a normative power that promotes core values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable development, there exist inherent tensions and contradictions in simultaneously advancing these values and pursuing economic interests, especially when engaging with non-European regimes. The EU's economic statecraft often requires pragmatic engagement with countries whose records on human rights are deemed problematic from a Western perspective. Strategic

partnerships with important global economic players like China, India, Brazil, and Gulf States illustrate this complexity. These partnerships aim to enhance trade, investment, and digital cooperation, which sometimes necessitate downplaying contentious issues to maintain mutual economic benefits. Moreover, the EU's trade policy, while tied to promoting human rights and sustainable development, can be constrained by institutional factors and divergent interests among member states, which complicate enforcement and coherence. The EU's development cooperation reflects a similar balancing act, aiming to reduce poverty and promote stability while aligning with recipient countries' priorities, which may not always include rigorous human rights improvements.

Engagement with illiberal regimes presents ethical and strategic dilemmas. The EU must balance its normative ambitions against realpolitik considerations, especially when these regimes are key economic or security partners. For instance, while the EU condemns human rights violations, it simultaneously pursues climate, energy, and trade cooperation with them. This duality is further reflected in the EU's foreign policy concepts, such as Lisbeth Aggestam's "ethical power", which envisions the EU as a force for global good, including military and civilian roles in crisis management and peacebuilding. However, Karen Smith critiques the persistence of military involvement as potentially undermining the EU's normative identity, complicating the ethical coherence of its external actions. Similarly, the promotion of democracy and human rights through tools like sanctions, development aid, and diplomatic engagement is often hindered by the limited political will among member states and the challenge of ensuring sustainable impact. Furthermore, the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policies face internal divisions and difficulties in achieving consensus, which can dilute the effectiveness of normative promotion.

In particular, sanctions have emerged as a fundamental component of the EU's foreign policy, particularly in response to geopolitical crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU increasingly employs targeted sanctions—such as trade bans and asset freezes—to influence the behavior of third countries, especially in relation to

human rights, democracy, and non-proliferation objectives. For instance, the comprehensive sanctions imposed on Russia illustrate the breadth and depth of the EU's sanctions regime.

Finally, strategic partnerships constitute a relatively novel mechanism aimed at enhancing cooperation with significant global entities such as China, India, and Brazil, as well as regional organizations like the African Union. These partnerships are designed to address shared interests in domains such as climate change, trade, and security, thereby reflecting the EU's dedication to multilateralism and global governance. However, various foreign policy instruments, including trade policy, development aid, energy policy, cybersecurity, and crisis management, exhibit varying degrees of effectiveness. This variability is associated with factors such as institutional coherence, alignment with the needs of recipient countries, and the challenge of balancing the diverse interests of member states.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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