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Letter from the Editors

The map of our world is drawn through division. Borders delineate the spaces where sovereignty begins and ends, providing an organization to political authority. These barriers structure the international system, but the modern world is not defined by barriers alone. It is just as significantly shaped by the countless connections that extend across them—through trade, technology, diplomacy, migration, the exchange of ideas, and more. The 49th volume of *Hemispheres* explores this dynamic through the theme "Bridges and Barriers." At a time when global politics is marked simultaneously by fragmentation and interdependence, the forces that divide societies are increasingly intertwined with those that bring them together.

Over the past year, new avenues for cooperation have emerged amid growing geopolitical competition. In the Middle East, efforts to bridge regional divides could be found in Arab-led mediation between Israel and Palestine. Collaboration in the environmental sphere has persisted, with widespread ratification of the High Seas Treaty codifying global protections for marine biodiversity. However, this year's Munich Security Conference suggested that even long-standing alliances can become sites of friction, as U.S. critiques of European political systems provoked calls for greater autonomy from the United States. The escalation of a diplomatic spat between Japan and China into a full-scale trade war revealed the depth of tensions in East Asia over Taiwan. Meanwhile, the Russia-Ukraine war entered its fourth year of fighting without a clear path to peace in sight. An ambitious second Trump administration has also sought to redefine the rules and norms that shape the international system. The overnight abduction of former Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro introduces the opportunity for democratic change, though the continuation of the regime under Delcy Rodriguez calls into question the future of Venezuela. President Trump's tariff policy echoes a growing displeasure with the effects of globalization in many developed countries, leaving the structure of international trade in flux.

Taken together, our contributors in this volume offer diverse interpretations of the theme "Bridges and Barriers," providing insight into how forces of division and connection shape the international system. Arianna Hellman explores the obstacles confronting deradicalization programs through case studies of Denmark and Saudi Arabia, highlighting how community reintegration and greater international cooperation can strengthen approaches to countering violent extremism. Mofei Shen reexamines traditional conceptions of U.S.-China decoupling, arguing that interdependence between the two countries persists even as rules of access to technology become further politicized. Through a comparative analysis of Sweden's and Japan's work-family policies, Emily Lupinacci investigates how norms, welfare regimes, and politics affect gender equality in different countries. Alpha Traore evaluates two competing

hypotheses on South Korean nuclear proliferation, arguing that both perspectives play a role in the country's nuclear calculus. Katharine Glimcher examines Ethiopian agricultural policy in response to the Great Recession, exposing the dangers of prioritizing export-oriented foreign agricultural investments over regional autonomy and smallholder land security.

Our interviews and editorials bring new perspectives that deepen the conversation surrounding the theme. Former Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor reflects on the Ukraine-Russia war and the path forward toward peace with Western support. Former legal advisor to the National Security Council Dr. Joshua Geltzer provides an inside look at AI and national security policy under the Biden Administration, while Ms. Nahla Valji, UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea, explores key challenges in Eritrea and the country's future development. Finally, our editorialists study the challenges of transnational cooperation across the world. By exploring the E.U.'s economic gravity, Sasson Ziv-Loewy shows how countries in the institution's periphery must navigate structural and political barriers to engage effectively with the Single Market. Meanwhile, Lauren Higuchi investigates the increasingly pluralistic foreign policy of the Central Asian states following the Russia-Ukraine war.

This year is marked by significant growth and achievement for *Hemispheres*. Our fall mixed-media magazine experienced unprecedented demand, featuring 40 articles from over 55 contributors and reflecting Tufts undergraduates' growing enthusiasm for international affairs. We also expanded our professional network by engaging with alumni working across the field of international relations, including at the National Security Council, the World Bank, and in television. These conversations reinforced our commitment to connecting students with pre-professional opportunities while reaffirming *Hemispheres*' mission as a platform for debate and engagement on global affairs.

The Editorial Board would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to this issue. The creation, curation, and refinement of this volume required the dedication of both our authors and staff editors, and their efforts are what make this publication possible. We are especially thankful to Ambassador William Taylor, Dr. Joshua Geltzer, and Ms. Nahla Valji for sharing their insights in engaging conversations with our team. We hope this volume of the Journal inspires meaningful inquiry and encourages continued discussion on the complex issues shaping global affairs.

Yours,
Zoe Raptis, *Editor-in-Chief*
Grayton Goldsmith, *Managing Editor*
Max Turnacioglu, *Managing Editor*
Eva Zeltser, *Managing Editor*

Articles

Navigating Pathways Toward Deradicalization and Rehabilitation: Lessons from Denmark and Saudi Arabia

Arianna Hellman, *Tufts University*

Abstract

Historically, efforts to address violent extremism have focused on using military and other security resources to deter and coerce violent extremists. Increasingly, such efforts are viewed as insufficient, leading to the expansion of counter-radicalization and deradicalization programs. This, in turn, is generating new debates about how to best use limited resources for programs and the importance of targeting ideology as opposed to behavior. This paper aims to evaluate the barriers countries face throughout the deradicalization process and provides recommendations for developing and improving deradicalization programs. It does so by fostering a greater understanding of processes related to violent extremism, drawing on two international case studies: Denmark and Saudi Arabia. De-emphasizing efforts to radically change individuals' ideology and developing holistic support to reintegrate them with local communities were notably successful approaches, albeit resource intense. However, greater cooperation between states to bridge economic and structural barriers to deradicalization initiatives, particularly through greater transparency of existing programs, is still needed.

Introduction

The bulk of existing scholarship in the field of violent extremism pertain to how individuals become involved in terrorism—often referred to as their "radicalization"—and to the nature of violent extremist groups. In particular, there is an emphasis on the threats these groups pose to the global West. However, there is a dearth of scholarship both rooted in the regions most impacted by violent extremism and about the multitude of responses to this extremism, of which there are three principle types: "counter-terrorism

(CT, e.g. using military or policing resources to deter or disrupt terrorists), countering violent extremism (CVE—preventative approaches using mostly non-coercive means), and risk reduction (seeking to ensure that violent extremists do not cause harm, e.g. through efforts to change behavior)."[1] The study of deradicalization is incredibly important, and this paper will principally concentrate on case studies in Saudi Arabia and Denmark as they offer relatively more established and successful deradicalization programs, exhibiting valuable insight into effective approaches.

Defining Key Terms

To start an effective analysis of deradicalization, it is first essential to firmly grasp the elements of violent extremism. This seemingly simple task is hindered by the lack of official definitions and the significant overlap between the terms "violent extremism" and "terrorism." The European Union and United Nations (UN) appear to lack clarity on what constitutes violent extremism, although the former USAID defined it as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives."[2] In a 2023 report, the U.S. Institute of Peace defined extremist violence as "a form of violent conflict in which people employ a set of behaviors that promote, support, or perpetrate violence to change existing political or social orders, and that advances an us-versus-them narrative that justifies killing, removing, or taking other violent actions against people who belong to particular social or political groups."[3] They clarify their lexical choices, stating that they use "extremist violence" as opposed to "violent extremism" to "emphasize the violent behavior, rather than the extremist ideology, as the primary locus of change. Additionally, the term extremist violence avoids categorizing a diverse cohort of people as violent extremists, regardless of legal status or actual level of involvement in extremist violence by those often covered by the term."[4] Legal definitions of terrorism are similarly disjointed. Prior to 9/11, the UN Security Council had no centralized and coordinated approach to terrorism. At the end of 2001, however, the UN Security Council passed

[1] Andrew Glazzard and Martine Zeuthen, "Violent Extremism," *GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack* no. 34 (2016), https://gsdrc.org/professional-dev/violent-extremism/.
[2] Glazzard and Zeuthen, "Violent Extremism."
[3] Lisa Schirch, Chris Bosley, and Michael Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," *U.S. Institute of Peace*, 2023.
https://tufts.app.box.com/s/r5tr1shmtwssw5skcir5yymur80hq5k4/file/2026482580050, 6.
[4] Schirch, Bosley, and Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," 6.

Resolution 1373, which "directed all States to criminalize terrorism in domestic law."[5] Notably, this still lacked a unified definition of terrorism and instead left that work to each individual state, resulting not only in differing interpretations but also in some states "defin[ing] terrorism to suit their own political purposes or to undermine human rights."[6] These varying definitions raise issues by impeding international collaboration in the criminal law sphere and other areas of counterterrorism.[7] Furthermore, the lack of clarity pertaining to these terms complicates any possible distinctions between terrorism and violent extremism. However, terrorism in relevant scholarship and policy appears to generally pertain to a narrower subset of violent extremism, although the two terms are also used interchangeably. This paper will adhere to the USAID definition of violent extremism for ease of analysis, in which violent extremism means engaging in rationalized violence through various methods to achieve societal goals.

Historical Approaches and UN Action

Deradicalization as a deliberate counterterrorism method emerged mostly in the 1990s, specifically in Egypt and Algeria, before expanding globally.[8] By 2009, 34 of 192 UN Member States operated some form of a deradicalization program, including six Arab states and ten European countries, although this number has increased since then.[9] Despite growing momentum behind these approaches to countering violent extremism, they remain poorly understood as a whole, which is driven in part by a lack of overall transparency. Accordingly, an address to the Special Rapporteur on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights while Countering Terrorism from Human Rights Watch called out the "sweeping rights violations" that are justified through "deradicalization" initiatives.[10] The address highlights how

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[5] Ben Saul, "Defining Terrorism in International Law," *NYU Law,* 2025, https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/defining_terrorism_international_law.html.
[6] Saul, "Defining Terrorism in International Law."
[7] Ibid.
[8] Victoria Ogbuehi, "Deradicalization as Counterterrorism Strategy: A Comparative Assessment of Egypt, Somalia, Kenya, and Nigeria Strategies," *Intergovernmental Research And Policy Journal,* October 10, 2023, https://irpj.euclid.int/articles/deradicalization-as-counterterrorism-strategy-a-comparative-assessment-of-egypt-somalia-kenya-and-nigeria-strategies/#.
[9] Hamed El-Said, "Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World," *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, 2017, https://www.iemed.org/publication/deradicalization-experiences-in-europe-and-the-arab-world/.
[10] "UN Rights Body Should Reject Misuse of 'Deradicalization' Agenda as Pretext for Violations," *Human Rights Watch*, March 5, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/05/un-rights-body-should-reject-misuse-deradicalization-agenda-pretext-violations.

China, for example, has abused the lack of a clear international consensus regarding definitions of extremism and deradicalization to target groups "based on nothing other than their identity, language, culture or religion" without cause.[11] Not only do these practices of "re-education," among others, consist of clear human rights violations, but they can also further drive radicalization and thus extremism itself. Although the bulk of countering violent extremism falls to individual states to address as they see fit, the UN has taken some action, rooted in the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS). This strategy emphasizes both the primary role of states in countering terrorism and terrorism's unacceptability.[12] Adopted by consensus in 2006, it is revisited every couple of years and implemented through eight Global Compact Working Groups.[13]

Additionally, the UN Secretary-General's 2015 "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," urges states to: develop appropriate strategies for dealing with foreign terrorist fighters, involve religious leaders in countering terrorism, ensure accountability for gross human rights violations through violent extremism, and develop programs to disengage individuals from violent extremism through "educational and economic opportunities."[14] It also repeatedly calls on states to consider the role of gender in all of these pursuits. On January 15, 2016, the UN Secretary-General laid out over 70 recommendations for measures to restrict the proliferation of violent extremism in the "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," describing it as "an appeal for concerted action by the international community."[15] On July 1 of that year, the UN General Assembly jointly adopted resolution 70/291, through which they recognized "…the importance of preventing violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, and in this regard … recommen[d] that Member States consider the implementation of relevant recommendations of the Plan of Action, as applicable to the national context."[16] These UN efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism are driven by the belief that it "undermines peace and security, human rights,

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[11] "UN Rights Body Should Reject Misuse of 'Deradicalization' Agenda as Pretext for Violations."
[12] UN General Assembly, Res. 70/291, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, A/RES/70/291, 1-4 (July 1, 2016), https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/291.
[13] "OHCHR and Terrorism and Violent Extremism," *United Nations*, Accessed March 9, 2026,
https://www.ohchr.org/en/terrorism#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20standardized%20definition%20of%20terrorism.,serious%20injury%2C%20or%20the%20taking%20of%20hostages.
[14] UN General Assembly, Report 70/674, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, A/70/674, art. IV 49 c (December 24, 2015), https://docs.un.org/en/A/70/674.
[15] "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism," *United Nations,* Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/plan-of-action-to-prevent-violent-extremism
[16] A/RES/70/291,10.

and sustainable development. No country or region is immune from its impacts."[17] To this end, the Office of Counter-Terrorism was established in 2017 to facilitate states' cooperation with the UN in addressing terrorism.[18] However, terrorism has become more concentrated in recent years. Accordingly, the Global Terrorism Index 2024 reported that "the number of countries recording at least one death from terrorism fell to 41 in 2023, down from 44 in 2022 and 57 in 2015."[19] Currently, there is clear room for improvement in ensuring effective global implementations of deradicalization programs that respect human rights.

Why People Turn Toward Extremism

Although there is a lack of cohesive statistical data regarding the ways in which people become involved in violent extremism, existing qualitative data has largely divided motivators into "push" factors, those which drive people away from their existing circumstances, and "pull" factors, those which directly attract people toward extremist ideologies.[20] Broadly speaking, push factors are adverse conditions in an individual's environment. For instance, there is an inverse relationship between socioeconomic opportunities and the propensity of violent extremism.[21] Citizens might perceive losses of governmental legitimacy in environments with poor socioeconomic potential, which can further hamper governmental capabilities to effectively counter the violent extremism that emerges. Poverty and unemployment also strengthen the pull of extremist groups by increasing the appeal of the income these groups can provide individuals. Poor governance in general, especially when linked closely with human rights violations, can further push people toward extremism by alienating residents and kindling sympathy for such efforts.[22] Although diversity does not intrinsically increase the likelihood of extremism within a state, severely disenfranchised groups may support extremism to gain power and legitimacy so they can further their goals. Similarly, long-lasting conflict can create a breeding

[17] "International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and When Conducive to Terrorism." *United Nations*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.un.org/en/observances/prevention-extremism-when-conducive-terrorism-day.
[18] "International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and When Conducive to Terrorism."
[19] "Global Terrorism Index 2024," *The Institute for Economics & Peace*, February 2024, https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf, 2.
[20] Report 70/674, art. III 23.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

ground for extremism from joint factors of insufficient governance and readily exploitable grievances. Inhumane treatment in prisons and other detention facilities, along with corruption among leaders and other illegal activities, is another possible driver of radicalization.[23] Social networks are a critical factor; knowing members of extremist groups can work to facilitate assimilation with the group, and the growing use of online tools has made this process even easier.[24] It is important to note, however, that while the background conditions for violent extremism are experienced by populations at large, only a select few members actually become involved in violent extremism. Individual push factors can range from exposure to violence, torture, personal oppression by domestic or foreign powers, and everyday experiences such as the denial of a loan.[25] Moreover, narratives of victimization permit for greater susceptibility to extremism, alongside "religious beliefs, ethnic differences and political ideologies."[26] Consequently, the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism recommends basing domestic development policies on the Sustainable Development Goals to comprehensively reduce these bridges to violent extremism. However, there are a multitude of positive feedback loops that inhibit such efforts. Violent extremism both exacerbates domestic problems and further exploits existing ones, leading to a vicious cycle of worsening social and political conditions.[27] It also impedes the ability of external development actors, including UN field personnel and peacekeeping missions, to support progress toward improved societal welfare by targeting these actors. Furthermore, there has been an increase in forcibly displaced people, partly because of violent extremism.[28] These displaced people are in turn more susceptible to forced recruitment by extremist groups.

Counterterrorism vs. Deradicalization

The U.S. launched the Global War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks, employing both aggressive military interventions and humanitarian projects in its counterterrorism efforts. On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush announced that "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."[29] Since then, the U.S. State Department

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., art. III 37.
[25] Ibid., art. III 33.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., art. II 16.
[28] Ibid., art. II 21.
[29] "Global War on Terror," *George W. Bush Library*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror.

has maintained the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, which is compiled based on the following regulations:

> Pursuant to Section 219 of the INA, the Secretary of State is authorized to designate an organization as an FTO if such an entity meets three criteria: the suspected terrorist group must (1) be a foreign organization; (2) engage in "terrorist activity," "terrorism," or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and (3) threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or economic interests of the United States.[30]

Terrorism is defined in Section 140(d)(2) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989 as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."[31] Once a group makes the list, no one from the U.S. can "knowingly provide 'material support or resources,'" including financial institutions. The list also helps to promote awareness and isolate the organization globally by reducing support for them.[32] However, the rate at which groups are added to this list far exceeds the rate at which groups are removed, or "delisted."[33] Consequently, there has been an increasing belief that the more traditional security-based counterterrorism measures are insufficient in reducing the proliferation of violent extremism.[34] In separating people previously engaged in violent extremism, there are two principal processes: deradicalization, which entails "the process of divorcing a person, voluntarily or otherwise, from their extreme views" and disengagement, or "the process of moving a person away from their extreme group's activities, without necessarily deradicalizing that person or changing their views."[35] This is distinct from the more proactive approach of counter-radicalization, which refers to methods implemented to prevent initial engagement with extremism in the first place.[36] Although deradicalization programs are more focused on peacefully separating people from violent

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[30] "The Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) List," Congress.gov, December 12, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10613.
[31] *Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1987,* HR 1777, 100th Cong., *Congressional Record* 133 (Dec. 22, 1987).
[32] "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *United States Department of State*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations.
[33] "Executive Order 13224." *United States Department of State*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224/.
[34] Report 70/674, art. I 4.
[35] "A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism," *International Peace Institute*, June 2010, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/a_new_approach_epub.pdf, 2.
[36] "A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism," 2.

extremism than traditional counterterrorism approaches, current initiatives are far from perfect solutions.[37] The programs under this umbrella of trying to reduce violent extremism are incredibly diverse, and abundant questions remain as to what makes them more or less effective.

Varying Focuses

When discussing post-conflict processes, an emphasis is often placed on retributive justice. There are numerous explanations supporting this approach. For instance, the severe nature of the crimes committed by violent extremists arguably warrants a harsh approach. Letting terrorists "off easy" can dishearten and destabilize communities that experienced significant harm at the hands of these extremists.[38] Although amnesty is often the approach to reintegrating former violent extremists because of legal impediments to prosecution, the UN Security Council's resolutions have stressed the need for prosecution as the overwhelming response for violent extremists.[39] This push, combined with the popular belief that these offenders "pose an outsized threat owing to their operational experience and extremist networks," has led to responses including "harsh security measures, stigmatizing public discourse, and the revocation of citizenship."[40] However, empirical evidence reveals that these fears of outsized threats may be misplaced, at least in part, as the probability of substantial harm to national security declines sharply over time.[41] There has been considerable debate over the security, legal, political, and societal risks posed by repatriating extremists.[42] Politicians and other political leaders often appear to favor the view that security concerns are paramount and thus restrict reintegration efforts. For instance, Alex Younger, the former chief of Britain's MI6, explained that the backgrounds and skillsets of returning extremists potentially make them dangers to national security, so public safety is the top

[37] Ibid., 1.
[38] Isidore Agbanero, "Victims' perspectives and the future of Nigeria amnesty program for ex-Boko Haram terrorists," *African Identities*, February 2026, https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2026.2621095.
[39] Chris Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," *U.S. Institute of Peace,* August 1, 2019*,* 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20231?seq=1.
[40] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict."
[41] Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," *GW Program on Extremism*, March 2020, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf, 8–9.
[42] Hoffman and Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," 6-7.

priority when evaluating reintegration at any level.[43] During a set of 2014 remarks on ISIS, former U.S. president Barack Obama said that "trained and battle-hardened, these fighters could try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks."[44] Indeed, these fears are not without cause. In 2015, Tunisia suffered two fatal terrorist attacks carried out by a couple of Tunisian foreign fighters and an ISIS member, resulting in the deaths of 60 individuals and the injuring of 89 individuals.[45] Returned foreign fighters are also behind the 1993 bombing attack in New York, the 2002 attack in Bali, the 2015 attack in Paris, and the 2014 attack in Brussels.[46] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser in 2015 found that the "blowback rate," or number of returning extremists that carry out attacks at home, was roughly 1 in 360.[47] This statistic has been used in attempts to subdue fears regarding repatriating extremists, although considering the deadly nature of even one attack, this number can still be troubling. A crucial piece of information largely absent from these discussions, however, is the timelines of such terrorist attacks. David Malet and Rachel Hayes reported in 2018 that the highest probability of such occurrences exists within the first five months of repatriation, after which point the threat substantially shrinks.[48] Consequently, they suggest that surveillance is justified for up to a couple of years following the return of extremists, after which point dedicating resources to any surveillance efforts is largely wasteful.[49] Evidence that these extremists are not unlimited threats is important for several reasons. For example, returning foreign fighters should not be viewed as volatile threats to be avoided no matter what, but rather as individuals for whom time and

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[43] Damien McElroy, "MI6 Warns of 'Very Dangerous' Shamima Begum-Style Returnees," *The National*, February 16, 2019, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/mi6-warns-of-very-dangerous-shamima-begum-style-returnees-1.826247.

[44] "Transcript of Obama's Remarks on the Fight Against ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/world/middleeast/obamas-remarks-on-the-fight-against-isis.html.

[45] Thomas Renard, "Returnees In the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia," *The Egmont Papers* 107 (n.d.): 44, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2019/04/EP107-returnees-in-the-Maghreb.pdf.

[46] David Maleta and Rachel Hayes, "Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?," *Department of Homeland Security*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1497987, 5; Kim R. Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Orbis* 61, no. 2 (2017): 212–26. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.02.005; Jewish Museum Murderer Convicted in Brussels," *Dw.Com*, March 7, 2019, https://www.dw.com/en/jewish-museum-murderer-convicted-in-brussels/a-47817839.

[47] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 14–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297411.

[48] Hoffman and Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," 8–9.

[49] Ibid.

successful intervention can manage the associated risks of their return. In contrast, refusing to repatriate these individuals can maintain their threat indefinitely. Therefore, deradicalization efforts should occur during this impressionable period of five months, and up to a couple of years, to be most effective.[50]

However, deradicalization efforts that impose a strict and exclusive focus on punishment not only hamper beneficial progress but are often infeasible due to available resources. Firstly, the nature of these conflicts and crimes severely limits effective investigations and prosecutions because of the sheer difficulty of obtaining evidence against individuals. Secondly, even if a path toward prosecution is followed, gender biases, such as the flawed notion that "women take more passive roles," compound the lack of evidence to result in minimal sentences for women in particular.[51] Even when this process is more successful, incarceration is seldom lifelong, meaning people will inevitably live in their communities. Furthermore, some countries fundamentally lack appropriate systems for prosecuting such people.[52] While revocation of citizenship may be a more feasible solution, it is still one wrought with challenges. For instance, it is at best a short-term solution that merely relocates the problem so that countries can avoid any obligations to repatriate these individuals, and at worst exacerbates the issues and dangers at hand. Thus, while processing violent extremists through criminal justice systems has its merits, this approach is rife with drawbacks and is better combined with other deradicalization approaches.

These other pathways force some degree of reconciliation between the dual objectives of mitigating the security risks of those returning from foreign violent extremism and caring for said returnees such that they can productively reintegrate in their community.[53] There are two principal versions of deradicalization programs, both delegating ideology as the root cause of violent extremism. The first, implicit or secular deradicalization, emphasizes disengagement from violence without explicitly targeting an individual's ideology.[54] The other version, explicit or conservative deradicalization, attempts to alter behavior by causing cognitive change to alter an individual's ideology.[55] The Secretary General's Plan writes that mentorship from religious and social leaders can help otherwise-susceptible individuals repudiate violent ideologies.[56] It also explains that these community leaders,

[50] Ibid.
[51] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 6.
[52] Ibid., 5.
[53] Ibid., 13.
[54] El-Said, "Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World."
[55] Ibid.
[56] Report 70/674, art III 36.

and namely the conversations they lead, help "[promote] tolerance, understanding and reconciliation between communities."[57] Accordingly, a U.S. Institute of Peace report explained that typical deradicalization initiatives utilize religion as an ideological avenue for providing "alternative interpretations of religious texts and doctrines to convince people to reject extremist views."[58] However, the U.S. Institute of Peace's Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide critiques this approach, writing the following: "Pressuring someone to change their entire worldview is exceedingly difficult and resource-intensive and can cause them to retreat further into their belief system and bolster their commitment to the cause."[59] Instead, RISE supports interventions that target improving "behavioral health and social well-being."[60] Based on these findings, providing a baseline of support and safety for individuals can help them be more receptive to ideological changes. In other words, successfully completing disengagement is likely a prerequisite for effective deradicalization programs. Strategies for accomplishing this can include support for mental, social, and physical health; educational and vocational training; strengthening social networks; legal and economic help; and observation to adjust approaches as relevant.[61] The successful involvement of affected communities is key for numerous reasons. First, community support increases program credibility. Second, they can help people cope with the abrupt losses of their social groups and sense of belonging. Furthermore, individuals who have effectively completed these deradicalization programs in the past can be instrumental in helping others working to reject extremist behavior.[62] However, it is important to heed the following guidelines from RISE to ensure a survivor-centered approach:

> Survivors of extremist violence should never be manipulated or coerced into participating in restorative justice processes. In some cases, mediations between survivors and people (re)integrating may both help those reintegrating take responsibility for the harm they have caused and help survivors gain a sense of justice, healing, or answers to their questions about what happened. In other cases, however, such meetings can be retraumatizing and

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 13.
[59] Schirch, Bosley, and Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," 22.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 14.
[62] "A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism," 12.

> threatening. If a survivor does not want to meet with someone who caused harm to them, they should not be forced to do so.[63]

When done properly, drawing on local norms, relationships, and practices is helpful in designing a plan to fit the local context, thus boosting its effectiveness. It is crucial to understand that the hallmarks of a successful program in one context can be substantially different in another. Location and timeframe are both important considerations when considering the local context and how best to create bridges between former extremists and the communities they are entering. Consequently, having a baseline understanding of deradicalization and the community it is being implemented in are important foundations for such programs.

Case Studies

Denmark

In 2018, the number of per capita foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) that Denmark sent abroad was among the highest in Europe, second only to Belgium.[64] An estimated 150 Danes, out of a population of approximately 6 million, went to Iraq and Syria to engage in terrorism, with many returning to Denmark afterward.[65] Denmark's program to prevent radicalization, the Aarhus Model, was created between 2007 and 2009 and implemented in 2010.[66] Three years later, this approach was expanded to include a program to deradicalize returning foreign fighters.[67] This updated model focuses on respecting the rights of participants and puts little to no emphasis on altering their ideology. Instead, it seeks to redirect existing beliefs and behaviors

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[63] Schirch, Bosley, and Niconchuk, "Rehabilitation and (Re)Integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement (RISE) Action Guide," 145.
[64] Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 3 (2019): 13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26617829, 13.
[65] "World Bank Open Data," *World Bank Open Data*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://data.worldbank.org;
Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 13.
[66] "Aarhus Model: Prevention of Radicalisation and Discrimination in Aarhus - Migration and Home Affairs," *European Commission*, April 18, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/aarhus-model-prevention-radicalisation-and-discrimination-aarhus_en.
[67] Preben Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," *Panorama - Insights into Asian and European Affairs*, January 2015, 245.

into legal activities, resulting in a uniquely secular program.[68] Concentrated in the city of Aarhus, the program is based on three key tenets: inclusion; collaboration between the public and private sectors; and scientific evidence.[69] To this end, it draws in a variety of experts at Aarhus University (including those with their anti- and de-radicalization program), social services members, and national security officials, among others.[70] As highlighted earlier, a strong understanding of motives for initial radicalization is integral to the development of deradicalization programs. The evidenced-backed approach undertaken in Denmark increases effectiveness and protects human rights by grounding methods in appropriate solutions rather than political strategies and abuse.

Notably, the exit program under the Aarhus Model is voluntary and only for people who have not committed crimes under Danish law.[71] Denmark puts these individuals through risk assessments and then tailored rehabilitation, which includes "mentorship, housing and economic support, medical treatment, mental health and psychosocial support, and periodic risk assessment."[72] Arguably, the most impactful of these components is the mentorship provided to participants. The mentors help redirect activism and other behaviors toward legal channels, reintegrate mentees into their communities, and serve as conversational partners for everything from quotidian struggles to epistemic questions about life. Support is also given to parents of children in the program to incorporate participants' communities in combating radicalization.[73] As a result of Denmark's efforts, between 2013 and 2015, the number of FTFs leaving from Aarhus dropped from 31 to one.[74] Additionally, no cases of recidivism were documented from 2013 to 2017.[75] There are also some links between these efforts and preventing radicalization in the first place.[76] However, the comprehensiveness of this

[68] Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," 245;
El-Said, "Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World."
[69] Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," 242.
[70] Ibid., 245.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 14-15.
[73] Bertelsen, "Danish Preventive Measures and De-Radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," 245.
[74] Kelly Cobiella, "Soft or Successful? Jihadis Reintegrated, Not Punished," *NBC News*, May 24, 2015, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/denmark-de-radicalization-n355346.
[75] Bosley, "Injecting Humanity: Community-Focused Responses for People Exiting Violent Extremist Conflict," 15.
[76] Jessica Stern and Marisa L. Porges, "Getting Deradicalization Right," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2010): 155–57, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25680969.

program makes it quite resource-intense. As a result of the tailored approach it utilizes, there is no set time frame for completion. The number of contributories that help enact it also obscures the financial costs.

Since Denmark's principal objective with returning foreign fighters is prosecution, not everyone is eligible for this exit program.[77] The program is also not a route to obtaining reduced sentences, and life imprisonment is still possible for individuals convicted of terrorism.[78] Punishments can also include passport loss, travel bans, and citizenship removal (if this does not make the individual stateless).[79] That being said, there are additional deradicalization programs for those who have been incarcerated. The three-year pilot program, Back on Track, was launched in 2011 and works to mentor incarcerated people with a history of extremism.[80] These individuals are also prevented from spreading their ideologies to other inmates during this process.[81] This program was widely successful and prompted the adoption of additional strategies for combating extremism in prisons, although there were still some flaws. For instance, in 2018, inmates lost all internet access following the discovery of extremist material on several PlayStation consoles within one of the prisons in Denmark.[82]

The program has also attracted attention to its "soft" approach with violent extremists, which stands in sharp contrast to many other Western countries. To this end, it has drawn some domestic opposition. In fact, Danish legislator Martin Henriksen has stated that, "[The program] sends a signal of weakness that instead of punishing the so-called holy warriors, they're given all the advantages of a welfare state."[83] It is worth noting, however, that Henriksen has a history of Islamophobic views, having previously said that "Islam has since its inception been a terrorist movement," and confirming that his political party "aim[ed] to ban the construction of mosques in cities where there are 'social problems.'"[84] Thus, this represents a heavily

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[77] "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country_pdf/DK-11272018.pdf.
[78] "Denmark," *Laws on Countering Terrorism Worldwide*, Accessed March 9, 2026, https://counterterrorlaw.info/country/denmark.
[79] "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," 8.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 14.
[82] "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," 8.
[83] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 16.
[84] Jacob Holdt and Rune Engelbreth Larsen, "An Open Letter to Barack Obama: On Danish Racism," *Panhumanism.com*, https://www.panhumanism.com/letter_to_obama.php; Alicia Buller, "Outrage as Danish MP Calls for Muslims to Worship in Warehouses," *Arab News*, January 5, 2018, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1219761/world.

biased view that likely fails to account for real effects. He is not alone, though, in thinking that a greater emphasis should be placed on punitive consequences.[85] Former Aarhus Police Superintendent Allan Aarslev, one of the creators of the Aarhus Model, has pushed back on this perspective that the program is too lenient, explaining that it is "difficult … it demands strategy, it demands skills," and is not a replacement for prosecution.[86] Public perception and support are not the only challenge the program faces. The lack of clear authority figures during periods of transition for the participants and the difficulty in ensuring the safety of frontline staff are also key issues.[87]

Overall, however, Denmark is distinct in that it has the necessary institutions, infrastructure, and a small enough population of offenders to support an initiative that balances prosecution and rehabilitation. Not only that, but it is an important case study for numerous reasons. It is uniquely secular and more focused on behavioral over ideological change. However, it is still effective in supporting the previously discussed findings that complete disengagement requires holistic care instead of isolated and aggressive attempts to change ideology. Perhaps more importantly, it reveals that the secular or religious nature of the program is not a hallmark of success but rather support and mentorship for participants are. However, this brings up questions as to how effective a secular approach is on a significantly larger scale, especially when combined with less accessibility to resources. In other words, the efficacy of using a shared religion in creating a supportive environment for larger groups of individuals is ambiguous. Furthermore, the extent to which participants should be separated from each other is unclear but important to clarify for modeling this program, particularly on a larger scale where separation is more difficult.

Denmark's approach to prosecution does not leave people stateless, thereby helping to protect basic rights. In taking accountability for their own citizens, Denmark has not faced any significant national security challenges, which should serve as a signal to other countries that security fears should not impede rehabilitation efforts. That being said, countries should take security concerns into consideration with their own deradicalization programs. Denmark's inclusion of rehabilitation programs within prisons and its reliance on collaborations with academic institutions are characteristics of its program that should be adopted in other countries for maximum effectiveness. To facilitate this, however, Denmark should increase

[85] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 16.
[86] Cobiella, "Soft or Successful?"
[87] Hassan, "Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters," 16.

publications of its methods as much as possible without incurring additional security concerns.

Saudi Arabia

Notwithstanding the Saudi government's conservative Islamic nature, religious extremists and militants still pose a threat to the state. Following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the Saudi government stepped up its counter-terrorism efforts, but the failures of these measures were fatally exposed in May 2003 when 27 people died in an al-Qaeda attack in Riyadh. This prompted the development of Saudi Arabia's official deradicalization program, which was rolled out in 2004.[88] It was designed to "'deprogram' jihadist radicals" and substantially mitigate the security threat they posed by using religious and psychological services.[89] Since its inception, the program has increased significantly in size and status.[90] The first phase emphasizes religious re-education, relying on Saudi Arabia's geographic centrality in Islam and legitimization from many influential religious scholars.[91] Initial reports pointed to a 100 percent success rate for the program, although more recent estimates suggest recidivism rates of up to 20 percent.[92] However, such recidivism measures are complicated by the inability for an extended observation of the long-term impacts thus far, and vague qualifications as to what counts as recidivism in this specific context. Additionally, success has been minimal among the most extreme militants. Notably, according to a 2009 report, 11 graduates of the Saudi program re-engaged in terrorism following their release from Guantanamo, including one of whom quickly assumed the position of deputy commander of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.[93]

As in Denmark, completion of this program—or lack thereof—has no bearing on an individual's prison sentence.[94] Since 2004, approximately 4,000 people have graduated from it.[95] The program was created to address three core areas: "ideological changes, vocational training and financial

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[88] Andreas Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study," *Middle East Institute*, June 10, 2015, https://mei.edu/publication/deradicalization-programs-saudi-arabia-case-study/.
[89] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."
[90] Marisa L. Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 22, 2010, https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/saudi-deradicalization-experiment.
[91] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."
[92] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."
[93] Ibid.
[94] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."
[95] Ibid.

support, and ensuring security of the former radicals."[96] Religious leaders, psychologists, and security officials work together to achieve these goals through a "six-week rehabilitation course, counseling sessions, and an aftercare program that helps reintegrate them into Saudi society."[97] Over time, the counseling aspect of the program has grown in relevance. Typically, Western-educated mentors administer tailored therapy and confirm the successful deradicalization of participants.[98] The relationships developed during the mentorship stage boost program success by enhancing understanding of participants' individual progress while also improving participants' often warped views of civil servants and authority more generally. This is key as cynical views of the government may have contributed to individuals' earlier extremism.

Another unique and significant component of this program is the "halfway house," where program participants remain for two to three months prior to their full reintegration into society. At the halfway house, the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice, participants continue receiving counseling, while also taking part in recreational activities and obtaining vocational coaching.[99] Families are given social support and are in charge of monitoring and helping participants following their release from the program.[100] That being said, the government still maintains a degree of surveillance over graduates for security purposes. To further reintegrate individuals into society, if they lack familial support, the government "provides assistance in finding wives for the predominantly young, male detainees, and pays for the wedding, the dowry and even an apartment and car."[101] Thus, the scope of this initiative truly stands out by touching every part of detainees' lives. The financial cost of such a program is not public, although the resource-intense and Saudi-specific nature of the program limits its applicability internationally. An additional benefit of such a comprehensive program, however, is that it can go beyond deradicalization to assist counter-radicalization through the relationships with communities that are established.[102]

The Saudi program has also improved over time. For instance, program officials have gradually de-emphasized efforts targeted at changing ideology and instead shifted toward a greater concentration on behavioral

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."
[98] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."
[99] Ibid.
[100] Christopher Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2008, 20, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ceip/0007792/f_0007792_6483.pdf.
[101] Casptack, "Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study."
[102] Stern and Porges, "Getting Deradicalization Right," 156.

changes.[103] This example of learning from experience also echoes recommendations in RISE to focus on actions, not beliefs and sacred values. However, especially owing to the legitimacy the government draws from Islam, the program is by no means secular.

The role of relatives has also expanded beyond simply visiting participants and assuming responsibility for graduates to now actively engaging in the deradicalization program alongside program experts to increase program buy-in.[104] Greater monitoring efforts of detainees have also been put in place both during the program and after completion.[105] Despite providing considerable transitional support, however, the Saudi program is still dependent on after-care and post-graduation surveillance of participants. It has also struggled with reintegrating the most radical violent extremists, even with extensive resources available. With Saudi Arabia's counseling center and emphasis on family support, the program addresses some of the Aarhus Model's primary struggles in providing support during transitions. However, cultural family dynamics in Saudi Arabia—namely the family as a strong social unit—allow for the functioning and success of the program in a way that is not universally replicable. Despite these obvious differences, the two case studies share an interesting and illuminating array of characteristics. For instance, both contain a balance of prosecution and rehabilitation, an emphasis on behavioral change over ideological change, the support of ample resources, and the incorporation of family and other community members.

Saudi Arabia's program also reveals that it is possible to implement deradicalization on a broad scale. It has a more structured program than Denmark yet still provides personalized attention. Its utilization of community support is a crucial factor that reduces costs and ensures success despite the large program size. Although this program supports the necessity of community and connection, as well as holistic support including education and vocational training, it also emphasizes that a program devoid of ideology and religion is not always possible given the sociocultural context. Rather, it blends more conventionally "Western" counseling with "non-Western" social and cultural support. Saudi Arabia's program is also more culturally and religiously grounded than Denmark's, as exemplified by the provision of dowries and wives to some program members. Saudi Arabia is unique in its ability to fund a program so generous that it has been attacked for providing "luxury hotels for terrorists."[106] Yet, the "luxuriousness" of

[103] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."
[104] Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy," 13.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Sara Brzuszkiewicz, "Saudi Arabia: The de-Radicalization Program Seen from Within," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, June 14, 2017,

transitional housing is not a requisite for effective deradicalization. Additionally, it is relevant to note that while numerous countries have cited security concerns as reasoning behind their hesitation to repatriate and rehabilitate extremists, Saudi Arabia created this deradicalization program out of security-related fears. The creators realized that this approach was preferable to the outcome if they did not more proactively address extremism, especially given the relatively high number of radicalized extremists residing within its borders. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's efforts are instructive to countries that are contemplating mechanisms for counter and de-radicalization, especially as they relate to security concerns.

Policy Recommendations and Implications

Next Steps for Denmark and Saudi Arabia

I propose several policy recommendations for the deradicalization programs in Denmark and Saudi Arabia. For instance, to address the unstable periods of transition, Denmark should increase family and community involvement and maintain ties between participants and their mentors for longer periods. Thorough monitoring of participants' mental health and comprehensive training for program members will help protect frontline staff. Greater transparency and public awareness of the program can also help remediate negative public opinion regarding the deradicalization efforts. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, should develop a reliable screening process for identifying the most extreme militants. Collaborating with academics and other experts, including the program counselors, would help reduce national security risks in doing so. However, the Saudis should ensure that additional monitoring does not result in further human rights violations. Although Saudi Arabia faces limitations in measuring recidivism rates owing in part to a lack of transparency and unified consensus on criteria for success, more efforts should be made to follow up with graduates of the program and maintain connections to monitor continued success rates.[107]

Increased Transparency

https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/saudi-arabia-de-radicalization-program-seen-within-16484.

[107] Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment."

Furthermore, both Denmark and Saudi Arabia should increase the transparency of their programs and what they have learned from their respective experiences. This would serve numerous purposes. First, it facilitates the development of effective programs elsewhere by enhancing global understanding of the methods that do and do not work in addressing terrorism and radicalization. Additionally, easier development can reduce program costs, which address an important concern with them examined in the case studies. Greater international transparency in methods and results would also help expose when countries are violating human rights in their approaches. Abuse could also be curtailed by reaching a more stringent consensus regarding relevant international definitions, thereby reducing vulnerability to manipulation.

Further Scholarship

Additional research is also needed in numerous areas. For instance, substantially more efforts should be dedicated to understanding the varying roles gender plays and how women become engaged and disengaged in violent extremism. Similar to men, this includes how they do not always fall in the neat binary of victim or perpetrator. Sexual violence can also hamper women's deradicalization and reintegration due to social stigmatization and lack of support. The issue of creating more fiscally conservative—and thus replicable—programs also necessitate further exploration regarding the impact of religious programming and whether keeping participants together or separating them is more effective. These recommendations, if implemented, could be a more resource-efficient way to address the pressing issue of violent extremism.

Conclusion

While there have been many recent developments in the field of deradicalization, significant knowledge gaps remain. This is partly driven by the lack of historical data available to analyze the most effective deradicalization approaches. Additionally, it is important to consider that there may be overlap between the perceived success of deradicalization programs and cases in which individuals become disillusioned, altering their ideology and behavior independently of completing these programs. However, some clear trends are emerging. Efforts were made to select well-established and successful deradicalization programs from which to draw lessons for the case studies. It should not be a surprise that these programs echoed other findings that strictly targeting ideology is not an effective approach. Instead, more comprehensive support for rehabilitation should be given, in tandem

with appropriate prosecution. For countries that cannot dedicate resources comparable to those of Denmark and Saudi Arabia, many questions remain, especially in the face of declining U.S. foreign aid. This issue is especially problematic given the demonstrated abuse of "deradicalization" initiatives. A greater incorporation of community members, which should include providing them with support and appropriate training, should be a central method for reducing program costs given these global trends. Relying more on these social networks can help build the requisite bridges for successful programs.

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Weaponized Interdependence and Dynamics of Partial Decoupling: Chokepoints, Adaptation, and the Security Dilemma in Advanced Technologies

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Abstract

This paper examines the erosion of U.S.–China technological engagement through the lens of weaponized interdependence. It focuses specifically on advanced technology sectors, particularly semiconductors, as a representative case study. Through examining U.S. export restraints after the first Trump administration, this paper argues that current instability in U.S.–China relations arises less from complete ideological divergence or failure of outright containment policy than from a structured reaction–counterreaction dynamic triggered by chokepoint activation. When the United States employs export controls and allied coordination to manage perceived technological risks, China responds through defensive reconfiguration aimed at reducing asymmetric vulnerability, in addition to retaliation in rare-earth export controls. Over time, these interactions generate three structural transformations: supply-chain reconfiguration, substitution, and regulations reinforcing segmentation. While previous literature is based primarily on the short-term effectiveness of coercion, this paper shifts attention to technological restraints' longer-term structural consequences. In summary, this paper suggests that technological interdependence is not dissolving but being selectively restructured. The result is a durable condition of partial, segmented decoupling in which interdependence persists under increasingly politicized rules of access.

Introduction

For much of the post-Cold War period, economic interdependence was understood as a stabilizing force in the field of international relations. Trade, investment, and technological exchange were assumed to generate shared interests that moderated rivalry between old hegemons and newly rising powers. This logic underpinned the United States' policy of engagement with China from the early 1990s onward. Integrating China into global markets was expected not only to promote economic convergence, but also to reduce incentives for strategic confrontation.

Yet in the past decade, this assumption has eroded, most dramatically in the technological domain. Rather than reinforcing cooperation, deep integration in advanced technologies came to be viewed as a source of strategic vulnerability. The result has been a sustained shift toward export controls, targeted sanctions, and coordination with strategic allies aimed at restricting access to critical technological inputs.[1] However, these measures have not produced wholesale disengagement. Instead, they generate an escalating cycle of restriction, adaptation, and selective separation that has fundamentally altered the structure of interdependence between China and the United States.

This paper seeks to understand why engagement has proven especially unstable in advanced technology sectors. Rather than asking if technological engagement has "failed," it examines how the structure of interdependence in these sectors shapes state behavior once security concerns become salient. The core puzzle is therefore not about ideological divergence or policy miscalculation, but why deep integration in technologies such as semiconductors has created conditions conducive to strategic denial of market access and fragmentation. Building on existing scholarship on weaponized interdependence, this paper shifts attention from episodic coercion to the longer-term structural effects that repeated chokepoint activation can generate. In this context, "chokepoint" may be understood as a strategically central node within a supply chain through which a disproportionate volume of technology or specialized input must pass. "Chokepoint activation" is thus conceptualized as a state's active and deliberate exertion of leverage over such a node. In the case of semiconductors, chokepoint activation refers to the different measures the United States used (export controls, licensing regimes, or allied coordination) to condition or restrict access for strategic purposes.

[1] Ana Swanson, "Trump's Trade War with China Is Officially Underway," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/business/china-us-trade-war-trump-tariffs.html.

It advances a central argument: in advanced technology sectors characterized by cumulative innovation, limited substitutability, dual-use applications, and highly concentrated production networks, interdependence allocates vulnerability asymmetrical.[2] Once these asymmetries become legible and politically salient, interdependence ceases to function solely as a stabilizing constraint. Instead, it becomes a channel through which coercion and counter-coercion operate, generating incentives for defensive reconfiguration. The outcome is not full technological separation, but a condition of *partial, segmented decoupling* in which interdependence persists under increasingly politicized rules of access.

To substantiate this argument, the paper proceeds in three steps. First, it specifies the conditions under which technological interdependence becomes self-destabilizing rather than merely coercive, extending existing work on weaponized interdependence by shifting attention from episodic leverage to system-level dynamics over time. Second, it traces how decades of U.S.–China engagement in semiconductors unintentionally produced the concentrated supply-chain structures that make chokepoint coercion feasible, recasting engagement itself as an endogenous source of vulnerability. Third, it analyzes the post-2013 period through a coercer–target framework, examining U.S. export controls and allied coordination, a strategy of strategic alignment between allies to strengthen or bypass export control measures, alongside China's adaptive responses.[3] Together, these interactions generate a stable but tense equilibrium of partial decoupling that reshapes, rather than dissolves, technological interdependence.

Analytical Framework

Existing work on weaponized interdependence emphasizes how states can exploit their position within global networks to coerce others through

[2] Dual-use application refers to applications in both civilian and military products. Many advanced semiconductors are today found in modern warfighting technologies and weapons modeling systems. See Jeanne Whalen, "Three Months, 700 Steps: Why It Takes so Long to Produce a Computer Chip," *The Washington Post*, July 7, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/07/07/making-semiconductors-is-hard; Matthew Schleich, "Securing Semiconductors: How to Scale-up Global Semiconductor Production and Protect U.S. National Security at the Same Time ," *United States Department of State*, May 16, 2023, https://2021-2025.state.gov/securing-semiconductors-how-to-scale-up-global-semiconductor-production-and-protect-u-s-national-security-at-the-same-time/.

[3] Allied coordination refers here to a strategic alignment between Western countries to block China from accessing the high-end of the semiconductor supply chain. It may also refer to China's active process of seeking allies to counter Western coercion. In other words, this term is simply a replacement of coalition-based export control.

panopticon or chokepoint effects.[4] This paper builds on that insight by shifting the unit of analysis from isolated episodes of coercion to the iterated interactions that such coercion generates. Rather than treating network structures as static sources of leverage, the framework conceptualizes weaponized interdependence as a process that unfolds through feedback effects. Chokepoint activation alters expectations about future access, induces behavioral adaptation by firms and states, and generates political pressures for further adjustments in the international system.

The temporal focus of this analysis begins in the early 2010s, when technological interdependence between the United States and China became explicitly securitized. Although frictions over technology transfer and industrial policy existed earlier, advanced technologies such as semiconductors were increasingly reframed during this period as national security assets rather than primarily commercial goods.[5] Export controls and defensive reconfiguration mark a qualitative departure from earlier strategies of engagement.

Within this framework, the United States and China are treated analytically as structural rather than normative actors.[6] The United States functions as the coercer insofar as it exercises jurisdictional control over upstream chokepoints in semiconductor supply chains, including design software, manufacturing equipment, and frontier fabrication capabilities. China occupies the position of the target due to an asymmetric exposure to these chokepoints that has been unintentionally built through its history of engagement. Importantly, neither actor's strategy is treated as exogenous. Instead, the framework emphasizes how policies on both sides evolve in

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[4] See Daniel W. Drezner, *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021); Douglas B. Fuller, "Weaponizing Interdependence and Global Value Chains: U.S. Export Controls on Huawei," *APSA Annual Meeting Paper*, 2022; Victor D. Cha, "Collective Resilience: Deterring China's Weaponization of Economic Interdependence," *International Security* 48, no. 1 (2023): 91–124, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00465.

[5] A major inflection point came in 2013 with the Snowden disclosures. The revelations exposed the extent to which U.S. information and communications technologies were embedded within global surveillance architectures and subject to American jurisdiction. For China, what had once been viewed as benign interdependence was now reinterpreted as structural vulnerability. In the aftermath, Chinese media and policy discourse increasingly emphasized technology security, indigenous breakthroughs, and the need for trusted national networks. Tan's empirical evidence shows a clear rise in the salience of terms related to decoupling and technology security following this initial knowledge shock. See Yeling Tan et al., "Driven to Self-Reliance: Technological Interdependence and the Chinese Innovation Ecosystem," *International Studies Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (March 17, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaf017.

[6] By "structural actors," this paper treats states as entities responding to incentives and constraints embedded within the international system, rather than as actors primarily motivated by ideological commitments or normative claims.

response to perceived vulnerability and adaptation of the other actor. Coercive measures may succeed in constraining specific technologies or firms, but they also generate adaptive responses that reshape incentives for investment, innovation, and cooperation. Similarly, defensive strategies aimed at reducing vulnerability may alleviate exposure while introducing new inefficiencies and dependencies. The interaction between coercion and adaptation thus produces an evolving equilibrium characterized by selective separation and managed interdependence.

Iterated chokepoint activation is argued to generate three durable structural transformations: i) supply-chain reconfiguration, ii) substitution and redundancy, iii) regulatory and standards segmentation. Figure 1 explains the definitions of these transformations, while Figure 2 illustrates the causal sequence linking chokepoint activation with adaptation, regulatory tightening, and the consequence of a segmented equilibrium.

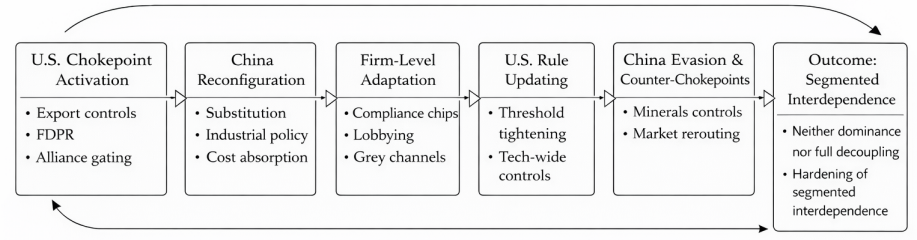
Figure 1. Structural Transformations Under Weaponized Interdependence

Structural Indicator	Analytical Meaning	Observable Manifestations
Supply-Chain Reconfiguration	Reorganization of production networks in response to political and security risk, without full withdrawal from global markets	Re-shoring or friend-shoring of fabrication and equipment supply; geographic diversification of critical nodes; avoidance of politically exposed jurisdictions
Indigenous Substitution and Capability Building	Deliberate efforts to reduce reliance on foreign chokepoints through domestic alternatives, even at higher cost or lower efficiency	State-supported development of domestic equipment, materials, and design tools; tolerance for duplication and inefficiency to reduce vulnerability
Regulatory and Standards Segmentation	Fragmentation of previously integrated markets through divergent legal, technical, and compliance frameworks	Parallel standards systems; differentiated export control regimes; increased transaction costs for cross-jurisdictional participation

This mechanism, however, does not apply universally. It is unlikely to operate in markets characterized by high substitutability, diffuse production, and low switching costs, such as commodity markets. Nor does it describe domains in which no actor possesses jurisdictional control over the high-end, decisive nodes. The argument advanced here is therefore sector-specific: it applies most strongly to advanced technologies that combine cumulative innovation, concentrated supply chains, and dual-use significance. The result of this sector-specific coercion is a partial interdependence between the two opponents. Since neither nation can completely

dominate the supply chain, a stalemate of competition is achieved. Hardening of such segmented interdependence only generates further rounds of chokepoint activation and counter-measures, a process that looks poised to continue until one side completely falls out of this competition.

Figure 2. Hypothetical Mechanism Diagram for Causal Sequence in Technological Interdependence



Under these conditions, the framework seems to highlight a security dilemma-like dynamic rooted in technological governance. Chokepoint activation becomes the opening move in an iterated process that generates feedback effects on both sides. Measures adopted by the coercer to mitigate future risk (e.g. targeted export controls) may be interpreted by the target as long-term containment, even when framed as narrow or preventive. Adaptive responses aimed at reducing vulnerability can, in turn, be perceived as evidence of latent capability-building, reinforcing incentives for further restriction. Over time, the outcome is not full decoupling, but a stable equilibrium of partial decoupling in which interdependence persists under tighter political control.

Why Existing Accounts of Engagement Breakdown Are Incomplete

A large literature seeks to explain the erosion of U.S.–China engagement. These explanations can be grouped into two broad camps: structural accounts and agent-centered accounts.[7] While they illuminate why political support for engagement weakened, they do not explain why advanced

[7] In fact, opinions about how to deal with China have been divided roughly into four major camps: Bull-Hawks, Bear-Hawks, Bull-Dove, Bear-Dove. Bulls and Bears refer to conceptions of China's development, whether it will continue to rise or has already peaked. Hawk and Doves refer to what policy the United States should take, whether its aggressive counter-measures or a window for cooperative opportunity. This essay concerns only with arguments from the hawks, as utilizing chokepoints in the technology sector is prone to cause containment and decoupling rather than cooperation or engagement.

technologies, rather than trade in general, became the primary locus of instability.

Structural explanations locate the breakdown of engagement in systemic shifts associated with China's rise. From this perspective, engagement was unsustainable because a rising power with divergent political and institutional characteristics inevitably threatened the position of the established hegemon.[8] Power transition theories emphasize how relative gains and security competition intensify as material capabilities converge, while institutional accounts stress incompatibilities between China's party-state capitalism and rule-based global economic governance.[9] Together, these arguments help explain why rivalry deepened, but they treat technological conflict as an epiphenomenon of broader strategic competition rather than as a distinct source of instability.

Agent-centered explanations focus instead on beliefs, and domestic political backlash. Engagement persisted, in this view, because policymakers overestimated the transformative effects of economic integration and underestimated the resilience of China's political and economic system.[10] As evidence accumulated that integration did not produce convergence, especially that China's industrial and regulatory practices also generated asymmetric risks, support for engagement eroded.[11] These accounts clarify how perceptions changed over time, but they offer limited insight into why certain sectors, particularly semiconductors, became uniquely securitized while others remained deeply integrated despite rising rivalry.

Both sets of explanations therefore share a common limitation. They treat engagement primarily as a political strategy whose viability depends on intentions, beliefs, or systemic power shifts. What they do not explain is how the structure of interdependence itself can generate instability. Specifically, they do not account for why deep integration in advanced

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[8] John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, October 28, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war.

[9] Aaron Friedberg, "The Growing Rivalry between America and China and the Future of Globalization," *Texas National Security Review*, January 4, 2022, https://tnsr.org/2022/01/the-growing-rivalry-between-america-and-china-and-the-future-of-globalization/; Scholars argue that China's party-state capitalism is fundamentally incompatible with the rule-based, legalistic architecture of institutions such as the WTO, producing structural tensions that transform engagement into contestation over who sets the rules of the system. See Mark Wu, "The 'China, Inc.' Challenge to Global Trade Governance," *Harvard International Law Journal* 57, no. 2 (January 1, 2016): 261–324.

[10] Kurt M Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning," *Foreign Affairs*, February 13, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-reckoning.

[11] Margaret M. Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai, "China's Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash: From Interdependence to Insecurity," *International Security* 47, no. 2 (2022): 135–76, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00447.

technologies produced concentrated vulnerabilities that made denial strategies feasible and self-reinforcing.

The argument advanced in this paper does not reject these explanations. Structural rivalry and shifting beliefs clearly shape the political context in which technology policy is made. Rather, this paper complements them by focusing on a different level of analysis. Instead of asking why engagement ended, the next section examines how technological interdependence, once embedded in concentrated and cumulative production networks, became weaponizable, particularly how that weaponization reshaped the system over time. By shifting attention from the collapse of engagement to the transformation of interdependence, this paper seeks to clarify why advanced technologies became central to contemporary economic statecraft.

Weaponized Interdependence: From Coercion to Systemic Dynamics

Unlike trade in consumer goods or relatively fungible commodities, advanced technologies like semiconductors exhibit a set of structural characteristics that fundamentally alter the strategic calculus of interdependence.[12] First, innovation is cumulative: access to frontier capabilities today shapes the feasible trajectory of technological progress tomorrow, creating path dependence rather than discrete, easily reversible exchanges. Second, substitution is limited. Although firms and states may diversify supply chains at the margins, there are few short-term alternatives to advanced fabrication nodes, specialized manufacturing equipment, or proprietary design software that do not incur substantial performance and cost penalties. Third, these technologies are inherently dual-use, generating civilian economic value while simultaneously enabling military, intelligence, and surveillance applications. Finally, production networks are highly concentrated geographically and institutionally, producing identifiable chokepoints through which influence can be exercised.

This asymmetrical nature transforms technological interdependence from a stabilizing force into a potential instrument of power. Once states recognize that control over key nodes in technology networks enables denial rather than mere bargaining, incentives shift. As Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman demonstrate, interdependence under conditions of

[12] As emphasized in recent scholarship and teaching on technological competition, these sectors are cumulative, difficult to substitute, embedded in security-critical systems, and governed by network position rather than formal ownership. See John Minnich, *"Economic and Technological War,"* IR 392/492: The Political Economy of China's Technological Rise. (class lecture, London School of Economics, London, UK, November 26, 2025).

network centralization and jurisdictional control becomes a source of coercive leverage rather than mutual restraint.[13]

Subsequent scholarship has also refined this framework by assessing the durability and limits of chokepoint power. Analysts emphasize that not all chokepoints are equally powerful, and that their effectiveness depends on firm-level incentives in addition to technological substitutability or the availability of alternative networks.[14] Where denial threatens long-term innovation, pressure to evade or undermine controls increases.[15]

Concerns about power trajectories intensify this dynamic. As rising powers approach technological parity, sensitivity to future risks increases. Under such conditions, the opportunity costs of restraint grow, and measures that might once have appeared excessively escalatory come to be viewed as preventive.[16] Consecutive "knowledge shocks" may further prompt policymakers to reinterpret technological interdependence as a liability, reinforcing incentives for insulation and control.[17] The result is not the abandonment of interdependence, but its reconfiguration under heightened political tension. Engagement persists, but becomes narrower, conditional, and increasingly segmented along lines of strategic trust.[18]

How Engagement Built the Chokepoints

The emergence of semiconductors as the central arena of U.S.–China confrontation was not the product of a sudden policy reversal, nor the result of deliberate vulnerability creation. Rather, it was the cumulative and largely unintended consequence of decades of engagement that deepened integration while concentrating control over critical nodes in global production networks.

From the late Cold War through the early 2010s, U.S.–China engagement was premised on a shared assumption: that integration would diffuse capabilities, reduce incentives for conflict, and bind China more tightly to

[13] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (July 1, 2019): 42–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351.
[14] Fuller, "Weaponizing Interdependence and Global Value Chains."
[15] Drezner, *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence.*
[16] Michael Beckley, "The Peril of Peaking Powers: Economic Slowdowns and Implications for China's Next Decade," *International Security* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2023): 7–46, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00463.
[17] Knowledge shocks typically refers to sudden revelations of surveillance and the expansion of export controls, most notably the Snowden revelations and U.S. export controls, which reframed interdependence as a key vulnerability. See Tan, "Driven to Self-Reliance."
[18] Ibid.

existing market and governance structures.[19] By the 1990s, this approach was systematized under what later came to be known as "trading the market for technology" (TMFT or *yi shichang huan jishu*).[20] The effectiveness of this strategy was amplified by what observers at the time described as an FDI (foreign direct investment) fever, during which multinational firms, eager to secure early mover advantages in China, accepted arrangements that they might have resisted elsewhere.[21] These incentives produced rapid integration across semiconductor value chains, particularly in the downstream segments China specialized, such as assembly, testing, and packaging. Upstream activities, however, remained concentrated among a small number of firms controlling advanced design software, manufacturing equipment, and frontier fabrication capabilities.[22]

This pattern of integration generated a distinctive hub-and-spoke structure. Chinese firms became indispensable participants in global semiconductor production, while remaining highly dependent on foreign suppliers.[23] From an efficiency perspective, this division of labor proved highly productive. From a strategic perspective, it entrenched asymmetric exposure.

Institutional developments reinforced this concentration. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 lowered barriers to trade and investment and accelerated the incorporation of Chinese facilities into global supply chains. China's post-WTO strategy therefore emphasized "introduce, digest, absorb, and re-innovate" (IDAR), shifting focus from acquiring foreign hardware toward building firms' absorptive capacity

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[19] John Minnich, "Trump, U.S.-China Competition, and the Future of Technology Transfer." *Global Public Policy and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2025): 411–21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-025-00125-9.

[20] This idea was carried out as Chinese authorities leveraged market size and regional bargaining power to encourage localization of production and training.

[21] Ling Chen and Miles M. Evers, "'Wars without Gun Smoke': Global Supply Chains, Power Transitions, and Economic Statecraft," *International Security* 48, no. 2 (January 1, 2023): 164–204, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00473.

[22] Stephen Ezell, "How Innovative Is China in Semiconductors?," Hamilton Center on Industrial Strategy, August 2024, https://d-russia.ru/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2024-china-semiconductors.pdf.

[23] Ezell, "How Innovative Is China in Semiconductors?"; Unfortunately, out of its unique position (intermediate to GVCs or Global Value Chains), its reliance on foreign firms to drive exports constrained its power from imposing a great amount of tech extractive policies. Prior to 2014-15, China was described as lacking the resources or capabilities to "go out" in search of foreign technology on a large scale. See John D. Minnich, "Scaling the Commanding Heights: The Logic of Technology Transfer Policy in Rising China," *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper* no. 2023-2 (June 29, 2023), https://ssrn.com/abstract=4496386.

through research and development, training, and indigenous innovation.[24] Throughout the 2000s, technological dependence was widely treated as transitional, to be resolved through continued cooperation and upgrading. State strategies emphasized indigenous innovation, improving the domestic absorptive capacity under a "win-win" condition of technological collaboration.[25]

Crucially, such outcomes were not the result of a coherent strategy to weaponize interdependence. They emerged instead from mutually beneficial decisions made under political trust and low perceived security risk. Engagement functioned as a force multiplier for efficiency, but in the future, it also rendered interdependence increasingly legible to state regulations.

By the early 2010s, shifts in the security environment altered how these structures were interpreted. Concerns about cyber espionage and military-civil fusion altered the strategic implications of technological dependence. Policymakers were prompted to reassess earlier assumptions about benign interdependence.[26] The neutral market infrastructure created in the past became increasingly reframed as potential leverage. Engagement thus produced the very conditions that later made weaponized interdependence possible: concentrated upstream control, high switching costs, and jurisdictional authority over indispensable inputs.

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[24] In practice, the IDAR framework expanded the policy toolkit. Joint venture requirements persisted, but they were supplemented by local content rules, government procurement preferences, standards-setting, and targeted industrial policies. The aim was no longer merely to host foreign production, but to embed learning within domestic firms and gradually move Chinese companies up the value chain. See John D. Minnich, "Re-Innovation Nation: The Strategic and Political Logic of Technology Transfer Policy in Rising China" (PhD diss., MIT, 2023), https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/152780/minnich-jminnich-phd-politicalscience-2023-thesis.pdf.

[25] Policy documents such as the Eleventh Five-Year Plan emphasized optimization, leapfrogging, and "win-win" technological collaboration, reflecting a prevailing belief that engagement remained both viable and beneficial. See National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), *Outline of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (国民经济和社会发展第十一个五年规划纲要)*, in Chinese, March 24, 2006, https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xwdt/gdzt/ghjd/quanwen/201403/t20140321_1201604.html; To this end, the Chinese state expanded its coordinating capacity through instruments such as the 2006 Medium and Long Term Program (MLP), which sought to strengthen domestic innovation in high-value-added sectors while remaining embedded in global markets. See Cong Cao, Richard P. Suttmeier, and Denis Fred Simon, "China's 15-Year Science and Technology Plan," *Issues in Science and Technology* 22, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 38–43, https://china-us.uoregon.edu/pdf/final%20print%20version.pdf.

[26] Tan, "Driven to Self-Reliance."

The United States: Chokepoint Coercion in Practice

The United States' turn toward chokepoint-based coercion in advanced technologies near the end of the Obama administration did not represent a wholesale abandonment of engagement, nor a sudden embrace of economic warfare.[27] Rather, it reflected a reassessment of risk under conditions in which the structure of interdependence—shaped by earlier engagement—appeared to grant the United States selective leverage over critical upstream nodes. Chokepoint activation emerged as a strategy of preventive risk management in order to constrain future technological developments rather than to extract immediate concessions.

Strategic Objectives

Official U.S. statements and policy documents from this period consistently emphasized two overlapping objectives. The first was to preserve U.S. and allied leadership in foundational technologies deemed essential to economic competitiveness in response to China's rise.[28] This includes advanced logic chips, artificial intelligence accelerators, and semiconductor manufacturing equipment. The second was to prevent China from leveraging civilian access to these technologies to accelerate military modernization or achieve rapid "leapfrogging" toward the technological frontier.[29]

These objectives became increasingly explicit after 2017. The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy framed China as a "strategic competitor" and identified technological leadership as a core domain of rivalry.[30] Subsequent policy debates, spanning multiple administrations, coalesced around the view that unfettered access to U.S.-origin technology posed long-term risks that could not be mitigated through engagement

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[27] The White House, "President's Council Launches Semiconductor Working Group," October 31, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/10/31/presidents-council-launches-semiconductor-working-group.

[28] See Karen Kornbluh and Julia Tréhu. "The New American Foreign Policy of Technology: Promoting Innovation, National Security, and Democratic Values in a Digital World." German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep48497

[29] Jeffrey W. Legro, "What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (August 16, 2007): 515, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592707071526; Markus Brunnermeier, Rush Doshi, and Harold James, "Beijing's Bismarckian Ghosts: How Great Powers Compete Economically," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 161–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2018.1520571.

[30] Congressional Research Service, *Semiconductors: U.S. Industry, Global Competition, and Federal Policy*, CRS In Focus IF10119, updated February 20, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF10119/IF10119.32.pdf.

alone. Importantly, this logic did not assume that China was technologically dominant in the present; rather, it treated future convergence as the primary threat.[31] Chokepoint control was therefore justified as a preventive measure rather than a reactive sanction.

Instruments

The operationalization of these goals relied on a layered set of legal and regulatory instruments that drew on U.S. jurisdiction over key nodes in global semiconductor supply chains. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Commerce added telecommunications firm ZTE to its Entity List—a targeted export control mechanism designed to restrict access to certain U.S.-origin technologies for the foreign actors it names—for violating sanctions. The move cut off its access to U.S. chips, software, and design tools.[32] Though temporarily reversed through a negotiated settlement (a plea to pay the fine), the episode exposed just how deeply embedded U.S. technology was in China's tech stack. In 2018, the U.S. reactivated controls in a broader context, combining national-security tariffs, a Section 301 IP investigation, and renewed export bans targeting ZTE. This marked the first full activation of chokepoint control: U.S. legal jurisdiction was used to disable a Chinese national champion by denying access to indispensable upstream inputs.[33]

What followed was a sustained expansion of that coercive architecture. Between 2019 and 2022, Huawei, SMIC, YMTC, Hikvision, and dozens of other Chinese tech firms were added to the Entity List. Simultaneously, the U.S. imposed extraterritorial controls using the Foreign Direct Product Rule (FDPR), denying China access to cutting-edge chips fabricated even by non-U.S. firms if U.S. technology was involved in the process.[34] The campaign culminated in October 2022, when the Commerce Department issued a sweeping set of export controls that blocked China from acquiring or manufacturing logic chips at or below 14nm, AI-grade GPUs (e.g., Nvidia A100/H100), and advanced semiconductor manufacturing equipment.

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[31] Brad Glosserman, "De-Risking Is Not Enough: Tech Denial toward China Is Needed," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 103–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2023.2286134.

[32] The support of resources ZTE provided to North Korea and Iran was allegedly in violation of economic sanctions that the United States imposed on these authoritarian regimes. See Pearson, "China's Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash."

[33] Liyu Han and Jiaxun Sun, "Trade Strategies and Power Games between China, the US and India," in *The Future of Asian Trade Deals and IP*, ed. Liyu Han et al. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

[34] Gregory C. Allen, "Understanding the Biden Administration's Updated Export Controls," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-biden-administrations-updated-export-controls.

These rules also barred "U.S. persons" from providing support to Chinese semiconductor fabricants, prompting American engineers to withdraw from projects at SMIC and elsewhere.

Allied coordination followed. In 2023, the U.S. secured agreements with the Netherlands and Japan to restrict the export of lithography and etching tools—particularly EUV (Extreme Ultraviolet) and advanced DUV (Deep Ultraviolet) lithography machines used to fabricate sub-7 nanometer (nm) logic chips.[35] Meanwhile, the Biden administration imposed further tool restrictions, introduced performance caps on Nvidia/AMD GPU exports, and proposed novel regulations to limit cloud-based AI compute access. As of 2025, outbound investment screening and legislative efforts (e.g., the SAFE CHIPS Act) continue to harden the framework.[36] The combined effect is a complex but targeted attempt to control the entire stack of advanced chip production: from IP and design software to manufacturing equipment, capital, and human expertise.

Structural Effects

In the short term, U.S. measures produced immediate disruption. The 2018 denial order against ZTE brought the firm to the brink of collapse within weeks, demonstrating the immediacy with which chokepoint control could incapacitate a technology-dependent company. Huawei's experience after 2019 was even more consequential: the loss of access to Google's Android ecosystem and—following the expansion of the Foreign Direct Product Rule in 2020 to advanced chips fabricated by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC)—effectively dismantled its global smartphone business.[37] In parallel, restrictions on high-end computing hardware curtailed Chinese access to Nvidia's most advanced AI

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[35] Sub-7nm logic chips are critical inputs for high-performance computing, artificial intelligence systems, and advanced defense applications, making them central to both economic competitiveness and military modernization. See "U.S. Secures Deal with Netherlands, Japan on China Chip Export Limit, Bloomberg Reports," *Reuters*, January 27, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/officials-netherlands-japan-washington-chip-talks-2023-01-27/.

[36] Georgia Adamson, Saif Khan, and Tao Burga, "Should the US Sell Blackwell Chips to China? Assessing the Impacts of Exporting the B30A AI Chip," October 25, 2025, https://ifp.org/wp-content/uploads/Should-the-US-Sell-Blackwell-Chips-to-China.pdf; CHIPS and Science Act, H.R. 4346, 117th Cong. (2022) (enacted), https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4346.

[37] "U.S. Secures Deal with Netherlands, Japan on China Chip Export Limit, Bloomberg Reports," *Reuters*, January 27, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/officials-netherlands-japan-washington-chip-talks-2023-01-27/; "TSMC Stops New Huawei Orders after U.S. Restrictions," *Reuters*, May 18, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/business/tsmc-stops-new-huawei-orders-after-us-restrictions-nikkei-idUSKBN22U0IS/.

accelerators, especially constraining progress in supercomputing and large language model (LLM) training. These episodes demonstrated that control over a narrow set of upstream technologies could rapidly disable downstream capabilities, confirming the tactical potency of chokepoint measures.

As these controls persisted, however, their effects extended beyond firm-specific disruption. On the U.S. side, semiconductor firms (e.g. Nvidia, Intel, and AMD) faced substantial revenue losses from reduced access to the Chinese market, prompting both commercial adaptation and political pressure for regulatory adjustment.[38] In response, firms attempted to preserve market presence by redesigning products to comply with control thresholds—most notably through downgraded "China-specific" chips such as Nvidia's A800 series.[39] In other words, firms designed commercial workarounds for 'detrimental' governmental regulations. These efforts, in turn, triggered further rounds of regulatory refinement, as U.S. authorities sought to close newly identified loopholes. Export controls thus evolved into a self-reinforcing governance regime, in which commercial adaptation and regulatory tightening interacted iteratively in what had previously been simply market-driven exchange.

At the technological frontier, U.S. officials have pointed to sustained constraints on China's access to leading-edge capabilities as evidence that this regime has produced meaningful strategic delay. As of 2024, China had not achieved mass production of 5 nm- or 3 nm-class logic chips, a limitation closely tied to its exclusion from extreme ultraviolet lithography following U.S.-led allied coordination.[40] These outcomes have been cited as validation of the "small yard, high fence" approach, in which narrowly targeted controls are aimed at a small number of decisive nodes.[41] As illustrated in Figure 3, U.S. export controls represent the initial chokepoint activation in an iterative cycle. The evolution from firm-specific measures to technology-wide thresholds reflects the rule-updating phase of this process.

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[38] Eric Fruits, "From Moore's Law to Market Rivalry: The Economic Forces That Shape the Semiconductor Manufacturing Industry," International Center for Law & Economics, November 17, 2025, https://laweconcenter.org/resources/from-moores-law-to-market-rivalry-the-economic-forces-that-shape-the-semiconductor-manufacturing-industry/.

[39] Industry analysts noted that such workarounds kept Chinese firms supplied for AI development, albeit at lower efficiency, and prompted U.S. officials to continually update rules to capture those chips as well.

[40] The China Academy, "2024: How Does China Overcome the US' Chip Sanctions?," January 30, 2024, https://thechinaacademy.org/2024-how-does-china-overcome-the-us-chip-sanctions/.

[41] Geoffrey Gertz, "Goodbye to Small Yard, High Fence," *New York Times*, December 31, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/31/opinion/china-semiconductor-biden-xi.html.

Yet the longer-term consequences of this strategy appear more complex. Lost sales and foregone scale threaten to erode the revenue base and R&D capacity of U.S. firms, raising concerns that prolonged restriction may undermine the very technological leadership it seeks to preserve. By the mid-2020s, this tension had surfaced openly in policy debates, with some industry actors and policymakers advocating selective relaxation of controls to maintain Chinese dependence on U.S. suppliers and avoid accelerating the search for non-U.S. alternatives.[42]

For China, the persistence of access constraints has driven a shift from short-term coping to longer-term reorientation. Rather than treating export controls as episodic disruptions, Chinese policymakers and firms increasingly operate on the assumption that chokepoint exposure constitutes a durable feature of the external environment. This expectation has redirected investment and organizational effort toward rebuilding the semiconductor stack under conditions of constraint. Foundries such as SMIC and Hua Hong expanded capacity at mature process nodes, while design firms linked to major technology conglomerates—most notably Huawei's HiSilicon—adapted architectures to inputs that could be supported domestically.[43] Over time, these adjustments have altered the internal allocation of resources, privileging resilience and controllability over immediate performance at the frontier.

Perhaps most consequentially, prolonged exclusion has catalyzed rapid learning and consolidation in China's semiconductor equipment sector. As U.S. suppliers withdrew, domestic firms such as Naura and Piotech moved from peripheral roles toward central positions, benefiting from policy support that tolerated inefficiency in exchange for capability accumulation.[44] What began as substitution born of necessity increasingly resembled a reconstitution of upstream capacity, narrowing gaps in segments that had once appeared structurally inaccessible. At the same time, Chinese firms redirected commercially viable technologies. Areas of surveillance systems, telecommunications infrastructure, and civil-military fusion technology expanded toward markets in the Global South as access to advanced

[42] Karen M. Sutter, "U.S. Export Controls and China: Advanced Semiconductors," CRS Report R48642 (Congressional Research Service, September 19, 2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48642.
[43] Paul Triolo, "A New Era for the Chinese Semiconductor Industry: Beijing Responds to Export Controls," *American Affairs*, February 20, 2024, https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2024/02/a-new-era-for-the-chinese-semiconductor-industry-beijing-responds-to-export-controls/.
[44] Danny Hague, "Inside Beijing's Chipmaking Offensive: Where Is China Gaining Ground?," *Georgetown Center for Security and Emerging Technology*, July 14, 2025, https://cset.georgetown.edu/article/inside-beijings-chipmaking-offensive/.

Western markets narrowed.[45] ZTE's role in providing the technological infrastructure for Venezuela's "Fatherland Card," which enabled detailed monitoring of citizens, and its partnership with Pakistan's state broadcaster to develop digital television systems and train personnel under expanding Sino-Pakistani cooperation, reinforced security concerns abroad. In the United States and allied countries, these cases contributed to a broader narrative that linked Chinese telecommunications firms to censorship export, surveillance capabilities, and potential influence operations, intensifying anxiety over the proximity of Chinese 5G vendors to critical national infrastructure.[46] In this environment, interdependence has not disappeared, but it has been reorganized: access is conditional, substitution is strategic, and exchange is mediated through overlapping political and regulatory boundaries.

[45] Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (2022): 9–47, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00433.
[46] G. van der Zwan, "Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region," ed. Anja Mihr, Paolo Sorbello, and Brigitte Weiffen, 1st ed. (Springer Nature, 2023), 329–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4.

Figure 3. Key U.S. Chokepoint Measures against China's Semiconductor and AI Sectors, 2018–2025[47]

Date	Target / Entity	Instrument	Strategic Rationale	Tech Scope (Aimed Capability)	Administering Agency
Apr 16, 2018	ZTE Corporation	Export Denial Order	First demonstration of chokepoint control: exposed structural dependence on U.S. chips and software	Telecom SoCs, mobile processors, Android stack	Commerce (BIS)
2018–2019	Huawei & 68 affiliates; ASML to SMIC (EUV block)	Export Control Diplomacy	Curb China's 5G rise and global platform influence; Prevent China from accessing lithography tools needed for advanced-node chips	5G infrastructure, Android OS, EUV for <7nm production	Commerce (BIS) & White House / State Dept
Nov 12, 2020	SMIC, Huawei, military-linked firms	Executive Order 13959 (Investment Ban)	Halt U.S. capital support for China's military–tech fusion companies	Logic fabs, military dual-use semiconductors	White House / Treasury
Apr 8, 2021	Phytium, Sunway, others	Entity List	Deny supercomputing entities access to chip design tools and foundry support	HPC chips, EDA software, advanced packaging	Commerce (BIS)
Sept 2022	Nvidia, AMD (A100/H100 chips)	Export Notification / License	Block China's access to leading AI training chips used in military/civil fusion	AI GPUs, >300 TFLOPs compute accelerators	Commerce (BIS)
Dec 15, 2022	YMTC, Biren, others	Entity List	Block memory and AI chip suppliers from accessing U.S. tooling and IP	NAND flash, AI accelerators	Commerce (BIS)
Oct 17, 2023	Nvidia A800/H800, Biren, Moore	Revised Export Controls	Close loopholes on "China-special" AI chips and expand controls to packaging & tools	Semi-degraded AI GPUs, metrology, advanced packaging	Commerce (BIS)
Dec 2, 2024	140 Chinese chip firms	Entity List + FDPR + new EAR rules	Finalize chokepoint net; close design–tool–	FDPR on AI tools, chip fabs,	Commerce (BIS)

[47] Compiled by the author from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) press releases, Federal Register notices, executive orders, company SEC filings, and media coverage including *Reuters*, *Bloomberg*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, 2018–2025.

			fab–IP loop for advanced chip production	advanced computing nodes	
May 2025	Export-controlled entities	Legislative Proposal (SAFE CHIPS Act draft)	Institutionalize hardware export bans by codifying performance caps and closing waiver pathways for firms like Nvidia	Codified GPU restrictions, reinforced performance limits	Congress / BIS (pending)

China: From Exposure to Defensive Reconfiguration

Strategic Goals

As Jeffrey Legro argues, foreign policy intentions are shaped by dominant ideas within states that function as "meshing gears" between structural conditions—such as power and interdependence—and national behavior. China's strategic orientation toward technology has therefore been neither static nor ideologically predetermined, but contingent upon changing assessments of risk and opportunity.[48] What distinguishes the post-2016 period is not merely China's desire for technological advancement, but a redefinition of technological dependence itself as a systemic vulnerability that could be activated under conditions of strategic tension.

This reassessment was already visible in the mid-2010s. *Made in China 2025* explicitly emphasized reducing reliance on foreign-controlled "core components," particularly semiconductors and advanced manufacturing equipment.[49] These concerns intensified after President Xi consolidated political authority. The articulation of the Innovation-Driven Development Strategy (IDDS) reframed technological capability not only as an economic growth engine but as a pillar of national security and regime resilience, seeking global leadership by 2030 and technological dominance by mid-century.[50] In this context, deep interdependence in advanced technology was increasingly reinterpreted as a source of strategic exposure.[51]

U.S. policy shifts reinforced this strategic urgency. As illustrated in Figure 2, the expansion of extraterritorial jurisdiction through instruments

[48] Legro, "What China Will Want."
[49] Avery Goldstein, "US–China Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century: Déjà vu and Cold War II," *China International Strategy Review* 2, no. 1 (June 2020): 48–62.
[50] Barry Naughton, "The Innovation-Driven Development Strategy, 2015–Present," in *The Rise of China's Industrial Policy, 1978 to 2020* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021), 69–98, https://doi.org/10.1515/9786078066605-005.
[51] Chris Miller, "Everything We're Competing On," in *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology* (Simon and Schuster, 2022).

such as the Foreign Direct Product Rule transformed latent dependence into an immediate risk. Chinese policy discourse began to treat access constraints not as episodic shocks but as a durable feature of the external environment. The objective, then, was not classical autarky. Instead, it centered on reducing asymmetric vulnerability: ensuring that critical components of China's economic and security infrastructure could not be externally disrupted in political crises.[52]

Responses

China's response to this environment has been multifaceted, but very costly. On the technological front, Beijing has prioritized rebuilding the semiconductor stack across fabrication, design, equipment, and materials—while simultaneously accepting that progress at the frontier would be slower and less efficient than under conditions of open access. The release of Huawei's Mate 60 Pro smartphone in 2023, powered by a 7-nanometer Kirin 9000S system-on-chip produced by SMIC, illustrated both the possibilities and limits of this approach. Denied access to extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography, SMIC relied on older deep-ultraviolet tools and multi-patterning techniques to achieve near genuine 7nm chip performance.[53] The result demonstrated technical ingenuity and organizational resilience, but at substantial cost: yields were reportedly far below those of leading global foundries, rendering production expensive and difficult to scale.[54]

This pattern—technical progress achieved through workaround rather than efficiency—has become characteristic of China's semiconductor trajectory under constraint. Heavy state support has allowed firms to tolerate low yields, duplication, and higher unit costs in exchange for reduced exposure to foreign chokepoints. Congressional analyses note that such substitution is not limited to logic chips alone, but extends upstream into manufacturing equipment, materials, and design tools, where domestic suppliers

[52] Darren Lim and Victor Ferguson, "Conscious Decoupling: The Technology Security Dilemma," in *China Dreams*, ed. Jane Golley, Ben Hillman, Linda Jaivin, and Sharon Strange ANU Press, 2020), http://doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2020.04.

[53] For contemporaneous reporting on Huawei's Mate 60 Pro and its domestically produced chipset, see Vlad Savov and Debby Wu, "Inside Huawei's Mate 60 Pro, Powered by a Made-in-China Chip," *Bloomberg*, September 4, 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-09-04/look-inside-huawei-mate-60-pro-phone-powered-by-made-in-china-chip; "Teardown of Huawei's New Phone Shows China Chip Breakthrough," *Reuters*, September 4, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/technology/teardown-huaweis-new-phone-shows-chinas-chip-breakthrough-2023-09-04/.

[54] See note 53.

have gained market share following the withdrawal of U.S. and allied firms.[55]

Beyond firm-level adaptation, China has sought to reshape the institutional environment governing technology exchange. Legislative and regulatory initiatives—such as the 2020–2021 semiconductor policy package—tie tax incentives, financing, and procurement eligibility to localization of intellectual property, R&D intensity, and domestic incorporation in China.[56] These measures aim to internalize critical knowledge within Chinese legal entities and ensure that learning generated under constraint remains domestically embedded. Financial instruments, including state guidance funds and leasing arrangements for imported equipment, have further enabled firms to bridge short-term capability gaps while substitution efforts mature.

Structural Effects

Rather than developing a completely self-sufficient industry or remaining in the status quo, China is engaged in what this paper calls a process of defensive reconfiguration: rebuilding critical capabilities under constraint, reallocating markets and partners, and institutionalizing mechanisms to reduce exposure to foreign chokepoints. This process has demonstrably narrowed some vulnerabilities, but at a significant cost and with uneven results across sectors.

Crucially, China's indigenous innovation and substitution strategies have fed back into U.S. strategy. Breakthroughs in Huawei's 7-nm chip, for example, reinforced further perceptions in Washington that China retains substantial innovative capacity even under constraint, prompting further tightening of controls. The result is a cycle of action and counter-action in which each side's measures validate the other's threat perceptions. As previously theorized, a new form of security dilemma has emerged. It is one rooted in the control and reconfiguration of technological interdependence rather than military deployment.[57] Each side's move (controls; self-reliance; diversification) is interpreted as offensive capability-building, triggering countermeasures that expand the scale of control and retaliation.

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[55] Karen M. Sutter, "China's New Semiconductor Policies: Issues for Congress", CRS Report R46767 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 20, 2021), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46767; and Christopher A. Casey, "U.S. Export Controls and China", CRS In Focus IF11627 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 24, 2022), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11627.

[56] Karen M. Sutter, "'Made in China 2025' Industrial Policies: Issues for Congress", CRS In Focus IF10964 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, December 12, 2024), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10964.

[57] Darren Lim, "Conscious Decoupling."

In this sense, decoupling is not a singular outcome but an evolving condition. China's pursuit of self-reliance does not eliminate interdependence; it reshapes geopolitics by redistributing risk and leverage across the production of semiconductors. While the United States retains control over design and fabrication, China occupies positions in rare-earth inputs, including critical raw materials essential to semiconductor production.[58] This asymmetry creates reciprocal vulnerabilities rather than unilateral dependence.

China's regulatory response mirrors the logic of chokepoint coercion. Within days of U.S. semiconductor restrictions, China's Ministry of Commerce announced enhanced export controls on critical minerals originating in or exported from China, including a prohibition on exports of gallium, germanium, antimony, and superhard materials to the United States, alongside heightened end-use and end-user scrutiny for graphite-related dual-use items.[59]

Although these materials had already been subject to licensing regimes introduced in 2023 and 2024, the new measures marked a qualitative shift by explicitly targeting the United States and prohibiting transshipment through third countries. The impact of these controls was further amplified by revisions to China's export-control framework that formalized extraterritorial application, extending regulatory reach beyond Chinese territory. As prices for affected inputs rise, downstream production costs and output for semiconductor-dependent industries are likely to increase, underscoring how interdependence generates both exposure and retaliatory capacity.[60]

As this paper outlines, strategic realignment has followed on both sides. Just as China has redirected deployment and partnerships toward aligned

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[58] Gracelin Baskaran, "China's New Rare Earth and Magnet Restrictions Threaten U.S. Defense Supply Chains," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-rare-earth-and-magnet-restrictions-threaten-us-defense-supply-chains.

[59] Gallium, mainly in the form of gallium nitride and gallium arsenide, is used to create integrated circuit chips and optoelectronic devices, like laser diodes, LEDs, and solar cells. Gallium-based semiconductors are used in different technologies like computers, telephones, and even military applications. See Matthew Blackwood and Catherine DeFilippo, *Germanium and Gallium: US Trade and Chinese Export Controls* (U.S. International Trade Commission, 2024), https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/executive_briefings/ebot_germanium_and_gallium.pdf; Marius Risse, Fiama Angeles, and Anttoni Asikainen, "China's Export Controls on Critical Raw Materials, Including Rare Earths," *Global Trade Alert*, October 9, 2025, https://globaltradealert.org/blog/chinese-export-controls-on-critical-raw-materials-inventory.

[60] Blackwood and DeFilippo, *Germanium and Gallium*; Risse, Angeles, and Asikainen, "China's Export Controls."

or permissive markets in the Global South, the United States has intensified efforts to diversify upstream supply chains. In early 2024, Washington launched the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue with Central Asian states to explore investment and cooperation aimed at reducing reliance on Chinese-controlled inputs.[61] These initiatives suggest that raw-material controls, like semiconductor export restrictions, are contributing to a durable segmentation of technological ecosystems, in which interdependence persists but is increasingly governed through jurisdiction-specific regulatory regimes rather than open markets.

[61] "U.S. And China Tighten Respective Export Restrictions on Advanced Technology and Critical Minerals," *Eversheds Sutherland*, January 10, 2025, https://www.eversheds-sutherland.com/en/united-states/insights/us-and-china-tighten-respective-export-restrictions-on-advanced-technology-and-critical-minerals.

Figure 4. Key Chinese Retaliation Against U.S. Semiconductor Export Control, 2023–2025[1]

Date	Target / Material	Policy Instrument	Measure Description	Structural / Strategic Effect
July 3, 2023	**Gallium & Germanium**	Export licensing requirement (MOFCOM & GAC)	China introduced export licensing for gallium and germanium products, citing national security concerns.	First post-U.S. chip controls move; converts upstream materials into **regulatory chokepoints** for semiconductors, RF, and defense tech.
Dec 1, 2023	**Graphite (natural & synthetic)**	Export licensing requirement	Licensing imposed on certain graphite products used in EV batteries and anodes.	Extends chokepoint logic into **energy–tech inputs**, signaling breadth beyond semiconductors.
Dec 3, 2024	**Gallium, Germanium, Antimony, Superhard materials (to US)**	De facto export ban + heightened review	China announced it would prohibit exports of certain critical minerals and materials to the United States.	**Targeted retaliation**; politicizes destination-specific access and mirrors U.S. country-specific denial logic.
Apr 4, 2025	**Medium & Heavy Rare Earth Elements**	Export licensing requirement	Licensing expanded to rare earths with high military and manufacturing relevance.	Reinforces China's leverage in **processing-intensive segments**, not just mining.
Sep 25, 2025	**Foreign firms (dual-use list)**	Dual-use export control listing	Three U.S. firms added to China's dual-use export control list.	Firm-level chokepoint construction; functional analogue to U.S. Entity List practice.
Oct 9, 2025	**Rare-earth processing, magnet & recycling technologies**	Export licensing requirement	Controls extended to rare-earth processing and magnet manufacturing technologies.	Locks in dominance at **processing and standards layers**, not merely material supply.
Oct 9, 2025	**Foreign-made products containing Chinese rare-earth content**	Extraterritorial licensing requirement	Licensing applies to exports of products containing ≥0.1% Chinese rare-earth value.	**Extraterritorial reach**: transforms Chinese materials into global compliance chokepoints.
Nov 8, 2025 (effective)	**Artificial graphite & lithium-ion battery components**	Export licensing requirement	Licensing on anode materials, batteries, and related equipment.	Institutionalizes segmentation in EV and storage ecosystems.

[63] Compiled by the author from the Global Trade Alert *Chinese export controls on critical raw materials: inventory*, official announcements by China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and General Administration of Customs (GAC), Chinese export-control catalogues and dual-use control lists, and contemporaneous reporting by *Reuters, Bloomberg,* and *the Financial Times*, 2023–2025.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the breakdown of U.S.–China technological engagement is best understood not as a political rupture or ideological reversal, but as the structural consequence of how advanced technologies are organized within global production networks. In sectors such as semiconductors—characterized by cumulative innovation, limited substitutability, dual-use applications, and jurisdictional concentration—interdependence does not merely generate mutual gains. It allocates leverage asymmetrically.

Tracing asymmetrical interactions between U.S. chokepoint activation and China's adaptive responses demonstrate that decoupling is an endogenous process rather than an exogenous policy choice. U.S. export controls initially succeeded in disrupting Chinese firms and delaying access to frontier capabilities, but they also triggered China's defensive reconfiguration through indigenous substitution, market reorientation, and regulatory insulation. Learning from the Western model, China also constructed counter-chokepoints in upstream materials and standards. These responses, in turn, reinforced U.S. perceptions of vulnerability and justified further tightening of controls. What emerges is a feedback loop in which each side's measures validate the other's threat assessments, producing a new form of security dilemma rooted not in military deployments, but in the governance of technological interdependence itself.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond semiconductors. As previously stated, interdependence did not disappear; it is being selectively restructured. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for both scholars and policymakers. Analytically, it suggests that debates over "decoupling" should shift from questions of intent to questions of structure. Politically, it underscores the limits of chokepoint strategies: while they may yield short-term leverage, they also accelerate adaptive responses that entrench segmentation over time. In this sense, technological decoupling is not a transient phase of rivalry, but a durable condition of contemporary globalization.

Building on these findings, several avenues for future research merit a more systematic exploration. First, a more sustained engagement with the history of technological interdependence would deepen our understanding of contemporary policy choices. In particular, further work could trace how earlier episodes of China's technology transfer or state-led industrialization, briefly discussed in this paper, shaped both present vulnerabilities and current political standpoint. Second, future research would benefit from incorporating quantitative analyses of technological and trade data generated by activities outlined in this paper (e.g. export controls, retaliatory measures, market substitution). Such data could shed light on the detailed process of reorienting supply chains, identifying alternative markets, and

engaging with new regions for technological innovations. Finally, although this paper focused on semiconductors as a paradigmatic site of technological competition, the analytical framework developed here is applicable to other strategic sectors, including renewable energy technologies, electric vehicles, and AI-enabled networks. Comparative analysis across these domains would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of how structural interdependence shapes the evolving contours of "great-power competition."

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Gender (In)equality from Work-Family Policies: Sweden and Japan's Path to Labor Market Participation

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Abstract

While the implementation of work-family policies (WFP) has created procedures and nationwide programs that have increased work-life balance, thereby promoting female labor market participation, differences in countries' respective institutional norms and welfare regimes limit the effectiveness of these policies. This discrepancy is evident in Sweden and Japan, two coordinated market economies (CMEs) that, despite both striving for maximum workforce participation and growth in female labor market involvement, have varying gender representation outcomes due to their different social democratic and conservative welfare regimes. My findings reveal how Sweden's social democratic welfare system supports a dominant public sector that provides extensive benefits to families but simultaneously creates significant occupational segregation in the workforce. Conversely, Japan's conservative welfare state, robust private sector, and demanding workplace norms hinder its WFP's ability to encourage a balance between professional and domestic responsibilities, thus decreasing female representation in the workforce. This paper explores how the welfare regimes, normative structures, policy intents, and center-right and center-left political behaviors of Sweden and Japan impact the efficacy of their WFP. This paper also reveals the variations and shortcomings of CMEs, specifically that skill-specific economies hinder women from consistently engaging in professional and domestic responsibilities.

Introduction

As advanced capitalist democracies (ACD) aim to maximize labor market participation and productivity, work-family policies (WFP) have

consistently served as a tool to promote economic prosperity and bolster women's presence in the workforce through mechanisms such as paid leave and subsidized childcare.[1] Japan and Sweden, two coordinated market economies (CMEs), have utilized WFP to stimulate their economies and encourage parents to balance their professional and domestic responsibilities.[2] Both countries have some of the highest rates of female labor market participation amongst other ACDs, including the U.S., U.K., and other E.U. member states. Despite these similarities, their contrasting welfare systems and political institutions play a key role in determining how their WFP are executed. While Sweden has universal, center-left institutions to support WFP, Japan's conservative social values and center-right party rule limit the efficacy of this support system. To examine the benefits, disparate impacts, and overall consequences of WFP, the question must be raised: How do WFP in Sweden and Japan impact female labor market participation, given their respective social democratic and conservative welfare regimes?

Literature Review: Understanding What Has Been Said About WFP

WFP are government-led initiatives that promote the dual maintenance of personal and professional responsibilities.[3] These include policies on paid leave, childcare, and flexible work arrangements to ensure that parents can financially and emotionally support their families. WFP have been vital in closing gender representation gaps in the workforce, as they are designed to moderate the conflicting work and family demands, providing women with more flexible work schedules and a more balanced distribution of responsibilities between parents.[4]

To understand WFP's role in Sweden and Japan, it is important to acknowledge each country's CME model. A CME is a form of capitalism where firms rely and depend on non-market institutions and actors, such

[1] Shintaro Yamaguchi, "Family Policies and Female Employment in Japan," *The Japanese Economic Review* 68, no. 3 (2017): 305–306, https://doi.org/10.1111/jere.12136.
[2] Angel Martinez-Sanchez et al., "Job Satisfaction and Work–Family Policies through Work-Family Enrichment," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 33, no. 4/5 (2018): 390–391, https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-10-2017-0376.
[3] Michael B. Wells and Disa Bergnehr, "Families and Family Policies in Sweden," in *Handbook of Family Policies Across the Globe*, ed. Mihaela Robila (Springer, 2014), 91–107, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6771-7_7.
[4] Melody Ge Gao and Hangqing Ruan, "Work-Family Policies and Gender Inequalities in Childcare Time," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 8 (2022): 1–3, https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231221142677.

as unions, rather than minimizing interaction outside the firm.[5] This approach fosters long-term collaboration between these partners, ensuring each partner is working toward strengthening the skills and performance of employees and investing in long-term projects. This system requires extensive relationships, networking, and contracting to ensure that markets are receiving sufficient support from their affiliates. A common asset of a CME is skill-specific labor, where workers become highly proficient in a certain craft to excel in specific jobs.[6] Governments in CME systems often invest in education and training systems to ensure their workers are specialized in their particular field, such as keeping STEM workers up-to-date on recent developments and providing necessary training on how to use new skills.

The existing literature on Sweden and Japan notes that they contain some of the most comprehensive WFP, which increase women's ability to participate in the labor market and encourage women to continue working while maintaining familial responsibilities. Scholars explain that paid leave policies and subsidized care tools, two key aspects of WFP, allow women to continue their jobs while remaining involved with their families.[7] For example, programs such as government-funded childcare centers enable parents to work during the day while their children receive care and education.[8] The effectiveness of this policy is clear: as of 2025, 80% of Swedish women between ages 20–64 and a record high of 55.3% of Japanese women over the age of 15 are employed, showing how the implementation of WFP has enabled women to continue working.[9]

Despite the positive socio-economic impacts of WFP, the literature also acknowledges that the societal and work-related norms of Sweden and Japan lead to shortcomings in female representation. While WFP alone helps reduce conflicts between professional and personal duties, existing labor market conditions and workplace norms can limit policies from being fully effective. For instance, Sweden's intentions of promoting the inclusion of women in the workforce are hindered by occupational segregation, where women are primarily concentrated in the public sector.[10] In Japan, while the

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[5] Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–44.
[6] Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, 1990).
[7] Wells and Bergnehr, "Families and Family Policies in Sweden," 93–95.
[8] Ibid., 94.
[9] "Japan: Female Labor Force Participation," theGlobalEconomy.com, Accessed March 6, 2026, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Japan/Female_labor_force_participation/; Wells and Bergnehr, "Families and Family Policies in Sweden."
[10] Linda Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 17, no. 1 (1996): 64, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02265031.

government succeeded in increasing overall employment, scholars highlight that this increased participation primarily consists of women working part-time.[11] Intense Japanese workplace norms, such as long work hours and the expectation to stay until the boss leaves, make full-time employment difficult to balance with family responsibilities.[12]

It is also important to consider how interactions between WFP and CMEs impact women's involvement in the workforce. Existing research reveals how center-left and center-right institutions interact with WFP, but scholars fail to examine how these institutions interact with the CME model, a phenomenon that may impact the execution and efficacy of WFP. The skill-specific nature of CMEs makes it difficult for people to re-enter the workforce, as many have a limited skill set. Furthermore, there is minimal research on how women specifically are impacted by difficult re-entry. While scholars note the difficulties of exiting and re-entering with only a specific skill set, they fail to examine how these CME assets jeopardize women as they leave their jobs to take maternity leave.

Furthermore, despite Japan and Sweden both possessing similar economic structures and traits, scholars have not compared how CMEs vary among states and how differing institutions impact the outcomes of WFP. For instance, Sweden's center-left political institutions more strongly support progressive WFP that promote work-life balance.[13] At the same time, Japan's center-right institutions do not prioritize social capital from WFP nearly as much, ultimately revealing that CMEs, despite performing similar functions across countries, can function differently based on their respective institutions and actors. Some research has begun to explore how CMEs vary across states and how differing institutions impact the outcomes of these policies, but more investigation is required to fully understand the depth of these outcomes.

Additionally, more research is necessary on how WFP interacts with the labor market and workplace norms. While policies such as job protection may allow women to retain their jobs, women may not take full advantage of these policies under certain cultural norms and conditions, thereby limiting their effectiveness. For example, intense dedication to one's job and social pressure are major traits in Japanese workplace culture that make it difficult to utilize WFP to their full extent, as the socio-political pressure

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[11] Patricia Boling, *The Politics of Work-Family Policies: Japan, France, Germany, and the US Compared* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[12] Junko Nishimura, "Work-Family Policies and Women's Job Mobility: Emerging Divides in Female Workforce in Japan," *Contemporary Social Science* 17, no. 4 (2022): 355–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2022.2092202.

[13] Kimberly J. Morgan, "Path Shifting of the Welfare State: Electoral Competition and the Expansion of Work-Family Policies in Western Europe," *World Politics* 65, no. 1 (2013): 103, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887112000251.

makes it difficult for Japanese workers to take extensive leave.[14] To further understand this topic, more research is needed on how these policies negatively impact female laborers in the long run. Although WFP were created with the intentions of promoting labor inclusion, investigating the disparate impacts of these policies is important in understanding their limitations and implicit gender inequality outcomes.

The current scholarship on the successes and drawbacks of WFP provides initial context on the short-term effects of these policies, but this paper will examine the nuances and diverse impacts of these policies, aiming to more broadly understand how current policies and norms may continue to impact women's overall inclusion in the workforce. Using Sweden and Japan as case studies, this research will reveal how, regardless of the same CME framework, industry models, and intentions to promote labor maximization, the enactment and success of WFP greatly vary based on how they are implemented through welfare programs and social and workplace norms.[15]

Sweden's Social Democratic Welfare State and Universal Policies

Sweden's overall goal of enhancing the well-being and economic sufficiency of all individuals drives its comprehensive and universal WFP. Historically, the Swedish government has established the norm that all adults, men and women alike, are expected to contribute to the family, both inside and outside the home.[16]

Beginning in the mid-20th century, the center-left dominance by Sweden's Social Democratic Workers' Party (SAP) ensured that the political interests of the working class, such as benign working standards and high wages, were being implemented by creating a social democratic welfare state.[17] In the late 20th century, the SAP prioritized low unemployment, higher living standards, and increased economic growth. In doing so, the government aimed to create universal welfare benefits and a redistributive tax system to promote socio-economic equality. With the influence of left power politics from the SAP and emerging labor unions, egalitarian norms

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[14] Margarita Estevez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan: Party, Bureaucracy, and Business* (Cambridge University Press: 2008), 29.
[15] Gøsta Esping-Andersen, "Hybrid or Unique?: The Japanese Welfare State Between Europe and America," *Journal of European Social Policy* 7, no. 3 (1997): 179–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/095892879700700301.
[16] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 67.
[17] Eileen Drew, Ruth Emerek, and Evelyn Mahon, *Women, Work and the Family in Europe* (Routledge, 1998).

and gender workforce equality became more favorable.[18] These norms have been present throughout the 21st century, during which the Swedish government has been promoting WFP not just for families but for women's inclusion in the workplace. Today, Sweden's social democratic welfare state continues to emphasize universal benefits and equality based on citizenship, where everyone receives comprehensive care and benefits through government-funded programs to alleviate work burdens.[19]

Sweden's political institutions allow for these overlapping interests of ensuring gender equality and maximizing employment to be easily executed. As a CME, robust regulation and intervention occur between the government and the labor market, creating federal programs that ensure work-life balance, job protection, and stable income.[20] Sweden's government and firms have historically collaborated to institutionalize laws that prioritize the well-being of workers. In 1977, the Swedish Annual Leave Act (*Semesterlag*) was adopted to ensure workers receive at least 25 days of personal vacation per year. Policymakers have also consistently revised the Working Hours Act of 1982 to institute a maximum of 40 working hours per week and flexibility to work remotely to accommodate health emergencies or familial circumstances.[21] These rights are all legally guaranteed, thereby providing access to all workers regardless of their employment affiliation.

Swedish WFP specifically supports the *individuals* within families, catering to their particular needs.[22] These more individualized WFP encourage parents to share household tasks and responsibilities. The Parental Leave Act, originally implemented by the SAP in 1974, replaced traditional maternity leave with policies that allow both parents to maintain their jobs while caring for their newborns.[23] These include 480 days of paid leave per child that can be divided between parents: a minimum of seven-week maternity leave and ten days of paternity leave. This law also protects parents from losing their jobs due to leave usage, allowing them to use their leave benefits without fear of penalty. Furthermore, Sweden's state-funded universal childcare programs provide public care and education to children starting at age one.[24] Reliable education programs allow parents to maintain their

[18] Morgan, "Path Shifting of the Welfare State," 82.
[19] Francis Sejersted and Richard Daly, *The Age of Social Democracy: Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400839124.
[20] Hall and Soskice, *Varieties of Capitalism*, 8–27.
[21] "Imagine a Fulfilling Career While Enjoying the Life You Love. In Sweden, It's Possible," Government Offices of Sweden, Accessed December 18, 2025, https://sweden.se/work-business/working-in-sweden/work-life-balance.
[22] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 49.
[23] Sejersted and Daly, *The Age of Social Democracy,* 58–89.
[24] Wells and Bergnehr, "Families and Family Policies in Sweden," 25.

careers without taking significant time off for childcare. This simultaneously bolsters economic activity and encourages women, who would normally stay home to care for their children, to participate in the workforce.

Despite Sweden's progress in gender equality in the workforce, attention must be brought to the shortcomings of the country's WFP. Sweden has one of the strongest cases of occupational segregation. This phenomenon is a form of horizontal segregation, which explains the separation of positions between men and women in the workplace: even as more women enter the labor market, their participation remains concentrated in sectors such as healthcare, education, and public services.[25] This is largely because, as Sweden simultaneously promotes female labor participation and grows its public sector to provide social benefits, women are drawn to the altruistic nature of these public sector roles.[26] For example, when policies were implemented in the 1970s to expand childcare and establish parental leave, more women entered the workforce but primarily gravitated toward the public sector.[27] This trend has continued into the 21st century. According to a 2014 report, 72% of employed Swedish women work in the public sector, depicting the disproportionate concentration of female workers in a single field.[28]

Vertical segregation, where women lack influence in unions and top positions, is also apparent in Sweden.[29] Sweden's CME framework requires highly specialized skills for different sectors of the workforce, but the skills and knowledge that most women acquire through their degrees are not applicable to the private sector or high-level leadership positions. Swedish women tend to be more interested in fields related to care, health, and education, which require softer skill sets.[30] Additionally, labor unions are often concentrated in manufacturing and other male-dominated industries, which inadvertently limit opportunities for female representation in these areas.[31] In 1996, women constituted 30% of the leadership positions in the public sector, and only 10% of management positions in the private sector.[32]

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[25] Ingvill Bagøien Hustad et al., "Occupational Attributes and Occupational Gender Segregation in Sweden: Does It Change Over Time?," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 2, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00554.

[26] Torben Iversen and Frances Rosenbluth, *Women, Work, and Politics: The Political Economy of Gender Inequality* (Yale University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300153118.

[27] Drew et al., *Women, Work and the Family in Europe*.

[28] "Women at Work, but in Which Sector? Assessing Persisting Gender Segregation across the Region," United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, August 21, 2017, https://unece.org/statistics/news/women-work-which-sector-assessing-persisting-gender-segregation-across-region.

[29] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 73.

[30] Wells and Bergnehr, "Families and Family Policies in Sweden," 35.

[31] Estevez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan*, 161.

[32] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 73.

Although women have become increasingly more involved in leadership roles since then, Sweden still primarily focuses on integrating more women into the general workforce, rather than throughout different sectors and leadership positions.[33]

Moreover, despite WFP, a wage gap persists between men and women in Sweden. Blue-collar women in the private sector earn only about 90% of men's wages in that same sector, while white-collar women earn approximately 75% of men's wages.[34] This exemplifies that Swedish women still experience difficulty in the workforce, despite their increased participation.

Furthermore, Swedish policymakers often fail to address these issues by claiming that Sweden is in a "better" position than other industrialized countries. Swedish legislators have historically "side-stepped" issues related to female disparities and overrepresentation of women in the public sector by primarily focusing on ensuring *overall* inclusion in the workforce.[35] While striving to provide universal access to resources to maximize labor participation, the Swedish government has consistently failed to address concerns about occupational segregation.

Looking toward the future, the rise of right-wing politics in Sweden has created concern about whether WFP's progress will continue or halt. Given Sweden's historical predominance of center-left politics, the increased presence of the center-right raises concerns over whether those attitudes will reverse progressive policies, instead instilling conservative initiatives that decrease female representation.[36] The effects of increased conservative sentiment are already evident. In 2024, an amendment allowed 90 days of parental leave to be transferable to another caretaker, such as a grandparent or guardian. Because only 30% of shared parental leave is taken by fathers, social democrats worry that this policy may encourage fathers to take less leave and pass the responsibility to another caretaker.[37] More broadly, center-left parties are generally stronger supporters of WFP than center-right parties.[38] A shift to the political right could threaten Sweden's historical commitment to gender inclusivity in the workforce. Additionally, this political shift may exacerbate current issues relating to horizontal and vertical segregation. Overall, changes in Swedish political institutions create

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[33] Ann-Zofie Duvander, "Modern-Day Outcomes of Work-Family Policy in Sweden," October 26, 2025.
[34] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 72.
[35] Drew et al., *Women, Work and the Family in Europe*.
[36] Morgan, "Path Shifting of the Welfare State," 86–90.
[37] Maddy Savage, "Sweden: Where It's Taboo for Dads to Skip Parental Leave," *BBC*, February 1, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20240130-sweden-where-its-taboo-for-dads-to-skip-parental-leave.
[38] Morgan, "Path Shifting of the Welfare State," 93.

uncertainty about whether WFP will continue to achieve socio-economic goals or whether progress will slowly stall.

Japan's Population Troubles and Conservative Welfare State

After experiencing a period of stagnation, deflation, and economic decline in the 2000s, the Japanese government implemented WFP to expand the labor force and stimulate economic growth.[39] Although WFP increased female labor participation, Japan initially implemented these policies to raise the country's falling fertility rate. As of 2024, Japan's birth rate has fallen to a record-low of 1.15 births per woman, which is far below the necessary replacement rate of 2.1.[40] Japan is unable to keep up with the social spending necessary for its rapidly growing elderly population, creating a need for policies that encourage the economic productivity of a younger population, including women.

To further encourage women to start families alongside maintaining their jobs, the Japanese government launched a sequence of five-year childcare policy plans, including the 1994 Angel Plans, the 1999 New Angel Plan, and the Child-Family Support Plan during the early 2000s.[41] In 2013, then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced WFP through "womenomics," a strategy aimed at increasing female involvement in the workforce while simultaneously promoting working women to have families.[42] This was primarily achieved through the development of childcare systems, the implementation of tax reforms, and the expansion of parental leave. This comprehensive leave system enables both parents to receive 67% of their salary during the first six months of leave and 50% afterwards for up to a year.[43] This increased female participation ushered in long-term benefits in

[39] Beina Xu and James McBride, "Abenomics and the Japanese Economy," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 23, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/abenomics-and-japanese-economy.
[40] Justin McCurry, "Japan Records Lowest Number of Births in More than a Century, as Population Fears Grow," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/05/japan-records-lowest-number-of-births-in-more-than-a-century-as-population-fears-grow.
[41] Meejung Chin, "Demographic Changes and Work Family Balance Policies in East Asia," Accessed December 18, 2025, 3, https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm12/CHIN-PAPER.pdf.
[42] Kathy Matsui, Hiromi Suzuki, and Kazunori Tatebe, *Womenomics 5.0* (Promethos Capital, 2019), 1–10, https://promethoscapital.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Promethos-Womenomics-Analysis.pdf.
[43] Mark Crawford, "Abe's Womenomics Policy, 2013-2020: Tokenism, Gradualism, Or Failed Strategy," *Asian-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19, no. 4 (2021): 2–3.

Japan, including an increased labor population and a prosperous economy.[44]

These policy initiatives from the 1990s expanded public childcare services, providing parents with reliable, high-quality daytime care for their children. These implementations were crucial to allowing mothers to maintain their positions in the workforce, especially because maternal employment greatly depends on the availability and quality of childcare.

Further understanding the Japanese WFP requires understanding how Japan's party politics, social norms, and welfare system shape the outcomes of these policies. Japan has a corporate-centered conservative welfare state, which preserves economic hierarchy.[45] Conservative welfare systems are designed to prevent excessive government aid, with employees instead obtaining benefits directly from their employers. Only those in lower classes qualify and utilize government programs. However, this creates a stigma around those who need social assistance, discouraging people from using these programs if they can get benefits directly from their employer instead. Furthermore, the enterprises that grant the most generous benefits are often most likely to have male-dominated leadership, which reinforces strong occupational welfare and the male breadwinner model.[46]

Japan's center-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) further limits the efficacy of WFPA. Since its formation in 1955, the LDP has dominated Japan's elections and politics.[47] The LDP continues to use WFP as a tool to combat falling birth rates and address labor shortages, rather than promote gender equality.[48] The absence of a center-left dominance in the Japanese electorate—which tends to favor egalitarian norms more than the center-right—makes it difficult for WFP to promote gender equality.[49]

Conservative gender norms also greatly inhibit the success of WFP. Japan, which has one of the largest global female labor market participation rates at 71%, struggles with encouraging women to work full-time due to its conservative norms, such as strong ties to familism, which prioritizes family needs above individual interests.[50]Although the maternal leave system provides ample time off, extended absences often deter mothers from returning to the workforce. While from the period of 1994–2004 to 2005–2013 there was a 15% increase in the amount of women employed before

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[44] Estevez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan*, 138.
[45] Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*.
[46] Masato Shizume, Masatoshi Kato, and Ryozo Matsuda, "A Corporate-Centred Conservative Welfare Regime: Three-Layered Protection in Japan," *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 14, no. 1 (2021): 110, https://doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2020.1829834.
[47] Estevez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan*, 105.
[48] Ibid., 105.
[49] Morgan, "Path Shifting of the Welfare State," 82.
[50] Matsui, Suzuki, and Tatebe, *Womenomics 5.0,* 1–10.

childbearing, there was a respective 2% decline between these year ranges in the number of women employed the year after childbearing.[51] When women exit the workforce, even temporarily, it often marks the end of the woman's career and the start of her commitment to nurturing the next generation.[52]

Despite policies aimed at supporting working parents, Japan's corporate culture creates immense hurdles for women trying to resume their careers after taking maternal leave. For mothers in particular, extended time away from work makes reentry into the workforce more difficult, as Japan's emphasis on firm-specific skills makes companies reluctant to lose specialized workers.[53] Furthermore, firms may hesitate to hire women, especially for senior positions, because maternity leave may require the company to retrain another employee. As a result, women often struggle to re-enter the workforce, whether returning to their previous positions or securing new ones that match their skills.

Additionally, the limited access to subsidized childcare services due to the conservative welfare regime is a major hindrance to mothers' workforce participation. The lack of public childcare centers leads to long, demanding waitlists, while private centers are too expensive for families to afford.[54] Most Japanese households do not include extended family members as potential caretakers, so when a reliable source of childcare is unavailable, women often quit their jobs to care for their children.[55]

Although Japan has a high female workforce participation rate, the rise of right-wing politics limits the effectiveness of WFP that could otherwise support work-life balance in the long-term. While Abe's initiatives aimed to promote work-life balance to fill labor shortages, the new LDP Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, emphasizes a strong work ethic and commitment to the workplace.[56] Her demanding schedule and "workaholic" mindset have been controversial among lawmakers.[57] This emphasis on strong ethics reduced opportunities for work-life balance. As a result, women may feel

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[51] Yamaguchi, "Family Policies and Female Employment in Japan," 309–310.
[52] Patricia Boling, *The Politics of Work-Family Policies: Japan, France, Germany, and the US Compared* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 143.
[53] Boling, *The Politics of Work-Family Policies,* 143.
[54] Mary Brinton, "Japanese Low Fertility and the Low Labor Force Participation of Married Women: The Role of Rigid Labor Markets and Workplace Norms," *Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry*, October 15, 2015, https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/special/p_a_w/056.html.
[55] Yukiko Asai, Ryo Kambayashi, and Shintaro Yamaguchi, "Childcare Availability, Household Structure, and Maternal Employment," *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies* 38 (2015): 172–92, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jjie.2015.05.009.
[56] Javier Hernandez and Hisako Ueno, "Japan's Leader Started a Meeting at 3 A.M. Then Came the Backlash," *New York Times*, November 12, 2025.
[57] Hernandez and Ueno, "Japan's Leader Started a Meeting at 3 A.M."

pressured to either remain in the workforce, an effect that will likely continue to decrease Japan's already falling birth rate, or exit it to start families and adhere to those responsibilities, a choice that will decrease female workforce participation. The persistence of center-right politics and Takaichi's unfavorable attitudes toward work-life balance could encourage conservative policies that support traditional family models and the male breadwinner status quo, further decreasing female workforce engagement. This could undermine years of progress made by Japanese lawmakers to further labor participation and bolster the economy.

Sweden vs. Japan: Similar Intents, Different Outcomes

Sweden and Japan both offer robust WFP and have experienced significant increases in female labor market participation since their implementation. While both countries are CMEs that emphasize skill specialization, the variations in the outcomes of WFP across the countries indicate that states that follow the same CME framework do not automatically have the same policy outcomes.[58] The results of WFP across the two states reflect their respective welfare regimes, highlighting the influence of their respective political institutions and parties on policy outcomes. Sweden's policies aim to address gender equality, work-life balance, and socio-economic benefits.[59] While Japan's WFP similarly increased female labor participation, the policies do not inherently *benefit* female workers, as they primarily serve as a mechanism to address labor shortages.[60] This comparison demonstrates that CME structure alone, while a necessary comparative instrument, is insufficient in predicting WFP outcomes.

It is evident that WFP functions differently depending on the problem they were designed to resolve, which reflects their surrounding welfare regime. Swedish social-democratic labor politics embrace the concept of "voluntary parenthood," providing women with the choice of pursuing motherhood, involvement in the workforce, or both.[61] It is important to acknowledge that Swedish legislators specifically designed these policies as a social initiative to promote gender equality. As such, Sweden's WFP allow women to balance motherhood and involvement in the workforce, without pushing them into doing one or the other. This social democratic ideology is also reflected in Swedish policy, which prioritizes social well-being over economic capital through balanced leave policies.[62] Japanese labor politics,

[58] Esping-Andersen, "Hybrid or Unique?," 179–181.
[59] Wells and Bergnehr, "Families and Family Policies in Sweden," 4.
[60] Brinton, "Japanese Low Fertility."
[61] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 49.
[62] Ibid., 92.

meanwhile, focus on maximizing overall labor participation over promoting gender equality or work-life balance. Japan continues to use WFP as a mechanism to boost its declining birth rate, rather than supporting its workers' well-being or amplifying women's role in the workforce.[63] While the conservative LDP has increased childcare support and leave programs, which are designed similarly to Swedish programs, the LDP simultaneously prioritizes an intense work culture over work-life balance, which makes it difficult for women to work while fulfilling domestic responsibilities.[64]

It is also worth noting that some of the characteristics of the CME model prevent WFP from being fully effective in facilitating work-life balance. The CME model inhibits individuals' flexibility to enter and exit the labor market because employees' skill sets are not widely transferable across industries.[65] For instance, Sweden's female workforce primarily possesses a general skill set that limits them to working in government or education jobs.[66] Additionally, Japanese women working for specific firms are trained to perform set tasks that are not necessarily transferable to other enterprises.[67] This job-specific training makes it difficult for employees to seek alternative employment or make changes to their career paths. Furthermore, the lack of flexibility in skill sets increases the likelihood that women will pursue domestic responsibilities during childbearing years, rather than maintain their professions. If a new mother were to exit the workforce during childbearing years and later re-enter, it becomes difficult for her to regain her original position or find a job outside of her narrow skill set. Especially because each job requires a particular skill set, firms in CMEs are more likely to replace workers who take time off, as finding a replacement is either too costly or too time-consuming. Because of this trend, women who work full-time positions that require specialized skills are more likely to quit their jobs entirely during childbirth.[68]

Examining how the CME model operates within Sweden's social democratic welfare regime compared with Japan's conservative welfare state further demonstrates CMEs' significant variation. While Sweden's policies offer a variety of social benefits, they are offset by the country's large public sector, which limits WFP's effectiveness. Sweden's vast public services are an extension of the public sector, where the government aims to ensure stability and availability in its services at all times.[69] However, this sector attracts more female workers, clustering women in this industry,

[63] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 60–62.
[64] Estevez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan,* 102–137.
[65] Iversen and Rosenbluth, *Women, Work, and Politics*, 56–66.
[66] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 72–77.
[67] Gøsta Esping-Andersen, "Hybrid or Unique?," 182.
[68] Shintaro Yamaguchi, "Family Policies and Female Employment in Japan," 310.
[69] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 49.

subsequently increasing occupational and horizontal labor segregation. Under this system, Swedish women tend to obtain general skill in education, social services, and government work.

Meanwhile, Japan's dominant private sector operates under an employer-based benefit model. Not only does Japan's CME structure make it difficult for women to re-enter the workforce, but its conservative welfare state, alongside its robust private sector, leads to limited childcare options. Women who are not eligible for public childcare or welfare are left with the benefits their employer provides, which may not be sufficiently comprehensive.[70] After giving birth, Japanese women either take a very short break from work or are discouraged from returning to their jobs because of difficulty re-entering the workforce. Furthermore, these benefits are provided on a firm-by-firm basis, neglecting women in part-time or informal positions.[71] Consistent with this, Japan's smaller public sector limits the availability and number of public childcare facilities, and private centers are often expensive and overbooked.[72]

One of the CME skill traps that Sweden and Japan both fall into is vertical segregation, where women are less likely to occupy leadership roles.[73] Considering how difficult it is for women to re-enter the workforce after taking time off, advancing to higher positions is an even greater challenge. Furthermore, leadership roles often entail significant increases in workload, which can make it difficult to balance domestic and professional responsibilities. In Sweden, the concentration of women in the public sector and their more generalized skill sets make it difficult to move to higher positions, as they often require more specific skills.[74] In Japan, strong norms of domestic responsibility, alongside managerial expectations of working long hours, make it difficult for women to balance domestic and career responsibilities. Overall, while both Sweden and Japan have generous WFP benefits and have increased women's overall workforce participation, the combination of skill-specific workforces and workplace norms results in vertical segregation that leads to workplace inequality.

These variations in the outcomes of WFP between Sweden and Japan indicate that following the same CME framework does not automatically result in the same policy outcomes. CME structure alone, while being a necessary comparative instrument, is insufficient at predicting WFP entirely.

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[70] Estevez-Abe, *Welfare and Capitalism in Postwar Japan*, 233.
[71] Junko Nishimura, "Work-Family Policies and Women's Job Mobility," 357.
[72] Brinton, "Japanese Low Fertility."
[73] Iversen and Rosenbluth, *Women, Work, and Politics,* 66–68.
[74] Haas, "Family Policy in Sweden," 59.

Norms, Political Climate, and Institutional Change: Implications for the Future of WFP

While Sweden and Japan are both CMEs with high rates of female labor market participation due to their expansive WFP, their contrasting welfare systems shape how these policies are executed and their outcomes. The Swedish government's emphasis on work-life balance to ensure mental and financial stability is crucial to the implementation of WFP, encouraging people to utilize their benefits and balance responsibilities. Japan, by contrast, implemented WFP to boost economic activity and address its aging population problem, rather than promoting gender inclusivity in the workplace.

The welfare systems and political parties of each state also coincide with their norms, which have contrasting impacts on WFP across Sweden and Japan. Sweden's social democratic norms around gender equality allow for WFP to be favorable amongst political parties and institutions. In contrast, Japanese workplace norms restrict WFP from being fully effective because they revolve around long and demanding work hours. While women in Japan are also eligible for leave and benefits, the intense work environment discourages them from taking on full-time positions because it becomes difficult to balance work and parenting. Ultimately, this cross-country comparison illustrates that WFP can only be as effective as the workplace norms that surround them.

Despite high overall workforce participation in both Sweden and Japan, current work-family policies still fail to support mothers in securing full-time and leadership roles, a gap that is increasingly exacerbated by shifting political climates. Based on this finding, it is important for additional research to be conducted to address how to improve WFP to ensure female inclusion in workplace hierarchies while allowing women to maintain domestic responsibilities. With the rise of center-right influence in both countries, scholars and center-left citizens fear that political changes to WFP will reverse progress toward female representation. Especially because most Swedish women work in the public sector and earn comparatively less than their male counterparts, the implementation of 90-day transferable leave enables women and other caretakers to shoulder more domestic responsibilities while their husbands continue to work. In Japan, Prime Minister Takaichi's commitment to fixing the falling birthrate alongside reinforcing "workaholic" norms poses a threat to working mothers, making it difficult to maintain the responsibilities as a mother and worker. Thus, future research should investigate what must be done to maintain the progress of WFP. These initiatives defeat the purpose of promoting work-life balance,

posing a question about what needs to be done to ensure that WFP are not moving backwards.

While Sweden and Japan remain global leaders in female labor participation, the efficacy of WFP is largely shaped by each country's welfare regime, political institutions, and norms. Having a high rate of female labor participation is not synonymous with equality *within* the workplace, which raises the question of how WFP can be adjusted in the future to advance national interests and work alongside changes in political institutions. While existing research provides context on the causes and effects of WFP, future research must examine how to promote effective WFP amid rising right-wing influence. WFP remains integral to ensuring female representation and involvement in the workforce, and it is vital that the impact of these policies continues. However, WFP does not equate to gender equality without a political landscape that supports this goal, which is important to consider when investigating WFP.

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Under What Conditions Might South Korea Go Nuclear? Alliance Credibility, Domestic Pressures, and the Limits of Extended Deterrence

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Abstract

Extended deterrence has long enabled U.S. allies to forgo nuclear weapons while remaining secure under the American nuclear umbrella. As adversaries acquire the ability to threaten the U.S. homeland and alliance politics grow more volatile, the credibility of these guarantees has come under increasing strain. This article examines the conditions under which a nonnuclear U.S. ally may move toward nuclear acquisition, using South Korea between 2022 and 2025 as a critical case. It evaluates two competing, though not mutually exclusive, mechanisms shaping nuclear decision-making: alliance credibility and domestic political pressures. Drawing on public opinion data, elite political discourse, alliance behavior, and regional security developments, the article finds that while both mechanisms have intensified, neither has yet produced an irreversible shift toward nuclear proliferation. Instead, South Korea has adopted a strategy of nuclear hedging, expanding nuclear-adjacent capabilities while remaining formally committed to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The findings suggest that nuclear restraint within the U.S.-led order remains resilient but conditional, dependent on sustained alliance reassurance and domestic restraint. More broadly, the South Korean case highlights the fragility of nonproliferation under conditions of strategic uncertainty.

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Introduction: Strategic Uncertainty and the Conditions for South Korean Nuclear Acquisition

The renewed debate over nuclear weapons in the Republic of Korea (ROK) is the product of major structural, technological, and political shifts in East Asia since the early 2000s. North Korea's development of thermonuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of striking the continental United States has created a new layer of uncertainty within the U.S.–ROK alliance.[1] These capabilities raise a fundamental question that has long troubled South Korean leaders: would the United States risk nuclear retaliation against its own territory to defend Seoul? This question lies at the center of South Korea's contemporary security dilemma. Despite facing an existential threat from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Seoul has not developed an indigenous nuclear arsenal. Since the early 1970s, successive South Korean administrations have relied on the American nuclear umbrella as the foundation of their national security.[2]

However, changes in the regional balance of power, combined with the rapid expansion of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, have led many South Korean policymakers and strategists to reassess the credibility of U.S. commitments.[3] In January 2023, President Yoon Suk-Yeol publicly stated that his administration might consider building nuclear weapons if the North Korean threat continued to intensify.[4] His statement echoed a warning from President Park Chung-Hee almost fifty years earlier and highlighted a recurring strategic concern: under what conditions might the ROK conclude that reliance on American protection is no longer sufficient and develop its own nuclear weapons?

This paper addresses that question by evaluating two competing hypotheses that offer distinct explanations for potential nuclear decision-making in South Korea. The first hypothesis focuses on alliance credibility. It posits that a decline in the perceived reliability of U.S. extended deterrence—a situation in which a state threatens military retaliation to deter another state from using force against one of its allies—will drive Seoul toward the actual pursuit of nuclear weapons, particularly once North

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[1] Niv Farago, "Why US Extended Deterrence to South Korea Might Not Work," *Asian Affairs* 55, no. 4 (2024): 648–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2024.2426138.
[2] Farago, "Why US Extended Deterrence," 653-654.
[3] Lami Kim, "South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?" *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 115–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1445910; Jeheung Ryu, "Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence in a Shifting Global Order: Theoretical, Empirical, and Policy Perspectives," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 13, no. 1 (2025): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.18588/202505.00a603.
[4] Farago, "Why US Extended Deterrence to South Korea Might Not Work," 648.

Korea can threaten the U.S. homeland.[5] Under this view, if South Korean leaders believe that Washington may be unwilling to risk nuclear retaliation on Seoul's behalf, they may conclude that reliance on American protection is no longer viable. South Korea would then begin taking concrete steps toward nuclear armament, such as altering domestic legal restrictions, redirecting its advanced nuclear sector toward military ends, or publicly signaling intent to proliferate.[6] The second hypothesis emphasizes domestic political pressures. It argues that democratically elected leaders in Seoul may pursue an independent nuclear deterrent when domestic political incentives create strong pressures for nuclear acquisition.[7] Under this view, the decisive shift occurs not when alliance credibility collapses, but when domestic constituencies view nuclear weapons as essential to national security and political leaders conclude that opposing these demands carries political risk.[8]

Understanding the relative weight of these mechanisms matters for contemporary debates in international security. If alliance credibility proves decisive, then the future of East Asian stability hinges on the consistency of U.S. commitments and the pace of North Korea's strategic modernization. If domestic politics prove more influential, then Seoul's nuclear future will depend on internal political developments, public attitudes, partisan competition, and bureaucratic dynamics. However, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. In practice, South Korean nuclear decision-making may reflect an interaction of the two mechanisms. External threats may reshape the public's perception of security, thereby intensifying domestic pressures on political leaders. Conversely, domestic demands for autonomy may amplify the effects of alliance credibility concerns. The theoretical framework developed here, therefore, treats both hypotheses as viable and potentially overlapping pathways toward nuclear acquisition. In both cases, the consequences are far-reaching: nuclear acquisition by the ROK could undermine the global non-proliferation regime, precipitate similar debates in Japan and Taiwan, and fundamentally alter the balance of power in East Asia.

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[5] Paul K Huth, "Conceptualizing Deterrence," in *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (Yale University Press, 1991), 16.
[6] Kim, "South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?" 115.
[7] Dong-Joon Jo and Erik Gartzke, "Determinants of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 1 (2007): 167–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002706296158.
[8] Jeheung Ryu, "Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence in a Shifting Global Order: Theoretical, Empirical, and Policy Perspectives," 3; Scott Curtice, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State*, Wright Flyer Paper, no. 82 (Muir S. Fairchild Research Information Center, Air University Press, 2021), 63-64.

The core argument of this paper is that present trends provide partial confirmation of both hypotheses, but neither mechanism is yet sufficient to compel nuclear acquisition. Between 2022 and 2025, abandonment concerns deepened as North Korea expanded its capabilities and U.S. political signals became less predictable, while domestic pressures created a permissive political environment for nuclear debate.[9] These dynamics pushed Seoul toward a more assertive hedging posture, reflected in expanded strategic consultations, growing interest in nuclear-relevant technologies, and the mainstreaming of elite nuclear discourse. Yet they have not produced an irreversible shift toward nuclear weapons. The evidence suggests that actual proliferation would require both mechanisms to reinforce one another rather than operate in isolation.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next part sets out the theoretical foundations of both hypotheses, detailing their independent variables, dependent variables, and causal mechanisms. The third part presents an empirical evaluation using qualitative case evidence, public opinion data, alliance behavior, and regional nuclear trends. The conclusion assesses which hypothesis better explains the conditions under which South Korea might pursue nuclear weapons and discusses the broader implications for deterrence and security in East Asia.

Theoretical Overview and Methodology

The debate over whether South Korea might pursue an indigenous nuclear arsenal sits at the intersection of several literatures in international security. Scholars have long examined why some states choose to acquire nuclear weapons while others refrain, offering competing explanations that emphasize external threats, alliance politics, domestic political incentives, and normative pressures.[10] The existing literature on nuclear proliferation provides two distinct logics for understanding potential South Korean nuclear decision-making: alliance-based theories that stress abandonment fears, and domestic politics theories that put a particular accent on the role of public opinion and electoral incentives when it comes to democratic

[9] Farago, "Why US Extended Deterrence to South Korea Might Not Work," 648; Emmanuelle Maitre, "Towards a South Korean Nuclear Weapon? Political and Strategic Considerations," *Foundation for Strategic Research*, July 18, 2025, https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/korea-security-and-diplomacy-program/towards-south-korean-nuclear-weapon-political-and-strategic-considerations-2025.

[10] Scott Curtice, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State* (Air University Press, 2021), 57–85.

foreign policy.[11] These bodies of scholarship guide the development of the two hypotheses evaluated in this paper and establish the scope of conditions under which each mechanism might influence Seoul's future nuclear behavior.

Alliance Credibility and Abandonment Risk

The first hypothesis is grounded primarily in alliance politics and security-based theories of nuclear acquisition. In these approaches, the credibility of a patron's security guarantee is central to a client state's decision to pursue nuclear weapons. The logic of mutual nuclear deterrence suggests that extended deterrence becomes less credible when adversaries develop capabilities that threaten the patron's homeland, a dynamic captured by Scott Sagan's "security model."[12] For instance, during the Cold War, France and the United Kingdom pursued independent nuclear capabilities partly due to uncertainties about U.S. commitments in Europe, given the Soviet Union's capabilities to retaliate against the United States.[13] Glenn Snyder's work on alliances further clarifies how abandonment fears intensify when an ally faces high potential costs in fulfilling its commitments.[14] In an extended deterrence relationship, this dynamic is particularly acute. Scholars of East Asian security describe this challenge as the "decoupling problem," in which the ability of North Korea to threaten the United States with nuclear retaliation raises doubts in Seoul about whether Washington would intervene in a major crisis.[15] Within this theoretical framework, the central mechanism is straightforward: as abandonment fears grow, a state may seek nuclear weapons to restore its autonomy and reduce reliance on uncertain external guarantees.

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[11] Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (University Press, 2009), 24, 84; Curtice, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State*, 67–69; Hyun Joo Cho and Jinwon Lee, "Understanding South Korean Public Attitudes toward Nuclearization: Trends over a Decade through External, Domestic, and Individual Perspectives," *Korea Observer - Institute of Korean Studies* 55, no. 4 (2024): 573–624, https://doi.org/10.29152/koiks.2024.55.4.573.

[12] Kim, "South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?," 119-120.

[13] Curtice, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State*, 58.

[14] Glenn Herald Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2007), 1-39.

[15] Terence Roehrig, *Japan, South Korea, and the United States Nuclear Umbrella: Deterrence after the Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 137-138.

Observable Implications, Confirming Indicators, and Disconfirming Indicators

If the external threat–alliance logic is correct, we should expect observable patterns signaling that South Korean leaders interpret gaps in U.S. deterrence credibility as intolerable risks. A confirming pattern would involve historical moments in which South Korean leaders responded to doubts about U.S. commitments by initiating nuclear programs or hedging activities. Hedging refers to a policy or strategy of preserving (or projecting the appearance of preserving) a latent indigenous capability to quickly assemble or deploy a nuclear weapon, typically without openly crossing the threshold into declared possession.[16] These reactions would not be ambiguous: they would include concrete steps such as authorizing sensitive fuel-cycle experiments, exploring reprocessing technology, or publicly expressing interest in nuclear options after major North Korean capability advancements. Another confirming indicator would be explicit statements from political elites across ideological lines expressing doubts about the reliability of U.S. protection and linking those doubts to calls for nuclear latency or dual-use nuclear technologies that could be repurposed for weapons development. Additionally, a confirming sequence would include measurable governmental investments in technologies with military nuclear relevance, such as enrichment for naval propulsion, advanced missile systems, or hardened command-and-control infrastructure, coinciding with periods in which alliance credibility appears to erode.

Disconfirming evidence would take the opposite form. If successive South Korean leaders consistently express strong confidence in U.S. extended deterrence, even in the wake of North Korean nuclear or ICBM advancements, this would undermine the causal logic of the hypothesis. Similarly, if no temporal correlation exists between North Korean capability improvements and any increase in elite nuclear advocacy, public debate, or policy change, then declining credibility cannot plausibly account for nuclear decision-making. Finally, if the South Korean government refrains from investing in technologies associated with potential nuclear military applications during periods of heightened uncertainty about U.S. reliability, this would disconfirm the hypothesis by revealing that concerns about abandonment do not translate into concrete proliferative behavior.

Domestic Political Pressures and Electoral Constraints

[16] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Defending Frenemies: Alliances, Politics, and Nuclear Nonproliferation in US Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 193.

The second hypothesis is grounded in domestic political approaches to foreign policy decision-making, especially in democratic states where leaders must respond to public preferences and electoral incentives. Unlike structural or alliance-based theories, domestic approaches emphasize how public opinion, party competition, leadership incentives, and identity politics shape nuclear decision-making in democratic states.[17] Although external threats matter, these theories argue that nuclear acquisition ultimately reflects the political incentives faced by domestic elites. Etel Solingen's work on nuclear decision-making emphasizes that domestic political coalitions can shape a state's orientation toward nuclear weapons, with inward-oriented, nationalist coalitions more likely to favor nuclear acquisition and outward-oriented, liberalizing coalitions more likely to restrain it.[18] In this tradition, nuclear decisions emerge less from structural imperatives than they do from internal political contestation.

Observable Implications, Confirming Indicators, and Disconfirming Indicators

If domestic political pressures, rather than alliance dynamics, drive nuclear decision-making, then we should expect a distinct set of observable implications. Confirming evidence would include clear patterns wherein surges in public support for nuclear weapons precede or directly influence elite political rhetoric. In such a scenario, political leaders would frame nuclear acquisition as a response to voter preferences, putting an emphasis on national pride and security autonomy. We would also expect nuclear issues to appear in electoral competition, with candidates or parties attempting to differentiate themselves through more assertive nuclear positions. Bureaucratic political pressures would further strengthen this pathway if military planners and strategic agencies signal that nuclear options would benefit national security. If these domestic pressures correlate with explicit policy movements, such as parliamentary debates on nuclear options or attempts to modify domestic laws governing nuclear technology, they will constitute strong confirming evidence.

On the other hand, disconfirming evidence would emerge if public support remains high for nuclear weapons even as elites do not adjust

[17] Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21–28; Jo and Gartzke, "Determinants of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation," 170–171.
[18] Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East*, 24, 84; Curtice, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State*, 40–46.

their rhetoric or policy signals accordingly. If political leaders consistently downplay or reject nuclear acquisition despite electoral environments in which nuclear preferences appear to offer political advantage, the hypothesis will lose explanatory leverage. If nuclear sentiment in the public fluctuates without producing any corresponding shifts in elite discourse, these patterns would disconfirm the view that internal politics drive nuclear choices.

Evaluating the Alliance Credibility Hypothesis, 2022–2025

Beginning in 2022, North Korea significantly expanded and diversified its nuclear and missile capabilities.[19] In September of that year, Pyongyang codified a new nuclear doctrine that authorized preemptive nuclear use under broad conditions and declared its nuclear status "irreversible," signaling a shift toward a more assertive and warfighting-oriented posture.[20] This doctrinal change removed any remaining ambiguity about North Korea's long-term intentions and reinforced the perception in Seoul that denuclearization negotiations had become strategically obsolete.[21] These doctrinal revisions were accompanied by substantial technological advances. In 2023, North Korea tested the solid-fuel Hwasong-18 ICBM, which analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies assessed as capable of striking "anywhere in the continental United States with multiple warheads."[22] Solid-fuel propulsion allows for faster launch times, greater survivability, and reduced vulnerability to preemptive strikes, thereby enhancing the credibility of North Korea's threat to the U.S. homeland. These developments intensify the classical decoupling problem identified by alliance theorists. If North Korea can reliably threaten the U.S. homeland, South Korean leaders must consider whether Washington would accept nuclear retaliation to defend Seoul.

The initial South Korean response to these developments aligns with the observable implications of the alliance-credibility hypothesis. In January 2023, President Yoon Suk-Yeol stated publicly that South Korea "might build its own nuclear weapons" if the threat environment worsened.[23] This statement, the first of its kind by a sitting ROK president in decades, implicitly shows that extended deterrence alone might not be sufficient as North Korean military capabilities improve. It demonstrates that senior decision-makers interpreted North Korea's advances as

[19] Farago, "Why US Extended Deterrence to South Korea Might Not Work," 656-657.
[20] Ibid., 656-657.
[21] Ibid., 648.
[22] Ibid., 649-651.
[23] Ibid., 648.

sufficient to reopen nuclear debates and to consider options that would otherwise be politically costly or diplomatically risky. This remark constitutes clear confirming evidence: a clear articulation of concerns tied to observable shifts in the external threat environment.

In response to Seoul's growing anxiety, the United States undertook a series of reassurance initiatives. The April 2023 Washington Declaration established the bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), expanded strategic planning coordination, and announced more frequent deployments of U.S. strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula.[24] In July 2023, the USS Kentucky, an Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine, made a high-visibility port visit to Busan, the first such deployment since 1981.[25] These steps were intended to demonstrate the robustness and reliability of U.S. extended deterrence by the Biden administration.[26] Key indicators, however, indicate that these reassurance measures did not significantly alleviate South Korean anxieties. Surveys by the Asan Institute from 2023 to 2025 show that between 71–76 percent of South Koreans consistently supported acquiring an indigenous nuclear arsenal, even after the USS Kentucky visit and expanded NCG activities.[27] Under the alliance-credibility hypothesis, this persistent public preference suggests that reassurance was insufficient to counteract perceptions of heightened vulnerability.

Moreover, policy discourse within Seoul reflected a growing consensus that extended deterrence alone may be inadequate to address future contingencies. Several state-linked research organizations, including the Institute for National Security Strategy, recommended that the government explore options ranging from NATO-style nuclear sharing to an indigenous nuclear armament.[28] South Korean conservative commentators and retired military officers posited that a South Korean nuclear deterrent could potentially be integrated into the U.S. alliance framework as a

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[24] The White House, "Washington Declaration," April 26, 2023, 2.

[25] Josh Smith, "Rare Submarine Visit Reminds North Korea of U.S. Nuclear Missiles," *Reuters*, July 21, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/rare-submarine-visit-reminds-north-korea-us-nuclear-missiles-out-sight-range-2023-07-21/.

[26] Betsy Klein, Kylie Atwood, and Sam Fossum, "Biden and South Korea's Yoon Announce Agreement to Deter North Korea, Including Deploying Nuclear-Armed Submarine," *CNN*, April 26, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/26/politics/biden-yoon-south-korea-state-visit.

[27] "Asan Poll: 'South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025' Record 76.2% Public Support for Nuclear Armament," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, April 28, 2023, https://asaninst.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=s3_4_2_eng&wr_id=92&sfl=wr_subject%7C%7Cwr_content&stx=opinion%2Bsurvey&sop=and.

[28] Kim Min-seo, Yang Seung-shik, and Yeom Hyun-a, "'S. Korea Should Consider Nuclear Armament after N. Korea-Russia Pact': New Report," *The Chosun Daily*, June 23, 2024, https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/06/24/VIHO77UDYVAKDF23LPUNBPTORA/.

"shared asset."[29] The appointment in late 2024 of Kim Yong-Hyun as minister of national defense further represented an institutional signal of this trend. Kim, a retired general and former academic, had long argued that South Korea might eventually require nuclear weapons to ensure its survival.[30] In resurfaced footage from a 2020 seminar, he warned that South Korea had "no survival or future" without a nuclear deterrent.[31] During his confirmation hearings, Kim did not repudiate those earlier views. Instead, he stated that "all options" should remain open should U.S. extended deterrence prove insufficient.[32] Although the administration reiterated its formal commitment to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the elevation of an official with a history of nuclear advocacy suggests that concerns about U.S. credibility had penetrated the upper levels of the national security bureaucracy.

The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2025 further reinforced these anxieties. Throughout the 2024 campaign, Trump questioned the value of U.S. alliances, criticized burden-sharing, and suggested that U.S. defense commitments should be contingent upon increased payments.[33] Early comments in his second term echoed these themes.[34] While ostensibly directed at European partners, these statements carried implications for South Korea because Seoul had confronted similar threats during Trump's first term, when he considered troop withdrawals and demanded substantial increases in host-nation support. Reporting by the Foundation for Strategic Research noted that Korean officials interpreted Trump's rhetoric as a sign of enduring volatility in American alliance policy.[35] Several Trump-aligned officials have also expressed openness to South Korean nuclear acquisition under certain conditions,

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[29] Choi Kang, "South Korea's Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Could Be a 'Common Asset,'" *The Asian Institute for Policy Studies*, September 6, 2024, https://asaninst.org/data/file/s1_3_eng/f15af67c43af11afd7a990dc4f32fd2b_72cUnShi_4f2d41a32c0e594596556e7ef87ef62409192756.pdf.

[30] William Gallo and Lee Juhyun, "Under Yoon, Calls for South Korean Nukes 'Normalized,'" *Voice of America*, September 9, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/under-yoon-calls-for-south-korean-nukes-normalized/7777068.html.

[31] Gallo and Lee, "Under Yoon."

[32] Ibid.

[33] Emmet Lyons, "Trump Questions NATO Allies' Will for Collective Defense While Casting Doubt on U.S.' Own Treaty Commitment," *CBS News*, March 17, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-nato-article-5-collective-defense-europe-doubt-us-treaty-commitment/.

[34] Lyons, "Trump Questions NATO."

[35] Emmanuelle Maitre, "Towards a South Korean Nuclear Weapon? Political and Strategic Considerations: Foundation for Strategic Research," *Foundation for Strategic Research,* Accessed December 8, 2025, https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/korea-security-and-diplomacy-program/towards-south-korean-nuclear-weapon-political-and-strategic-considerations-2025.

describing it as potentially compatible with U.S. interests if it contributed to broader regional balancing. Elbridge Colby, who currently serves as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USDP), had declared in the past that "It's time to put all options, including South Korea's own nuclear armament, on the table and discuss them."[36] From Seoul's perspective, such arguments are double-edged. On the one hand, they reduce the perceived diplomatic cost of considering indigenous nuclear options. On the other hand, they reinforce the impression that the United States may seek to offload security responsibilities onto its allies rather than maintain a robust extended deterrent. Both effects are broadly consistent with the alliance-credibility hypothesis: they weaken confidence in the stability and permanence of U.S. guarantees, thereby increasing the relative attractiveness of an independent deterrent.

Furthermore, in late 2025, the National Security Strategy released by the second Trump administration represented a marked departure from the 2017 document, which had explicitly framed U.S. foreign policy around renewed great-power competition and identified China and Russia as revisionist adversaries, alongside North Korea as a regional threat.[37] The new strategy largely abandons this framework. China appears primarily as an economic competitor, Russia is not clearly identified as a strategic adversary, and North Korea is hardly addressed.[38] Equally striking is the absence of sustained discussion of U.S. alliance commitments in Northeast Asia.[39] From the perspective of alliance management, such omissions are consequential because they weaken strategic clarity at the exact moment when it is most valuable. A strategy document that gives limited attention to alliance commitments and the North Korea threat, therefore amplifies abandonment fears.

The election of Lee Jae-myung as president in 2025 has not eliminated these underlying tensions, but has complicated the interpretation of the evidence. Lee campaigned on a platform that combined a more conciliatory approach toward North Korea with a reaffirmation of the U.S.–ROK

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[36] Toby Dalton and Celia McDowall, "The Key Questions Senators Should Ask Trump's Nuclear Policy Nominees," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 26, 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/nuclear-policy-security-nominees-trump-senate-questions-confirmation-hearings?lang=en.

[37] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2017), 45-48, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

[38] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (November 2025), 8-25, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

[39] The White House, *National Security Strategy,* (November 2025).

alliance.[40] In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2025, he called for a "phased solution" to reduce tensions and emphasized peaceful coexistence on the peninsula rather than confrontation.[41] In other public remarks, Lee stressed that Seoul would continue to rely on U.S. extended deterrence while seeking to restore inter-Korean dialogue and confidence-building measures.[42] His administration has not endorsed nuclear armament and has reiterated South Korea's commitment to the NPT.[43] These positions constitute partial disconfirming evidence for the alliance-credibility hypothesis. They suggest that, at least under the current leadership, concerns about abandonment have not yet produced a decisive policy shift toward proliferation.

Nevertheless, Lee's government has also taken steps that keep the nuclear question alive. Early discussions with Washington have reportedly included requests for deeper consultation mechanisms on nuclear planning and for greater autonomy in conventional defense, including renewed interest in technologies such as nuclear-powered submarines and advanced missile defenses.[44] Although these initiatives do not cross the legal threshold into nuclear weapons development, they preserve future options and expand strategic autonomy. Moreover, public opinion data have not changed dramatically under Lee. Support for an indigenous nuclear arsenal has remained high, and influential think-tank figures such as Choi Kang of the Asan Institute continue to argue that a South Korean nuclear capability could eventually be framed as complementary to, rather than in opposition to, U.S. strategy.[45]

On balance, the empirical record from 2022 to 2025 partially confirms the alliance-credibility hypothesis. North Korea's doctrinal and technological advances have increased the objective risks facing both South Korea and the United States. U.S. reassurance measures have been substantial but have not fully dispelled South Korean fears of decoupling, as

[40] "At U.N., South Korean Leader Vows to Reduce Tensions with North Korea," *The Japan Times*, September 24, 2025, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/09/24/asia-pacific/politics/koreas-lee-new-era/.
[41] "At U.N., South Korean Leader Vows to Reduce Tensions with North Korea."
[42] Kim Eun-jung, "Lee Says S. Korea's Ultimate Goal Is Reunification with N. Korea," *UPI*, November 24, 2025, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2025/11/24/korea-Lee-Jae-Myung-reunification-North-Korea-ultimate-goal-G20/3601763959814/.
[43] Kim, "Lee Says S. Korea's Ultimate Goal."
[44] Kate Kang, "After Trump's 'dry in the U.S.' Remark, South Korea's Nuclear Submarine Debate Reignites Entirely," *IR Insider*, November 20, 2025, https://www.irinsider.org/east-asia-1/after-trumps-dry-in-the-us-remark-south-koreas-nuclear-submarine-debate-reignites-entirely; "Hegseth Praises South Korea's Plans to Raise Its Military Spending and Boost Defense Capabilities," *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 5, 2025, https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/16136938.
[45] Kang, "South Korea's Indigenous Nuclear Weapons."

reflected in persistently high public support for nuclear weapons and the mainstreaming of elite nuclear discourse. The rhetoric of key officials under Yoon and the appointment and statements of Defense Minister Kim Yong-Hyun, in particular, align closely with the observable implications outlined in the theoretical section: doubts about U.S. willingness to incur nuclear risks have translated into open discussion of nuclear options at the highest levels of government. At the same time, the absence of concrete moves toward weaponization—no abrogation of NPT commitments, no declared fuel-cycle breakout, and no official decision to pursue nuclear arms—together with President Lee's more cautious posture, prevents a full confirmation. The evidence thus points toward a scenario in which alliance-credibility concerns have significantly increased the likelihood that South Korea will one day consider nuclear proliferation, but have not, at least thus far, tipped the state into an irreversible nuclear path.

Evaluating the Domestic Political Pressures Hypothesis, 2022–2025

Domestic political pressures in South Korea have become an increasingly important element of the nuclear debate. From 2022 to 2025, the evolution of public opinion, partisan competition, and bureaucratic activism produced a domestic environment that made nuclear acquisition politically salient. A core feature of this period is the persistence of overwhelming public support for an indigenous nuclear deterrent. As highlighted earlier, surveys by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Chey Institute throughout 2022 to 2024 consistently showed nuclear support ranging from roughly 70 to 76 percent, with only marginal partisan variation.[46] These findings deserve close analytical attention because they remained high even during periods of reduced crisis intensity. They reflect a deeper structural shift in public attitudes: nuclear acquisition has become a mainstream expectation rather than a fringe viewpoint.[47] For the domestic political hypothesis, such sustained public support is highly relevant as it establishes a permissive electoral environment in which political elites face

[46] Karl Friedhoff, Toby Dalton and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, February 21, 2022, https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons; Thomas Maresca, "Survey: Almost 73% of South Koreans Want Country to Develop Nukes," *UPI*, February 6, 2024, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2024/02/06/Gallup-Chey-survey-North-Korea-nuclear-weapons-denuclearization/8841707211962/.

[47] Friedhoff, Dalton, and Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons."

little backlash for invoking nuclear options and may, in some cases, gain political advantage by doing so.

The observable implication expects that political parties, particularly those in opposition, will leverage nuclear issues for electoral differentiation. The empirical record strongly confirms this expectation. From 2023 onward, conservative lawmakers within the People Power Party repeatedly discussed adopting "nuclear armament as an official party policy initiative," framing nuclear options as necessary for deterrence and national self-reliance.[48] These statements did not emerge during acute crises; they occurred even during periods of relative diplomatic calm. The persistence of nuclear rhetoric under such conditions indicates that nuclear issues have become embedded in partisan competition. Conservative elites used nuclear advocacy to position themselves as stronger guardians of national security and as more willing to challenge what they characterized as overreliance on the United States.[49] This behavior constitutes clear confirming evidence: partisan actors treated nuclearization not solely as a strategic question but as a political resource, utilizing it to differentiate policy agendas and court voters already predisposed toward nuclear options. The domestic mechanism thus operated through electoral incentives, as predicted.

The second major development regarding the domestic hypothesis is the expansion of nuclear discourse within bureaucratic and policy institutions. In June 2024, the state-funded Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS) issued a report "calling for diversifying options in response to North Korean threats," including the possibility of redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or exploring an indigenous program.[50] The existence of this report signaled institutional recognition that nuclear policy had become a legitimate topic of national strategic planning. The INSS is not an opposition think tank; it is affiliated with South Korea's National Intelligence Service. Its engagement with nuclear options indicates that the bureaucracy now views nuclear questions as relevant to long-term strategy. For the domestic political hypothesis, this constitutes a form of bureaucratic confirming evidence, demonstrating that nuclear discourse has penetrated the technocratic core of national security planning.

The hypothesis also predicts a key disconfirming implication: if domestic pressures alone were determinative, a change in political leadership should not significantly alter nuclear advocacy. The election of President

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[48] Kim Seung-yeon, "Deepening Russia-N.K. Ties Reignite Debate over S. Korea's Nuclear Options," *Yonhap News Agency*, June 26, 2024, https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240626005000315?section=features%2Ffeatures.

[49] Kim, "Deepening Russia-N.K. Ties."

[50] Ibid.

Lee Jae-myung in 2025 provides a critical test. Lee's government quickly reaffirmed commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, emphasizing the importance of sustained U.S.-ROK coordination and warning against strategic overreach.[51] In contrast to Yoon-era rhetoric, Lee and his national security team have avoided invoking nuclear options and instead stressed the importance of strengthening conventional deterrence and alliance mechanisms.[52] These actions demonstrate that domestic pressures are permissive but not decisive. Despite strong cross-partisan public support and clear partisan incentives, the executive exercised restraint. This pattern constitutes disconfirming evidence for the domestic political hypothesis.

However, the disconfirming evidence does not negate the influence of domestic pressures; rather, it clarifies the conditions under which they matter. Even as Lee publicly rejected nuclear options, domestic incentives redirected themselves into adjacent strategic domains. A particularly salient example emerged in the elevation of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) to a bipartisan national priority by 2025.[53] South Korean interest in naval nuclear propulsion predates this period, but it was the domestic environment of the Yoon years—marked by high public support for nuclearization and escalating partisan competition over strategic autonomy—that propelled SSNs into the center of national debate.[54] Notably, the SSN issue remained politically salient under Lee. Reporting from Military.com, Reuters, and Politico indicates that during the recent 2025 summit with President Trump, Lee personally requested U.S. approval to acquire nuclear submarine propulsion technology.[55] Operational arguments framed the request—South Korea's diesel-electric fleet was increasingly inadequate for tracking Chinese and North Korean submarines in contested waters—but the political significance extends beyond capability gaps. The very fact that a progressive president, one who had campaigned on alliance coordination and diplomatic engagement, advanced a nuclear-relevant request underscores the gravitational pull of domestic expectations. Strategic autonomy has become a cross-party norm.

Domestic reactions to the submarine agreement further illustrate the mechanisms at work. Conservative media outlets criticized the deal, arguing that U.S. approval merely enabled South Korea to purchase

[51] Kim, "Lee Says S. Korea's Ultimate Goal."
[52] Ibid.
[53] Chris Megerian and Josh Boak, "US Will Share Tech to Let South Korea Build a Nuclear-Powered Submarine, Trump Says," *Military.com*, October 30, 2025; "South Korea's Lee asks Trump for fuel used by nuclear-powered submarines," *Reuters,* Accessed December 9, 2025.
[54] Megerian and Boak, "US Will Share Tech."
[55] Ibid.

submarines built in an American shipyard, without transferring nuclear propulsion technology or fuel.[56] From this viewpoint, SSNs without nuclear weapons could not provide a survivable second-strike capability and therefore offered limited strategic value. Such critiques demonstrate how partisan actors utilize nuclear-adjacent issues to argue for more assertive measures by portraying these arrangements as technologically constrained and strategically insufficient, implicitly favoring indigenous nuclearization. They reinforce the notion that domestic pressures constitute a powerful, though not always uniform, driver of strategic debate.

Other analysts interpreted the agreement differently. Doo Jin-ho of the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy characterized the SSN acquisition as a major diplomatic success for the Lee administration, noting that previous U.S. administrations had rejected similar proposals due to concerns about nuclear proliferation.[57] In this interpretation, Trump's more transactional approach created an opportunity for Seoul to secure a concession that earlier governments could not obtain. This view illustrates a distinct domestic mechanism: policy entrepreneurs and technocratic elites frame nuclear-adjacent initiatives as evidence of effective leadership, thus enhancing political incentives to pursue similar capabilities. Reuters also reported that South Korean officials sought U.S. permission for fuel-cycle activities related to submarine propulsion, indicating a willingness to explore capabilities previously considered too sensitive to pursue.[58] These developments align with the theoretical expectation that bureaucratic actors, operating under conditions of high public support and permissive partisan rhetoric, will expand the policy agenda into nuclear-relevant domains.

Taken together, the domestic record from 2022 to 2025 provides partial confirmation for the domestic-political hypothesis. Public opinion stabilized at levels that made nuclearization politically attractive; opposition lawmakers adopted nuclear rhetoric as a tool of electoral differentiation; and bureaucratic institutions integrated nuclear-relevant concepts into long-term planning. At the same time, the executive's restraint under President Lee demonstrates that domestic pressures operate as permissive conditions rather than decisive catalysts. Leadership preferences, international commitments, and alliance dependencies continue to mediate the translation of domestic incentives into policy. The domestic mechanism

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[56] Konstantin Asmolov, "Why Does South Korea Need a Nuclear Submarine?," *New Eastern Outlook*, November 22, 2025.

[57] Asmolov, "Why Does South Korea Need a Nuclear Submarine?"

[58] Ju-min Park and Joyce Lee, "South Korea Seeks US Fuel for Domestically Built Nuclear-Powered Submarine, Official Says," *Reuters*, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/south-korea-seeks-us-fuel-domestically-built-nuclear-powered-submarine-official-2025-11-07/.

thus increases the likelihood that nuclear options remain on the strategic agenda, but it has not yet produced an irreversible movement toward nuclear acquisition.

Conclusion: Strategic Uncertainty, Converging Pressures, and the Limits of Nuclear Restraint

This study set out to evaluate the conditions under which the Republic of Korea might pursue an indigenous nuclear deterrent by examining two competing, though not mutually exclusive, explanations: the alliance credibility hypothesis and the domestic political hypothesis. Both mechanisms were empirically supported between 2022 and 2025, but neither was sufficient on its own to trigger a decisive shift toward nuclear acquisition. Instead, South Korea's nuclear posture during this period is best understood as strategic hedging shaped by the interaction of external uncertainty and permissive domestic politics, rather than by an irreversible commitment to proliferation.

From an alliance-politics perspective, the findings are broadly consistent with theories that emphasize abandonment risk and the fragility of extended deterrence when an adversary can credibly threaten the patron's homeland.[59] North Korea's doctrinal codification of preemptive nuclear use and its successful testing of the solid-fuel Hwasong-18 significantly heightened decoupling risks.[60] These structural shifts elevated abandonment concerns in Seoul and pushed nuclear options into the mainstream of official discourse. High-visibility U.S. reassurance measures, including the Washington Declaration and the USS Kentucky's visit, failed to eliminate these anxieties.[61] As the alliance evaluation showed, credibility is shaped not only by deployment and consultation mechanisms, but also by broader U.S. strategic signaling, which affects perceptions in Seoul about long-term political will and alliance priority. At the same time, the absence of concrete moves toward nuclear breakout—no abrogation of NPT commitments, no declared shift in fuel- cycle policy, and no presidential commitment to proliferation—suggests that alliance anxieties, while serious, have not yet pushed South Korea across the nuclear threshold.

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[59] Kim, *South Korea's Nuclear Hedging?*, 119-120; Curtice, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Proliferation Models as Concurrent Pressures on a State*, 58.
[60] Farago, "Why US Extended Deterrence to South Korea Might Not Work," 649-657.
[61] The White House, "Washington Declaration," 2; Smith, "Rare Submarine Visit Reminds North Korea of U.S. Nuclear Missiles"; Klein, Atwood, and Fossum, "Biden and South Korea's Yoon Announce Agreement to Deter North Korea, Including Deploying Nuclear-Armed Submarine."

Domestic political dynamics reinforce this conclusion. Sustained public support for nuclear weapons, cross-partisan elite discourse, and bureaucratic engagement with nuclear-adjacent capabilities have lowered the political costs of nuclear advocacy and ensured that nuclear options remain salient.[62] At the same time, the restraint exercised by the current South Korean leadership underscores the limits of domestic explanations. Despite favorable public opinion and electoral incentives, executive preferences, legal constraints, and continued reliance on the U.S. alliance have thus far prevented a transition from hedging to weaponization.[63]

Together, the findings from both hypotheses indicate that South Korea's nuclear trajectory remains contingent, fluid, and highly sensitive to future changes in both structural and domestic conditions. Abandonment concerns have intensified, but they have not produced an irreversible move toward nuclear weapons. Domestic pressures have become more powerful and more institutionalized, but they remain permissive rather than determinative. In the absence of a decisive convergence between severe alliance erosion and domestic political incentives strong enough to make nuclear acquisition unavoidable, South Korea is likely to continue its current hedging strategy—maintaining alliance commitments while expanding nuclear-adjacent capabilities that enhance autonomy without breaching nonproliferation norms.

More broadly, the South Korean case highlights a central insight of alliance politics: under conditions of heightened threat and strategic ambiguity, nuclear restraint is not automatic but conditional. Extended deterrence can persist even in the face of serious credibility challenges, but only so long as reassurance, consultation, and credible signaling remain sufficient to offset abandonment fears. When those conditions weaken, states may hedge rather than proliferate, preserving flexibility while stopping short of nuclear acquisition.

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[62] Friedhoff, Dalton and Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons"; Thomas Maresca, "Survey: Almost 73% of South Koreans Want Country to Develop Nukes."
[63] Kim, "Lee Says S. Korea's Ultimate Goal."

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Land Grabs, Control, and Agricultural Policy-Making in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The agricultural sector in Ethiopia has been a cornerstone of the nation's economy. This paper examines the expansion of foreign agricultural investments after the Great Recession and its implications for the federal motivations behind shifts in agricultural policymaking and governance. To investigate this problem, the paper draws on existing literature on Ethiopian land regimes and agricultural investment, as well as case studies on flagship agricultural projects and labor conditions in the floriculture sector. I argue that while foreign agricultural investment may theoretically aid the larger macroeconomic needs of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian government has unduly prioritized political consolidation of regional governance as well as bolstering the export-economy. In practice, state-led promotion of foreign investment has marginalized regional autonomy, weakened smallholder land security, and contributed to labor precarity and livelihood insecurity in affected communities.

Introduction

"We're creating a system that serves all market actors, that creates integrity, trust, efficiency, and enables small farmers to manage [risk]."[1] At TED Global in 2007, economist Eleni Gabre-Mahdin shared her vision to create the first commodities market in Ethiopia, the Ethiopia Commodity Exchange (ECX). The ECX is a moderated market that centralizes the trading of agricultural commodities (for example, maize and coffee). It seeks to ensure standardization and cut out the "middleman" in trading by connecting farmers and buyers directly.[2] This followed the success of similar

[1] Eleni Gabre-Madhin, "A Commodities Exchange for Ethiopia," *TEDGlobal*, Arusha, June 2007, 14:43,
https://www.ted.com/talks/eleni_gabre_madhin_a_commodities_exchange_for_ethiopia.
[2] Gabre-Madhin, "Commodities Exchange."

commodity exchanges in India and China, but in Gabre-Mahdin's vision, the ECX would be uniquely tailored toward empowering small farmers. The proposal was taken to Ethiopian parliament a few months later, and the company went operational in April of 2008. To this day, the ECX continues to be a success story, particularly for coffee farmers. The system limits the exposure of small farmers to risk and generates both safety and flexibility for producers and consumers. Unfortunately, The innovation showcased by Gabre-Madhin in 2007 was all but present in government planning in 2008, when leaders turned to the agricultural sector as the path forward following the Global Recession. When agricultural policy-making shifted its focus away from smallholders in order to bolster the economy, land-grabs took center stage.

"Land grabs" and "large-scale agricultural investments" both refer to the same practice of leasing large swaths of land to foreign investors. The term "land grabs" embodies the rhetoric of critics of Ethiopian agricultural policy-making while "large-scale agricultural investments" is favored by the Ethiopian government and promoters of the practice. For the sake of clarity in this paper, I will use the more neutral terminology: "foreign agricultural investments."

The Ethiopian government has often been criticized for the prioritization of foreign agricultural investments, thus this paper will examine agricultural policy-making and the Ethiopian government's focus on the commercialization of the agricultural sector. Foreign investors, markedly, are a part of this sector, and this paper seeks to determine whether or not the heavy involvement foreign investors have in both land and agriculture influences the policy-making happening at the state level. The Ethiopian government holds sole ownership of their land and has consolidated control over agricultural policy-making.[3] Since foreign land investments are promoted and coordinated by the state rather than by market actors,[4] the state actively steers these investments toward projects it identifies as advancing its strategic development agenda.

As it currently stands, the literature is split between institutional and anthropological examinations of Ethiopian agricultural policy. The former looks more generally at foreign agricultural investments as a deliberate state-led strategy for modernization and development, and tends to take the state's rhetoric at face value while acknowledging the systemic issues it

[3] Tom Lavers, "'Land Grab' as Development Strategy? The Political Economy of Agricultural Investment in Ethiopia," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012): 105–132, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.652091; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Land to Investors: Large-Scale Land Transfers in Ethiopia* (Forum for Social Studies, 2011), https://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/land_to_investors_ethiopia_rahmato.pdf.
[4] Lavers, "Land Grab," 110–114.

creates. Conversely, the latter argues that foreign agricultural investments function less as a development strategy, but as a mechanism of displacement and coercive state-power which produces uneven and harmful consequences for local communities. This paper seeks to explore how Ethiopian agricultural policy-making intentionally shifted, and ultimately went awry, following the 2008 global financial crisis. It will first present the historical context of land regimes in Ethiopia to situate 2008 policy shifts, then review the current literature on large-scale agricultural investments in Ethiopia, before examining two case studies of large flagship projects as well as labor practices in the floriculture sector to assess how foreign investments have influenced agricultural policy-making.

Historical Context

To begin to understand the impact of broader institutional patterns of consolidation and what gave way to the current Ethiopian government's pursuit of agricultural expansion, it is important to clarify the historical shifts in Ethiopian land regimes. Pre-1974, under Emperor Haile Selassie's regime, land ownership was extremely unequal and decentralized, with control dispersed only throughout the crown, nobility, churches, and local landlords.[5] At the time, peasants could only hold land under tenancy or tribute systems; land rights were tied to class rather than citizenship. The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution dismantled the imperial political system and ushered in a socialist military regime: the Derg. The Derg were a group of military officers that took power after the revolution, and centralized authority throughout the state, restructuring state-region relations and expanding the reach of the state by means of economic and administrative shifts. As the Derg regime nationalized rural land to consolidate political authority, reorganize agrarian relations, and manage rural populations, land became a cornerstone of state power rather than a privately controlled resource. A significant component of this nationalization was the creation of peasant associations that administered land allocation and use at the village level, embedding the principle of state land ownership within local systems of rural governance. This was a critical juncture that reshaped state incentives and land rights.[6] In 1991, the Derg collapsed, giving way to Ethiopia's post-1995 federalist regime. This regime reconfigured political authority through the

[5] Lavers, "Land Grab," 111–113.
[6] Manuel Schädler and Franz W. Gatzweiler, *Institutional Environments for Enabling Agricultural Technology Innovations: The Role of Land Rights in Ethiopia, Ghana, India, and Bangladesh*, ZEF Working Paper 119 (Center for Development Research, 2013), 4-36, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/88349/1/773536450.pdf.

introduction of ethnic federalism while maintaining centralized state power over strategic policy areas, most notably agriculture and land.[7]

Literature Review

In "'Land grab' as Development Strategy? The Political Economy of Agricultural Investment in Ethiopia," Tom Lavers explores the domestic political motivations and state strategy behind Ethiopia's decision to promote foreign agricultural investments.[8] Drawing on federal and regional policy documents, he argues that these investments serve the government's broader goals of state consolidation and foreign exchange generation. He highlights federal attempts to channel investment toward lowland regions framed as "unused."

Ethiopia is constitutionally organized as an "ethnic federal state" which theoretically privileges regional autonomy as a significant part of larger state function. Ethiopia's structure as an ethnic federal state organizes the state into regions based on ethnicity and grants regions the right to self-determination.[9] However, Lavers explains that following the 2008 global food crisis, the state's broader agricultural investment, aimed at bolstering the economy, actually disrupted the region-forward structure. In an effort to generate more capital and resources for the country during this crisis, the state shifted its agricultural policy toward pro-investor rapid land-leasing and away from regional authority. While this policy was intended to ameliorate suffering of the people and Ethiopian economy in direct response to the crisis, it primarily marginalized local governments in practice. Investment policy by-in-large became a tool to temper and undercut federalism, not just develop agriculture. Regions in the lowlands and on the periphery of the state were pressured to lease their land out to investors. At the federal level, the state designated more rural land as "unused" or "underutilized" in order to override regional claims to the land.[10] Lavers thus demonstrates how agricultural policy-making became a vehicle for state development and strategy.

Manuel Schädler and Franz W. Gatzweiler assess land rights regimes, the legal, social, and customary frameworks established in a country which determine individual or group access to land.[11] They examine the influence of land rights regimes on agricultural technology adoption across four countries, including Ethiopia, in their working paper "Institutional

[7] Lavers, "Land Grab," 111–113; Rahmato, *Land to Investors*, 6–8.
[8] Ibid., 105–132.
[9] Rahmato, *Land to Investors*.
[10] Ibid., 6–8; Lavers, "Land Grab," 111–113.
[11] Schädler and Gatzweiler, "Agricultural Technology Innovations," 4-36.

Environments for Enabling Agricultural Technology Innovations: The Role of Land Rights in Ethiopia, Ghana, India, and Bangladesh." They argue that secure and clearly defined land rights are essential for innovation and investment. In the Ethiopian context, they find that centralized land ownership and tenure insecurity create obstacles to agricultural modernization. Tenure insecurity refers to the uncertainty of the continued right to access, control, and benefit from land, as people using state-owned land face the possibility of state-reallocation or expropriation. Schädler and Gatzweiler argue that as a state-owned land regime, the Ethiopian government has created tenure insecurity as an intentional structural feature rather than a by-product of state-land ownership.[12] Then, the Ethiopian state takes advantage of this system in order to favor of foreign agriculture investments. The authors emphasize that Ethiopia's state-controlled land system simultaneously enables rapid land leasing to investors and constrains smallholder innovation. Their analysis situates Ethiopia's agricultural investment policies within the broader institutional structure of land usage.

Fouad Makki and Tsegaye Moreda provide a microeconomic view of the impact of foreign agricultural investments primarily through household surveys, ethnographic fieldwork, and community-level data.[13] These anthropological tools reveal the lived-experience of citizens dealing firsthand with the consequences of foreign agricultural investments. They argue that land acquisitions by foreign agricultural investors operate as processes of development by dispossession, in which land, authority, and livelihoods are reallocated away from local communities through state-backed investment regimes. Related works by Moreda and Max Spoor; Alelegn Wenedem Agegnehu; Felix Horne; and Nebiyu Abesha, Engdawork Assefa, and Maria Petrova add to this insight by examining how these investments are negotiated and enforced in practice, the restricted consent of citizens, weak protections of local land-use rights, and the political marginalization of affected communities.[14]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Fouad Makki, "Development by Dispossession: Terra Nullius and the Social Ecology of New Enclosures in Ethiopia," *Rural Sociology* 41, no. 4 (2013): 523–545, https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12033.

[14] Tsegaye Moreda and Max Spoor, "The Politics of Large-Scale Land Acquisitions in Ethiopia: State and Corporate Elites and Subaltern Villagers," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 36, no. 2 (2015): 224–240, https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.1049133; Alelegn Wenedem Agegnehu, "Protection of Local Land Use Rights in the Process of Large-Scale Agricultural Land Acquisition in Ethiopia," *African Identities* 21, no. 1 (2023): 113–133; Felix Horne, *Understanding Land Deals in Ethiopia* (Human Rights Watch, 2011), http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OI_Ethiopa_Land_Investment_report.pdf; Nebiyu Abesha et al., "Large-Scale Agricultural Investment in Ethiopia:

This literature centers community governance, economic and social wellness of households, and pastoralist populations. By gathering data through ethnography, interviews, and larger case studies, scholars are able to interrogate lived experience. Case studies in Benishangul-Gumuz, a lowland region on the border of western Ethiopia, have documented widespread displacement as a result of large-scale land acquisitions because of the state's classification of the area as sparsely populated and "underutilized."[15] In interviews with farmers and pastoralists in this region, Moreda discovered that communities were informed of land deals after agreements were already made between state officials and investors. In direct conflict with the supposed autonomy of regional governance, communities were systematically pushed out of negotiations, while state officials controlled access to information and decision-making.[16] In interviews, some community members reported fear of retaliation through loss of access to state resources in the face of any resistance to any deal,[17] which is why open resistance to land acquisitions is rare.

The state is both an active broker and enforcer of land leasing. Despite disruption of livelihoods and negative impact on citizens, it continues to facilitate land deals in favor of foreign exchange. Scholars have documented the presence of police and other state enforcement actors operating alongside local administrations to ensure a smooth transition and suppression of resistance to foreign agricultural investments.[18] While Ethiopian law technically recognizes local land-use rights, these protections are not heavily enforced concerning land leasing, particularly in peripheral regions where state authority is uneven and accountability mechanisms are limited.[19] Once land has been allocated to investors, consent processes are often opaque or symbolic, and access to effective appeal mechanisms for affected communities is minimal. Agegnehu shows that this gap between legal frameworks and administrative practice leaves local populations vulnerable to dispossession despite the existence of formal safeguards.[20]

What remains underexplored is how the post-2008 shift to prioritizing foreign agricultural investments feeds back into and influences agricultural

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Development, Challenges and Policy Responses," *Land Use Policy* 112, 105852 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2022.106091.

[15] Tsegaye Moreda, "Listening to Their Silence? The Political Reaction of Affected Communities to Large-Scale Land Acquisitions: Insights from Ethiopia," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, no. 3–4 (2015): 517–539, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.993621.

[16] Tsegaye Moreda and Max Spoor, "The Politics of Large-Scale Land," 224–240; Horne, *Understanding Land Deals.*

[17] Moreda, "Listening to Their Silence?," 528–530.

[18] Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 523–545.

[19] Agegnehu, "Protection of Local Land," 113–133.

[20] Ibid.

policy-making itself: reshaping state priorities, governance practices, and political control to the detriment of regional autonomy and small landholders.

The Argument

The Ethiopian government's extensive involvement in agriculture makes it an important place to study how economic needs generated by a global crisis combine with the political motivation to consolidate power and the influence of foreign capital to reshape policy-making, and the livelihoods of the people at large. This paper seeks to understand how foreign investments in land have influenced agricultural policy-making in Ethiopia since 2008. By focusing on 2008, we can clearly study the evolution of agricultural policy toward generating foreign exchange, as well as Ethiopia's response to a global crisis.

This paper argues that leasing out land to foreign powers may theoretically aid Ethiopia in meeting their macroeconomic needs, especially immediately following the 2008 food crisis caused by the Great Recession. However, in practice, the Ethiopian government has prioritized generating foreign capital and political consolidation over constitutional regional autonomy, contributing to systematic marginalization of rural livelihoods. This stems directly from coercive administration practices and weak accountability mechanisms for foreign investors that produce systemic patterns of dispossession and uneven economic outcomes.

Foreign Agricultural Investment and Policy-Making Since 2008

Post-2008 Policy Shift and State Strategy

Ethiopia entered the 2008 crisis with existing structural foreign exchange constraints, mostly due to the National Bank of Ethiopia's monopoly on foreign currency which made the Ethiopian Birr not freely convertible. This centralized financial control caused an import bottleneck, which was only exacerbated by a global food price shock.[21] As the crisis limited the state's ability to import fuel, food, and capital goods, the government rapidly

[21] International Monetary Fund, "The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia: 2008 Article IV Consultation-Staff Report; Staff Supplement; Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion; and Statement by the Executive Director for The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", *IMF Staff Country Reports*, 264 (2008), https://doi.org/10.5089/9781451812831.002.

expanded its agricultural sector through large-scale farming and foreign investment. Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization was Ethiopia's foundational state-led growth strategy at the time, seeking economic industrialization through the agricultural sector, however, this strategy's reliance on smallholder production was not viewed as a viable path toward rapid commercialization.[22] Therefore, the state shifted agricultural policy toward large-scale projects and foreign investors. In doing so, the state sought not only to generate foreign exchange and demonstrate economic capacity, but also to consolidate political authority in effort to project strength and industrialization in the global theater. In this context, managing vulnerability became both a political and economic priority.

Institutionally, post-2008 agricultural policy emphasized state-led commercialization and a rapid upscaling of pro-investor policies to more easily facilitate large-scale projects. This prompted a state shift away from regional control of land access through the use of policy loopholes, such as deeming land as "sparsely populated" to allow the state to take and cede control of it. The state also simplified land-leasing procedures to accelerate approval timelines.[23] By increasing the presence of federal ministries and the role of investment commissions, regional authorities were relegated to implementation of centralized policy.

Foreign agricultural investment became a policy tool, and the state's focus on investment was justified through the development strategy rhetoric and calls for efficiency of larger scale food/agriculture production through commercialization. Investment promotion was coordinated and facilitated by the state instead of private market actors. The state promoted investment projects by deeming them vehicles of modernization, privileging foreign investment with tax exemptions for investors.[24] These changes set the stage for the flagship agricultural projects that began in Ethiopia during this time, which became practical expressions of the new priorities of the state and instructive examples of industrialization.

Flagship Projects and Policy Normalization

Karuturi Global emerged as one of the most prominent transnational corporations to benefit from Ethiopia's prioritization of foreign agricultural investments. Beginning in 2009, the company was granted access to land in Gambella, a lowland region in western Ethiopia originally framed by the state as sparsely populated and underutilized. Approximately 100,000 hectares were allocated to Karuturi for large-scale export farming of corn, rice,

[22] Rahmato, *Land to Investors*, 10–12.
[23] Abesha et al., "Large-Scale Agricultural Investment."
[24] Ibid.

flowers, and sugar.[25] While the Ethiopian constitution formally charges regional states with land administration, the negotiation and approval of these large-scale leases increasingly occurred through federal-level institutions, including the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate, which assumed authority over "unused" land identified for commercial farming.

The speed and scale of land allocation to Karuturi reflected more than a development ambition held by the state—it demonstrated a structural shift in policy-making. With regional governing bodies repositioned as implementers rather than active decision-makers, the Karuturi situation made sweeping pro-investor policy shifts that narrowed the regional autonomy envisioned in Ethiopia's constitutional framework in order to advantage Karuturi. Despite subsequent challenges and underperformance, Karuturi retained political and administrative backing, demonstrating how the state prioritized the appearance of development through flagship projects rather than evaluating progress through social or economic outcomes.[26] Flagship projects became more valuable to the state as symbols of development rather than as net-positive investments in the economy.[27] The visibility of vast mechanized farms, irrigation infrastructure, and foreign capital flows functioned as performative evidence of Ethiopia's developmental trajectory, while tangible economic development was ignored. Karuturi was not an isolated case, but an early manifestation of a broader post-2008 policy logic that gave exclusive privileges to foreign agricultural investments—a logic that would be further institutionalized through subsequent projects, like Saudi Star.

Saudi Star represents a second flagship investment that, while distinct in its geopolitical ties and ownership structure, emerged from the same post-2008 policy logic privileging large-scale, foreign-led agricultural development. Beginning in 2008, Saudi Star acquired land in Gambella for large-scale rice farming, the same peripheral lowland region targeted by Karuturi and other large-scale projects. Initial leases covered approximately 10,000 to 20,000 hectares, with expansion plans reportedly extending up to 500,000 hectares, underscoring the ambitious scale envisioned by both investors and the Ethiopian state. Unlike Karuturi, Saudi Star was closely linked to Saudi capital with strong state backing, and the investment was framed not only in terms of development and commercialization, but also as part of a broader food security and foreign exchange strategy.[28] This alignment of investor priorities—tax incentives, ease of access—with Ethiopia's macroeconomic needs, namely an acute shortage of foreign currency,

[25] Lavers, "Land Grab," 114–118; Rahmato, *Land to Investors*, 9–14.
[26] Lavers, "Land Grab," 122–124.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Rahmato, *Land to Investors*, 17–21.

further entrenched export-oriented agriculture as a national priority. Political support for flagship projects was embedded within a political economy that privileged foreign exchange earnings, centralized oversight of land resources, and strengthened federal leverage over peripheral regions.[29] Like Karuturi, Saudi Star's operational challenges and delays did not damage the political support it received, which further demonstrates how the state was interested in optics and macroeconomic posturing, rather than the actual outcomes of these projects.[30]

As more flagship projects and land acquisitions emerged, government overreach and investor-centric policy influence became increasingly normalized. By the resolution of the 2008 crisis, large-scale land leasing had been cemented as a regular economic instrument rather than a crisis response. Agricultural policy-making in Ethiopia increasingly served dual economic and political functions, with state institutions extending their reach into rural areas not only to promote growth, but also to consolidate administrative control. Bureaucrats prioritized the compliance of local communities while orienting agricultural policy-making toward anticipating the needs of investors and deploying financial incentives in advance.[31]

By centralizing authority over the identification, leasing, and administration of "unused" land, federal institutions expanded their leverage over peripheral regions whose constitutional autonomy had historically been framed as foundational to Ethiopia's federal system, like the Gambella. Control over land allocation enabled the state to moderate access to capital, infrastructure, and employment opportunities, thereby embedding regional administrations within vertically structured patronage and oversight networks.[32] Commercial agriculture thus functioned simultaneously as a development strategy and as a territorial governance strategy; it transformed land from a resource embedded in regional identity and livelihood security into a centrally managed asset tied to export revenue and regime durability. The post-2008 policy shift, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an economic adjustment to global crisis, but as part of a broader recalibration of state power in which agricultural commercialization strengthened federal authority at the expense of both regional autonomy and localized landholding security.

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[29] Lavers, "Land Grab," 122–124.
[30] Ibid.; Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 528–530.
[31] Kassahun Berhanu and Colin Poulton, "The Political Economy of Agricultural Extension Policy in Ethiopia: Economic Growth and Political Control," *Development Policy Review* 32, no. S2 (2014): S197–S213, https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12082.
[32] Tom Lavers, "Patterns of Agrarian Transformation in Ethiopia: State-Mediated Commercialisation and the 'Land Grab,'" *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 3–4 (2012): 804–807, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.660147.

Agricultural Extension, Bureaucracy, and State Control

Ethiopia has consistently invested in agriculture as a core pillar of its state development strategy. Over the decade from 2002 and 2003 to 2011 and 2012, agriculture received an average of 15% of the government's development budget, reflecting its centrality to economic planning.[33] A major component of this investment has been the expansion of the agricultural extension system, particularly through an ambitious training program for extension workers, now referred to as development agents (DAs).[34] The agricultural extension system is a participatory and decentralized program aimed at disseminating agricultural practices and technologies from experts to smallholder farmers. The number of DAs has increased dramatically over time, from approximately 2,500 in 1995 to 15,000 in 2002, reaching nearly 45,000 in 2009, with the stated goal of deploying three development agents in every kebele (neighborhood) nationwide[35].

Broad-based agricultural extension has been perceived by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the ruling political coalition until 2019, as essential not only to agricultural growth, but also to the long-term survival of their regime.[36] Extension agents are thus tasked with a dual mandate: promoting productivity while simultaneously securing political control and administrative penetration across rural Ethiopia. This dual role, however, impedes the extension system, thereby reducing its effectiveness in achieving its stated goal of comprehensive agricultural growth.[37] Therefore, through agricultural extension, the state reinforces a governance model where policy implementation is tailored to the state's need for administrative and political control, rather than farmers' needs, local autonomy, or community well-being.

Floriculture and Lived Experience

These governance and policy shifts raise important questions about the lived experiences and well-being of workers and communities operating within Ethiopia's agricultural sector. State rhetoric surrounding land acquisitions and foreign investment frames these projects as successful export-driven growth, yet fieldwork conducted in communities designated as investment sites documents patterns of displacement, exclusion, and economic exploitation of local citizens. The floriculture sector presents an

[33] Berhanu and Poulton, "The Political Economy," S201–S204.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., S201–S205.

opportunity to examine the lived experiences of workers in an agricultural investment cited as "successful." Despite such supposed success, it becomes apparent that the state offers weak accountability mechanisms for communities involved in foreign investment projects.[38] By limiting pathways to lodge grievances and the enforcing of compliance through the threat of retaliation, governance structures leave communities without any viable ways to secure meaningful recourse or autonomy over working conditions and land usage.

The Ethiopian state frequently cites floriculture as a successful example of foreign agricultural investment due to its contribution to export profit and employment creation.[39] By the early 2010s, floriculture was generating hundreds of millions of dollars annually and supplying European markets with cut flowers, particularly roses.[40] However, ethnographic studies revealed that the benefits of floriculture were being reaped primarily by the state. Workers employed in the sector face low wages, insecure contracts, and limited bargaining power—on top of unsafe labor conditions.[41] Women are particularly impacted by this disparity, despite making up the majority of the floriculture workforce. They are disproportionately employed in greenhouse work due to perceptions of manual dexterity and greater compliance, yet face heightened exposure to occupational hazards.[42] Studies report frequent contact with agrochemicals, limited access to protective equipment, and inadequate health monitoring, resulting in both short- and long-term health risks.[43] While regulatory frameworks governing labor safety and environmental protection exist on paper, enforcement remains inconsistent.

These dynamics echo trends in foreign agricultural investment writ large: the lack of accountability is not an exception for failed projects but a structural feature at the root of investor-focused agricultural governance. The floriculture sector illustrates that investments in agriculture characterized as development gains are riddled with negative impacts when foreign exchange generation and political control take priority over citizen welfare in policy-making. The Ethiopian state's emphasis on export performance obscures the lived realities of workers whose labor sustains these sectors, allowing exploitation and insecurity despite the success of these projects in producing revenue and jobs. Ultimately, the floriculture sector underlines

[38] Moreda, "Listening to Silence," 532–534; Agegnehu, "Protection Land Use," 120–123.
[39] Abesha et al., "Large-Scale Agricultural Investment."
[40] Ibid.
[41] Abebe Gizachew Abate, "The Effects of Land Grabs on Peasant Households: The Case of the Floriculture Sector in Oromia, Ethiopia," *African Affairs* 119, no. 474 (2020): 90–114, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48589065.
[42] Abate, "Effects of Land Grabs."
[43] Abesha et al., "Large-Scale Agricultural Investment."

a wider argument that post-2008 agricultural policy-making, while economically smart, nevertheless systematically marginalized the livelihoods and welfare of citizens

Policy Feedback, Normalization, and Marginalization

From a purely macroeconomic perspective, the urgency of foreign exchange constraints during the 2008 crisis appear to present a reasonable logic guiding the state's agricultural development. However, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that the pro-investor agricultural policy shift was a deliberate strategy that prioritized rapid scaling and commercialization of the agricultural sector above all else. The continued political backing of Karuturi and Saudi Star by the state, despite underperformance, clearly demonstrates the state's ulterior aim of consolidating political capital. Moreover, state narratives that measure success purely through volume of investment and exports drastically underplay the realities of policy implementation. The supposed success of foreign agricultural investments does not equal widespread benefit for citizens, and ultimately, this commercialization of agriculture is entrenched in harm.

Ethnographic and community-based research can successfully capture this systematic harm. It highlights the coercive practices of the state, dispossession of regional authorities, realities of labor precarity, and continued insecurity felt by communities. These consequences are inexorably linked to policy implementation by the state. Floriculture is a strong example of how even a hallmark sector of economic "prosperity" still profits off the exploitation of its workers, who lack any avenue for resistance or accountability. By linking an in-depth analysis of macroeconomic state-strategy with this understanding of how state shortcomings negatively impact lived experience, this paper puts forth agricultural policy-making and the influence of foreign investments on policy-making as the missing links in understanding the disparities perpetuated by the state.

Once adopted as a pillar in the economy, foreign agricultural investment becomes self-reinforcing in policy-making. As discussed earlier, the post-2008 agricultural policy-making landscape in Ethiopia has evolved to cater almost entirely to foreign investors when it comes to land leasing and the export economy; large-scale investments are now treated as a default development path. With policies in place that support infrastructure for foreign agricultural investments, these projects are able to persist and thrive even when they underperform. This is because these projects are not merely an economic pursuit of the state; success is measured in ease of facilitation,

and failure does not trigger reform.[44] Investment strategy has become politically "sticky," as political power and displays of economic success have become intrinsically tied. Facilitation of investment has become a self-perpetuating goal.

The consequences for smallholders and rural livelihoods are clear: investor-oriented policy has sidelined alternative agricultural practices. While Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization continues to uphold smallholder agriculture rhetorically, these policy shifts have weakened its efficacy in practice. Smallholders face diminished access to land and significant tenure insecurity. While alternative employment opportunities under these large-scale projects are offered as a substitute for land tenure, they lack stability or acceptable compensation.[45] The agricultural extension system exacerbates this shift. Rather than supporting farmer autonomy, DAs are tasked with advancing state objectives and enforcing regional compliance with what is essentially federal overreach.[46] Ultimately, smallholders are treated as lesser than state-led development strategies, which significantly undermines the livelihoods of rural populations.

The prioritization of foreign agricultural investment has also reshaped welfare and labor practices in Ethiopia's agriculture sector. While the state frequently cites job creation as a key justification for large-scale investments, labor protections and worker welfare are not a primary concern in the state's policy design and implementation.[47] Regulatory frameworks for labor conditions formally exist, but experience weak enforcement in practice, reflecting the state's focus instead on investor stability and export performance. As a result, the costs of health risks, job insecurity, and heightened household vulnerability to income loss and food insecurity are often borne by local communities and are shifted onto workers and their families rather than addressed through policy reform. The current approach to labor treats it as merely an input into production rather than a central part of development, illustrating how current agricultural policy-making marginalizes citizen welfare.

Weak enforcement of labor protections, limited grievance mechanisms, and centralized decision-making limit the capacity of impacted populations to shape policy outcomes.[48] Therefore, agricultural policy-making that privileges foreign exchange generation without robust accountability mechanisms risks reproducing structural marginalization by excluding

[44] Makki, "Development by Dispossession," 530–533.
[45] Kassahun Berhanu and Colin Poulton, "The Political Economy of Agricultural Extension Policy in Ethiopia," *Development Policy Review* 32, no. S2 (2014): S207–S210.
[46] Berhanu & Poulton, "Political Economy."
[47] Rahmato, *Land to Investors*, 22.
[48] Berhanu & Poulton, "Political Economy"; Moreda, "Listening to Silence"; Abesha et al., "Large-Scale Agricultural Investment."

populations impacted by foreign investment—even in sectors framed as development successes.

Conclusion

This paper examined how foreign investments in land have influenced agricultural policymaking in Ethiopia since 2008. By focusing on this period, the analysis placed Ethiopia's foreign investment push within a moment of heightened economic vulnerability in the wake of the global food crisis. Increased foreign exchange shortages and political pressures caused by the crisis positioned agriculture as a key site of state intervention, especially due to food-importing states' need for large swaths of farmland abroad during the crisis. This paper has shown that foreign agricultural investment is not merely an economic strategy, but a deeply political one, reshaping governance regimes, accountability structures, and the realities of those whose livelihoods depend on land and agricultural labor.

The evidence presented shows that Ethiopia's post-2008 agricultural policy-making, while economically strategic, has systematically prioritized foreign exchange generation and political consolidation over inclusive and accountable development. These patterns showcase how the Ethiopian government's agricultural development strategy is less about improving livelihoods than about managing economic vulnerability and political control. Foreign agricultural investment has reshaped how the state aims to control land and the mechanisms through which it formulates and enforces agricultural policy by prioritizing the appearance of progress instead of its instantiation. State capacity has been mobilized to attract and retain investors, while protections for citizens—whether smallholders, workers, or local communities—have fallen by the wayside.

Implications Beyond Ethiopia

Ethiopia's record of foreign agricultural investment also mirrors broader patterns that typically accompany state-led development projects in other parts of Africa and in the Global South.[49] As a developing state with strong central authority and ambitious growth interests, Ethiopia has been a notable example of using agricultural investment to address structural economic constraints, particularly foreign exchange shortages. But examining Ethiopia as a case study reveals how centralized governance and export-

[49] Magdalena Hules and Simron Jit Singh, "India's Land Grab Deals in Ethiopia: Food Security or Global Politics?" *Land Use Policy*, no.60 (2017): 343–351, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.10.035.

oriented development can lead to compromised institutional decisions, especially if the institutions of accountability are ineffectual. The prioritization of investment facilitation above local inclusion and labor protection exposes the dangers of development systems that value scale and speed over distributive outcomes.

The findings of this paper suggest that foreign agricultural investments should not be evaluated solely by macroeconomic indicators such as earnings or employment figures. The practices of the Ethiopian government demonstrate how investment-led development can easily become a dominant influence on policymaking, even when such policies negatively impact a nation's citizens. Without safeguards in place to protect workers, maintain accountability for corporations, and center the rights of the people, prioritizing foreign agricultural investments risks exacerbating or creating insecurity and inequality. The trajectory of agricultural policy in Ethiopia after 2008 serves as a cautionary example for policymakers aiming to implement pro-investor development strategies. Despite the state's ability to quickly mobilize land and facilitate investment, the long-term sustainability of these practices will depend on embedded social protections and increased collaboration, rather than fixating solely on growth objectives.

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Interviews

Missed Opportunities and Hard Lessons: Former Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor on Western Support for Ukraine

Interview by Zoe Raptis and Max Turnacioglu

Biography

Ambassador William Taylor is a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. He previously served as the United States ambassador to Ukraine from 2006 to 2009 and the chargé d'affaires from 2019 to 2020 in Kyiv. During his first tour in Kyiv, the Ukrainian government was in the process of building closer ties to NATO and the EU, allowing Ambassador Taylor to strengthen Ukrainian-American relations. Prior to his time in Kyiv, Ambassador Taylor coordinated U.S. government assistance in the former Soviet Union from 1992 to 2002, in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2003, and in Iraq from 2004 to 2005 as director of the Iraq Reconstruction Office. He then served as the U.S. government's representative to the Mideast Quartet in Jerusalem from 2005 to 2006. During the Arab Spring, Ambassador Taylor returned to reconstruction work and directed assistance to the Middle East as special coordinator for Middle East Transitions at the U.S. Department of State. In 2015, he became executive vice president, Europe and Russia, at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Ambassador Taylor holds a Bachelor of Science from the United States Military Academy, and earned a Master of Public Policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He also served as an infantry platoon leader and combat company commander in the U.S. Army in Vietnam and Germany. Ambassador Taylor has continued to be an active commentator on Ukraine during the current Russian invasion, appearing in major news outlets such as CNN, Bloomberg, and Fox News.

1. *To start, could you walk us through your career in diplomacy and public service, and how those experiences ultimately led you to serve in Ukraine twice, at such pivotal moments in the country's history?*

I started out at the U.S. Military Academy, then served in the U.S. Army for about six years, including in Vietnam and in Germany. When I got out of the Army, I went to graduate school, where I studied public policy and arrived in Washington, D.C., at about the time the big energy crisis back in the 1970s was hitting.[1] I worked for a U.S. senator for about five years, then I served at a small think tank in the Defense Department at Fort McNair in the D.C. area, and then spent five years at the U.S. mission to NATO from 1987 to 1992. So, I saw NATO right at the end of the Cold War. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, and then, in 1991, the Soviet Union imploded, which meant that NATO didn't really have its longtime enemy: the Soviet Union.

In the Soviet Union's place, there were 15 new independent states. The State Department set up a small office to coordinate assistance appropriated by Congress to these new independent states as they struggled toward market economies and democratic governments. I worked there for some period of time, which gave me an opportunity to visit the former Soviet Union. So, I visited Russia. I visited Ukraine. The Caucasus states—Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan—Central Asia, some of the East European states as well.

At the end of that period of time, of course, 9/11 happened, and the State Department sent me to Afghanistan for a year, and then sent me to Iraq for another year, and finally sent me to Jerusalem to work on a separation agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Israelis had made the decision back in this period of time—about 2005 and 2006—to pull out of Gaza and parts of the West Bank, so there was a UN effort called the Quartet whose purpose was to help [the transition to a stable Palestinian state]. I was in Jerusalem for about a year, at which time I got another call from the State Department asking me if I would like to be the chief of mission in Ukraine. So this got me to a great job.

I was [in Ukraine] from 2006 to 2009. The Orange Revolution,[2] of course, had taken place in 2004 to 2005. When I came back from Ukraine the first time, I joined the United States Institute of Peace. I worked there for a while. I was called back to the State Department when the Arab Spring

[1] The 1973 Yom Kippur War and the 1979 Iranian Revolution interrupted petroleum production in the Middle East, leading to protracted oil shortages in developed nations and a period of economic stagnation and price inflation known as stagflation.

[2] The Orange Revolution was a Ukrainian protest movement launched in response to widespread corruption and electoral fraud during the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election. Pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych had initially won the popular vote, yet election monitors signalled that the election had been rigged in his favor. Popular resistance forced a revote, where pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko prevailed. As much as 20% of the Ukrainian population may have participated in nationwide Orange Revolution protests, indicating the scale of political upheaval. See Taras Kuzio, "New Data Creates Demographic Profile of Orange Revolutionaries, Voters," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 10, 2005.

erupted—blossomed—and I worked for the State Department coordinating assistance going into Middle Eastern states—Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria—for a couple of years, and then I returned to the Institute of Peace. [3]

In 2019, the first Trump administration withdrew the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Masha Yovanovitch, and gave no real explanation as to why that was happening. So, the State Department needed someone with some experience in Kyiv and the embassy there to return, settle things down, reassure the embassy, and deal with the new Ukrainian government under President Zelenskyy, who had just been elected. After checking with the outgoing ambassador—she encouraged me to go out there and take her place—I was in Ukraine again for about seven months as the acting ambassador (chargé d'affaires), and that was an exciting time.

I've been back and forth to Ukraine many times. I'm on a couple of boards and academic rosters there, so I make it my business to get there frequently. Since the full-fledged invasion in February of 2022, I've been to Ukraine 12 times. I'll be back there again this month to observe the fourth anniversary of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. I appreciate being able to go back frequently to talk to the Ukrainians—in the government, out of the government, friends, some at the embassy, some in the army. I try to keep in touch with Ukrainians as they are dealing with this existential fight—[existential] for them and crucially important for us, the United States and Europe.

2. *You arrived in Kyiv in 2006 to remarkable change. Ukraine was emerging from a decade of illiberal creep under Leonid Kuchma and the dramatic upheaval of the Orange Revolution, which brought Viktor Yushchenko—a pro-Western reformer—to power. How would you describe the atmosphere in Kyiv at that moment, and what expectations did American diplomats and Ukrainians have regarding the country's geopolitical future?*

There was a feeling of excitement and great anticipation that Ukraine's course toward Europe had been set. As you say, Viktor Yushchenko and his charismatic Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, were pro-Western. Yushchenko had defeated Viktor Yanukovych, the candidate favored by Vladimir Putin, who had tried to intervene in the election. It was highly controversial when the initial results declared Yanukovych [the winner]. Ukrainians

[3] The Arab Spring was a pro-democracy movement across the Middle East, beginning in Tunisia in 2010. Tunisian, Libyan, Egyptian, and Yemeni leaders were all deposed in popular uprisings, while major protests occurred in Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Sudan.

knew they had elected Yushchenko. They believed the vote had been doctored and that Yanukovych was not the legitimate president. So, they went into the streets during what became known as the Orange Revolution, and they persisted in the face of cold winter, storms, pressure, attacks. They prevailed and got another election deemed free and fair: Victor Yushchenko was elected to great enthusiasm by most Ukrainians.

However, President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Tymoshenko could not get along well. They had the opportunity to really move Ukraine forward—economically, politically, internationally—but there was a lack of trust between the two. The opportunity to move toward Europe in a coherent, unified way was lost at the time.

So, it was a complicated time, [marked by] real debate. Ukraine is, in fact and in practice, at heart, a democracy. And it's a raucous and robust democracy. There were strong arguments as to which direction Ukraine should go. Should Ukraine move toward Europe, as Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, and many others hoped after the Orange Revolution? Or should it move toward Russia, as some in the east and south advocated, led by the unabashedly pro-Russian Party of Regions under Yanukovych?

Looking back, it's surprising that the second-largest political party in Ukraine during that period of time was explicitly pro-Russian. And the debates had to do with whether or not to join NATO, the status of the Russian language, affirming Ukrainian as the state language, minority and religious rights. There was turmoil. So [there was] great enthusiasm after the Orange Revolution, [but] probably a lost opportunity to move Ukraine forward.

3. *Was there ever a particular interaction with Ukrainian leaders, civil society, or even ordinary citizens that left a lasting impression on you?*

Many, many. The Ukrainian people, in particular since Russia's full-scale invasion, have demonstrated a resolve, a determination, a commitment to their nation that probably even surprised Ukrainians themselves, but they all contributed. I mean, every family—actually, *every* family—has contributed one way or the other, some tragically. Their fathers or sons or brothers or sisters have been killed in this war. This war, of course, began in 2014 when the Russians first invaded Crimea and then the Donbas, and then there was this, what people call "low level," war between 2014 and 2022. But Ukrainians remember that it wasn't so "low-level" for those soldiers who were out there on the front lines in Donbas, where 14,000 Ukrainians died. Ultimately, Ukrainians have demonstrated, over the 12 years since 2014, the rising determination to not be dominated—subjugated—by the Russians.

One good friend of mine, Alex, I met in 2006. He was a civilian at the time, but in 2022, he joined the army when the Russians invaded and was out on the front lines when he realized that the Russian artillery was doing grave damage to the Ukrainian soldiers in trenches. My friend remembered seeing U.S. military aircraft used in Iraq to great advantage against artillery. When he was back in Kyiv, he got a friend of his to finance what turned into a training academy for Ukrainian pilots to learn how to fly U.S. planes [called A-10 fighters] that could go after the Russian artillery. However, it turns out that the A-10 fighters were used by the American military in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they weren't the best weapon to use in Ukraine because, unlike the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Ukrainians did not have air superiority, and these slow-moving aircraft were vulnerable. And so in the middle of these training sessions, Alex switched to F-16 planes and trained [pilots on them]. This is to say that [Alex is] one individual who was not even in the army in 2021, who joined the army in 2022 and took it upon himself to try to increase the fighting capability of the Ukrainian military.

There's an incredible innovative spirit in Ukraine to develop technologies—new weapons, tactics, and variations on existing weapons and technologies—that will allow the Ukrainians to get an edge over the Russians. It's hard to keep that edge because the Russians learn too. And the Russians, of course, have more resources. The Russians have a larger population and a larger industrial base, so they can put together manufacturing at scale more easily than the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians have to be innovative and entrepreneurial and quick to respond.

My friend Alex is exactly that, and he's not alone. Every time I talk to Ukrainians—Ukrainian families, people in school, people in universities—they tell stories about how their families contribute every day, whether money or support for soldiers—sometimes protective equipment, sometimes weapons. The Ukrainian people, the whole nation, are united to defeat the Russians. It's inspiring, and it should inspire us to continue to support them.

4. *The 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest is often seen as a critical missed opportunity to bring Ukraine further into the Western fold. At the time, President Yushchenko was openly committed to NATO accession, and the United States heavily advocated in Ukraine's favor, yet resistance from Germany and France proved decisive. From your perspective, why did the membership action plan fail, and how consequential was that decision?*

I think it was decisive. Had it gone the other way in Bucharest in 2008, and if Ukraine and Georgia were admitted to the Membership Action Plan (MAP) that you just described, the Russians probably would not have invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, much less in 2022, so I think it was an enormous missed opportunity. It's an interesting story about how that happened, because you're right—President Yushchenko and his government were very much in favor of starting the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at NATO, as was President George W. Bush.

There's an interesting behind-the-scenes story in Washington. Before all NATO summits, preparations begin months in advance. [The United States was] no exception. So, from the fall of 2007 to the winter of 2008, Secretary of State [Condoleezza] Rice and Secretary of Defense Bob Gates began preparations for the summit coming up in the spring. Rice and Gates assumed, turns out, erroneously, that the U.S. position would be not to support MAP status for Ukraine and Georgia. When [NATO allies] heard—especially the French and the Germans—that the United States was likely to oppose a MAP, they locked themselves in [with that position]. They were comfortable in that policy position.

As preparations in all NATO capitals continued, the briefings finally got to President George W. Bush. When he was presented with the question of [whether the] United States should support a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia, he said yes, of course we should. This was contrary to what the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense had been assuming all along and to the message that had gone out to our NATO allies. President Bush assigned a mission to his National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, to convince the Germans to support a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia. Steve Hadley tried in Berlin, had good conversations, but was unable to turn that around. The policy was too entrenched and established.

However, President Bush was determined not to give up. He was still going to try, and he went to the summit determined to change the minds of NATO leaders and bring them around to support MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia. He visited Kyiv on the way to Bucharest, and I met him at the airport. We made all the rounds, talked to the President, the Prime Minister, the defense minister, civil society, and Ukrainian [civilians]. His wife Laura Bush, Steve Hadley, Condi Rice, and Bob Gates were there. They were all preparing for the meeting in Bucharest in the upcoming days. They talked to a lot of Ukrainians, and they were convinced by that visit that indeed the Ukrainians did want to join [NATO] and would be good partners. So, they went to Bucharest with the intent of convincing the other NATO allies to accept the Ukrainians and Georgians as MAP candidates. But, as we know, it failed. He couldn't do it. The Germans, French, and others were too far gone—too far committed to opposing a MAP.

To answer your question about how consequential that missed opportunity was, had Ukraine and Georgia been granted MAP candidate status, I am very sure—though no one can ever know—that Putin would have thought very hard about invading Georgia. But when Putin saw that Georgia and Ukraine didn't get a MAP, Putin said, "Ah, the NATO folks, the West is not going to support Georgia, so I can invade." And he did in August of 2008. I'm sure the decision in Bucharest was on his mind. And [then] he invaded Ukraine in 2014—first in Crimea and then in Donbas.

5. *Following up on what you said about this being a missed opportunity that indirectly led to war between Ukraine and Russia, do you believe that war between Ukraine and Russia was ultimately inevitable?*

As far as the Ukrainians were concerned, no. The Ukrainians wanted to live their lives. They wanted to develop their political economy. They wanted to develop their society. They wanted to send their kids to school. They wanted to be part of Europe. They wanted to join the European Union. They wanted to join NATO. They were frustrated with not being able to join NATO, but the Ukrainians did not see war with Russia as inevitable.

The Russians, on the other hand, and Putin in particular, had their goal of dominating Ukraine. Putin wanted to ensure that Ukraine didn't join the West. Putin wanted to ensure that Ukraine was reincorporated into Russia as it had been during Soviet times. Putin made clear what his thoughts about Ukraine were in several long essays and explicit speeches, where he said that Ukraine is not a real country. There's no such thing as the Ukrainian people, he wrote—they're really just Russians.

Of course, the Ukrainians knew that they were not Russians, and they knew that they did not want to live under Russia again. They had been there. Most Ukrainians can remember hearing from their parents and grandparents and even great-grandparents about how the Soviet Union, under Joseph Stalin, starved Ukraine and killed at least four million Ukrainians by intentional famine. They call it "Holodomor": death by hunger. So the feeling about Russia, on the part of Ukrainians, was deep, historical, and emotional. [Their intent was] to live as a normal European country and develop their economy within European structures. That was not the intent of Putin.

So, in answer to your question, the Ukrainians did not see war as inevitable. They just wanted to get on with their lives and join Europe. The Russians were not having it, and the Russians tried, in many different ways, to subordinate Ukraine, finally ending up with the big invasion in 2022 to try to conquer Ukraine and bash it into submission. So, this war is entirely the making of Vladimir Putin and the Russians.

6. *Russia has suffered enormous human and material costs—roughly 1.2 million casualties to date and minimal territorial gains since 2024. Its economy is floundering and key allies, such as Venezuela and Syria, have collapsed. Yet Moscow continues to fight unabated. From your perspective, is Russia still pursuing a war it can win, or one it simply refuses to stop? Where, in your view, does a credible path to peace lie, and how should that shape Western strategies on military support, sanctions, and diplomacy?*

Putin seems to think that much of what you just said is not true—he seems to think that he's winning this war, even though, as you just pointed out, the Russian army is struggling to take a small territory in Donbas at great cost. Those costs are either not evident to Putin or he doesn't care, because he continues to fight, thinking he can grind down the Ukrainians. He thinks he can wait out the support from the West and control the Ukrainians by attacking their energy, electricity, and gas—making them freeze in the dark of the war's harshest winter.

Putin thinks that he can somehow win this war at enormous cost to his economy, people, soldiers, family, and to his reputation. He's paid an enormous price for this [war], but he's not stopping. You ask the right question, how can he be forced to stop? He *can* be forced to stop. I'm absolutely convinced that the Trump administration, together with European allies, can exert leverage on Putin to make it clear to him that his strategy of continuing to grind will not succeed. There are several different levers that the West can use to convince Putin that he cannot win.

One lever is military. President Putin knows that President Trump can provide Ukrainians with the Americans' best long-range cruise missile, the Tomahawk. Last fall, President Trump was considering providing Tomahawks to the Ukrainians, and Putin panicked, knowing that this weapon in the hands of the Ukrainians would be devastating to his attempt to continue this war. So Putin placed a phone call to President Trump the day before President Trump was scheduled to have this very conversation with President Zelenskyy about the Tomahawks. Putin convinced Trump not to provide the Tomahawks. That shows me that Putin knows that Trump has leverage. It shows me that Putin is seriously afraid of the weapons that the Americans can provide Ukrainians to put them in a position to stop this grinding advance that the Russians are making.

The second lever is economic. There's been a whole host of economic sanctions on Russia in the years since the four-year war, some even date back all the way to 2014. As we know, these economic sanctions by themselves have not stopped the war, but we, and Ukrainians, have learned

which sanctions are the most effective at constraining the Russians. The Ukrainians have focused heavily—and now we, the Americans, along with the Europeans, are also focusing more heavily—on the primary source of funds Putin uses to finance his war machine. That source is the sale of Russian oil and gas on international markets. Oil and gas exports provide the bulk of the revenue Putin needs to sustain this war. As a result, the Ukrainians have targeted oil facilities and pipeline infrastructure deep inside Russia using their own cruise missiles and long-range weapons, striking refineries in particular. Ukraine has also gone after the so-called "shadow fleet"—old, poorly maintained oil tankers that Russia uses to circumvent Western sanctions. No one is supposed to be buying Russian oil, especially above a certain price cap, and the Russians rely on this shadow fleet to bypass those sanctions and generate additional revenue. The Americans have [targeted the shadow fleet] too. For example, shadow-fleet tankers coming out of Venezuela have switched their registry to the Russian flags so the Russians could claim they were protected and avoid being stopped.[4] Russia even sent a submarine to escort one of these tankers in the Atlantic, but that didn't stop the U.S. from boarding and seizing it. Putin knows this.

When Putin saw last summer that President Trump was serious about imposing secondary tariffs on countries that buy Russian oil—including India, one of the world's largest buyers—it rattled him. Trump placed significant tariffs on Indian imports to pressure New Delhi to cut Russian oil purchases, and India subsequently reduced those purchases. Putin panicked, just as he did when Trump was about to provide Ukraine with Tomahawk missiles, and sought a meeting with President Trump. Trump mistakenly thought Putin was ready to negotiate an end to the war so agreed to meet in Anchorage, Alaska. Nothing came of the meeting because it became clear to Trump that the Russians were not serious about ending the war. The message from this episode demonstrates that Putin knows that Trump has economic and military pressure. Those sanctions—including the oil price cap, pressure on the shadow fleet, and sanctions on Russia's major oil companies Rosneft and Lukoil—have significantly reduced revenue flowing into the Russian treasury to fund the war. That's putting a big crimp in Putin's ability

[4] Tankers part of the Russian "shadow fleet" typically fly non-Russian flags or sail under entirely falsified registrations. As the U.S., Ukraine, and Europe have become more adept at tracking shadow fleet vessels, many have resorted to flying the Russian flag, believing that it would deter harassment from countries seeking to avoid antagonizing the Russian government. This practice is what Ambassador Taylor is referring to in the case of Venezuela. See Alice Johnson, "Sanctions: Seizure of Russian-Flagged Tanker Demonstrates Major Shift in Enforcement," *International Bar Association*, March 2, 2026, https://www.ibanet.org/Sanctions-seizure-of-Russia-flagged-tanker-demonstrates-major-shift-in-enforcement.

to fund this war, and Putin knows that. Putin understands that Trump has leverage on him.

Trump was appalled by Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians and energy systems during extreme winter conditions. He asked Putin to pause attacks for a week, and Putin agreed, showing he recognizes Trump's leverage. This is all a long answer to your question. How can this end? The war can end when Trump applies real pressure, using the leverage that he's got to make Putin realize he cannot win and must negotiate a cease-fire.

7. *In the past, you've described Russia's actions as also "a hybrid war against Europe and against the United States." How do you understand the non-military dimensions of this conflict—such as information warfare, cyber operations, and energy coercion?*

The primary focus of the Russians at this point is Ukraine, and that's because Putin has this obsession with Ukraine, so he has devoted incredible resources from his small—and shrinking—economy to the main fight against Ukraine. However, as you say, he is also trying to weaken Ukrainian allies in Europe and in the United States. Putin is trying to drive wedges between NATO allies themselves, between NATO allies and Ukraine, and between NATO allies and the United States. He uses these "hybrid warfare" tactics. He has sent some of the shadow fleet and other vessels into waters surrounding NATO and has cut undersea cables that connect NATO allies in communications and electricity. He has used clandestine warfare to plant bombs on aircraft coming to the United States from Europe. He has [conducted] cyber attacks on various entities in Europe and the United States and Ukraine.

His main focus is still Ukraine, but he would like to sow division, dissension, and turmoil in Europe. He is trying to convince the Europeans that they should not be supporting Ukraine and trying to convince Americans that we should not be supporting Ukraine. So far, he's failed. [But] these are terrorist attacks. They could escalate into something bigger, but we can deal with terrorist attacks, and we are dealing with them. Good intelligence—combined intelligence, European, American, and Ukrainian—can deal with these issues. The main focus right now needs to be supporting Ukraine and convincing Putin that he cannot win there.

8. *The U.S. has shifted its approach to Russia across administrations, from Bush's initial personalistic approach to the Obama "Reset,"*[5]

[5] Following 9/11, President Bush formed a notably personal bond with President Putin through collaboration on counterterrorism. However, American and Russian foreign policy interests began to diverge, and Russian-American relations became strained by the end of

> *and now to a period defined by Ukraine's existential defense against Russia. Looking back over these decades, which approaches worked, and which didn't? What lessons should U.S. policymakers carry forward in the context of Ukraine today?*

You're right there. Policy has fluctuated over time and, as you've indicated, each U.S. president comes in thinking that he can deal with the Russians or with Putin in a way that his predecessor couldn't. So, President Trump came into [his second term] last January, thinking that President Putin was a friend of his and that he could get President Putin to agree, because they had a good relationship, to end this war. President Trump soon found out that that was wrong. President Bush had the same experience. President Clinton had the same experience. President Obama had tried the "Reset," and then the Russians invaded Crimea. So, every president came in hoping that he could develop a relationship with the Russians. I think that's a mistake. I think what we have to do is recognize what the Ukrainians know and what the Eastern Europeans know, having lived beside Russia for 300 years: we have to recognize that Russia is an imperialist empire, ever trying to move its boundaries out. Even [after] a big setback at the end of the Cold War, when the Russians lost, they've been trying, and Putin in particular has been trying, to reestablish that empire.

As long as that [imperial] instinct—impulse—is present, then we have to defend against it. We have to try to contain it. We have to try to deter the Russians from attacking their neighbors. This is, again, why it's so important that we support the Ukrainians as they—without our military, without our soldiers—are stopping the Russians from expanding their empire back into Ukraine. All the Ukrainians are asking for is military support, economic support, political support—and that we should give them. That's the message: we should provide Ukrainians with the support they need to stop the Russians, as long as Putin is intent on imperial expansion.

When we look at Ukraine and Russia, it's so easy to tell where our interests are. Ukraine did not provoke this war. The Russians started this war. [They] invaded without provocation. [They] initiated this war. So, Ukraine is the victim and Russia is the aggressor. It is also the case, obviously, that Ukraine is fighting for its existence, its principles, its sovereignty, its people, and it is a democracy that is under real threat from an autocracy. Our support should clearly go to Ukraine.

Bush's presidency. Upon assuming office, President Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton began a coordinated effort to "reset" the Russian-American relationship and improve cooperation, but, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, relations once again deteriorated.

We take a look at the two leaders: President Zelenskyy and President Putin. President Zelenskyy is actually a heroic figure. He's a heroic figure, not just in Ukrainian history for rallying his nation to defend itself against the existential threat of the Russians, but he's also an inspiration to us, to the rest of the world—the Europeans, the Americans, the Canadians. It's an inspiration to us that says sometimes we have to fight for the things that we believe in. And Ukrainians are doing that. Whereas, on the other side, you have a convicted war criminal. Putin has been convicted of crimes against humanity, of atrocities, of war crimes—in particular abduction of Ukrainian children—but, more broadly, of aggression against a neighbor. So, Ukraine has to prevail, and we need to support them.

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National Security in the Modern Age: An Interview with Dr. Joshua Geltzer, Former Legal Advisor to the National Security Council

Interview by Colby O'Connor

Biography

Dr. Joshua Geltzer is a partner at the law firm WilmerHale, where his practice centers on national security as well as artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. Prior to joining WilmerHale, Dr. Geltzer served in senior roles at the White House, including as Deputy Assistant to the President, Deputy White House Counsel, and Legal Advisor to the National Security Council (NSC) under the Biden administration as well as Deputy Homeland Security Advisor. Dr. Geltzer also served as Senior Director for Counterterrorism and Deputy Legal Advisor to the NSC under the Obama administration. At the White House, he advised on subjects such as counterterrorism, hostage negotiation, critical infrastructure protection, and the intersection of advanced technologies and national security.

In addition to his work in government service, Dr. Geltzer was the founding Executive Director of Georgetown Law's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection, where he served as a visiting professor of law. Dr. Geltzer holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton University, master's and doctorate degrees in international relations and war studies from King's College London, and a J.D. from Yale Law School.

1. *To begin, can you describe how you first began working with the National Security Council?*

Sure. My first chance to go over to the National Security Council was in 2015, a decade ago now, when I joined the legal team there. The legal team traditionally consisted mostly of national security lawyers "on loan" to the White House from different parts of the executive branch: from the Defense Department, the State Department, the intelligence community, and, in my case, the Justice Department. Having spent some time in the National

Security Division at the Justice Department, including working with the National Security Council's legal team and others, I got a chance to work with the NSC legal team starting in early 2015.

2. *Given the high pressure and impactful nature of your work under the Biden administration, is there a specific decision or moment from your time in government that you find most memorable or defining?*

There are a few, some are very specific, and some are at a much broader or more strategic level. Specific moments that I think were very gratifying for a lot of us involved were when Americans held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad came home. It's an issue for which I have particular passion, as did many others in the Biden administration. When you're working on those cases, you have a lot of very tough days, but if you stick with it, and you have a president willing to make hard choices the way President Biden was—that enables Americans to come home—then you get a really good day where those individuals emerge from really unimaginably hard circumstances, returning to U.S. soil and to their loved ones. That is very fulfilling and gratifying to see. There were also days that were meaningful in other ways. For those of us who've been part of the counterterrorism mission in various respects, seeing overdue justice done with respect to Ayman al-Zawahiri [for example,] represented an important moment for a lot of us who've been part of counterterrorism issues.[1]

Then there are things at the more strategic level. When one issue is part of building an executive order or a national security memorandum, that is satisfying in its own way. In particular for me, working on the National Security Memorandum on artificial intelligence was a really fascinating and meaningful project, and seeing it issued by President Biden was quite rewarding.[2]

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[1] Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by a U.S. launched drone missile strike on July 31st, 2022 in Kabul, Afghanistan. He was the second in command at Al-Queda at the time of the 9/11 attacks, and became the leader after the death of Osama Bin Laden

[2] The memorandum was issued in late 2024, and focused on three main policy objectives. It sought to maintain U.S. AI leadership, accelerate AI use across National Security Agencies, and develop AI safety and governance frameworks to support national security. The document also focused on how and when AI could be used by national security agencies in order to establish a balance between security and privacy. See "DCPD-202400945 - National Security Memorandum on Advancing the United States," Leadership in Artificial Intelligence; Harnessing Artificial Intelligence to Fulfill National Security Objectives; and Fostering the Safety, Security, and Trustworthiness of Artificial Intelligence," *Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration*, October 23, 2024. https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/DCPD-202400945.

3. *You mentioned your involvement in negotiations to release American hostages during the Israel-Hamas conflict following the October 7 attacks. Could you further describe that experience of managing such a high-stakes and instrumental moment?*

There was so much to deal with as a government in the immediate wake—and frankly, for weeks and months to come—after October 7. Among [the administration's] priorities, a really high priority was getting out the Americans who were held by Hamas. The Biden administration felt that, while our goal, of course, was to get all of them out as quickly as we could, there was a near term opportunity to get at least some out particularly swiftly. That's what you saw us able to do. We worked with partners in the region, who are often the key to negotiating, sometimes indirectly, with bad actors in the world like Hamas. We were able to get some Americans out quite swiftly, even if it took literal years, unfortunately, to get other hostages out. I do think it's a testament to the commitment of the U.S. government that—even when dealing with something as big-picture and with as massive a set of regional and strategic ramifications as the October 7 attacks had—we simultaneously dealt with the really granular: the particular Americans who were in unspeakable conditions being held by Hamas. [We also dealt] with their loved ones, who were understandably beside themselves and wanted to make sure that we were treating this as an absolute priority and doing so with a sense of urgency, which we also believed we should be doing.

4. *Through your testimony before Congress and your work in the Biden administration, you talked about the transnational terrorist threat of white supremacist networks, and you've likened their methods to those of ISIS and other similar groups. How do you characterize these similarities, and what implications do you think they have for how we think about and respond to terrorism today?*

I start with a fundamental principle that whatever ideology or political view inspires someone, what that person cannot do, no matter their frustrations, is turn violent with those beliefs. That is to my mind, and I think the minds of many of us who work on counterterrorism, the defining feature of [terrorism]. It turns ideological or political views into the one thing that those cannot become in the context of a democracy, which is violence or credible threats of violence. The ideology or political views that inspire people to violence has waxed, waned, and shifted in the United States and in other countries over time. One thing that we started to do, truly on day one of the Biden administration, was to make sure that we were treating all forms of political violence with the urgency they demand, given the threat to public

safety, and democratic integrity they represent. That doesn't mean that you bring all the same tools to [different] manifestations of that problem. It's very different to deal with a terrorist group that's holding territory, having seized it abroad, versus to deal with a network of individuals who want to pursue violence on U.S. soil. In the first instance, the U.S. military might have a very reasonable role to play. In the second, it has none. Intelligence community authorities are going to differ dramatically when one is talking about actions abroad versus threats at home, but starting with the premise that all forms of ideologically motivated or politically motivated violence are unacceptable, we can then calibrate which tools to bring to bear for which threats. That's part of dealing with the hard, multifarious nature of political and ideological violence these days. I do think we see actors across different ideological motivations learning tactics and techniques from each other. In this world of global connectivity, it's very easy [for these groups] to watch each other and even incorporate and adapt some of those same tactics.

5. *You've also written about the role of Russian disinformation in strengthening these online white supremacist networks. What lessons do you think can be drawn from the Biden administration's efforts to address that?*

I do think that foreign governments and foreign actors' efforts to distort and disrupt U.S. democracy—and perhaps even more egregiously, to stoke the embers of violence and threats to public safety at home—should be kind of a unifying rallying cry, whatever one's own views domestically may be. No one should interfere with our democracy, and no one should add to the already substantial problem of those who might turn violent with their ideological or political views, whatever those might be. I do think there are U.S. adversaries and rivals in the world who see an opportunity in harnessing modern technologies to reach into our democracy and pit us against each other, even doing so to the point of trying to exacerbate existing calls to violence. My hope is that over time, our government increasingly disrupts that activity, but also that we as a society are increasingly hardened to those sorts of influence efforts. Ultimately, I do think foreign actors will continue to try to exploit that vulnerability where they can.

6. *So what do you believe that people or the government should do to "become increasingly hardened," against these threats, as you put it?*

At a societal level, I do think there's potential for increased digital literacy and fluency that's going to be necessary as all of us continue to live in an

increasingly digital world. This isn't just a world of national security. This is a world in which there are scams and frauds perpetrated online to dizzying effect, in terms of the dollars reaped in by bad actors, criminal activity, and exploitation of youth. Especially as there's generational change, and a populace that obviously makes use of the extraordinary things available through the internet, people need to be increasingly able to discern fact from fiction, to discern those who might imitate certain actors from the real actors. I think we are going to need that as we live in an increasingly digital world, and we're going to need that as bad actors see those digital tools as points of entry and opportunities for exploitation.

7. *In your view, does combating AI-generated misinformation require a substantially different approach than traditional misinformation?*

I think as a starting point, AI holds both tremendous opportunity and considerable risk. As your question indicates, on the "risk" side of the spectrum is the ability to take disinformation and deep fakes and enhance both their speed and ease of production, as well as their efficacy. What can be done with AI already is quite remarkable. Of course, like most technologies, it will only get better from here. The capacity to have seemingly influential voices weighing in on hot-button issues or even galvanizing people to violence or leading them to doubt the results of an election, could hold real peril. You are rightly asking whether that is different in degree or different in kind from the existing problems of misinformation and disinformation circulating. I do think it ratchets up the challenge here, because we have seen it easy enough in the age of the internet to spread terrorist recruitment materials, for example.[3] It takes this idea of micro-targeting that we see online and ups the ante for it even further—to have AI produce many variations of a terrorist recruitment video or some deep-fake of a celebrity or a politician saying the opposite of what they really believe. I do think that innovation takes an existing problem set and accelerates the challenge posed by it.

8. *You currently work at WilmerHale with a focus on AI and cybersecurity law. How do you think international law can adapt to*

[3] Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State have used social media platforms to spread their ideology through multiple messages, leading to a diversified viewer base that IS can recruit and radicalize at little cost. Michael Steinbach, "ISIL Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Washington, D.C., July 6, 2016, Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches-and-testimony/isil-online-countering-terrorist-radicalization-and-recruitment-on-the-internet-and-social-media-.

effectively respond to hybrid effects, including cyberattacks, disinformation, and other emerging tactics?

I'm fascinated by this, and had the chance recently to visit a law school and participate in the symposium on the future of the law of armed conflict, a form of international law. I think AI is injecting some really interesting questions at a really high pace for international law. There's a lot of discussion in the literature already about so-called autonomous weapons systems, and part of what I've seen as a practitioner is that autonomy isn't some event waiting to happen at a particular date in the future. Instead, we've actually had certain weapons systems for years—think of the Aegis missile system and the Patriot system that have degrees of autonomy—that are pre-programmed to respond automatically to certain stimuli for the very reason that the humans would be too slow in the circumstances imagined. So autonomy seems to me a spectrum, not a dichotomy, and it's a spectrum that we are moving along given what AI can do. Again, grounding this as from a practitioner's perspective, rather than debate autonomous weapons systems, yay or nay as a category, I think there's a real burden on lawyers associated with militaries to think about the individual systems that are already being developed and deployed. They have elements in which autonomy appears to get ceded from humans to machines, and lawyers are being asked to rapidly respond and figure out whether we're comfortable with that, and whether those systems are able to meet international laws' demands for things like proportionality, distinction and humanity.[4] I am open to the possibility that some systems, in some circumstances, can meet these standards. They're not categorically incapable of meeting those thresholds, but it requires, to my mind, a much more granular view of particular systems: how they've been tested, how they seem to perform, and what circumstances they would be deployed in. It's a much more granular and contextual question.

9. *Chinese AI policy is more focused on inclusivity and multilateralism, with the global south as well as AI as the driving force for social and economic development and sustainability. Do you believe American AI policy falls short in these areas? If so, what can be done to fix that?*

[4] Humanitarian International law has much of its basis on these three principles. It dictates proportionality, the idea that an action should be responded to with a like action. It also requires distinction between combatants and civilians in times of war, and humanity, the idea that the rules apply even when those affected are not under a specific treaty, as denoted in the Martens Clause. See "Martens Clause," ICRC Online Casebook, Accessed February 17, 2026, https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/martens-clause.

I might start by contesting the premise a little bit, if you will indulge me. I do think the Chinese engaged in a clever act of public diplomacy releasing a document purportedly focused on multilateral governance and dimensions of AI globally at the same time as the U.S. government released its AI action plan in July of 2025.[5] But I would say two things about what the Chinese released; one, on its own, by its own terms, it was not an "apples-to-apples" document.[6] In other words, this was not claiming to be their version of an action plan. It was instead a release of a document purportedly imagining how there could be greater global governance in AI, whereas the document released by Washington did not purport to be that. It was a document on how to drive AI growth in the private sector and with some role for the government here in the U.S. The Chinese certainly have their own version of that document, it just wasn't what they released that day. The second point I'd make is that I haven't seen a lot of effort put in by the Chinese to actually make real anything in that document. It strikes me more as an act of public diplomacy to counter an AI Action Plan released by Washington, to focus on their alleged commitment to global governance. But here we are, months later, and I don't see a lot of diplomatic "oomph" being put by the Chinese behind global governance. That said, the Chinese and Americans are clearly focusing on AI as a thing of the future, in both private sector and government, a difference which is less distinguishable on the Chinese side than it is on the U.S. side. By a "thing of the future," I mean in economic terms, in national security terms, something where they each want to have the lead. There's probably a good reason for that, given what this technology represents in terms of economic opportunities, economic efficiency, and for national security and public safety. I think that the two governments are probably thinking about it a lot more similarly than those two documents that got released the same day might lead a reader to infer.

[5] The U.S. government released an action plan for artificial intelligence centered around three pillars: innovation, infrastructure, and international diplomacy and security. The plan pushed for deregulation, investment in AI and datacenters, as well as using it to protect U.S. jobs and capabilities. At the same time, it seeks to ensure the U.S. will remain at the forefront of AI technology, through exporting technology to its partners while keeping the technology and semiconductors away from U.S. rivals. See White House, "America's AI Action Plan" (2025).

[6] The Chinese government released a document titled "Global AI Governance Action Plan," which highlighted the need for collaboration between governments, companies, and academia, as well as the need to address energy and environmental issues. It also discussed promoting common norms, and removing bias from AI models. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Global AI Governance Action Plan" (2025).

10. *Finally, to many students reading Hemispheres, your career trajectory is inspirational. What advice would you give to those who aspire to work at the intersection of law, security and policy?*

Two things, one is to find good mentors and to be a good mentor when the opportunities arise. I have been very grateful in school, in work, but really just in life, to have professors, bosses, colleagues, people who have invested in me, who've given me opportunities when there were surely others interested in those opportunities. They've helped me succeed in those opportunities and have kept offering support, guidance, and insight at critical junctures. I have felt it a responsibility, but also a pleasure, to try to do the same for others, when the opportunities to do so arise. I would encourage readers both to be open to being mentored and being mentors, both of which are lifelong things to do. I think the second thing I'd emphasize is, especially if one is interested in national security, especially if one is interested in the law, and maybe doubly especially if one is interested in national security law, to keep an eye on technology. I do not claim to be a computer scientist, I do not claim to be an engineer. I am not those things, but I have tried to work on and learn about issues at the intersection of technology and national security and the law, because those seem to me to be very, very interesting and consequential, and to be ones where understanding a bit about the technology itself really helps lawyers, who are then relied upon to apply existing law, as written, to those new technologies.

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Gender, Governance, and Sustainable Development: An Interview with Nahla Valji, UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea

Interview by Arman Kassam

Biography

Nahla Valji's career in international development began in South Africa, where she worked on a variety of issues ranging from human rights to gender-responsive budgeting, eventually leading the Africa-wide work on transitional justice at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.[1] During this time she founded and served as managing editor of the International Journal of Transitional Justice.[2]

In 2010, she joined the UN, taking on a series of increasingly senior roles at UN Women leading the organization's work on peacekeeping, peace negotiations, and the rule of law as well as engagement with the Security Council.[3] In 2015, she headed the Secretariat for the landmark Global Study on UN Security Council Resolution 1325—a comprehensive Security Council review of progress on women, peace and security.[4]

She subsequently moved to the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General as a Senior Adviser, and head of the Spotlight Initiative—a flagship €500 million program to eliminate violence against women and girls, tied to the Sustainable Development Goals.[5] Her work across these roles led to

[1] "Secretary-General Appoints Ms. Nahla Valji of Canada as the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Eritrea," *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, January 22, 2024, https://unsdg.un.org/latest/announcements/secretary-general-appoints-ms-nahla-valji-canada-united-nations-resident.
[2] "Secretary-General Appoints Ms. Nahla Valji."
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

her recognition in the 2021 edition of Apolitical's 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy.[6]

In January of 2024, Valji was appointed to the role of UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea, serving as the Secretary-General's designated representative in the country, coordinating the development work of the UN in country where she works closely with government bodies to support implementation of UN 2030 goals.[7]

Over the span of her career she has played a leading role in building new institutions, including two UN funds and a Security Council mechanism on women, peace and security.[8] She holds a Master's in Political Science and International Relations and a Joint Diploma in Forced Migration Studies from York University, and is co-editor of the Oxford Handbook on Gender and Conflict.[9]

1. *First off, could you talk through your career journey? How did you get involved with the UN, and what did your career progression look like?*

The first half of my career was spent with civil society organizations working firstly in South Africa, and then across the African continent. I began by interning in South Africa shortly after the end of apartheid on human rights issues, specifically socio-economic rights. South Africa is one of the most progressive countries on socio-economic rights. From there, the majority of my time was spent on issues of transitional justice, eg. How do countries recover from conflict and human rights violations? South Africa, of course, had the incredible experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and reparations, a solution that they found for themselves that the rest of the world now looks to as an example.[10] This then led to my work at the UN, where I first joined UN Women working on rule of law and justice and eventually on peace and security more generally. I was then, for seven years, in the office of the Secretary General as a senior advisor on gender—the first time that this position had existed. It was an incredible privilege. Lastly, for the last two years I've been the UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea—which is essentially the Secretary General's representative in a country—heading up the UN team in that country.

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[6] "Apolitical's 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy," *Apolitical*, Accessed February 11, 2026, https://apolitical.co/list/en/gender-equality-100.
[7] "The Resident Coordinator," *UN Sustainable Development Goals*, Accessed February 13, 2026, https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/leadership/the-resident-coordinator.
[8] "Secretary-General appoints Ms. Nahla Valji."
[9] Ibid.
[10] "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Accessed February 5, 2026, https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/.

2. *You mentioned that you were the first Senior Advisor on Gender. What do you consider your proudest achievement while you were in that role?*

We've been really lucky in the past decade to have a Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General who really championed issues of gender equality. From the first days of his term, the Secretary General (Antonio Guterres) wanted to ensure that there was parity in the organization, so I worked on his gender parity strategy. Within the first few years, we achieved parity in the senior leadership of the UN for the first time in over seven decades. I also led the largest initiative to end violence against women and girls via a €500 million ($600 million) partnership which brought together the entire UN system to address this issue.

3. *The UN is an institution that faces a lot of public criticism. Combining the time that you spent in the Secretary General's office with your many years in the UN as a whole, you've gained a lot of insight into the high-level operations of the organization. How would you respond to those who criticize its effectiveness and efficiency?*

Criticism of the UN is not new, and it's healthy. The UN is the world's body; people should feel like they have a say and this really is their organization. This criticism has never been needed more than it is right now. If we look around the world—the growing levels of inequality, the climate emergency, the conflicts that we're facing—we need global solutions. The first thing I would say is that consensus is difficult. The United Nations is now 193 countries. Trying to create consensus across 193 countries understandably leads to frustration.

But I would also say that we often only think of the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, and all the high-profile events and headlines. But so much of the work that the UN does is quiet and long term, focusing on everyday benefits. It's strengthening institutions. It's supporting peace processes. It's coordinating humanitarian emergencies and setting global norms. And these efforts don't often make the headlines, but that's the UN's bread and butter. We don't realize the way in which the United Nations shapes so much of our lives. The fact that we get on a plane or get on a boat and that our food is shipped across the world is regulated by norms and regulations that go beyond nation-states. So many aspects of these processes are formalized via UN-created treaties that set norms on trade, air, sea pathways, and food safety and standards. Those basic everyday things that we sometimes forget about—that's also the United Nations.

4. *I want to focus on what you're doing right now in Eritrea. Since 1993, when Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia, the country has faced a severe socioeconomic and political climate.*[11] *In your opinion, which factors contributed the most to the current state of Eritrea?*

Eritrea is a really fascinating country. As you said, it's been independent for just over 30 years now. It fought a 30 year liberation struggle to be independent from Ethiopia and before that was colonized by Britain, Italy, and others. It sits in the horn of Africa; Sudan is next door, as is Ethiopia and their challenges. Yemen is across the water. It sits in a region with a lot of insecurity, and that's a particular challenge that it faces. The Horn is also prone to cyclical drought. It's a country that is experiencing some of the worst effects of climate change, having contributed almost nothing to it. So there are lots of historical, regional, structural, factors, which impact the country.

Despite this, and perhaps in response to those challenges, Eritrea is a country that's really chosen its own development pathway to address its particularities. It has a development approach that's deeply rooted in national ownership and self-reliance. For them, self-reliance means being able to use their own resources to provide for the people. They also have a strong focus on social justice and equality, so things like minimum household standards, universal access to healthcare, education, those kinds of things. So they have constraints on the one hand, but they've made deliberate policy choices within those constraints to really choose their own development pathway. I think it's a country that too little is known about. But in fact, I think there's a lot we can learn from Eritrea, particularly in this moment, where official development assistance and global development aid is being slashed.[12] This is a country that has not been as impacted as other countries or has been impacted in different ways. So I think there's lessons that can be learned from here as well.

5. *What would you say would be one specific lesson countries such as the United States could take from Eritrea?*

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[11] Tirana Hassan, "World Report 2025: Eritrea," *Human Rights Watch*, Accessed February 5, 2026, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/eritrea.

[12] Allison Lombardo and Stuart Patrick, "The Painful, Seismic Shift in Humanitarian Aid – and What's Next," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* December 10, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/12/the-painful-seismic-shift-in-humanitarian-aidand-whats-next.

Well, I would never want to compare countries, but if I just focus on this country and what we can learn from it, I would give the example of solidarity and care for each other. What strikes you when you come to Eritrea is the incredible kindness of people. I'll give you one example of this. For the past three years, we've had the war next door in Sudan, and when that conflict began, the president here said very clearly: "The Sudanese are our brothers and sisters, and when they come to this country there will be no camps. They will be hosted by our communities and by our families." This is a country that does not have a lot, but that is exactly what they have done. They've taken people into their families, into their homes, and into their community centers, and they have used whatever resources they have [to help them]. And when we asked how we can help, the government was very clear: "We're appreciative of your support, but it should not target Sudanese as beneficiaries only. Help us support the Eritrean host communities, so that everybody has access to health, education, and the food that they need." I think this focus on building a sense of community, solidarity, and care for each other is something extraordinary that we could all learn from.

6. *To what extent does gender equality and female empowerment in Eritrea reflect these values of community and social justice that you previously mentioned? What are some challenges the country has faced in this area?*

My first experience or knowledge of Eritrea was actually through the lens of gender equality. When I was in university, one of my first essays was on the role of women and liberation struggles around the world. I found that Eritrea had some of the highest numbers of women fighting in the national liberation struggle. They had over 30% women. Those are similar numbers to those in Guatemala and South Africa, but what was unique about Eritrea was that these women were fighting forces on the front lines. One of the things that allowed them to do that was a very clear political direction that women and men were going to be equal in the liberation struggle, and that gender equality was going to be seen as part of the national liberation struggle. But it was also this idea that Eritrea collectivized care: men and women had equal roles both on the front lines and in terms of caring for young people, elderly, behind the lines in factory work, etc. They were directly involved in things that supported the front lines, and that's really fascinating because it's still something that we're learning about: models of how to address care work and gender roles. The laws and policies of post-independence Eritrea very much recognize women's rights and gender equality. I

think there is a real enabling environment here. There are strong foundations for women's participation and equality.

But the reality is, no country in the world has achieved women's equality. I think there's still traditional cultural obstacles to women's full equality here, and like every country, there's still work to be done. Women's full participation in the labor force, women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, etc. But I think Eritrea is a country with a strong foundation and the political will and leadership to realize those goals.

7. *Even with this strong foundation, Eritrea faces significant political and economic instability after three decades of fighting pre-independence and only having three decades since to recover. What do you see as a way forward? Do you believe the foundation is strong enough to support Eritrea's future development?*

The most important factor in its future development is peace in the region. Eritrea wants greater economic integration and yet is unable to achieve it given the current political climate. If I look at the statements of the government, of the president, there's often talk about the need for that integration. That will allow them to thrive. If we look beyond Eritrea to the continent as a whole, Africa has the resources to support that integration and to support the growth that will drive it: the youth population and innovation, and this country is no exception in that regard. What is needed now is peace, security, stability, and an absence of external intervention and destabilization to really allow the region to thrive. Eritrea would be part of that: there are strong foundations that will help this country and this continent to take a much more influential role on the global stage.

8. *Looking at the domestic situation in Eritrea, what is one specific current initiative that you believe has a high potential for impact?*

Food systems are a real priority for the country. They have really focused on water conservation: in the past 30 years, they have created some 900 dams of various sizes—from micro dams in communities to massive infrastructural dams—and then connected that to solar irrigation and large-scale irrigation. They have been trying to even just optimize the way that planting is done by small-scale farmers. Seventy percent of people in Eritrea do subsistence agriculture, so food systems are a really critical piece of the economy here. If the country can move in the direction of stronger food systems and food security, there is so much potential here. Everything here is organic. It tastes amazing, it's locally grown. Eritrea is a country that really focuses on preserving the climate and thinking about how they generate

sufficient food in a way that is safe, nutritious, organic, and safeguards the environment as well.

9. *Zooming out a little, what broader lessons can we learn from both the international and the domestic handling of Eritrea during these last 60 years of war and then independence?*

The biggest thing that I would say is that there is no one size fits all model. Whether it's development, human rights, or foreign policy, we really need to listen, understand, and meet people and countries where they are. Going back to the fact that this country is only 30 years old, somebody once said to me, "Reflect on where your country was at 30 years." What did it need? What space, what partnerships, how was it treated by the international community? I think those are important things to reflect on. If we can work with dialogue, cooperation, principled engagement, that moves us in the right direction, that's the most important thing.

10. *You said, "think about where your country was 30 years into its existence." We're both Canadian—30 years into Canada's existence, nobody was taking Canada seriously. The French and British were still fighting it out during those first decades and we weren't even a real country until 120 years after that. So, in that regard, Eritrea has come way further than Canada ever did in 30 years.*

Absolutely, and I think we often forget that perspective. Going back to the UN as a whole, we've created norms, standards, and international policies that are meant to govern all countries. But this means that we judge all countries by the same standards at the same time, without seeing the evolution of national institutions and each country's unique timeline.

11. *Lastly, I want to shine a spotlight. We've accomplished that with Eritrea in this interview, which has otherwise suffered from a significant lack of awareness. In addition to Eritrea, where should we direct our attention? Which other forgotten crisis, nation, or situation needs to be better publicized and addressed?*

There's so many at the moment, in every corner of the world. I think the most important advice I would give would be to pay attention to what's happening around the world. Because there are large-scale patterns that we need to be paying attention to that stretch across borders. But if we think about specific forgotten crises, the one that comes to mind is the one next door in Sudan. It's not a forgotten crisis, but it's the largest humanitarian

catastrophe in the world at the moment, and I don't think it's getting anywhere near the kind of attention that it needs to be getting. There's also Western Africa, the Sahel, what's happening in Latin America at the moment, the race for the Arctic, and more. There are just so many different parts of the world that require more attention. I fear that, at the moment, our headlines are gravitating toward the sensational and focusing on sound bites, and we're losing the ability to deeply understand different contexts, make connections between those contexts, and contribute in the way that we need to.

12. *One of the most significant roadblocks to people being informed is fatigue. There's just so much going on and it's almost impossible to keep up with it all. What advice do you have for people who may want to stay engaged, but have struggled to figure out how?*

It's something that I struggle with myself, and I struggle with watching some of the younger people I know who deeply care and feel very impacted by everything that's happening in the world at this moment. We need to find this balance between an overload of information and the way in which information is packaged to us, between hope, authenticity and action. Our biggest buffer against cynicism and despair is action.

Find the sources that help you to think critically and independently, create your own opinions by weighing the perspectives you find, and be informed. Contribute in some way, even in your community. It gives you a sense of agency and power over what's happening in the world right now. It's not just about the information, how we consume it, what we consume, or how we understand the world. It's also about what our role and place is in that, and how we act on the information we're given.

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Editorials

A Guide to Orbiting Europe: An Analysis of Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade Between the Single Market and Non-EEA European States

Sasson Ziv-Loewy

Introduction

The European Union has economic gravity. More specifically, the EU's economic gravity is captured by the European Single Market. Whereas the EU has a broad political mandate, the Single Market's focus is uniting Europe's economies. On the global stage, the economic gravity of the European Single Market is so overwhelmingly powerful that trying to exist only on the perimeter of the orbit would cause long-term political and economic frictions and enshrine structural inefficiencies in domestic law. These ramifications result in unnecessary losses from misaligned regulations leading to decreased trade and inefficient production. The partial access that countries not part of the Single Market are able to negotiate for currently costs them influence over European decision making and swathes of market access in sectors which are not subjects of these trade deals. From the perspective of the United Kingdom, sovereignty is valued over Single Market membership, where sovereignty is defined as the ability of a country to control its domestic law. This was seen clearly in the Brexit vote, where Britons expressly decided that the costs of the European Union were too great to bear.[1] However, I will argue that it is a mistake for countries on the outer orbit of the EU to resist the pull of the Single Market. I will demonstrate the economic gravity of EU states in trade and strength at the negotiating table because of the strategic wielding of its massive consumer base. Next, I will analyze why this is a problem for countries trying to achieve an imagined "best of both worlds" by positioning themselves at the edge of the European orbit. I will analyze possible paths forward by looking at the case for unilaterally implementing European law into domestic legislation with

[1] Arnar Freyr Arnorsson and Gylfi Zoega, "On the Causes of Brexit," *European Journal of Political Economy* 55 (2018).

Switzerland as an exemplary case which is nevertheless inalienably flawed. I will conclude that even a country like the United Kingdom, the largest economy on the perimeter of the European community, feels the immense pull of Europe's economic gravity and must continue to align itself further with Europe, or else face the consequences of failing to pick a path.

The EU and the Prevailing Status Quo

Along with the EU and the Single Market exists a host of similarly-acronymed organizations whose purpose is to promote European economic cooperation. The European Economic Area (EEA), for example, is the free-trade zone allowing free movement of goods, services, people, and capital between all 27 EU states and three EFTA member states (Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein).[2] The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) comprises four non-EU countries (the aforementioned three as well as Switzerland) who work to eliminate tariffs on industrial goods, with no customs union and no obligation to adopt common regulatory law.[3] Not requiring member states to adopt European common law categorizes the EFTA as a free trade arrangement rather than an integrated market and allows these nations to maintain sovereignty over their domestic policy. This is best seen in the case of Switzerland as the country expressly chose to be a member of the EFTA rather than the EEA in order to maintain its sovereignty.[4]

Problems with the Status Quo

There are many problems with countries that attempt to exist on the periphery of the EEA, with all interactions with EEA countries governed by long-negotiated, sector-specific treaties: separate import standards, duplicated conformity assessments, separate dispute jurisdictions, diverging laws over time, and more. While these countries seek to obtain an imagined "best of both worlds" in simultaneously maintaining autonomy and reducing trade friction, the reality is that they merely ingrain structured inefficiency into their laws. Their differing trade rules necessitate the institution of complex processes like additional checks and assessments which make trade slower, more tedious, and more difficult to navigate at the business

[2] *Agreement on the European Economic Area* (EEA), adopted January 3, 1994, 4-5.
[3] *EEA Agreement*, 8.
[4] EFTA Studies, "Swiss–EU Relations," accessed March 4, 2026.

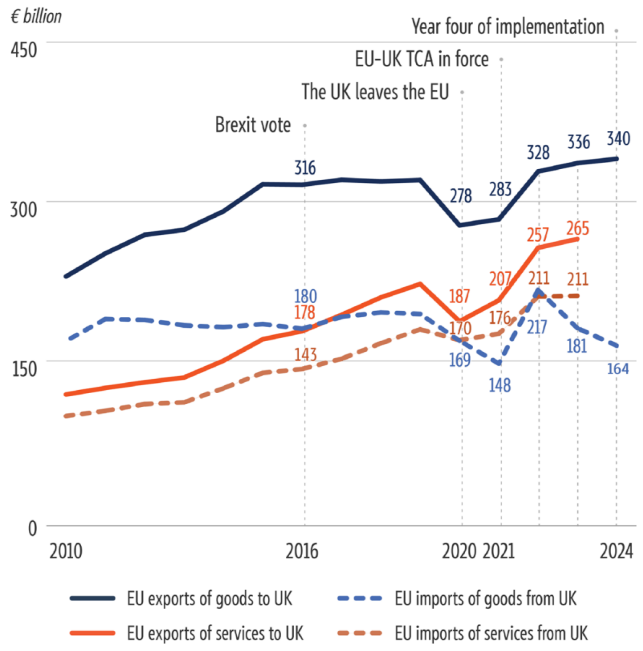
level.[5] The European "perimeter nations," the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, western Balkan nations (Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo), and others, exemplify how states operating outside the EEA through sector-specific treaties will inevitably lead to some level of market inefficiency, with this loss presenting as the opportunity cost in potential trade.[6] All of these countries have their own reasons for not being part of the Single Market. For some, sovereignty takes priority. For others, they could not join the Single Market even if they wanted to. These latter cases include countries like Albania who, despite their many efforts and overtures at European integration, are mired by their high levels of corruption and organized crime.[7]

The U.K., a country who was part of the Single Market for many years, is perhaps the best example of this, as there is a clear before and after. First, the dashed line in the figure below depicting EU imports of U.K. goods takes a large dip beginning in 2020 representing the U.K.—EU trade post-Brexit and pre-deal. The following spike beginning in 2021 is a direct result of the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) deal between the two economies. Finally, the unambiguous downward trend since 2022 represents the longer-term effects of trade frictions, representative of why the U.K.'s present status quo is unsustainable.

[5] Bernard Hoekman and Alessandro Nicita, "Trade Policy, Trade Costs, and Developing Country Trade," *World Development* 39, no. 12 (2011): 2069–79, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2011.05.013.

[6] Zsolt Pataki, *The Cost of Non-Europe in the Single Market: "Cecchini Revisited": An Overview of the Potential Economic Gains from Further Completion of the European Single Market*, EPRS Study PE 510.981, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2014.

[7] European Commission, *Albania Report 2025*, Enlargement Package (European Commission, November 4, 2025), Accessed March 1, 2026.



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Europe, like the rest of the world, has devoted great effort to eliminating barriers to trade since the start of the postwar period.[9] During this time, global tariff rates have generally trended to an all time low.[10] Not accounting for temporary and episodic tariff spikes, the 21st century boasts the lowest global average tariffs of any time in history, with World Trade Organization member states and General Agreement on Tariff and Trade signatories maintaining a considerably lower average than even this reduced rate.[11] Further still, the countries of the EEA have all but eliminated tariffs and quotas entirely.[12] In this low-tariff world, non-tariff barriers to trade increasingly become the limiting factor when it comes to international economic business and cooperation, which is why organizations such as the EU and EEA are so fixated on bringing these non-tariff barriers to trade to zero.[13] Nevertheless, many countries take one look at the reams upon reams of EEA

[8] Isabelle Ioannides, *EU-UK Trade Flows: Continuities, Changes and Trends*, EPRS Briefing PE 765.767, European Parliamentary Research Service (April 2025), 5.
[9] Michael Tomz, Judith Goldstein, and Douglas Rivers, "Membership Has Its Privileges: The Impact of GATT on International Trade" (working paper no. 250, King Center on International Development, Stanford University, February 10, 2005), 2.
[10] Tomz, Goldstein, and Rivers, "Membership Has Its Privileges," 2.
[11] Ibid., 19.
[12] *EEA Agreement,* 18.
[13] Anne-Célia Disdier and Marco Fugazza, "A Practical Guide to the Economic Analysis of Non-Tariff Measures" (World Trade Organization, 2012), 7.

regulatory law and feel that the framework of rules makes it impossible for them to ever be signatories to EEA treaties as European regulations tend to be considerably more strict than the regulations of other countries. Higher standards for sectors such as foodstuffs and digital privacy are often quite popular with consumers, but detested by businesses who face greater costs when complying with those standards.[14]

The core of the Single Market and EEA are the principles of the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital as well as closer cooperation in other fields, such as research and development, the environment, education and social policy.[15] The method for achieving these principles is chiefly the complex network of rules and regulations that each country has to sign off on before joining the EEA. In this way, all the members of the EEA are signatories of one cohesive body of legislation, leaving little to no disparity between the trade laws of member states.[16] The disparity that does exist is categorized as the "rate of transposition of Single Market directives" and sits at around 1.1% for EEA states and 1% for EFTA states, meaning only one of every 100 trade laws in the EU differs from the Brussels standard.[17] While there are no equivalent statistics for countries outside of the Single Market to measure against, it is a commonly noted phenomenon that European laws often end up spreading to associated non-member nations because of Europe's economic weight on the international stage.[18]

When Brussels Gets Rotten

When EU rules and regulations are artificially imposed on non-EU entities in order to stay competitive in the all-important European market, it is known as the Brussels Effect.[19] This phenomenon suggests that "by promulgating regulations that shape the international business environment, elevating standards worldwide" European law ends up "leading to a notable Europeanization of many important aspects of global commerce."[20] This quote comes from Anu Bradford, who coined the term "Brussels Effect."[21] One of Bradford's important conclusions from studying the Brussels Effect

[14] Disdier and Fugazza, *Economic Analysis of Non-Tariff Measures*, 49.
[15] *EEA Agreement*, 7.
[16] *Transposition (Enforcement Tools)*, European Commission Single Market Scoreboard, December 10, 2021.
[17] *Transposition (Enforcement Tools)*.
[18] Anu Bradford, "The Brussels Effect," *Northwestern University Law Review* 107, no. 1 (2012), 40.
[19] Bradford, "The Brussels Effect," 3.
[20] Ibid., 52.
[21] Ibid., 3.

is that the EU need not work too hard, if at all, to make external actors comply with European law as market forces alone do most of the convincing.[22] One of the most famous and relatable consequences of the Brussels Effect is the implementation of USB-C chargers in Apple products.[23] Upon the news of the forthcoming implementation of an EU directive that would require "standardised charging ports for mobile phones and other portable electronic devices,"[24] Apple coincidentally adopted this as part of its own corporate policy globally, not just in the EU.

In addition, the European community does not appreciate when countries attempt to exist only on the outer orbit of the EEA. When negotiating trade deals that would allow countries partial access to the Single Market, the EEA will try to extract as many concessions from perimeter countries as possible.[25] Moreover, a state's perceived closeness to the European market is not sufficient to guarantee preferential treatment. Membership in NATO or another spiritually similar organization does not shield negotiating states from European economic might. In all of these negotiations, the EU is the Goliath. The 30 countries of the EEA are expected to amount to $22.5 trillion dollars in GDP in 2026.[26] The largest European economy outside of the EEA, the U.K., is expected to total $4.2 trillion in GDP for 2026.[27] Though this comparison is quite a crude one, the sheer numbers tell a damning story of negotiations between two imbalanced actors. For countries in the western Balkans, this disparity is felt even more acutely. A country like Albania, striving for European integration more than any other in the region, is expected to grow its economy to about $32.4 billion dollars in GDP in 2026, making it orders of magnitude away from rivaling the European economy.[28] The raw numbers matter here because perimeter nations gain far more from Single Market access than the EU gains from accessing their markets. The key concept here is leverage. Because of the imbalance in leverage, the EU can afford to be much more cutthroat in negotiations with these countries than vice versa. The EU is the dictator of terms.

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[22] Ibid., 57.
[23] Zach Meyers, "If the 'Brussels Effect' Fades in Tech Markets, the EU Will Only Have Itself to Blame," *Competition Policy International*, January 3, 2025, https://www.cer.eu/in-the-press/if-brussels-effect-fades-tech-]markets-eu-will-only-have-itself-blame.
[24] "EU Common Charger Rules: Power All Your Devices with a Single Charger," *European Commission*, December 28, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/eu-common-charger-rules-power-all-your-devices-single-charger-2024-12-28_en.
[25] Pataki, "Cecchini Revisited."
[26] *World Economic Outlook: Global Economy in Flux, Prospects Remain Dim,* IMF Report, October 2025.
[27] "Global Economy in Flux."
[28] Ibid.

In a cruel corollary, the percentage of trade going from perimeter nations to EEA states is significantly greater than the reverse. For a country like the U.K., about 42% (48% of goods exports and 36% of services exports) of all exports were sold to Europe.[29] Not only does this mean that nearly half of U.K. goods are subject to highly discrepant regulations, but the 42% number also sits about 20% above the U.K.'s next most important trading partner by volume, the U.S..[30] Only 13.2% of EU exports are destined for the U.K..[31] Again, the U.K. is the country with the greatest pull of those just outside of the European orbit. The more moderately sized economy of Albania, for example, sends 71.7% of its exports to Europe, while the EEA sends only 0.2% of its exports to Albania.[32] The result of this imbalance is that countries on the perimeter of the Single Market negotiate with significantly more urgency, while EU states can steer the process however it sees fit.

Even when tackling the largest economy in the world, the EU has shown its ability to wield its powerful consumer market as a formidable weapon. The Brussels Effect spared no blushes for Apple, the third largest corporation in the world, despite the fact that it sits thousands of miles from single market territory. The EU is consciously aware of this power and has no reservations using it as a weighty bargaining chip. The world's largest economies and corporations adjust to European standards in order to preserve access to its sacrosanct consumer market, as seen in the Brussels Effect's impact on Apple. The tendency of global actors to bend to European law has worrying implications for the U.K., as trading on Europe's doorstep makes it considerably more difficult to resist its pull.

Comparative Analysis of the U.K. and Switzerland

Brexit was a time of major upheaval for Britain's foreign relations. Perhaps most impacted was, predictably, British trade. As part of the agreement to leave the European Union, the U.K. also left the EEA and European Single Market.[33] This meant that, overnight, Britain went from a nation enshrining all EU customs and standards in its own domestic law to a nation that was untethered and free to make all its own choices. This decoupling means a

[29] Matthew Ward and Dominic Webb, *Statistics on UK Trade with the EU* (House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, April 22, 2025), 15.
[30] Office for National Statistics, *UK Trade with the United States: 2024*, April 25, 2025.
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https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/de2675ef-51c8-44e7-bf62-3c781ef938e6_en?filename=Albania+country+fiche.pdf.
[33] Cabinet Office, *Summary: The UK's New Relationship with the EU*, GOV.UK, July 2, 2021.

lot for international trade. For one, without any kind of trade agreement with the EU, the U.K. would be a "third country."[34] This would subject the U.K. to all manner of potential tariffs and excess requirements in order to access the European market.[35] Another problem for the long-term is that, over time and without active work to move closer together, U.K. and EU law will diverge, causing trade friction between the differing laws and adding unnecessary inefficiency and an increased opportunity cost as time passes.

The U.K. has time and time again ruled out rejoining the Single Market. Even Keir Starmer, a leader who greatly desires to move closer toward Europe, believes that rejoining the EEA would be unfeasible. In 2024, he told reporters, "I've been really clear about not rejoining the EU, the single market or the customs union… I don't think that that is going to happen."[36] Quite apart from the questionable political will for such an action, when the U.K. joined what was then called the European Economic Community in 1973, it was significantly easier to become integrated into Europe.[37] Today, Britain would be subject to a host of impossible demands for a country of its level of entrenchment. Instead, Britain has decided that the best path forward is to negotiate free trade with the EU in as many sectors as it can in order to negate the effects of acting outside the EEA. In this way, the U.K. is trying to place itself on the very outer orbit of Europe, never seeking full integration while otherwise remaining as close as possible.

The Swiss model is all about balance. Switzerland walks the fine line between maximizing European integration while retaining maximum feasible sovereignty. Switzerland achieves this by both comprehensive free trade agreements and unilaterally implementing European law into its domestic legislation.[38] The Swiss system of free trade agreements, having been developed over the course of more than 50 years, is considerably more advanced and coordinated than the comparatively young independent U.K. system.[39] Below is a chart showing the important overlaps and dissimilarities of these arrangements.[40]

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[34] *The UK's New Relationship with the EU.*
[35] Ibid.
[36] Kiran Stacey, "Britain Will Not Rejoin EU in My Lifetime, Says Starmer," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/03/britain-will-not-rejoin-eu-in-my-lifetime-says-starmer.
[37] "EU Enlargement," European Union, Accessed March 4, 2026, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.
[38] European Commission, "Switzerland," *Access2Markets.*
[39] Ibid.
[40] Aslak Berg, "Living Next Door to an Elephant: Lessons for the UK from EFTA," *Centre for European Reform*, April 29, 2024, https://www.cer.eu/insights/living-next-door-elephant-lessons-uk-efta.

Policy Area	EEA	Swiss–EU Agreements	UK–TCA
Tariff-free trade for industrial goods	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Tariff-free trade for agricultural goods and seafood	No	No	**Yes**
Alignment on regulations for goods	**Yes**	**Yes**	No
Dynamic alignment of regulations	**Yes**	No	No
Freedom of movement	**Yes**	**Yes**	No
Schengen membership	**Yes**	**Yes**	No
Financial contributions	**Yes**	**Yes**	No
Participation in single market for services	**Yes**	No	No
Seamless data flows (automatic data protection adequacy)	**Yes**	No	No
Institutions for monitoring and dispute settlement	Yes, separate monitoring authority and court	No	Yes, arbitral panel referring to UK and EU domestic law

Compiled by author using data from the Centre for European Reform.

Trade Deals

Post-Brexit trade between the U.K. and the EU has been governed predominantly by the EU-U.K. Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).[41] Fundamentally, the TCA "provides for zero tariffs and zero quotas on all goods that comply with the appropriate rules of origin."[42] This is quite a limited scope for a comprehensive free trade agreement, although when looking at countries in similar positions to the U.K., it is clear that free trade between the EU and its perimeter countries is best established over the course of many sector-specific agreements rather than one all-encompassing one, such as in the case of Switzerland.[43] In order to reap the benefits from zero tariffs under the TCA, products must meet the "rules of origin" requirements by proving they are sufficiently U.K. or EU-made.[44] Companies and firms must gather evidence of origin for goods or their components to demonstrate compliance.[45] Failing to meet origin thresholds can result in tariffs, despite the free trade agreement, and navigating these requirements is particularly onerous for manufacturers with complex supply chains, such as the automotive and electronics sectors.[46] This post-Brexit arrangement

[41] European Commission, *EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement*.
[42] Ibid.
[43] "MRA Switzerland–EU," State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, Accessed March 4, 2026, https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/en/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/Technische_Handelshemmnisse/Mutual_Recognition_Agreement_MRAo/MRA_Schweiz_EU.html.
[44] European Commission, *"EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement."*
[45] Ibid.
[46] Office of the United States Trade Representative, *Adapting Trade Policy for Supply Chain Resilience*, Policy Paper No. 326 (USTR, 2024), 27.

reveals that even the largest economy on Europe's perimeter cannot escape regulatory influence.

In contrast, as the only country with access on such a sectoral basis, Switzerland's network of deals with the EEA "far exceeds the scope of a usual free trade agreement."[47] The most important piece of the Swiss puzzle is the Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA), designed as "an instrument designed to remove technical barriers to the trade of industrial goods between Switzerland and the EU."[48] In force since 2002, the MRA works by tackling exactly the problems faced by the U.K. and its comparatively lacking trade agreements.[49] For example, in order to avoid the problem of unrecognized regulatory checks, the MRA includes a clause stating that "to avoid duplication of procedures when Swiss and Community requirements are deemed equivalent, the Community and Switzerland shall mutually accept reports, certificates and authorisations issued by [conformity assessment bodies] and manufacturer's declarations of conformity certifying conformity to their respective requirements in the areas covered."[50] This provision is the result of lengthy forbearance between the EU and Switzerland, and it successfully eliminates a pressing issue in the sale of manufactured goods for both parties. For reference, as of 2016, roughly 69% of Swiss exports to the EEA and about 61% of EEA exports to Switzerland were covered by the MRA.[51] This clause is a great example of how Switzerland coordinates its trade with Europe, without relinquishing much of its sovereignty, if any at all. While the TCA manages tariffs, though preserves friction, Switzerland's MRA system targets the friction itself, focusing on deeper regulatory coordination in exchange for smoother market access.

Conformity Assessments

Additionally, since the U.K. and EU are now separate jurisdictions, regulatory checks and conformity assessments apply differently, meaning goods must independently meet both U.K. and EEA standards when sold in each

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[47] EFTA-Studies, *"Switzerland's Sectoral Access to the EU's Single Market,"* February 8, 2019, https://www.efta-studies.org/sectoral-access-to-the-single-market.
[48] "MRA Switzerland–EU."
[49] Ibid.
[50] European Community and Swiss Confederation, *Agreement between the European Community and the Swiss Confederation on Mutual Recognition in Relation to Conformity Assessment*, Official Journal of the European Communities L 114 (April 30, 2002), http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2002/309(5)/oj.
[51] State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, *Trade Statistics on the Switzerland–EU Mutual Recognition Agreement*, 1.

respective market.[52] Even when rules remain similar, the lack of mutual recognition means duplicate testing and certification, which increases costs and is an important point in the more comprehensive free trade arrangement that Switzerland has with the EEA.[53] For example, a machine or toy produced in the U.K. must carry a UKCA mark for Britain and a CE mark for the EEA, requiring entirely separate conformity assessments.[54] The effect of this regulatory separation is the manufacturing of tight borders, where similar standards become duplicated costs and delays pile up. While the U.K. quite literally voted to bear these costs in the Brexit referendum, the Swiss model provides a simple solution to avoid these losses: unilateralism.

In 2010, Switzerland unilaterally adopted the Cassis de Dijon principle into its domestic law.[55] This is an opposite example to the previous case. With this action, Switzerland voluntarily sacrificed sovereignty in return for more Single Market access without Single Market obligations. Cassis de Dijon is the principle that a product legally sold in one country should be allowed to be sold in another, even if technical standards differ, unless there is a strong public-interest reason to block it.[56] In unilaterally reducing technical barriers, Switzerland harmonized its domestic regulations with Europe's rules, allowing any product legally sold in the EEA to be sold in Switzerland without additional requirements (some exceptions, mainly foodstuffs).[57] In acting unilaterally, Switzerland accepted EU regulatory outcomes without any reciprocal obligation on the EU's part and without formal influence over future rulemaking. This is a central trade-off in Switzerland's approach to Europe: greater market access and lower non-tariff barriers not negotiated through authority but rather the voluntary absorption of Single Market rules under the guise of domestic reform. In contrast with

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[52] "Using the UKCA Marking," GOV.UK, Accessed March 4, 2026, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/using-the-ukca-marking.

[53] Lucian Cernat, *The Art of the Mini-Deals: The Invisible Part of EU Trade Policy*, ECIPE Policy Brief no. 11/2023 (European Centre for International Political Economy, October 2023), 3.

[54] "Using the UKCA Marking."

[55] *Trade Policy Review: Switzerland and Liechtenstein—Summary*, WT/TPR/S/280 (World Trade Organization, April 23, 2013).

[56] "Cassis de Dijon Principle," Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research, Accessed March 4, 2026, https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/en/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/Technische_Handelshemmnisse/Cassis-de-Dijon-Prinzip.html.

[57] "Special Regulation for Food," Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research, Accessed March 4, 2026, https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/en/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/Technische_Handelshemmnisse/Cassis-de-Dijon-Prinzip/sonderregelung_lebensmittel.html.

the U.K.'s post-Brexit system of duplicated conformity assessments and regulatory friction, Switzerland has built its borders around minimizing costs. Through unilateral alignment with EU standards, in exchange for sovereignty and rule-making influence, Switzerland receives far smoother European market access than the U.K..

Partial Alignment

Trade in animals, plants, and foods also faces strict inspections known as Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks.[58] "Export Health Certificates" and inspections are required for meat, dairy, fish, seeds, and other products exported from the U.K. to the EU (and vice versa), costing time, money, and patience.[59] British veterinary products, for example, must undergo certain inspections at European ports, causing delays for perishable goods. Without any veterinary agreement, every shipment must separately prove it meets EU animal and plant health standards.[60] Much of the popular discourse on the subject of regulatory alignment concerns the ability of British farmers to stay competitive in Europe. To begin with, U.K. farming is already heavily subsidized and has not yet found a sustainable business model.[61] Additionally, without regulatory alignment, British farmers face repeated inspections and delays in its sensitive agricultural sector that erode competitiveness even further.

The Swiss model is not perfect either. To keep the current arrangement effective, the MRA must be periodically updated to incorporate new EU and EEA standards. When the EU introduced new medical device regulations, the corresponding MRA chapter was not updated (due to institutional disputes), creating new frictions for medical technology trade, a sizable industry in Switzerland.[62] Without an updated agreement, Switzerland was treated as a "third country" by the EEA, meaning Swiss-made medical devices could no longer enter the EU via the streamlined MRA route and Swiss manufacturers were required to appoint an "EU Authorized Representative" and undergo separate EU conformity assessments, which Switzerland

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[58] Ioannides, *EU-UK Trade Flows: Continuities, Changes and Trends*, 5.
[59] "Get an Export Health Certificate," GOV.UK, Accessed March 4, 2026, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-an-export-health-certificate.
[60] Ioannides, *EU-UK Trade Flows: Continuities, Changes and Trend,* 11.
[61] Emma Downing and Sarah Coe, *Brexit: Future UK Agriculture Policy*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper no. CBP 8218, 4.
[62] Miriam Fraga-García et al., "New Scenario in the Field of Medical Devices in the European Union: Switzerland and the United Kingdom Become Third Countries," *Farmacia Hospitalaria* 46, no. 4 (July–August 2022): 244–250.

had tried so desperately to avoid.[63] The Swiss government acknowledged this problem as a direct consequence of not having an institutional framework with the EU, and it had to adopt contingency measures to ensure supply of medical goods.[64] As of publication, this incident has yet to be resolved and is further proof that any country remaining on the perimeter of the European orbit, no matter how extensive their integration network is, will inevitably incur costs from doing so. While the U.K. absorbs immediate border friction from a classic case of regulatory divergence in its agricultural sector, the case of Switzerland's medical technology suggests that even deep alignment without institutional integration leaves perimeter states exposed to costly disruptions.

Conclusion

Europe's economic gravity does not reward ambiguity. Not being part of the Single Market yet wanting to tap into its vast consumer market can be a vicious cycle, following European rules but never contributing to their making, covering costs with no bargaining power, and managing friction that full integration was designed to eliminate. Recent developments from tariff shocks to supply chain disruptions have brought to the surface just how tightly European economies are already bound together and market access has also shown to be increasingly dependent on simple regulatory convergence, not goodwill. For countries on the outer orbit, divergence may preserve some sovereignty, but it also multiplies transaction costs and invites constant renegotiations from a position of weakness.

If a country like the U.K., for example, has decided that joining the Single Market would require giving up more sovereignty than it is willing to do, then it should move toward a Swiss-style model of European economic relations. For the United Kingdom, tension is becoming permanent. If rejoining the Single Market is politically infeasible, then the best alternative seems to be a deliberate move toward a Swiss-style model of deeper sectoral alignment. Nevertheless, this move would not eliminate all barriers to trade. Switzerland's own experience shows that partial integration requires institutional maintenance and an acceptance of whatever standards the EU imposes, without formal voting power to change those standards. Without

[63] Sheila O'Shaughnessy, "EU–Switzerland MRA Expired," *mdi Europa*, May 27, 2021, https://mdi-europa.com/eu-switzerland-mra-expired/.
[64] "Switzerland Remains a Committed Partner to the EU Even Without the Institutional Agreement," Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Council, May 26, 2021, https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/newsuebersicht/2021/05/schweiz-eu-engagierte-partnerschaft.html.

EEA membership, no arrangement will be seamless, though one option certainly seems preferable to the others.

I have intentionally avoided resting this argument on anything particularly volatile such as transatlantic relations or Europe's evolving environmental policy (a tall barrier for entry for many states). These things may accelerate or complicate the already complex process, but they do not change its logic. The central truth endures: Europe's market is large enough that alignment occurs whether countries choose it or not. The real choice, then, is between a managed alignment that delivers stability or an unmanaged divergence that guarantees friction. Sovereignty, in this case, only means deciding how and on what terms those rules are absorbed. Economic gravity hates compromise, and everyone feels its pull sooner or later.

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Out from the Shadows: Central Asia's Emerging Role on the Global Stage

Lauren Higuchi

From a vital trade corridor for China on the Silk Road to farmland for the Soviet Union, Central Asia has traditionally been viewed as defined by the great powers that surround it. Even after gaining their independence following the fall of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan remained largely under Russia's sphere of influence: their economies, foreign policies, and, especially, security strategies remained closely integrated with Russia's largely by default.

However, Russia's once-undisputed power has begun to face challenges from a rising China, which has moved into Central Asia as a technology provider, infrastructure investor, trade partner, and security guarantor. China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) first emerged as a regional security organization in 2001, challenging the regional dominance of the similar Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The original Collective Security Treaty, signed in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, created a formal military alliance between Russia, Armenia, and the CARs, akin to NATO. The CSTO focuses on peacekeeping operations and responding to traditional military threats.[1] Meanwhile, the SCO is not a military alliance like the CSTO. Instead, it focuses on combating irregular security threats such as terrorism and extremism and regularly hosts joint military exercises typically focused on countering these types of threats.[2] Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of both

[1] "History of the Collective Security Treaty Organization," Collective Security Treaty Organization, Accessed March 9, 2025, https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/#:~:text=History%20of%20creation%2C%20fundamentals%20of,the%20possibility%20of%20further%20extension.

[2] "A Quick Guide to SCO and Its Military Cooperation," China's State Council Information Office, June 5, 2018, http://english.scio.gov.cn/infographics/2018-06/05/content_51673238.htm.

organizations, while Uzbekistan became a member of the SCO after leaving the CSTO in 2012.[3]

China's goal of incorporating Central Asia into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the 2010s began a new period of conflicting Chinese and Russian power in the region. The BRI became a blanket term for both traditional infrastructure projects, such as railroads and pipelines, and more non-traditional programs, such as the Digital Silk Road and Health Silk Road. The Digital Silk Road project aimed to export digital and internet infrastructure to Central Asia, while the Health Silk Road project aimed to export Chinese COVID vaccines.[4] Through projects such as these, over the course of the 2010s, China slowly asserted itself as the leading power in many developing sectors, such as technology and sustainability, in Central Asia. However, BRI projects, notably early railway and pipeline projects, failed to provide promised jobs and economic inflow to Central Asians, garnering anti-Chinese criticism from both the public and Central Asian governments.[5] China's intense loan repayment timeline also loaded smaller states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with massive debts as they struggled to keep up with the payments.[6] To many Central Asians and outside observers, it appeared clear that the Chinese-led projects of the 2010s, while lucrative for China, were not providing the boosts to development the CARs had hoped.

Now, after the CARs have been subjected to a decade of power competition between Russia and China, Russia's war in Ukraine has precipitated a shift in Central Asian states toward a more multi-vectoral foreign policy, with the goal of cooperating with a diverse range of countries outside of Russia. I argue that this phenomenon is best illustrated in Afghanistan, where we can see a clear decline in Russian- and Chinese-led initiatives and an increase in self-guided, multi-vectoral Central Asian leadership.

Effects of the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia's war in Ukraine has shifted Central Asian foreign policy away from Moscow. Historically, Central Asian states have avoided choosing sides in

[3] Zheng Xianghong, "Uzbekistan and the CSTO: A Tumultuous Ride," *Chinese Social Sciences Net*, January 27, 2013,
http://euroasia.cssn.cn/xsyj/xsyj_englt/201601/t20160127_2847363.shtml.
[4] Hong Yu, "Is the Belt and Road Initiative 2.0 in the Making? The Case of Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, no. 3 (2022): 2,
https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2122858.
[5] Hong, "Belt and Road 2.0," 8–9.
[6] Ibid., 9.

the conflict, oftentimes as a tactful way of rejecting Russian expansionism.[7] The boldest countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, openly refute Russia's territorial claims in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and support Ukrainian sovereignty.[8] Kazakhstan, in particular, has reason to be wary of Russian expansionism. In 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that "Kazakhs never had any statehood, [Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev] has created it"—a statement eerily similar to Putin's rationale for Russian "reclamation" of Ukraine.[9] Such comments were echoed in 2020, when Vyacheslav Nikonov, head of the Russian State Duma Committee on Education and Science, claimed that Kazakhstan "simply didn't exist," and its present-day land is "a great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union."[10] After witnessing similar reasoning used to justify the invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan and its neighbors understandably have taken the threat of Russian expansionism much more seriously.

As the Russia-Ukraine War consumes Russia's security forces and Western sanctions expose the fragility of the country's economy, Central Asian states' reliance on Russia is becoming a greater liability.[11] In Central Asia, the conflict has caused the price of agricultural and energy products to skyrocket, putting an enormous financial strain on consumers.[12] Many Russian-led projects have also been cancelled, causing significant job losses for Central Asians.[13] This economic fallout is affecting public sentiment:

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[7] "The Security Situation in Central Asia under the Context of Major Power Competition: Current State and Prospects," *International Cooperation Center*, July 10, 2025, https://en.icc.org.cn/thinktank_theories/intl_observation/399.html.
[8] Vusala Abbasova, "President Tokayev Says Kazakhstan Will Not Recognize Donetsk, Lugansk as Independent States," *Caspian News*, July 20, 2022, https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-tokayev-says-kazakhstan-will-not-recognize-donetsk-lugansk-as-independent-states-2022-6-20-0/.
[9] Anna Dolgov, "Kazakhs Worried after Putin Questions History of Country's Independence," *The Moscow Times*, September 1, 2014, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/01/kazakhs-worried-after-putin-questions-history-of-countrys-independence-a38907.
[10] Asylkhan Mamashuly, "'A Big Gift.' Russian MPs' Statements About Kazakhstan's Territory Spark Outrage," *Radio Azattyq*, December 15, 2020, https://www.azattyqasia.org/a/kazakhstanis-reaction-to-the-statements-of-russian-deputies-about-the-kazakh-territory/31002411.html.
[11] Trisporah Fried, "A New Great Game Emerges as Central Asia Drifts Away from Moscow," *Hudson Institute*, November 21, 2025, https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/new-great-game-emerges-central-asia-drifts-away-moscow-tsiporah-fried.
[12] Nurbolat Nyshanbayev et al., "Central Asia in a Changing World: Understanding the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 45, no. 4 (2024): 5-6, https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2024.45.4.30.
[13] Nyshanbayev et al., "Changing World," 5-6.

according to surveys, Central Asians increasingly blame their current financial struggles on Russia's invasion.[14]

These vulnerabilities of overreliance on Russia have prompted a period of serious "reevaluation" and "recalculation" in each Central Asian country's foreign policy.[15] The dominant themes of these revised policies are diversification and balancing.[16] Diversification entails expanding the number of countries from which the region receives economic benefits, while balancing ensures they prevent a single country from gaining too much power in the region. Central Asian states have begun by seeking economic and security support from other sources. To avoid the ramifications of sanctions, Central Asian trade with Russia has trended downward, while trade with other countries, notably China, has increased rapidly.[17] Similarly, following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, Russian arms imports to Central Asia dramatically decreased by 23% from 2021 to 2023, a clear signal that Central Asian states are distancing themselves from Russia.[18]

China is beginning to fill this growing gap. Currently, China dominates as a key economic partner in Central Asia and challenges Russia's formal role in the security landscape through organizations such as the SCO. China and other countries, such as Türkiye, are also potential replacements for Russia in the arms technology sphere as the states seek more modern high-tech equipment, such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and fear compromised Russian manufacturing capabilities.[19] Western countries, like France and Italy, are also becoming impactful arms contributors, further supporting a diversification away from Russian arms.[20]

Working with Global Powers

Beyond foreign policy diversification, another growing trend for the Central Asian Republics is greater internal cooperation and alignment in engagement with external powers. The states have held united dialogues with

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Sardor Allayar, "Shifting Dynamics in Central Asia: The Security Landscape amid the Ukraine Conflict," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytic Reporting*, March 5, 2025, https://cabar.asia/en/shifting-dynamics-in-central-asia-the-security-landscape-amid-the-ukraine-conflict.
[16] Allayar, "Shifting Dynamics."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Joshua Bernard-Pearl, "New Security Trends in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Sales of Russian Arms Decline," *Caspian Policy Center,* August 27, 2024, https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2024/08/27/security-trends-in-central-asia-and-south-caucasus_CxopCxu.pdf.
[19] Bernard-Pearl, "New Security Trends."
[20] Ibid.

various countries, including the U.S., China, Japan, and Germany, under a C5+1 initiative, where the five Central Asian countries are aggregated as the "C5" and the "+1" refers to the external country they meet with.[21]

A key emerging partnership is with Türkiye, primarily through the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The OTS is an intergovernmental organization of Turkic-speaking states aimed at fostering cooperation within the Turkic world.[22] Early suggestions and efforts to form a Turkic council were led by Kazakhstan in 2006, before forming the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States in 2009, which would later officially become the OTS in 2021.[23] Tajikistan is the only CAR that is not a member of the OTS, as Tajiks are not a Turkic ethnic group. However, importantly, this has not excluded it from Turkish-Central Asian cooperation in the realms of arms procurement and transportation connectivity.[24]

In the past, the regional grouping of the five states was typically fabricated by external powers such as the West or Russia.[25] This artificial attribution of unity overlooked the decades of border and ethnic conflicts that divided the region. Because of these tensions, the Central Asian countries often did not see themselves as a single entity, unlike external powers, which did. However, in recent years, almost all significant border disputes originating from Soviet territory delineation have been resolved, thereby also easing the tensions that kept the CARs divided.[26] This marks a promising step toward self-driven regional unity, as the states are choosing to act together of their own will. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan has emphasized that the Central Asian states should unify to "resist external forces that seek to pit the states of the region against each other and divide them."[27] Divisions between Central Asian states remain, but initiatives such as C5+1 display a newfound dedication to collaboration, allowing them to increase their power as a rapidly emerging regional bloc.

Such cooperation, combined with Central Asia's enduring dependence on Russia, gives the CARs a unique ability to pursue relationships with

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[21] "Central Asia's 'C5' Security Bloc Can Become a Reality," *The Times Of Central Asia*, May 20, 2024, https://timesca.com/central-asias-c5-security-bloc-can-become-a-reality/.
[22] "Organization of Turkic States," Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turk-konseyi-en.en.mfa.
[23] Daria Isachenko, "Turkey's Turns to Central Asia," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, comment no. 49 (2025): 5-6, https://doi.org/10.18449/2025c49.
[24] Isachenko, "Turkey's Turns," 5-6.
[25] Uuriintuya Batsaikhan and Marek Dabrowski, "Central Asia — Twenty-five Years After the Breakup of the USSR," *Russian Journal of Economics,* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruje.2017.09.005.
[26] Marcin Popławski, "Central Asia: A Region without Border Disputes?," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, January 17, 2025, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-01-17/central-asia-a-region-without-border-disputes.
[27] "'C5' Security Bloc."

Russia's opponents without separating themselves from Russia. External powers know that the Central Asian states can not fully separate themselves from Russia because of the inherent security vulnerabilities caused by their long border with Russia. Therefore, they afford Central Asia more flexibility and collaborate with the CARs without requiring significant concessions or guarantees of reducing relations with Russia. Central Asia thus wields the unique ability to play both sides, further strengthening its ability to pursue a successful multi-vectoral foreign policy.

Central Asia's Approach to Afghanistan

A new paradigm of regionally-driven cooperation and diversification away from Russia is exemplified by Central Asia's recent rapprochement with Afghanistan. Separation from Russia requires Central Asian states to seek alternative trade routes to replace the traditional Northern Corridor route, which passes through Russia into Europe. One of the popular alternatives, particularly for Uzbekistan, is a trans-Afghan corridor, which restores connectivity with South Asian ports.[28] In pursuing this transit corridor, the Central Asian Republics have approached Afghanistan in a new, self-driven fashion, signaling a readiness to act as their own regional administrator. Moreover, these efforts are part of a larger Central Asian strategy to cautiously reintegrate Afghanistan into the region in an attempt to promote and maintain stability. This coordinated strategy remains in its early stages; however, it reflects the development of a shared goal among the Central Asian states.

This desire for Afghanistan's reintegration is rooted in the fear that an economically unstable and isolated Afghanistan will cause broader instability and extremism to spill over into the rest of Central Asia, destabilizing the entire region.[29] Central Asian governments worry that instability would spark an influx of Afghan refugees, which would increase the risk of militant extremists entering their borders and lending strength to extremist religious movements in their own countries.[30] However, officials in Central Asia are optimistic that pragmatic engagement can ensure security in the region and reassert Central Asian autonomy. Therefore, the states are

[28] Paul Bartlett and Joanna Lillis, "Central Asia: Bringing Afghanistan in from the Cold," *Eurasianet*, July 7, 2025, https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-bringing-afghanistan-in-from-the-cold.

[29] Sebghatullah Safari, "Understanding the Afghan Taliban's Deepening Links with Central Asia," *UOL Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research*, September 29, 2025, https://csspr.uol.edu.pk/atcars/.

[30] Kate Mallinson, "Afghanistan Creates Tricky New Reality for Central Asia," *Chatham House*, August 27, 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/afghanistan-creates-tricky-new-reality-central-asia.

leading their own efforts to re-engage and stabilize Afghanistan primarily through cooperation in critical infrastructure, such as energy projects and trade corridors.[31] The three most significant infrastructure projects set to move into physical implementation in the near future are the Trans-Afghan railway, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI), and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA 1000).[32]

The Trans-Afghan railway aims to connect South Asia to the Middle Corridor, which crosses the Caucasus and Turkey into Europe, to the Northern Corridor through Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and potentially to the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line.[33] Many existing railways in Central Asia were developed, rehabilitated, or improved by the Soviet Union or as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. These new lines in Afghanistan, however, would be a significant step forward for Central Asia, as the states themselves take initiative over their own rail network development to directly benefit their own economies. Additionally, new routes and markets in South Asia will decrease dependency on Russia for economic connectivity.

Turkmenistan has traditionally been the most reclusive of Central Asian governments, often referred to as the "North Korea" of Central Asia because of its tendency toward isolationism. Turkmenistan is often the odd one out in terms of Central Asian collective action. For example, it is not a member of the SCO or the CTSO. However, Turkmenistan is now joining the other CARs in efforts to integrate Afghanistan by leading the charge in energy projects and energy diplomacy efforts. One such project is Turkmenistan's TAPI gas pipeline, which aims to supply Turkmen gas to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan.[34] In September of 2024, Turkmen and Taliban officials met to officially resume progress on the project after it had been halted since its inception in the 1990s due to conflict and instability in Afghanistan.[35] The revival of the project suggests that Turkmenistan considers the Taliban government stable enough to justify investing in a major infrastructure project. Turkmenistan has also boasted that the project will serve a

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[31] Aidar Borangaziyev, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Pragmatism instead of Illusions," *The Times Of Central Asia*, April 16, 2025, https://timesca.com/afghanistan-and-central-asia-pragmatism-instead-of-illusions/.

[32] Borangaziyev, "Afghanistan and Central Asia."

[33] Daria Zielińska, "Pragmatism Beyond Divides: Central Asia's Engagement with Afghanistan," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, November 7, 2025, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-11-07/pragmatism-beyond-divides-central-asias-engagement-afghanistan.

[34] Zielińska, "Pragmatism Beyond Divides."

[35] Farangis Najibullah and Khursand Khurramov, "Central Asia's High-Stakes Gamble with the Taliban," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, September 22, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-tajikistan-turkmenistan/33126717.html.

humanitarian purpose in Afghanistan by creating 12,000 new jobs and contributing to greater economic prosperity.[36] As of 2026, ten kilometers of pipeline have already been built in Afghanistan.[37] Significantly, the TAPI project is entirely Turkmen-led, suggesting that Turkmenistan, like its neighbors, is taking a leading role in developing regional infrastructure and markets.

The CASA 1000 project, led primarily by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is a high-voltage transmission line designed to transport surplus electricity generated in the summer to Afghanistan and Pakistan.[38] This project represents a significant effort toward collaboration by Tajikistan, which had been the most hesitant of the Central Asian republics to work with the Taliban government.[39] While none of the Central Asian governments have formally recognized the Taliban government, Tajikistan has gone a step further and explicitly labeled the Taliban a threat.[40] Statements made at the 2024 CSTO Parliamentary Assembly by Tajik officials calling Afghanistan a "breeding ground of terrorism" reflect Tajikistan's heightened fears of terrorist activity crossing over from Afghanistan.[41] However, the CASA 1000 project suggests that Tajikistan may be following the other Central Asian states' leads, striving to foster a stronger relationship with the Taliban in an effort to improve economic and security cooperation.

A defining characteristic of recent Central Asian endeavors in Afghanistan is a strict apolitical focus on developmental projects and economic interaction. Many of the Central Asian governments have refrained from making political statements in their dealings, and so far, none have officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan.[42] In the European Union-Central Asia summit held in Afghanistan in 2025, EU and Central Asian leaders jointly committed to helping "Afghanistan develop into a secure, stable and prosperous State with inclusive government and governance systems that respect the human rights and fundamental

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[36] Borangaziyev, "Afghanistan and Central Asia."
[37] Fidel Rahmati, "10 km of TAPI Gas Pipeline Completed in Afghanistan," *Khaama Press*, March 16, 2025, https://www.khaama.com/10-km-of-tapi-gas-pipeline-completed-in-afghanistan/.
[38] Fabio Indeo, "CASA-1000 Energy Project Revival: Involving Afghanistan in the Regional Cooperation," *NATO Defense College Foundation*, August 27, 2025, https://www.natofoundation.org/central-asia/casa-1000-energy-project-revival-involving-afghanistan-in-the-regional-cooperation/.
[39] Najibullah and Khurramov, "High-Stakes Gamble."
[40] Aleksandar Ivanović, "The CIS Summit and Central Asia's Afghan Challenge," *American Foreign Policy Council*, November 14, 2025, https://www.afpc.org/publications/articles/the-cis-summit-and-central-asias-afghan-challenge.
[41] Ivanović, "CIS Summit."
[42] Zielińska, "Pragmatism Beyond Divides."

freedoms of all its citizens, including women, girls."[43] However, it is worth questioning if the CARs truly aim to support the EU's aspirations for the region or if they are simply ensuring EU support for economic development in the future. The CARs have continued economic investment and cooperation with the Taliban without actually demanding such political changes, suggesting that their real priority is not to jeopardize their growing relationship with the Taliban. Because the Central Asian states experience less pressure to adhere to Western liberal standards than Western countries, they are able to engage with the Taliban without pressure to complicate their relationship with political demands. This gives the Central Asian states an advantage when forging new relationships with the Taliban that can help grow their power as a regional authority.

Afghanistan represents a new theater where the CARs are demonstrating their ability to take control over their own regional affairs. The CAR-led projects in Afghanistan echo the early infrastructure projects of China's BRI. However, instead of being dictated by an outside power, the CARs are leading these projects themselves and creating markets for their own benefit and under their own control.

Combating Terrorism

The greatest area of multilateral cooperation among the CARs has been in the security sector, specifically through combating terrorism across Central Asia. This is a change to the traditional dynamic. Russia and China have traditionally used Central Asia as a buffer against terrorism spreading from the Middle East. For example, China created the SCO primarily to combat the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism that it feared would spread through Central Asia into China.[44] As Turkic Muslim groups, the Uyghur and East Turkestan movements in Xinjiang were perceived to be linked to the Central Asian states, further exacerbating China's need for a regional partner in counterterrorism. As a result, China established the SCO to gain the CARs' support for counterterrorism efforts. Furthermore, the SCO acts as a tool for China to bring Central Asia into its sphere of influence, carving a foothold in a region traditionally dominated only by Russia. Joint counterterrorism military exercises with the SCO predate the BRI and other economic and development-focused Chinese initiatives in

[43] European Council, "Joint Declaration Following the First European Union-Central Asia Summit," press release, April 4, 2025, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7745-2025-REV-1/en/pdf.

[44] Stephen Aris, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: 'Tackling the Three Evils.' A Regional Response to Non-Traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (2009): 457–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130902753309.

Central Asia, making them some of the earliest attempts to generate influence in the region. Now, however, the CARs' approach to counterterrorism is changing.

The Central Asian states, under their new C5 bloc mentality, are making their own security strategy regarding Afghanistan. In 2025, Central Asian governments held the first Special Representatives' Meeting in Tashkent, where a major topic was developing a coordinated strategy for combating terrorist activity from Afghanistan.[45] The meeting also established a new 'Contact Group,' which will serve as a "regional platform for regular consultations, coordination, and dialogue" for matters on Afghanistan, further emphasizing greater institutionalization of Central Asian cooperation.[46]

A major focus for counterterrorism efforts moving forward will be the ISIS-Khorasan group based in northern Afghanistan. ISIS-K is responsible for numerous cross-border attacks and for recruiting fighters from the Central Asian Republics.[47] ISIS-K is a threat to the Taliban and has ambitions of destabilizing governments in Central Asia, making eliminating the group a shared ambition of the CARs and Afghanistan.[48] Although there are few actual plans to combat terrorist threats in the region, the mutual threat of ISIS-K, combined with the emerging strategic cooperation of the Special Representatives' Meeting, points to a future of regional counterterrorism efforts with reduced external involvement.

Conclusion

Central Asia's cautious and pragmatic invitation for Afghanistan to reintegrate into the international community is a telling sign of the desire to navigate its foreign policy on its own terms. While the region remains dependent on external powers such as Russia and China for larger security guarantees, its ambitions to address the "irregular" security threat posed by terrorism in Afghanistan independently indicate that Central Asia is becoming a regional decision-maker. Additionally, the Central Asian states are now dictating and designing their own railway projects in Afghanistan, rather than taking direction from Beijing with the BRI, which further highlights their new agency. The growing institutionalization of Central Asian

[45] Sadokat Jalolova, "Central Asian Countries Launch New Contact Group on Afghanistan," *The Times of Central Asia*, August 29, 2025, https://timesca.com/central-asian-countries-launch-new-contact-group-on-afghanistan/.
[46] Jalolova, "New Contact Group."
[47] "'C5' Security Bloc."
[48] Clayton Sharb and Danika Newlee, "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Last modified November 9, 2018, https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/warfare-irregular-threats-and-terrorism-program-archives/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic.

cooperation—evident in the beginnings of a formal regional C5 bloc—also points to greater regional unity aimed at reducing the ability for external powers to exploit divisions between the states.

Central Asia is seizing the opportunity to transform the region from a passive battleground dominated by external powers into an active network of highly connected countries. It is hard to deny the growing economic opportunity and strategic power of the region. In 2025, the combined economy of Central Asia grew 6% while the U.S. and Eurozone only saw growth of 1.1% and 1.6%.[49]

Central Asia has ultimately created a multi-vectoral foreign policy that attracts benefits from the most powerful opposing powers in the modern world with minimal concessions. The future of Central Asian collaboration is reflected in many of Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's speeches. Since 2018, the CARs have held annual Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, which President Mirziyoyev recently described in his address to the UN General Assembly as "an effective mechanism for deepening regional integration."[50] In this same address, President Miziyoyev affirmed that Central Asia is "steadily securing a stronger position in the system of international relations as an independent actor."[51] In the seventh Consultative Meeting, President Miziyoyev furthered this optimistic vision of present and future Central Asia. He proudly recounted the region's achievements in integrating into the global economy and expanding its markets and praised the success of the C5+1 format in allowing the region to take "a unified position at high-profile international forums."[52] One of the most significant and promising takeaways from this speech, however, was Miziyoyev's proposition to "transform [their] meetings from a consultative format of regional dialogue into a strategic format: 'The Community of Central Asia.'"[53]

This optimism is not purely hopeful rhetoric from Central Asian heads of state. Rather, it is founded on the tangible economic and development gains over the past few years, possible only through increased collaboration.

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[49] Teymur Atayev, "New Railway Corridor to Link Central Asia with Arabian Sea Ports by 2027," *The Caspian Post*, July 15, 2025, https://caspianpost.com/opinion/new-railway-corridor-to-link-central-asia-with-arabian-sea-ports-by-2027.

[50] Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly" (speech, United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY, September 23, 2025), *President of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8525.

[51] Mirziyoyev, "Address at the United Nations."

[52] Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the Seventh Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia" (speech, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, November 16, 2025), *President of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8674.

[53] Mirziyoyev, "Address at the Seventh Consultative Meeting."

After a long period of consistently being written off as an open space for great powers to compete in, Central Asia is finally coming into its own as a unified bloc, ready to assert itself on the global stage.

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