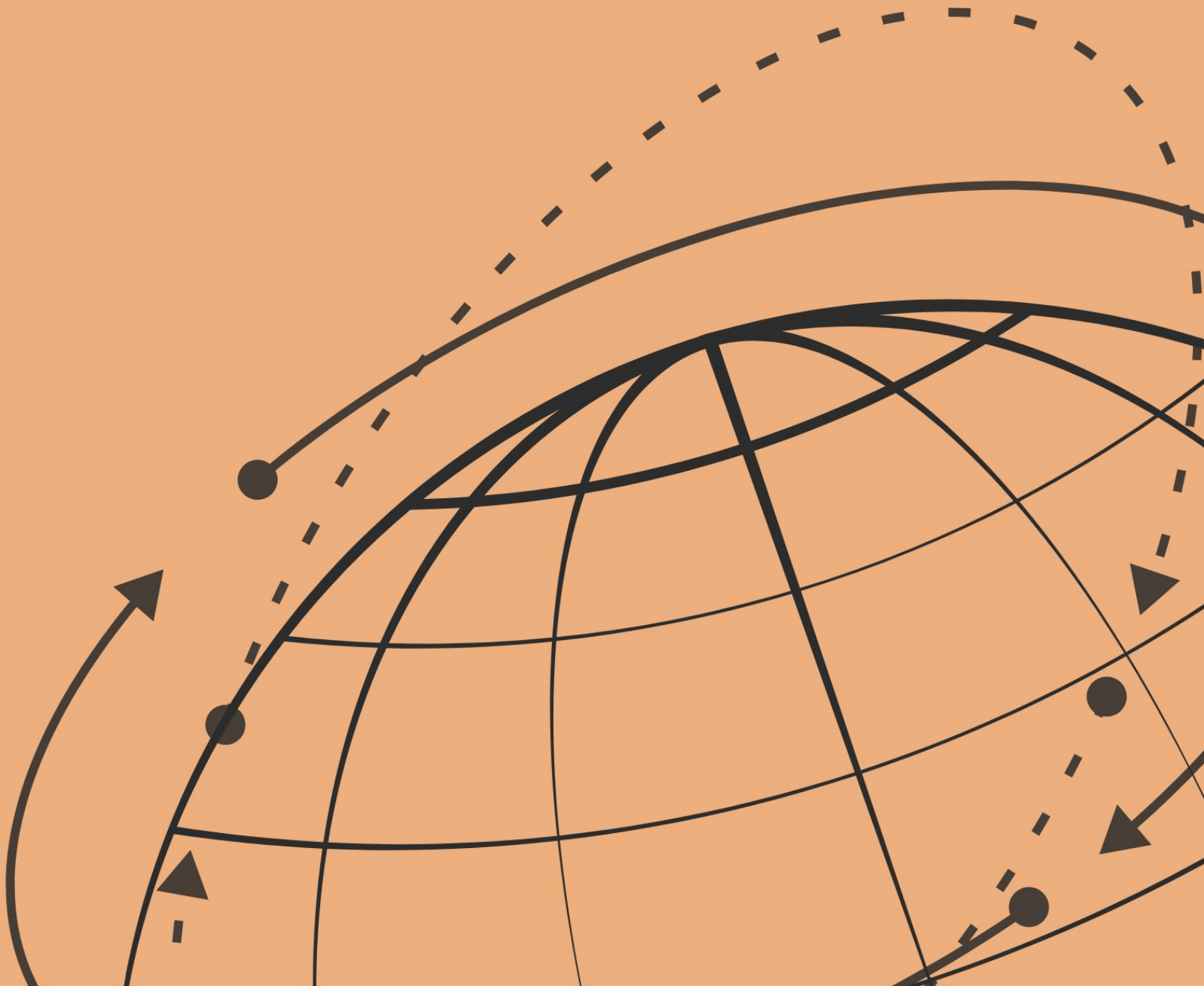
THE GLOBE

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THE GLOBE

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Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers,

This is my first time addressing you as the Editor-in-Chief of *The Globe*, the only undergraduate international affairs journal at The George Washington University and the Elliott School of International Affairs. I am honored to be presenting you with this issue of the journal's third year anniversary since its revival in 2023.

This issue is the culmination of months of intense work on the part of our managing editors, associate editors, and authors to provide the highest quality research in international affairs. We welcomed our newest cohort of Associate editors and revamped our consultation system to provide further opportunities for students to improve their writing and provide original research to the international affairs academia world. The work you see could not have been done without the hard work of our team and I want to extend my utmost gratitude to their dedication and commitment. Many of these projects were conducted remotely and spanned borders around the world as many of our staffers continued their dedication to our journal while working or studying abroad.

During the term our team created this issue, the field of international affairs continued to face a new set of challenges and changes. Across the world, we saw a wave of "Gen Z" anti-government protests of young students and activists speaking out against political corruption, economic inequality, and rising authoritarianism, including in the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The War between Israel and Palestine continues to rage, with the humanitarian crisis continuing to worsen by the day, despite attempts at a lasting ceasefire. This unprecedented conflict has led to more and more Western nations recognizing the independence and sovereignty of the State of Palestine, yet a true path to peace remains to be seen. The Russia-Ukraine War continues to be fought as America shifts its commitments to Ukraine and reapproaches Russia. While the ceasefire brokered by Malaysia and the United States between Cambodia and Thailand has been broken, with conflict again erupting in Southeast Asia alongside the continuing civil war in Myanmar. As these conflicts continue, the first year of U.S. president Donald Trump reaches its end, with unprecedented shifts in the global superpower's foreign policy, that has been described as a departure from multilateralism and the liberal international order America built.

As I continue with my duties as Editor-in-Chief, I move forward knowing that the journal carries with it the ever changing world of international affairs as new challenges emerge and other issues are resolved. As we reflect on the historical precedents that paved the way for the current global environment we live in, I encourage you to to think critically and engage deeply with the ideas, perspectives and lessons provided in this issue.

All the best,

Daniel Catapang*
Editor-in-Chief

*Daniel Catapang is a Junior majoring in International Affairs (Security Policy concentration) and Asian Studies with a minor in History. He is a member of the GW Model United Nations Travel Team and served as an Under Secretary-General for the George Washington Conference on International Affairs XXX. His research interests lie in U.S. foreign policy, East and Southeast Asian affairs, and maritime and defense issues. He has interned at National Security Institute at the Antonin Scalia School of Law and the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control. He is pursuing a career in public service with the U.S. federal government in foreign policy and national security areas.

"A United Front?": Solidarity, Statehood, and the Limits of Internationalism in Revolutionary Iran

By: Chris Carpenter*

Abstract: Iran's engagement with the wider Middle East is as frequently discussed as it is poorly understood. Existing debates about the material and ideological forces driving the Islamic Republic's policy often lack historical perspective, flattening and essentializing the complex history of Iran's regional entanglements. This study aims to historicize Iran's involvement in the Middle East, tracing the history of Iranian internationalism from the pre-revolutionary years of the 1970s to the 1980s and the political consolidation of the Islamic Republic. Through an analysis of oppositional Iranian interaction with Lebanon, Palestine, and Oman, it traces the rise, transformation, and eclipse of revolutionary internationalism. This refers to a form of solidarity, espoused by both Islamist and leftist revolutionaries in the 1970s, that saw Iran's revolution as inseparably tied to other regional struggles in an ideological milieu shaped by anti-imperial and nationalist politics, as well as diverse Islamic and leftist currents. With the emergence of the Islamic Republic, the pressures of state-building and war, and the dramatic and violent narrowing of the domestic political sphere in the 1980s, however, Iranian policy increasingly witnessed tension between two formerly co-constitutive currents: revolutionary internationalism and state-based nationalism. By the late 1980s, Iranian regional policy had largely subordinated this revolutionary background to a state-driven search for influence and security within the international order. Although the Islamic Republic continues to mobilize the rhetoric and legacies of revolutionary internationalism to explain its foreign policy, the content of these appeals has been sharply limited by the perceived interests of the state.**

Key Words: Iranian Foreign Policy, Revolutionary Internationalism, Middle East Relations

****Author's Note:** This essay was written in April of 2025. In its conclusion, I argued that Iran's cautious and largely defensive posture over the past two years illustrates the subordination of its internationalist history to the perceived security needs of the state. Much has happened since. On June 13, Israel began bombing Iran, initiating—in egregious violation of international law—a twelve-day war in which it would kill not only a large number of military and political leaders, but also hundreds of civilians. Iran responded with missile and drone strikes, constituting its largest military confrontation with Israel in its history. Shortly before the war's end, the United States joined with direct strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, damaging though not destroying the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. With the future deeply uncertain and additional regional conflict likely, Iran's government has aimed to tap into popular nationalism and crack down on real or imagined dissent while navigating deep social, economic, and diplomatic crises. Whether these measures will pay off is unclear. Regardless of what future months and years may bring, the war does not fundamentally alter the analysis offered in this article. In the end, it was an increasingly aggressive Israel (and its supporters in Washington), and not any alleged revolutionary enthusiasm in Tehran, that brought the war to Iran. Iran's leaders, in both their domestic and foreign policies, remain concerned above all with state security, though the success of their efforts on this front seems dubious. Today, beset by war, economic injustice, and authoritarian governments, the dreams of a region—and a world—reshaped by an anti-imperial "united front" appear as a distant echo. The empire they struggled to vanquish remains all too real.

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In 1971, readers of *Fatah*, the weekly periodical of the eponymous Palestinian organization, were presented with an obituary for a fallen fighter. Such articles were not rare at the time, but this one, titled "Iran, the Jordan Valley, and Back," was unusual in that its subject was not Palestinian.[1] The man in question, known by the nom de guerre Abu Abbas, was Ali Akbar Safa'i-Farahani, an Iranian Marxist revolutionary who had been executed by the Pahlavi state following a guerrilla attack on a gendarmerie post in the northern Iranian village of Siahkal earlier that year. The Siahkal operation, led by a small guerrilla group known as the Fada'iyan, was a military failure, but its example travelled widely and inspired years of guerrilla struggle against the Shah.[2] Its commander, Safa'i-Farahani, had recently returned to Iran following several years of training with Palestinian fighters in Jordan, where he rose through the ranks as a commander. Following his death, a joint statement by Palestinian and Iranian factions eulogized him as a "Martyr of the Palestinian Revolution and the Iranian Revolution."[3] Cutting across national borders, these revolutionary linkages made perfect sense within the framework of Cold War-era guerrilla movements. The article itself drew a clear connection between these two movements, quoting Safa'i-Farahani himself as declaring that "the enemies of the masses are a united front."[4] Accordingly, the obituary implied, the struggle against them must be united as well.

While Safa'i-Farahani was unusual in his military experience abroad, and while his Marxist-Leninist orientation as a member of the Fada'iyan was certainly not shared by all Iranian revolutionaries, the notion that the struggle against the Shah was fundamentally connected to other regional and global causes—a sense of revolutionary internationalism—was widely shared in the 1970s. Those of both Islamist and leftist orientations, who sought to overthrow the Pahlavi state, did not see their battle as isolated, but tied together with Palestine, Oman, and elsewhere. This internationalist solidarity helped to define the Iranian Revolution and to shape its significance. Undergirding these ties was a sense of a common enemy, one designated as such by many (otherwise opposed) opposition factions: imperialism, identified with American power.

[1] Marral Shamshiri, "The Gendered Politics of Dead Bodies: Obituaries, Revolutionaries, and Martyrs Between the Iranian, Palestinian, and Dhufar Revolutions," in The Fate of Third Worldism in the Middle East: Iran, Palestine, and Beyond, ed. Rasmus C. Elling and Sune Haugbolle (Oneworld Academic, 2024), 103.

[2] Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerilla Movement in Iran," Middle East Report 86 (March/April 1980); for more on Siahkal, see Peyman Vahabzadeh, A Guerrilla Odyssey: Modernization, Secularism, Democracy, and Fadai Period of National Liberation in Iran, 1971-1979 (Syracuse University Press, 2010), 20, 25-30.

[3] Shamshiri, "The Gendered Politics of Dead Bodies," 103.

[4] Marral Shamshiri, "Revolutionary Transnationalism in the Persian Gulf: Iranian-Arab Solidarity in Dhufar in the 1970s," Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2023): 347.

The Iranian Revolution was thus embedded in a global or universalist vision defined by opposition to American imperialism. As a phenomenon visible across the Middle East and the world, it is only logical that Iranian revolutionaries would see their cause as connected to other counter-hegemonic struggles. Crucially, however, while this sense of internationalism was vital to the Iranian Revolution, it did not contradict the revolutionary movement's nationalist outlook. Instead, imperialism was seen as having stifled Iran's national sovereignty, along with that of other peoples. Accordingly, nationalism and internationalism were intertwined and mutually reinforcing among Iranian revolutionaries in the 1970s.

The fall of the Shah and the rise of the Islamic Republic drew on these intertwined currents of nationalism, internationalism, and anti-imperialism—currents that would continue to shape Iran's engagement with the region. Yet the pressures of state-building in the post-1979 era added a new dynamic to the mix, one which reshaped and limited Iranian internationalism, now driven by state organs. Iran's involvement in the region remained intense and generally opposed to American hegemony. Yet the consolidation of the post-revolutionary state, an increasingly repressive domestic political sphere, and the need for state security amid war and diplomatic isolation channeled Iranian internationalism in new directions. The interests of the state, as seen by Iranian leaders, would come first and direct international policy. The regional connections of the pre-revolutionary era, especially in Lebanon and Palestine, remained influential, but were rechanneled to more state-driven ends. "Ideology" never ceased to play a role in the Islamic Republic's decision-making, but it was recast in a framework that prioritized the perceived interests of the state and nation. In other words, the Islamic Republic's current foreign policy is indeed influenced by a counter-hegemonic agenda (largely directed against the United States and Israel) with deep roots in the anti-imperial networks of the pre-1979 era. However, an examination of the transformations in the country's post-revolutionary regional involvement reveals that these earlier connections are consistently framed within and limited by the security interests of the state. The traces of revolutionary internationalism, while not completely erased, have been thoroughly subordinated to the logic of national security.

Introducing the Framework

In recent years, scholars (particularly historians) have increasingly turned their attention to regional and "global" interconnections. This approach has shaped innovative new research on the Iranian Revolution. A growing body of work has explored transnational connections and global influences, acknowledging Iran's specificity while countering the tendency to present the country's history in isolation.

These works have dramatically enhanced our understanding of the Iranian Revolution and Middle Eastern history more broadly, but a number of gaps remain in the literature. First, scholarship on the specific histories of Iranian relations with given countries (Lebanon, Palestine, or Oman, for example), tends to be more narrowly focused, and disconnected from the research on broader global entanglements. Recent work, however, has begun to remedy this. Several recent studies have begun to ground these global approaches in specific regional sites. As scholar Arang Keshavarzian notes, "the global" is a highly uneven field, and engagements with it are always localized in specific contexts, themselves connected to a wider "imagining [of] the world."[5] Thus, this paper engages with recent scholarship on the "global" dimensions of the Iranian Revolution, but grounds its analysis in three specific (and interconnecting) case studies: Iranian engagement with Palestine, Lebanon, and Oman. This focus is partly due to limitations of space—a more complete discussion of Iranian revolutionary internationalism could fill several volumes. But also stems from a recognition that, while Iranian revolutionaries engaged with currents from around the world, actual transnational connections with other locations in the Middle East—involving the material circulation of personnel and supplies, as well as accompanying ideological influences—were the most intense and concrete of these revolutionary entanglements.[6]

Another gap in the existing literature is that between historical scholarship on the pre-1979 internationalism of various Iranian opposition factions (and the Iranian state), and work on the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic's foreign policy. While the former has produced groundbreaking research on Iran's revolutionary milieu and its global context, the latter category tends to be more policy-oriented, is generally undertaken by scholars of political science or international relations, and often lacks deeper historical framing. While some recent research has sought to bridge this divide by bringing a historical perspective to bear on the early Islamic Republic's foreign policy, these bodies of scholarship often remain disengaged from one another. Yet, a more unified historical analysis of pre-1979 (oppositional) international involvement. (when revolutionaries lacked state power) alongside an analysis of Iran's foreign policy in the 1980s and beyond (when state-building emerged as a paramount concern) can shed new light on the role of state interests and identity in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

Bridging the 1979 divide thus allows for a deeper understanding of continuity, change, and the role of the state in Iran's current regional engagement.

In examining Iranian internationalism, I draw on pre-existing scholarship on universalism and solidarity. In his excellent study of transnational jihad in 1990s Bosnia, anthropologist Darryl Li makes several important interventions in the study of universalist projects. First, he argues that universalism is "a structure of aspirations," not a single model or theory. As such, what makes a project universalist is its theoretical extent, not its actual acceptance by all or even most people.[7] Second, he argues that universalism is not the negation of difference, but rather "a claim to transcend" it.[8] A universal project must thus be able to manage differences in service of a larger goal or community. This means that the universal and the particular are not necessarily contradictory; rather, the universal provides a broader framework in which the particular can be understood. This understanding can be fruitfully applied to the Iranian case. Li's insight about the co-constitutive nature of the universal and the particular applies to any form of internationalism, which takes "the nation" as its base category, and seeks to join with other nations in service of a common goal. At the same time, understanding universalism as aspirational helps us to understand the goals and worldviews of Iranian internationalists, not just their effects. Put together, Li's framework reveals the Iranian opposition's anti-imperial internationalism in the 1970s to be rooted in the particular experience and identity of an Iranian nation, placed alongside other national causes seen to be battling the same enemy for similar reasons.

Solidarity can be seen as a sort of ideological (and material) glue holding together any internationalist project. But solidarity is a slippery concept, and one that deserves a thorough explanation. In her study of relations between Hezbollah and the Palestinians, Laleh Khalili understands solidarity as a force shaped, reshaped, and limited by shifts in power and identity. Defining solidarity as a "sense of unity between two political actors on the basis of shared interests, understandings, or aspirations, and sometimes a common enemy," Khalili argues that solidarity can be distorted by imbalances in power or goals (in which case it can transform into co-optation or spokespersonship).[9] Yet, even more relevant for this study is Khalili's "non-essentialist [notion] of identity."[10] She observes that Hezbollah has many overlapping

[5] Arang Keshavarzian, "Globalizing the Iranian Revolution: A Multiscalar History," in *Global 1979: Histories and Geographies of the Iranian Revolution*, ed. Arang Keshavarzian and Ali Mirsepassi (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 45, 48.

[6] Shamshiri, "Revolutionary Transnationalism in the Persian Gulf," 345-346; Maryam Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life: The IRGC and the Global Guerilla Movement," in *Global 1979*, 182.

[7] Darryl Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 11.

[8] Ibid 12.

[9] Laleh Khalili, "'Standing With My Brother': Hizbullah, Palestinians, and the Limits of Solidarity," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April 2007): 278.

[10] Ibid 277.

and shifting identities (Shi'i sectarian organization, Lebanese political party, Islamic or anti-colonial movement, etc.); depending on the circumstances and which elements of identity are emphasized at a given time, the party's solidarity with Palestine may be intensified or limited. A similar analysis can be applied to Iran. The Islamic Republic too has many shifting identities: it is a nation-state in the international order, a Shi'i theocracy, a self-declared model for the Muslim world, an opponent of American hegemony, and an aspiring regional power. It is a state, with all the considerations that this entails, and a self-proclaimed revolutionary force. These aspects all combine in dynamic and ever-shifting ways to shape Iranian policy. This analysis also draws on Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry's characterization of Iran's "state identity" (consisting, in their analysis, of "Iranism," Islam, and Shi'ism).[11] In examining the pre-revolutionary era and the earliest post-1979 years, however, it adds a tension between this state identity and what we might term a "revolutionary identity," an identity which, I am arguing, has been incorporated into and subordinated by the state.

Before continuing with the analysis, it is necessary to clarify two points. The first is that while this essay studies Iranian revolutionaries, it is important to note that these were not the only group of Iranians engaging with the region and the wider world in the 1970s. The Pahlavi state, too, sought to position itself as a regional power and adopted an increasingly assertive foreign policy in the years leading up to the revolution.[12] Though space does not permit an extensive discussion of these connections in this essay, the Pahlavi state lurks in the background of the analysis, its regional engagements mirroring those of its opponents. It, too, would leave a deep mark on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

The second is that, in my analysis of the 1970s, I include both Islamist and leftist forces under the umbrella of "Iranian revolutionaries." While these groups infamously came to blows following the Revolution, with the latter ultimately being crushed by the increasingly repressive state of the former, they both played a key role in Iran's revolutionary mobilization. Additionally, despite ideological frictions, the boundaries between "Islamist" and "leftist" forces were often blurred prior to 1979.[13] Despite his own hostility to the left, even Khomeini had to keep his messaging vague and adaptable before taking power, positioning him as an oppositional figurehead even among those who did not share his political philosophy.[14] "Islamists" and "leftists," on individual and organizational levels, crossed paths in both material and ideological terms. But most importantly, and why both feature in this essay, is that both Islamists and leftists participated in the culture of anti-imperial internationalism that defined the era. Both identified American power and its regional subsidiaries as an enemy. And both tapped into the language of Third Worldism that offered a powerful mobilizing framework in this era. They often did so in distinct ways, and while the discourse of anti-imperialism overlapped, it would narrow following the revolution. Yet we must avoid the tendency to read the political consolidation of the 1980s backwards into the pre-revolutionary era. Though the role of the left would later be obscured by hegemonic narratives both within and outside of Iran, an account that only covers one ideological orientation tells but a partial story of the Revolution.

An International Road to Revolution

At the root of oppositional Iranian internationalism in the pre-revolutionary era was a common enemy and a sense of shared struggle. The main enemy was the United States. Under the penumbra of American imperialism fell regional powers: the Shah's government, Israel, American and British-backed Gulf states, and others. Although they did so in slightly different ways, both leftist and Islamist forces frequently voiced a sense of a shared cause with groups in Lebanon, Oman, and especially Palestine. The revolutionary movements often voiced a sense of global struggle, an attack on "the structures of global power," "localized" in specific national contexts.[15] In Iran, this national context was defined by the 1953 coup, in which the United States and Britain had overthrown the country's prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, and the Shah's repressive, pro-American rule.

[11]Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2016): 613-616.

[12]Keshavarzian, "Globalizing the Iranian Revolution," 51; Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 127-128.

[13]Ali Mirsepassi, "A Quiet Revolution: In the Shadow of the Cold War," in *Global 1979*, 32; Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 179-180; Naghmeh Sohrabi, "Remembering the Palestine Group: Global Activism, Friendship, and the Iranian Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2019): 291; One interesting example of this overlap between religion and the "secular" left in pre-1979 Iran comes from the testimony of Khosrow Golesorkhi, a journalist and poet executed by the Shah's government in 1974. At his televised trial, Golesorkhi declared his Communist beliefs while also referencing the Battle of Karbala and quoting 'Ali. He stated that "I who am a Marxist-Leninist found social justice for the first time in the School of Islam and then reached socialism," reflecting the ideological fluidity of his milieu. "Excerpts from Khosrow Golesorkhi's Self-Defence at His Trial, January 1974" in Negin Nabavi, ed. *Modern Iran: A History in Documents* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016).

[14]Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (University of California Press, 1993), 26-32, 60-87; Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 222-223.

[15]Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 181.

To many Iranians, this was a straightforward imperial attack on the country's sovereignty, one which fit within a long history of imperial encroachment. It thus furthered a sense of common cause with regional revolutionaries fighting other domains of American and pro-American power. The struggle for Iran's self-determination was seen as connected to other regional efforts—a clear example of nationalism and internationalism reinforcing one another.

Perhaps the clearest connections between Iran and a broader anti-imperial movement came from the leftist guerrilla movements of the 1970s. Although their numbers were small and their military efforts generally unsuccessful, their anti-imperial worldview tapped into a much more widely-shared current in this era. This includes the statements of official organizations, as well as individuals. The Fada'i guerrillas, in a 1973 communique, laid out this worldview in detail. Declaring their opposition to "imperialism, Zionism," and the Shah's "dictatorial fascist system," these revolutionaries considered the Pahlavi state (which, in line with the American Nixon Doctrine, had been assuming a much more aggressive international role) a pro-American "gendarme" in "the region's counterrevolutionary fight."[16] Yet they also saw the struggle against this system as region-wide, pointing to "insurrectionist hotspots in Palestine, Dhofar [Oman; sic], Iran, and Turkey." It was not only formal organizations that voiced these critiques: individual activists expressed similar sentiments. In 1971, for example, the state tried Shokrollah Paknejad, a young activist who had been arrested attempting to cross the border to Iraq and ultimately make contact with the Palestinian factions. Paknejad's widely-circulated testimony clearly voiced a sense of shared struggle, declaring that "imperialism has brought oppression not only to the Palestinians, but to our people [Iranians] and a large number of other peoples of the world."[17] Accordingly, the Shah's attempt to prosecute such an act of solidarity was presented as the act of a "puppet" and a capitulation to imperialism.

The connections between Iranian revolutionaries and their regional counterparts in the 1970s were not limited to shared discourse, however. They also (as revealed in this essay's opening anecdote) involved material connections, transnational flows of people and experience. This is where the revolution's anti-imperial connections were most clearly localized in specific regional nodes: Lebanon, Palestine, and Oman all among them.[18]

A small but influential number of Iranian oppositionists spent time in these other regional "hotspots," receiving training, forging connections, and developing outlooks that would shape their subsequent trajectory. The numbers involved were small, but these human-level transnational connections were the skeleton on which a broader global outlook was built. Palestinian groups in particular, based largely in Jordan and then (after 1971) in Lebanon, were particularly important in facilitating not just ideological cohesion, but material connections throughout the region.[19] In addition to receiving military training abroad, a small number of Iranian revolutionaries directly joined other regional struggles, considering them part of a "struggle against [a] common enemy." These networks of revolutionaries also extended, in the early 1970s, to Oman's Dhufar region, where the British-backed sultanate was battling a Communist and anti-colonial insurgency. Some Iranian revolutionaries, mostly from the Fada'iyan and the Mojahedin, joined the Dhufari rebels. The connection between these two causes was made clearer by the Shah's direct intervention on behalf of the Sultan. Although the Dhufari insurgency would be defeated in the mid-1970s, Oman remained an important cause for Iranian revolutionaries: with the Shah's troops remaining in the country until 1979, several revolutionary factions (including the Communist Tudeh) understood the Dhufar war within the larger framework of imperialism, and thus saw the withdrawal of the Iranian army from Oman a matter of "national independence."[20]

The 1970s Iranian opposition's connections with other regional forces were hardly limited to the leftist parties. Islamist and clerical opposition networks also developed important ties throughout the region, albeit often in a less systematic way. The Shi'i clergy, of course, was already a transnational network, and with Khomeini himself exiled in Iraq, engagement with other regional forces was unavoidable. Lebanon, with its large and socio-politically disadvantaged Shi'i community (along with the presence of Palestinian organizations in the country), was a particularly important site of regional interconnection. Mostafa Chamran, who would later become revolutionary Iran's minister of defence, spent much of the pre-revolutionary era in Lebanon, developing strong ties with Lebanese-Iranian Shi'i leader Musa al-Sadr and his political party/militia, the Amal Movement. Chamran himself leaned towards Mehdi Bazargan's Liberation Movement of Iran, but also maintained contacts with a wide variety of other factions,

[16] "A Declaration of the Cherikha-ye Fedai-ye Khalq about the Plan of Imperialism, Zionism, and Other Reactionaries and the Need for the [Middle Eastern] Region's Revolutionary Forces to Unite (Excerpts)," February 1973, Wilson Center Digital Archive, *Nabard-e khalq: nashriyeh-ye dakheli* vol. 1 (Bahman 1352s [January/February 1973]), 1-2, 6-9. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.

[17] Sohrabi, "Remembering the Palestine Group: Global Activism, Friendship, and the Iranian Revolution," 290.

[18] These were not the only theaters of Iranian internationalism in the 1970s. A number of Iranian opposition factions also built connections in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.

[19] Shamshiri, "Revolutionary Transnationalism in the Persian Gulf," 345.

[20] "Tudeh Party Calls for a United Front," in *Middle East Report* 71 (Oct 1978).

serving as a conduit for diverse groups of Iranian revolutionaries abroad.[21] Another key figure facilitating these transnational revolutionary connections was Mohammad Montazeri, son of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri. Montazeri enjoyed connections to the clerical network in Najaf, while preserving his own organizational autonomy.[22] Figures like Chamran and Montazeri, amid the chaotic backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War, facilitated the movement of a small number of Iranian revolutionaries (a few of whom would go on to play important roles in the early Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)) through Lebanon and elsewhere, forging connections with both Lebanese Shi'a and Palestinians.[23]

These Islamist revolutionaries, themselves a diverse and often fractious group, espoused distinct forms of internationalism that, while often distancing themselves from their Communist counterparts, nevertheless borrowed heavily from Third Worldist and anti-colonial ideas. The most apparent distinguishing feature in Islamist rhetoric was, of course, the role of Islam and the *Umma* as a community to be liberated. Islamist revolutionaries were less likely to use the Marxist-leaning language of class, with figures like Khomeini instead referring more vaguely to "the oppressed" (*mostazafin*).[24] Distinctions between Islamist-oriented and leftist revolutionaries could and did surface in the pre-1979 era: they precipitated a bitter 1975 split among the Mojahedin, for example. On a different front, Yahya (Rahim) Safavi, a future IRGC leader who received military training at a Palestinian camp in Lebanon in 1978, lamented the lack of religiosity among his hosts and the "Marxist-Leninist" orientation of many Palestinian fighters.[25]

Still, these ideological distinctions were not absolute in the pre-1979 era. Safavi, after all, was—despite his ideological differences—still training in the same camp as his leftist counterparts. Mohammad Montazeri's language reflected the influence of both Islam and left-wing guerrillas: he was described by a fellow revolutionary as "[working] for the freedom of all subjected people and especially for the dignity of the Islamic *umma*."[26]

Even Khomeini himself, despite his antipathy to the left, expressed this mixed rhetoric. In a 1978 interview, after firmly rejecting collaboration with Marxist factions, he echoed leftist-inflected anti-imperial language, arguing that "the United States and the other big powers…exploit the wealth of poor countries, fostering their agents in these countries and supporting the repression exerted against the peoples of the Third World. The United States, which was behind the 1953 coup d'etat and the Shah's return to and continuance in power, has not changed its policy."[27] Here we see, once again, the connection between an Iranian national struggle (against the Shah and American power) and a broader internationalist struggle. Despite their ideological differences, many otherwise-opposed revolutionary factions could unite in the pre-1979 era around a discourse of anti-imperialism that was simultaneously nationalist and internationalist. The latent contradictions between these tendencies would become far more apparent after 1979.

This internationalist outlook, tying the Iranian struggle against the Shah to other regional anti-imperial causes, was not limited to political leaders. Instead, the internationalist ethos impacted mass politicization at the ground level. Historian Naghmeh Sohrabi, describing the aforementioned case of Shokrollah Paknejad and the "Palestine Group," argues that the activist's testimony, with its clear expression of solidarity and revolutionary internationalism, proved popular among a younger generation of Iranians—many of whom would take to the streets to overthrow the Shah less than a decade later. She argues that the trial exemplified a "burgeoning…sense of belonging to a global stage and of being conversant in the language of global revolution."[28] This global context, in which others throughout the region and world were understood to share aligned causes, helped give the revolutionary effort meaning. Historian Ali Mirsepassi, writing of his own experience of the revolutionary era in the provincial city of Golpayegan, echoes this impression by describing the global consciousness that pervaded 1970s Iran, even in towns in which contact with foreigners was limited. In particular, he notes, the Palestinian struggle appeared as an important point of inspiration, shaping both his own politicization and that of those around him.[29] A sense of belonging to a wider revolutionary collective, then, one that stretched across national borders, shaped the Iranian Revolution in the outlooks of ordinary people.

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[21]On Chamran, see Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 188-189; Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, "Postrevolutionary Iran and Shi'i Lebanon: Contested Histories of Shi'i Transnationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 2 (2007): 274-281.

[22]Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 185-187.

[23]Despite the fact that both played important roles in Iranian relations with Lebanon, Montazeri and Chamran often differed in their politics. Iranian opposition figures connected to Lebanon generally fell into one of two camps: supporters of Amal (often affiliated with the Liberation Movement) and supporters of the PLO and the Lebanese National Movement. As Amal and the PLO increasingly came to blows in southern Lebanon, this divide caused a great deal of friction, especially during and after the Revolution. Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon," 139-142; Shaery-Eisenlohr, "Postrevolutionary Iran and Shi'i Lebanon," 276-281

[24]Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 47-50. While distinct, it is worth noting that this populist-Islamism owed an immense debt to the left.

[25]Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 191-192.

[26]Ibid 193.

[27]"'The Start of a Gigantic Explosion': An Interview with Iranian Shi'ite Leader Ayatollah Khomenie [sic]," *Middle East Report* 69 (Jul-Aug, 1978).

[28]Sohrabi, "Remembering the Palestine Group: Global Activism, Friendship, and the Iranian Revolution," 291.

[29] Ali Mirsepassi, "Seeing the World from a Humble Corner: A Political Memoir," in *Global 1979*, 88.

The Revolution, the Region, and the Pressures of State-Building

The Iranian Revolution, as this essay has argued, reflected the influence of many ideological and political forces, from anti-imperialist Third Worldism to nationalism and Islamism. Accordingly, in 1979, Iran's new revolutionary leaders presented themselves in many different, overlapping ways: as national leaders, as Muslim revolutionaries, and as models for "oppressed peoples" globally. This discourse drew upon and reflected the earlier internationalist connections of Iranian revolutionaries with other regional forces. As long as they could unite around a common short-term goal and a common enemy, this remained a reasonably effective united front. In 1979, however, it did not take long for (increasingly violent) political conflict to emerge. As the revolutionaries' attention turned to state-building, Khomeini and his allies increasingly monopolized the political sphere, shutting opponents out of state institutions (and ultimately arresting, exiling, and executing many) over the next several years. This consolidation of power was facilitated by a sense of national crisis, furthered by both the 1979 hostage-taking at the U.S. Embassy and the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. This political narrowing, and the corresponding focus on the practical necessities of state-building, served to limit previously developed transnational solidarities. In the 1980s, these connections remained important, but existed in tension with, and were increasingly made to serve, national interests.

In early 1979, Palestine's Yasser Arafat became the first world leader to visit Tehran following the triumph of the revolution. He was greeted by a massive crowd chanting in support of the Iranian and Palestinian Revolutions. "For a moment," historian Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi writes, "Iran seemed to be inaugurating a new era of anti-colonial revolution, in which the liberation of Palestine would be front-and-centre."[30]But this internationalist, anti-imperial movement was on far shakier ground than it initially appeared. After all, many of the Iranian revolutionaries' pre-1979 contacts with the PLO had been made by leftist organizations—groups which now increasingly clashed with Khomeini's Islamist agenda and would soon be subject to increasingly violent repression.[31]Indeed, Arafat himself posed a challenge for Iran's new government. Arafat's party, Fatah, may have overlapped with some Iranian revolutionaries in its opposition to American and Israeli hegemony, but the Palestinian movement was, by and large, a secular and left-leaning one at this stage. Iran's new leaders were faced with the puzzle of supporting the Palestinian revolution as an anti-colonial and Islamic cause, while navigating serious ideological disagreements with the main Palestinian factions.[32] Historian Maryam Alemzadeh argues that the earliest post-revolutionary years thus witnessed a "discursive transformation," in which Iran's role as part of an internationalist liberation movement was de-emphasized in favor of a more narrowly Islamic orientation and domestic state-building under Khomeini. While the Islamic Republic continued to voice its opposition to Israel, its concrete, material interactions with the Palestinian struggle remained much more ambivalent.[33]

The early Islamic Republic channeled prior internationalist connections into a new framework driven by state interests and the need for political consolidation. This pattern is clearly reflected in the early history of the IRGC. As mentioned above, a small but influential number of early IRGC leaders had pre-revolutionary connections with guerrilla movements in Lebanon and beyond. Although their ideological outlook could differ from these groups, they still participated in a broader discourse of anti-colonialism and international struggle. This was often framed in Islamic terms, and these terms grew increasingly exclusionary with the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, but figures like Montazeri[34] (both father and son) and Chamran remained genuinely committed to a more global agenda.[35]

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[30]Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Rules of the Game," Sidecar (New Left Review Blog), April 25,2024.https://newleftreview.org /sidecar /posts/rules-of-the-game

[31]Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Rules of the Game." See, for example, the connections between the Fada'iyan and the PLO mentioned in the introduction. This also included Islamist-leaning revolutionaries with a more internationalist orientation than Khomeini (Montazeri, for example).

[32]A major point of contention, and one that mirrored domestic political conflict in Iran, was whom to support in Lebanon. At this point, the PLO was opposed by the Shi'i Amal and its major state ally, Syria. While "moderates" affiliated with the Provisional Government (Chamran, Bazargan, and Sadeq Qotbzadeh) favored Amal, the more "revolutionary" line of Montazeri and others stressed the importance of supporting the PLO. These divisions within the Iranian government would shape relations with Lebanon and Syria throughout the early 1980s. Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon," 139-142.

[33]Maryam Alemzadeh, "The Islamic Republic Party and the Palestinian Cause: A Discursive Transformation of the Third Worldist Agenda," in *The Fate of Third Worldism in the Middle East*, 170-175.

[34]It is worth noting that, despite his role in the early history of (what would become) the IRGC, Mohammad Montazeri never took an official leadership position in the Corps. Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 202.

[35]Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 201; Mohammad Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, Issue 2 (2013), 137-152. Again, it is worth noting that the exact content of this internationalism differed greatly among these figures, with Chamran favoring Amal and Montazeri adopting a more pro-Palestinian line.

Mohammad Montazeri, for example, argued that the Revolution "belongs to all Muslims of the world" and sought to mobilize revolutionary Islam on behalf of "'*al-nas*' [the people] and for all the repressed of the world.[36] One of the IRGC's first major declarations described its "goal" as "guarding the Islamic Revolution in Iran and expanding it globally based on authentic Islamic ideology."[37] Yet with Khomeini and others largely concerned with domestic state-building, the first half of this goal took precedence, with export of the Revolution only pursued when it was seen to bolster the Islamic Republic. The IRGC's earliest major actions involved crushing domestic rebellions, most notably that of the Kurds, while it also played a major role in the war with Iraq. While the Corps alluded to its guerrilla past to justify its ad-hoc organizational structure, it seriously diluted the internationalist agenda of Montazeri and others, instead developing a military model that both relied on and served the state.[38]

The early Islamic Republic was an uncertain and politically fractious polity. While a multitude of factions struggled over the direction of the revolution and the structure of the post-1979 state, the internationalist commitments of the revolutionary era remained both powerful and contested throughout the early 1980s. Key to this process was the IRGC's Unit for (Islamic) Liberation Movements, a short-lived body supported by Mohammad and Hossein-Ali Montazeri and, after the former's death in 1981, under the leadership of Mehdi Hashemi.[39] Montazeri and Hashemi both saw the Revolution as carrying global significance for oppressed peoples around the world, and sought to direct policy to this end. These revolutionaries thus sought allies across the region and beyond, and, importantly, across sectarian boundaries. In 1980, these efforts were complemented on the diplomatic front by a large Gathering of International Liberation Movements held in Tehran. The conference brought together a disparate group of anti-colonial movements from the region and beyond, and sought to position Iran at the head of a global revolutionary wave. While both Khomeini and (Hossein-Ali) Montazeri expressed support for the gathering, the latter was notably more enthusiastic.[40]

Yet the conference revealed a great deal of dissension between these (often ideologically incongruous) movements, with participants debating the role of the Soviet Union, the secular Palestinian factions, and the balance between Shi'i and Palestinian organizations in Lebanon. The conference was the last time the Islamic Republic sought to gather together such a large and ideologically diverse group of revolutionaries. Subsequently, Tehran's support would narrow towards "genuine Islamic forces," promoting only those groups in greater alignment with Iran's own (increasingly narrowly-defined) ideology and interests.[41]

The convergence of international realpolitik and domestic state-building (including the purging of the left) can be seen clearly in Iran's post-revolutionary relations with Oman. The revolution in Dhufar, while attracting support from some non-Marxist corners, had long been Communist in orientation. The Iranian factions most active in supporting the Omani revolutionaries were leftist guerrilla factions mentioned previously. Islamist-leaning revolutionaries, on the other hand, were far less directly involved in Dhufar, while Iranian fighters who ventured to Oman were often seen with suspicion and subjected to competing and ambivalent narratives.[42] The Omani revolution had also ended by the time of the Shah's overthrow, although Iranian troops remained in the country. All of this facilitated the Islamic Republic's generally positive relationship with Muscat. This grew even more important as the war with Iraq left Tehran largely bereft of international allies. In the early 1980s, Oman—seeking domestic and regional stability—opposed efforts to direct the GCC against Iran, while Khomeini informed Omani leaders that the revolutionary government would honor the Shah's previous agreements with the country.[43] In the Omani case, the revolutionary connections of the 1970s did not prove useful to post-revolutionary Tehran. Instead, the Islamic Republic forged a cordial relationship with the Omani government, borrowing more from the Shah's regional policy than from the pre-1979 opposition.

[36]Alemzadeh, "Revolutionaries for Life," 203.
[37]Ibid 201.
[38]Ibid 207-209.
[39] Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Searching for Friends Across the Global South: Classified Documents, Iran, and the Export of the Revolution in 1983," in *The Fate of Third Worldism in the Middle East*, 73-75; Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon,"142-143.
[40]Mohammad Ataie, "Brothers, Comrades, and the Quest for the Islamist International: The First Gathering of Liberation Movements in Revolutionary Iran," in *The Fate of Third Worldism in the Middle East*, 127.
[41]Ataie, "Brothers, Comrades, and the Quest for the Islamist International," 142-144. By narrowly-defined ideology, I mean the exclusion of groups which did not hew to the state's political outlook (secular and leftist organizations, for example). By narrowly-defined interests, I mean that Tehran was increasingly reluctant to back revolutionary movements in contexts that were not seen to strengthen the state's security.
[42] Shamshiri, "The Gendered Politics of Dead Bodies," 115-118; Naghmeh Sohrabi, "Where the Small Things Are: Thoughts on Writing Revolutions and their Histories," *Jadaliyya*, May 21, 2020. https://www.jadaliyya.com /Details/41154.
[43]Marc Valeri, "Iran-Oman Relations Since the 1970s: A Mutually Beneficial *Modus Vivendi*," in *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*, ed. Gawdat Bahgat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Neil Quilliam (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 154-156. This included agreements on navigation, the continental shelf, and cultural relations.

As in the pre-1979 era, Lebanon was a central locus of Iran's post-revolutionary regional engagement. In the words of Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, a radical Iranian diplomat and politician who played a key role in the early history of Hezbollah, the country was a "springboard for promulgating the revolution."[44] By the time of the Revolution, Lebanon was engulfed in a multi-sided civil war involving numerous political and sectarian groups, as well as neighboring states. These post-revolutionary policies drew on multiple foundations: pre-existing Shi'i politicization in Lebanon, Palestinian revolutionary activity and Israeli occupation, and a wave of (Sunni and Shi'i) enthusiasm for the Iranian revolutionary model at a time when earlier forms of mobilization seemed to be failing. The early Islamic Republic's approach to Lebanon was complex and frequently shifting. Like much of Iran's foreign policy, it reflected factional conflict in Tehran. And although Lebanon would see some of revolutionary Iran's most determined efforts to export the revolution, it also offers a window into the shift away from earlier revolutionary internationalism, and towards a more state-driven approach.

From the beginning, revolutionary Iran's engagement with Lebanon was a point of fierce contention in Tehran, a disagreement that indexed larger political differences. The Provisional Government's "moderates" sought an alliance with Amal, were skeptical of intervention in support of Palestine, and ultimately did not seek the "export" of the Revolution. "Radicals" like Montazeri, on the other hand, saw the Revolution as containing global significance and sought to intervene actively in support of the PLO. The first major incident in this regard came in 1979, when Mohammad Montazeri tried to dispatch volunteers to fight alongside Fatah in southern Lebanon; in the face of opposition from Iranian moderates, Amal, and Syria, he failed.[45]

Following the consolidation of clerical power in 1981 and Israel's invasion of Lebanon the following year, Iran once again sought involvement in Lebanon, this time sending IRGC troops to the Beqaa Valley. Iran also cultivated an alliance with the newly-formed Association of Muslim Ulama in Lebanon, a network of Shi'i and Sunni religious leaders who saw the Iranian model of mosque-based mobilization as a key tool for rallying resistance to Israeli occupation, and that helped to lay the groundwork for Hezbollah.[46]

These interventions were driven by the Islamic Republic's revolutionary internationalists, including Ayatollah Montazeri.

[44]Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon," 139.
[45]Ibid 143-148.
[46]Mohammad Ataie, "Exporting the Iranian Revolution: Ecumenical Clerics in Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 53, Issue 4 (2021): 682-688

The IRGC established training camps in the Beqaa, seeking to foster a "combatant society against the occupation" and playing a major role in the establishment of Hezbollah.[47] Yet this internationalist policy was contested—notably, Khomeini himself was far less enthusiastic about revolutionary "export" than Montazeri.[48] Montazeri's fall in the late 1980s and the rise of Khamenei and Rafsanjani sealed Iran's new approach. The Islamic Republic remained a key supporter of Hezbollah, but in pursuit of "strategic depth" rather than revolutionary upheaval. Accordingly, Iran supported Hezbollah's entrance into the Lebanese political sphere and its postwar alliance with Amal. This signalled a shift away from "revolution" and towards a role in an established political system. This shift was also accompanied by closer relations with Assad's Syria, more for practical than ideological reasons. Iran continued to support regional resistance to Israeli occupation in Lebanon, and the alliance continued to be framed in internationalist terms (sometimes anti-imperial, sometimes sectarian), but by the 1990s, the driving force was less revolution than regional power and security amid ongoing tensions with the United States, Israel, and many Arab states.[49]

By the late 1980s, the internationalist ethos in Iranian revolutionary policy had clearly begun to ebb. The Unit for Islamic Liberation Movements had faded amid increasing ideological and political exclusivity, while Mehdi Hashemi was arrested and executed in 1987.[50] Shortly before this, Khomeini himself denounced Hashemi and the Unit, declaring that "all the activities in the name of support to so-called liberation organizations must stop and all those involved in this matter condemned."[51] Mohammad Montazeri, a key internationalist figure of the early revolutionary years, was killed in the bombing of the Islamic Republican Party's headquarters in 1981, although his father remained extremely influential, and for a time appeared to be Khomeini's heir apparent. During the Iran-Iraq War, practical alliances trumped anti-imperial ideology, leading to backroom arms deals with both the United States and Israel.

[47]Ataie, "Exporting the Iranian Revolution," 684
[48]Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon," 147.
[49]Ataie, "Exporting the Iranian Revolution," 689-690. Though largely beyond the scope of this essay, Iran's policy towards Syria in these years is also instructive. Iran's longstanding alliance with the (ideologically incongruous) Baathist state was primarily driven by the search for regional influence and security. Earlier revolutionary internationalist leaders, especially Montazeri, were deeply skeptical of Assad's government, even cultivating some ties with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The fall of this intentionalist wing ensured that Tehran was more concerned with cultivating a regional ally than with spreading the revolution to Damascus. Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon," 148-150.
[50]One study suggests that Mehdi Hashemi's execution was driven largely by Rafsanjani's conflicts with Montazeri, and was the result of Hashemi's opposition to backroom dealings with the United States. Ulrich von Schwerin, "Mehdi Hashemi and the Iran-Contra-Affair," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, issue 4 (2015): 520.
[51]Fuchs, "Searching for Friends Across the Global South," 74.

Hossein-Ali Montazeri was one of the early Islamic Republic's most powerful and ideologically committed internationalists, but his opposition to the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988 sealed his political downfall.[52] Following Khomeini's death and with Montazeri sidelined, Iran's new leaders, Ali Khamenei and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, followed a more realpolitik-driven policy, seeking to cultivate allies and shore up regional power. Subsequent Iranian policy (especially in Lebanon and Palestine) continued to bear the marks of earlier international connections, but fully subordinated revolutionary internationalism to the interests of the state.[53]

The Limits of Internationalism and the Traces of History

Iran's regional policy remains a topic of fervent discussion in the United States and elsewhere, yet it is rarely understood in historical context. Iran has long sought to position itself as a regional power, with institutions like the IRGC's Quds Force playing an important role throughout the Middle East. Iran has cultivated close alliances with political and military organizations in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and beyond. It has undertaken large-scale military intervention in Syria. And it has continued to assert its support, both ideological and material, for the Palestinian resistance. Yet accounts that portray Iran's regional involvement as driven primarily by internationally disruptive revolutionary enthusiasm are mistaken. Iran seeks a regional role not primarily as a revolutionary movement—that era ended long ago—but as a state seeking to guard its security and influence.

Examining the history of Iranian internationalism can shed new light on the dynamics driving the country's foreign policy. From an oppositional sense of anti-imperialist unity in the 1970s, Iran's international engagement was reshaped by the Revolution and the imperatives of state-building amid international isolation and war. Whereas in the 1970s, the Iranian opposition's sense of solidarity with other regional movements was rooted in an analysis of shared conditions and a sense of imperial encroachment, the post-1979 era generated tension between the Islamic Republic's dual identities as a revolutionary movement and as a nation-state. The latter aspect won out. The new government voiced a sense of international solidarity when it appeared to suit the state's interest, but was unwilling to risk Iran's very statehood. This should not be surprising: the internationalist solidarity of the pre-1979 era was not abstract or sentimental, but rooted in an analysis of shared interests. With the attainment of state power and a dramatically altered international environment, these interests were reconfigured and increasingly drew as much or more from the Shah's regional policy as they did from the pre-1979 opposition.

This limiting of Iranian internationalism was thus rooted in two key factors. First was the consolidation of Khomeini's government and the corresponding narrowing of the political sphere, as rival political currents were forced out of government, driven into exile, imprisoned, or killed. This sidelined many key internationalist figures, from the left to Islamists who did not hew to the official line. Second was, as previously mentioned, the need to secure the Iranian state and search for international allies. These factors have combined to generate an Iranian foreign policy that has largely jettisoned its revolutionary roots—one which seeks to safeguard the state within the international order, rather than to overturn it entirely.

The traces of anti-imperialist ideology and revolutionary internationalism have not completely disappeared. The revolution and the state to which it gave rise emerged out of a profoundly internationalist milieu, and it still reflects that history, if in a limited way. But anti-imperial resistance is less the driving factor in Iran's foreign policy than an ideological adornment, deployed to justify, organize, and explain policies undertaken with a much more state-oriented set of interests.[54] The early Islamic Republic exhibited tension between its identities as a revolutionary movement seeking to spread its message and a nation-state seeking sovereignty and security. Following 1979, the balance between nationalism and revolutionary internationalism that had earlier proven co-consecutive shifted, the former generally superseding the latter—not erasing it entirely, but absorbing and repurposing it. Iran's continuing opposition to American and Israeli power has allowed these languages to converge to an extent, but only when it seems to suit national security.

In Oman, for example, revolution never suited the Islamic Republic's interests, and, despite very different political models, Tehran has long maintained a solid relationship with the Sultanate (which also serves as a conduit between Iran and other powers, including the United States).[55] In Lebanon, Iran's involvement is intense. While relations between the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah cannot be reduced to that of a puppetmaster and puppet, Iran does remain the Lebanese group's closest ally and source of foreign support. This is often framed, as are many of Iran's alliances, in revolutionary, anti-imperial terms. Yet Iran has not encouraged Hezbollah to overturn the Lebanese political system, or to establish its own Islamic Republic. Instead, Iran seems content to cultivate an ally embedded in the Lebanese system, one that gives the country "strategic depth" without fully overturning the regional order.

[52] Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 187.
[53] Ataie, "Exporting the Iranian Revolution," 689-690.
[54] Mohammad Ataie, "Continuity Despite Revolution: Iran's Support for Non-State Actors," *Middle East Briefs*, No. 141 (May 2021): 6-7.
[55] Valeri, "Iran-Oman Relations Since the 1970s," 149-163.

Finally, there is the case of Palestine. The Islamic Republic has indeed taken serious international risks—including sanctions and military threats[56]—to support Palestinian resistance, but its policy since October of 2023 has highlighted the state's caution and pragmatism. Tehran has proven unwilling to risk a war that might jeopardize the future of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, its major military actions since 2023 have been responses to attacks on Iran or Iranian interests (and hence comprehensible in terms of national defence and deterrence), not to the destruction of Gaza, for which it refuses to risk its own survival.[57] Thus, although the history of Iranian internationalism allows the Islamic Republic to use the language of anti-imperialism to explain its place in the region, the substance of this revolutionary approach has been absorbed by and made to serve the interests of the state, throwing the limits of state-driven internationalism into stark relief.

[56] It is worth noting, however, that these onerous sanctions have more to do with the nuclear program than Palestinian resistance. The nuclear program is, of course, another example of state security driving Tehran's policy.

[57] On the practical limits of Iranian support for Palestine, see Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Rules of the Game" and Maryam Alemzadeh, "Iran, Palestine and the Axis of Resistance," *Middle East Report* 313 (Winter 2024).

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From Chaos to Control: How the 1990s Shaped Russia's State Capitalism and Authoritarianism

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Abstract: The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s created a complex economic and political landscape that fundamentally shaped Russia's subsequent governance model. This paper examines how the financial turmoil and oligarchic power struggles of the post-Soviet era directly influenced Vladimir Putin's strategic approach to state capitalism and authoritarian control in Russia. By analyzing the intersection of historical economic conditions and contemporary political dynamics, the research demonstrates how the foundational challenges of the 1990s established a persistent cycle of centralized power and economic intervention. The findings reveal that Putin's initial political project—diminish oligarchic influence and reestablishing state dominance over key sectors—was not merely a reactionary strategy but a calculated response to the systemic vulnerabilities exposed during the 1990s. Moreover, contemporary authoritarian control has been further entrenched by global challenges and domestic political pressures, creating a self-perpetuating system of governance that continues to define Russia's political economy.

Key Words: Post-Soviet Russia, Vladimir Putin, political economy, authoritarianism

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Introduction

In the post-Soviet era, as democracies gained ground across former Soviet republics, Russia's political path unfolded far more turbulently. Despite Russia's liberal experiments under President Boris Yeltsin, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the country remains gripped by autocratic rule and restricted access to markets. Over several decades, it has faced various domestic, international, and economic pressures to transition toward Western ideologies, yet today, the nation stands as a firm pillar of state capitalism and authoritarianism. This ideological legacy can be traced far into Russia's roots as well as from the contribution of one man: Vladimir Putin. Through these unique pressures and influences, the question remains: *To what extent did the economic turmoil and oligarchic power struggles of post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s shape Putin and the Kremlin's approach to state capitalism and create a cycle of authoritarian control that continues to influence Russian politics today?*

This paper contends that the economic turmoil and oligarchic dominance of the 1990s not only shaped Vladimir Putin's initial strategy to curtail elite power and reassert state control over strategic industries, but also set in motion a self-reinforcing cycle of centralized authority and state capitalism. The institutional arrangements and political dynamics forged in response to the post-Soviet crisis became deeply entrenched, ensuring that the same mechanisms once intended to stabilize the economy now perpetuate Russia's authoritarian political order and interventionist economic model, a trajectory further sustained by contemporary geopolitical pressures and domestic constraints. The broader economic chaos of the 1990s created a popular mandate for Putin's statism and reshaped the institutional landscape, concentrating economic power in ways that made it uniquely susceptible to co-optation by a centralized state. This initial path was then 'locked in' by the influx of petrodollars, which provided the regime with the means to sustain this model without needing to foster broad-based economic development. To support this argument, this paper explores potential causes through the lenses of theoretical frameworks such as Path Dependency and Rentier State theory to help explain how historical economic conditions and modern pressures reinforce persistent authoritarian structures. Methodologically, this argument is tested against four key sections: the mechanics of state capitalism, comparison between different post-Communist states, counterfactual analysis, and the impact of oil, each addressing different components of the broader question.

The first section on the mechanics of state capitalism provides a comprehensive analysis of Putin's strategic economic model, examining how the Kremlin transformed Russia's economic landscape through three fundamental mechanisms: control over strategic sectors, selective privatization, and centralized economic planning. Putin's state capitalism is defined by state control over strategic sectors like energy and infrastructure, turning key industries into tools of political and economic influence. Through selective privatization, loyalty-based oligarchic management, and centralized economic planning, the Kremlin ensures that economic power remains tightly aligned with state interests and directives. The analysis centers on how state-owned enterprises were transformed into instruments of political and economic power, providing crucial insight into how Putin created an economic system that ensures near-total state control, effectively using economic mechanisms as direct extensions of political power and creating a resilient framework that can rapidly respond to both internal political challenges and external geopolitical pressures.

The research continues through a second section with a comparative analysis of post-Soviet economic transformations, examining how different nations navigated the complex transition from communist structures through detailed case studies of Poland and Belarus. By employing the Path Dependency theory, this segment meticulously traces how each nation's initial economic and political choices in the 1990s created cascading effects that fundamentally shaped their long-term political economies. This provides critical evidence demonstrating how initial policy responses during the uncertain 1990s created divergent economic trajectories, with each nation's approach reflecting unique historical, political, and cultural contexts that continue to influence their current economic landscapes.

Through a counterfactual analysis, the third section provides an examination of the potential outcomes had Russia implemented more structured market reforms during the 20th century. The analysis reveals how a more measured approach could have mitigated extreme economic volatility, prevented rapid wealth concentration among oligarchs, and potentially fostered conditions more conducive to the growth of democratic institutions and political pluralism. Specifically, the section demonstrates how the chaotic economic transformation created the political conditions for Putin's authoritarian consolidation, whereas a more deliberate transition might have developed a more resilient political system with distributed economic power.

The final section of the research paper applies the Rentier State theory to analyze how Russia's extensive dependence on energy exports has reinforced and sustained its authoritarian state capitalist model. The analysis reveals how Putin has systematically leveraged resource revenues to consolidate power, creating networks of economic dependency that extend from oligarchic elites to broader population segments. Through this lens, the section provides critical insight into how resource wealth can be strategically deployed to sustain authoritarian governance, demonstrating the interconnection between economic structures and political control.

Overall, findings reveal that while Putin's state capitalism initially emerged as a response to the 1990s crisis, its endurance stems from both entrenched historical legacies and contemporary challenges, including reliance on energy exports, institutional inertia, and resistance to Western influence. Understanding this trajectory is essential not only for interpreting Russia's domestic governance but also for assessing its foreign policy behavior and resilience to international pressures. As Russia's relations with Western governments continue to deteriorate, reflecting on the legacy of the 1990s clarifies the structural constraints and motivations shaping its state capitalist model today.

Theoretical Background

This literature review and analysis of previous approaches examines and evaluates modern works on Russia's economic challenges in the late 20th century and their influence on President Vladimir Putin and his government as they transformed economic policy towards state-controlled capitalism. These sources highlight the various historical factors that influenced the Kremlin's decisions throughout the past two decades and continue to influence policy today. Notably, the existing body of scholarly research reveals a significant gap in the understanding of the comprehensive mechanisms through which the economic transformations of the 1990s continue to shape Russia's current political and economic landscape. While extensive literature explores the initial economic transitions, there is a conspicuous shortage of in-depth research connecting Putin's consolidation actions at the turn of the 21st century to the nation's sustained and present-day authoritarian system. Meanwhile, modern scholarly work regarding contemporary autocratic rule attributes it to broader historical roots, geopolitical narratives, and economic structures. However, it fails to provide a nuanced, direct connection to the pivotal economic and political actions of the 1990s, namely, the rapid dismantling of the Soviet command economy through chaotic privatization, the rise of oligarchic power, severe economic contraction and hyperinflation, and the 1998 financial crisis that shattered public confidence in liberal reforms. Overall, current work remains critical as it provides insight into the implications of Russia's economic struggles and its linkage to Putin's growth in power and initial policies as President.

A major area of focus from past literature is President Boris Yeltsin's economic approach and his privatization initiative in the early 1990s. While intended to bolster support for market reforms, these policies inadvertently created a class of wealthy oligarchs who acquired significant assets for minimal sums. Economist and Former Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Simeon Djankov, criticizes this view by detailing how Russia's initial privatization efforts from 1993-1994 failed to generate significant budget revenues and were followed by the 1995 loans-for-shares scheme, which transferred state-owned natural resource enterprises to wealthy businessmen in exchange for government loans.[1] This process, combined with abundant natural resources and political pressure from former communist elites, led to the emergence of powerful financial-industrial groups that bolstered crony capitalism in Russia. While Yeltsin's attempt at shock therapy was intended to progress the nation's economy to rapidly rival that of Western nations, Djankov explains why it failed to succeed in Russia. One key reason was that despite its potential to efficiently utilize its abundance of key natural resources, Russia's new wealth bolstered corruption during privatization auctions where access to natural resource assets was at stake. Djankov argues that the scale of available resources within Russia worked contrary to its best interests as the country did not have the systems of regulation and law enforcement in place to effectively optimize the output of these resources for the betterment of the nation.[2]

While the policy aimed to mimic Western counterparts through a more efficient economic model, the absence of a clear regulatory framework, rapid pace of these changes, and immense scale of privatization opened the door for wealth mismanagement in Russia. In contrast, the United Kingdom's own privatization wave under Margaret Thatcher was implemented alongside strong regulatory institutions, independent oversight bodies, and a well-established legal system that constrained insider abuse and ensured transparent market competition. Whereas the UK paired privatization with sector-specific regulators, competitive bidding rules, and long-standing protections against concentrated ownership[3], Russia adopted the outward form of Western liberalization without the institutional safeguards that made such reforms effective, enabling oligarchic capture rather than broad-based market development.

Researchers Anna Yelkina and Ken Kim further evaluate the success and failures of privatization, attributing much of its drawbacks to the lack of legal oversight. Referencing Russia's loans-for-share scheme—created to auction off stakes of Russian companies—Yelkina and Kim credit poor regulation of funds and the lack of legal oversight as a cause of the numerous corruption scandals, poor asset management, and oligarchs gaining control over major industries at a fraction of their true value.[4]

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[1]Djankov, Simeon. "Russia's Economy under Putin: From Crony Capitalism to State Capitalism." Peterson Institute for International Economics 15, no. 18 (September 2015): 2. https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/publications/pb/pb15-18.pdf

[2]Ibid 4.

[3]Edwards, Chris. "Margeret Thatcher's Privatization Legacy." *Cato Journal, Vol. 37, No. 1* (Winter 2017): 92. https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/2017/2/cj-v37n1-7.pdf.

[4]Ken, Kim, and Anna Yelkina. "Privatization in Russia: Its Past, Present, and Future." *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal* 68, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 15.

Together, these sources provide context and illustrate the building blocks of the Russian economy that required Vladimir Putin to initiate intense change. As Putin stepped into the presidency at the turn of the 21st century, the country was still grappling with the consequences of rapid privatization as oligarchs gained control over key sectors of the economy and were virtually untouchable. Meanwhile, economic instability plagued the nation as hyperinflation, economic contraction, and the 1998 financial crisis further expanded economic division at the expense of broader economic development and the welfare of ordinary Russian citizens.

This issue of economic disparity came to a breaking point in 1998 during Russia's financial collapse as international oil prices plummeted and the Yeltsin government was forced to default on its debt. Juliet Johnson examines the magnitude of this collapse and its effects throughout all aspects of the Russian economy, describing the 1998 crisis as the end of Russia's first attempt at economic transformation and the nail in the coffin for President Boris Yeltsin's reputation. In her piece, Johnson illustrates the various policies that contributed to the state of the Russian economy as Putin rose to power and designates the 1998 financial crisis as a critical juncture in this narrative, marking the culmination of the continuous economic challenges throughout the decade.[5] The crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of Russia's developing market economy while underscoring the urgent need for a new economic approach.

When examined collectively, these sources provide a clear trajectory of Russia's economic challenges during the 1990s. They demonstrate how the combination of poorly executed privatization, weak legal institutions, rampant corruption, and economic instability created a fertile ground for Putin's state-controlled capitalist model. The failures of the Yeltsin era, as described by these authors, effectively justified Putin's more interventionist approach to economic management and his efforts to rein in the oligarchs. As a whole, past literature frames the economic turmoil of the 1990s as the foundation that garnered public support for a stronger state role in the economy and shaped the Kremlin's policies upon Vladimir Putin's arrival.

Literature on Putin's early economic policies and handling of the oligarchs explores how the Kremlin strived to stabilize the economy and oligarchic exploitation of the 1990s through the new approach of state-controlled capitalism. Putin's swift and stringent actions are heavily emphasized throughout several academic works as authors contrast the inefficiencies of the late 20th century with the unyielding management under Putin's new regime.

Researcher Peter Rutland details Putin's independence and boldness compared to leaders before him as he moved swiftly to distance the oligarchs from their previously held political power.[6]

Putin's immediate actions can be seen as a direct response to the economic turmoil and oligarchic power struggles of the 1990s, as the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few oligarchs during the Yeltsin era had created a crisis of legitimacy for the Russian state. As Rutland elaborates, Putin's move to alienate the oligarchs from political authority was not merely a personal power play but a calculated strategy to restore public faith in the government and to reassert state control over key economic sectors.[7]

Putin took this approach further as loyalty to the Kremlin became of utmost importance, and those who expressed public discontent and resistance were punished for it. In his work, David Mandel explores this approach from the Russian government, stating, "The best-known examples are the prosecutions of oligarchs Gusinskii, Berezovskii, and Khodorkovskii, singled out for using their wealth to oppose Putin. Other oligarchs, whose fortunes are no less tainted by illegal activities, have been left in peace and enjoy privileged access to the Kremlin."[8] By targeting high-profile oligarchs who opposed him, Putin sent a clear message to the business elite: cooperation with the state was now mandatory for continued prosperity. Mandel further underscores the pragmatic nature of Putin's oligarch management strategy by effectively creating a new social contract between the state and the business elite. Oligarchs could retain their wealth and influence, but only if they aligned their interests with those of the state and refrained from challenging Putin's political authority.[9] This approach, coined by Mandel as "Managed Democracy," while initially popular and seemingly necessary given the context of the 1990s, set the stage for a new form of authoritarian control. By centralizing economic power within the state apparatus, Putin effectively created a system where political loyalty became intertwined with economic opportunity.

These articles convey the stark contrast between the Kremlin's economic approach during the Yeltsin regime and the early stages of the Putin regime. The sweeping policy changes enacted by President Vladimir Putin to create Russia's new system of "state capitalism" marked a shift towards a stronger role of the bureaucracy.

[5]Johnson, Juliet. "Russia's Economic Policies." In *Developments in Russian Politics*, 10th ed., 108. Duke University Press, 2024.

[6]Rutland, Peter. "Putin and the Oligarchs." In *Putin's Russia*, 3rd ed., 6. Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.

[7]Ibid 3.

[8]Mandel, David. "'Managed Democracy': Capital and State in Russia." Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe 13 (2). August 21, 2005: 120. https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560500306762.

[9]Ibid 13.

However, while providing short-term stability, this movement has had long-term consequences for Russia's economic development and political landscape that continue to shape the country's landscape today. As President Putin's policies continue to evolve, the literature on current issues is limited. However, Stanislav Markus addresses the future negative economic consequences of Russia's doubling down on state-controlled capitalism as it wages its war in Ukraine. With heavy sanctions threatening critical industries and foreign investment drying up in Russia, Putin's decision to shift towards state-controlled capitalism takes an even greater spotlight today.[10] This cycle continues to influence Russia's economic policies, as evidenced by Markus's examination of Russia's response to sanctions following the Ukraine war, where, rather than liberalizing, the state has further tightened its grip on the economy. The literature thus reveals how the economic instability and oligarchic excess of the 1990s not only justified Putin's initial move toward state capitalism but also established patterns of state control that have become deeply embedded in Russia's economic and political framework, making any deviation from this authoritarian model increasingly difficult.

The literature soundly demonstrates that the economic chaos and oligarchic exploitation of the 1990s provided both the justification and blueprint for Putin's state-controlled capitalist model. The failed privatization efforts under Yeltsin, combined with weak institutional oversight and the 1998 financial crisis, created conditions that made Putin's interventionist approach appear acceptable and necessary to the Russian public. The scholars further determine that Putin's solution of "managed democracy" and forced alignment between business interests and state authority has established patterns of authoritarian control that have become self-reinforcing, as, even today, Russia has responded to contemporary challenges by further consolidating state control over the economy.

However, as a whole, there is limited research regarding the direct link between Putin's actions of consolidation at the turn of the 21st century and the nation's system of authoritarianism today. While the research vastly claims that the traumas of the 1990s shaped the initial implementation of state capitalism, there is little evidence addressing the extent to which this turmoil may have founded deeply embedded structural barriers that continue to influence Russia's domestic policy choices today. On the contrary, scholarly work relates present-day autocratic rule with historical legacies, nationalist narratives, and economic dependencies, but there is minimal research connecting these causes directly to the actions and conditions of the 1990s, a monumental inflection point that is discussed throughout this research as a catalyst for Russian political and economic structures for the forthcoming decades.

Furthermore, while the existing literature provides a crucial foundation for understanding the context of Putin's rise, it often stops short of explaining the precise causal mechanisms that transformed a temporary crisis response into an enduring political-economic system. Scholars such as Simeon Djankov and Peter Rutland provide detailed accounts of Putin's consolidation of power, particularly his efforts to sideline oligarchs and reestablish state control over the economy. However, their work primarily focuses on the initial actions and their immediate effects. This paper builds directly on their findings by theorizing the how: it explicates the precise path-dependent mechanisms that turned the contingent policies of the early 2000s into the entrenched, self-perpetuating system of state capitalism and authoritarianism seen today. By applying the lens of Path Dependency theory, this research moves beyond a narrative of Putin's strategic choices to argue that the institutional vacuum and economic chaos of the 1990s created a "critical juncture," establishing a systemic framework that made the consolidation of state power not just possible, but increasingly difficult to reverse over time.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The complex political and economic trajectory of post-Soviet Russia can be understood through two critical theoretical lenses: Path Dependency theory and Rentier State theory. These frameworks provide insight into how the economic chaos of the 1990s created enduring institutional structures that continue to shape Russian governance and political economy. Furthermore, they elaborate on how Russia's current economic dependence on resource exportation further reinforces the authoritarian nature of the nation.

Path Dependency Theory

Path Dependency theory, by emphasizing the importance of historical inertia in impacting current political trends, offers a compelling explanation for the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in contemporary Russia. While the development of path dependency as a formal concept can be attributed to various economists and political science scholars, particular applications are most applicable to this period of Russian history. Specifically, the variant concept of "critical junctures," articulated by Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier in their work, *Shaping the Political Arena*, argues that moments of significant change and monumental historical events create self-reinforcing mechanisms, making it difficult to deviate from established trajectories and minimizing the opportunities for change in political systems. In their analysis of eight Latin-American countries, the Colliers argue that political and institutional developments during critical junctures—such as the initial incorporation of labor movements into political systems—created

[10]Markus, Stanislav. "Long-Term Business Implications of Russia's War in Ukraine." *Asian Business & Management* 21, no. 4 (May 21, 2022): 483–87. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41291-022-00181-7.

enduring "path-dependent" effects on state-labor relations and political regimes. These initial moments shaped the political strategies, institutions, and alignments that defined the political landscape for decades.[11] Subsequently, Paul Pierson's article, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," builds on ideas from economics and historical institutionalism through his implementation of "increasing returns" in political science. He argues that several features of politics, including collective action problems, institutional stickiness, and the centrality of power, amplify the effects of path dependency. These dynamics create 'institutional inertia,' which helps explain the persistence of suboptimal policies or institutional arrangements.[12]

These approaches can similarly be applied to the tumultuous period of the 1990s in Russia, revealing a profound illustration of path dependency in action. Drawing directly from the Colliers' concept of "critical junctures," the collapse of the Soviet Union represents a watershed moment that fundamentally restructured Russia's political and economic landscape. Just as the Colliers observed in Latin American political development, Russia experienced a transformative moment that created self-reinforcing institutional mechanisms with long-lasting consequences. The initial privatization process and economic shock served as a critical juncture that established a unique set of "rules of the game," which would become increasingly entrenched over time.

Pierson's insights into "increasing returns" and institutional inertia are particularly salient in understanding the Russian case: the initial economic chaos of the 1990s created a system of crony capitalism that developed strong positive feedback loops, making policy deviation increasingly costly and unlikely for the Russian government. As Pierson argued, political systems have unique characteristics that amplify path dependency,[13] and in Russia, these mechanisms manifested through the emergence of oligarchic networks, informal institutional arrangements, and a centralized power structure that became progressively more difficult to dismantle. The concept of increasing returns becomes evident in the way initial economic decisions created compounding advantages for a small group of political elites. Each subsequent political and economic choice became increasingly constrained by the initial institutional framework, effectively "locking in" a system of governance that prioritized state control and limited democratic alternatives.

This process demonstrates the core argument of path dependency: that early choices can have disproportionately large and long-lasting impacts on institutional development, creating a trajectory that becomes progressively more challenging to alter by constraining future options.

Rentier State Theory

Rentier State theory supplements this outlook by examining the impact of the geopolitical environment surrounding Russia today and analyzing how its export-based economy further reinforces authoritarian structures. This idea, originally explored by Hossein Mahdavy in "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: the Case of Iran," identifies nations from their disproportionate dependence on natural resources and relative lack of reliance on taxation for revenue. According to Mahdavy, this imbalance towards resources reshapes the social contract between the state and its people, as the state has the potential to be financially and economically sufficient without conforming to the desires of the population.[14]

The Rentier State theory, further expanded and formalized by Hazem El Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani in *The Rentier State*, claims that when faced with this position, nations tend towards authoritarianism and the restriction of political liberties for the people. Economically, rentier states often develop a "rentier mentality," where the easy influx of wealth discourages productive labor and entrepreneurship, while resource rents are distributed through patronage networks to secure loyalty. The authors further emphasize how this structure weakens institutions, promotes inequality, and hinders economic diversification, while oil rents strengthen state power and centralization, shielding regimes from external pressures for reform or democratization.[15]

This model can apply to Russia today as its economic dependence on the export of mineral fuels, oils, and other natural resources profoundly shapes its political and economic landscape. Following the theoretical insights of Mahdavy, El Beblawi, and Luciani, Russia exemplifies a classic rentier state where hydrocarbon exports constitute a disproportionate share of national revenue. As of 2024, oil and gas revenues accounted for approximately 30% of Russia's federal budget,[16] underscoring the nation's critical vulnerability to resource-based economic models. This economic structure fundamentally transforms the state's relationship with its citizens, creating what El Beblawi conceptualized as a "rentier mentality" where wealth generation becomes disconnected from productive economic activities. The petrostate dynamics also manifest in Russia's foreign policy and internal governance.

[11] Collier, Ruth Berins, and David Collier. *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. From the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002.

[12] Pierson, Paul. "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics." *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000). https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011.

[13] Ibid

[14] Mahdavy, Hossein. "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran." *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, 1st ed., 40. Routledge, 1970.

[15] Luciani, Giacomo, and Hazem Beblawi. *The Rentier State*. 1st ed. Routledge, 1987.

[16] Yermakov, Vitaly. Fiscal Flex: Russia's oil and gas revenues in 2024." *Oxford Energy Comment*, 30. The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, February 2025.

The ability to generate substantial revenue from natural resources shields the state from traditional accountability mechanisms. As Mahdavy originally observed in his analysis of Iran, such states can effectively minimize domestic tax collection, thereby reducing the traditional democratic linkage between taxation and political representation.[17] In Russia's case, this translates to a reduced need for broad-based economic participation and a heightened capacity for authoritarian governance. The resource-driven economy becomes both a symptom and a perpetuating mechanism of the existing authoritarian configuration.

The interaction between Path Dependency and Rentier State theories illuminates the complex dynamics that have shaped Russian political development since the 1990s. The initial institutional configurations established during the 1990s following the Soviet collapse created a foundational framework that was subsequently reinforced and amplified by the state's control over natural resource revenues. This theoretical synthesis provides a sophisticated understanding of how historical contingencies and economic structures contribute to the current authoritarian landscape in Russia.

The Mechanics of State Capitalism

Key Characteristics and Functions of the Kremlin Model

At its core, Putin's state capitalism can be defined by three fundamental mechanisms: strategic sector control, selective privatization with oligarchic management, and centralized economic planning.[18] Strategic sector control allows the Kremlin to directly manage critical industries—particularly energy, natural resources, and infrastructure—transforming state-owned enterprises into instruments of political and economic power. Selective privatization and oligarchic management enable the state to maintain a tight grip on economic elites by offering protection and economic opportunities in exchange for absolute political loyalty, effectively creating a system where business success is contingent upon alignment with state interests.[19] Centralized economic planning completes this framework by providing the government the ability to coordinate economic decision-making, rapidly mobilize resources, and implement strategic objectives with minimal institutional resistance. These characteristics work synergistically to create an economic environment where the state maintains near-total control, using economic mechanisms as direct extensions of political power, thereby ensuring that economic activity is consistently subordinated to the strategic goals of the ruling political elite. This approach is not only a response to the economic struggles of the 1990s, but a resilient institution that has adapted to both internal political challenges and external geopolitical pressures.

Putin's Approach to Oligarchs

The most prominent example of this strategy was the 2003 case against Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his company, Yukos Oil. This confrontation was far more than a personal vendetta or an isolated punishment of a political rival; it was a foundational act of Putin's state-building project with profound systemic implications. The dismantling of Yukos and Khodorkovsky's imprisonment served as an unambiguous signal to the entire elite class. The core message was that the property rights established during the chaotic 1990s were not secure or absolute. Instead, they were being fundamentally restructured: private wealth and economic power were now conditional upon absolute political loyalty to the Kremlin. This move effectively transformed the oligarchs from independent, and often challenging, power centers into a co-opted and dependent elite. By making it clear that vast fortunes could be unmade by the state, Putin established a core mechanism of his authoritarian model, ensuring that economic power would henceforth serve, not challenge, his political authority. As Putin himself stated following the arrest: "Everyone should be equal before the law, irrespective of how many billions of dollars a person has on his personal or corporate account. Otherwise, we will never teach and force anyone to pay taxes ... and defeat organized crime and corruption."[20]

This rhetoric of law and order provided public justification for a move that fundamentally subordinated private capital to state interests, cementing a key pillar of Russia's new political economy. While different economic sectors experienced varying degrees of state intervention, in strategic industries like energy, natural resources, and defense, Putin pursued direct state control or required close collaboration with state interests. The natural gas and oil sectors, in particular, became essentially extensions of state power, with companies like Gazprom and Rosneft operating as quasi-governmental entities. In contrast, sectors considered less strategically vital, such as retail, consumer goods, and certain technology domains, were allowed more operational autonomy, provided they did not challenge political narratives or state priorities.[21]

The economic restructuring was also underpinned by a broader political logic. By reducing the independent power of oligarchs, Putin was not merely conducting an economic reformation but fundamentally reshaping the political ecosystem that emerged from the chaotic privatizations of the

[17] Mahdavy, Hossein. "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran." *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, 1st ed., 40. Routledge, 1970.

[18] Easter, Gerald M. "The Russian State in the Time of Putin." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 24, no. 3 (July 2008): 211–214. https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.24.3.199.

[19] Markus, Stanislav. "Oligarchs and Corruption in Putin's Russia: Of Sand Castles and Geopolitical Volunteering." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2017): 28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26396016.

[20] "Putin Defends Oil Tycoon's Arrest." *The Guardian*, October 27, 2003. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/27/russia.

[21] Lane, David. "From Chaotic to State-Led Capitalism." *New Political Economy* 13, no. 2 (June 2008): 181–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460802018505.

1990s. The message was clear: economic elites would be permitted prosperity, but only within a framework of strict state oversight and political acquiescence.[22] However, this approach cannot be understood solely as opportunistic power consolidation. Historical context, including Putin's 2005 State of the Nation Address, reveals that Putin's strategy was deeply rooted in a broader geopolitical vision of restoring Russia's national dignity and institutional integrity after the economic chaos of the 1990s.[23] Putin's interventions can be understood as a systematic attempt to reconstruct state capacity, ensuring that economic power was realigned to serve national strategic objectives rather than the narrow interests of a small economic elite.

Comparison Between Post-Communist States

The mechanics of state capitalism described above were not inevitable. As a comparison, other post-Soviet states faced similar critical junctures but embarked on vastly different paths. Upon the fall of the Soviet Union, various governments, now independent with different economic strengths, political challenges, and demographic environments, had the ability to reorient their nations towards new economic and political models that best suited their needs. Russia, Belarus, and Poland were among many, and each had differing approaches to the transition to a post-Soviet world order. While some states built closer ties to the West, Russia and others grew distant from their European neighbors and implemented further state control. The actions of each have had long-standing effects that defined economic systems and continue to shape the geopolitical environments of the region today. To better understand how Putin's policies at the turn of the 21st century still impact today, it is important to see how the actions of nations in similar positions continue to reflect their economic systems as well. Through the lens of the Path Dependency theory, it is evident that the policy practices of each nation during the uncertain and influential period of the 1990s had cascading effects that have shaped the political and economic trajectories of the states, leading to their separate paths today.

Case Study I - Poland and Russia

In analyzing the trajectory of state capitalism in Poland and Russia since the 1990s, a nuanced picture of divergent economic transformations emerges. Poland's transition is characterized by strategic privatization, robust institutional reforms, and steady integration with Western economic systems. This complete overhaul of the communist economy was motivated by its decades of failures and Poland's loss of faith in the ability of the Soviet Union to provide further aid.[24] Unlike Vladimir Putin, who viewed state control as an integral aspect of Russian identity and the solution to correcting Soviet economic mismanagement, Polish leadership looked for alternatives and turned to the West for support. In an address to the U.S. Congress, Lech Wałęsa addressed Poland's struggles and need for financial aid from the United States, asserting "The economy we inherited after almost five decades of Communist rule is in need of thorough overhaul. Today all the countries of the Eastern Bloc are bankrupt. The Communist economy has failed in every part of the world."[25]

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland, with the help of Western nations, implemented aggressive market-oriented reforms, quickly liberalizing its economy and attracting significant foreign direct investment. This "shock therapy" approach dismantled price controls, opened markets to foreign competition, and moved rapidly to privatize state-owned enterprises. While it ultimately set Poland on a path toward integration with Western economies, the transition was far from smooth. The sudden exposure to market forces caused sharp increases in unemployment, as inefficient state industries collapsed, and income inequality widened between urban and rural regions. Many citizens faced steep declines in living standards during the early 1990s, with inflation spiking temporarily before stabilizing. Corruption and mismanagement also marred parts of the privatization process, as some assets were sold under questionable circumstances or ended up concentrated in the hands of politically connected actors.

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[22] Goldman, Marshall I. "Putin and the Oligarchs." *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 6 (2004): 33. https://doi.org/10.2307/20034135.

[23] Putin, Vladimir, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation." Address at the Kremlin, Moscow, April 25, 2005. http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931.

[24] Kubow, Magdalena. "The Solidarity Movement in Poland: Its History and Meaning in Collective Memory." *The Polish Review* 58, no. 2 (July 1, 2013): 9. https://doi.org/10.5406/polishreview.58.2.0003.

[25] Clamor in the East: Remarks to Congress; Excerpts From Address by Walesa." *The New York Times*, November 16, 1989. https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/16/world/clamor-in-the-east-remarks-to-congress-excerpts-from-address-by-walesa.html.

gradually stabilize its currency enabled it to avoid the severe hyperinflation and chronic instability that plagued many other post-communist states. Critically, Poland's policies during the transition period still reflect today as Poland has become fully integrated into the European economic structures and has a diverse economic foundation.[26]

In contrast, Russia's state capitalist model evolved into a more centralized and politically controlled economic system. The 1990s in Russia were marked by catastrophic hyperinflation, with inflation rates reaching almost 2,500% in 1992,[27] devastating personal savings, and massive economic uncertainty. Rampant corruption during President Boris Yeltsin's tenure compounded these challenges, as weak legal institutions and opaque privatization schemes enabled political insiders to manipulate the system for personal gain. The "loans-for-shares" program and other poorly regulated reforms allowed a small group of well-connected businessmen to acquire massive state assets—often in energy, mining, and manufacturing—at deeply discounted prices. This political climate, dominated by corruption and instability, was a key point of contention for Vladimir Putin as he entered office, influencing his rapid response. In his early days of presidency in July 2000, in the Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin announced the greatest challenges facing Russia and his vision for bringing about change: "The main obstacles to economic growth are high taxes, corruption among officials, and extensive crime. Solving these problems depends on the state."[28]

The personal political philosophy of Putin emerged as a crucial determinant in solidifying state capitalism. Having emerged from the Soviet security apparatus, Putin viewed economic control as fundamentally linked to national security and political stability. His approach sought to correct what he perceived as the chaotic and destructive privatization of the 1990s by reasserting state control over strategic economic assets, particularly in energy, defense, and critical infrastructure sectors: He elaborates further in his statement claiming, "But our position is very clear: only a strong, or effective if someone dislikes the word 'strong,' an effective state and a democratic state is capable of protecting civil, political and economic freedoms, capable of creating conditions for people to lead happy lives and for our country to flourish."

Unlike Poland, which had a stronger tradition of independent economic activity and closer cultural ties to Western Europe, Putin insisted that Russia maintain a more deeply ingrained centralized economic model. The historical memory of state control, combined with a strong authoritarian political tradition, made a return to centralized economic management more psychologically acceptable and politically feasible. The resulting system represented not just an economic strategy, but a broader national approach to rebuilding social and political cohesion in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

By the 2020s, these divergent paths have become even more pronounced: Poland has fully integrated into European economic structures, benefiting from EU development funds, a diversified economic base, and strong institutional frameworks. Conversely, from the onset of state capitalism, Russia has experienced increasing economic isolation, particularly following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which triggered unprecedented international sanctions and further consolidated its state capitalist model through increased economic nationalism and reduced global economic integration. The fundamental difference lies not just in economic policies, but in the underlying approach to institutional development: Poland's trajectory illustrates a decisive break from its pivotal juncture, whereas Russia demonstrates a classic case of 'increasing returns,' where initial choices made it progressively harder to change course.

Case Study II - Belarus and Russia

The transitions to state capitalism in Russia and Belarus at the turn of the 20th century present intriguing parallels and divergences that exemplify the motives for pursuing state capitalism for each, as well as the effects of the policies in shaping their current economic landscapes. Belarus, under Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, faced similar threats of oligarchic dominance, which were quickly dispelled by Lukashenko's war on privatized businesses. As Tadeusz Giczan reports in a Center for European Policy Analysis article, around three-quarters of businessmen were "accused of large-scale embezzlement, stripped of their assets, and had to flee the country"[31] within Lukashenko's first term, demonstrating the direct impact oligarchic management similarly had in Belarus in comparison to Russia.

However, Belarus pursued state capitalism from a different perspective, largely maintaining the Soviet-era economic structure with minimal privatization. Unlike Russia's more hybrid approach,

[26] Galbraith, Marysia H. *Being and Becoming European in Poland: European Integration and Self-Identity*. Anthem Series on Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies. London, UK New York, NY: Anthem press, 2014.

[27] Aslund, Anders. "Why Has Russia's Economic Transformation Been So Arduous?" *Carnegie Endowment*, April 28, 1999.

[28] Putin, Vladimir. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation." Address at the Kremlin, Moscow, July 8, 2000. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480.

[29] Europäische Kommission, ed. *2023 Country Report Poland*. European Economy Institutional Paper, 245 (June 2023). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2765/755853.

[30] "Impact of Sanctions on the Russian Economy." European Council, October 12, 2023. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/.

[31] Giczan, Tadeusz. "The Rise of Belarusian Oligarchs." *Center for European Policy Analysis*, July 30, 2020. https://cepa.org/article/the-rise-of-belarusian-oligarchs/.

Belarus retained a more centralized economic model where state-owned enterprises remained the dominant form of economic organization. Lukashenko's motivation was fundamentally about maintaining political control and social stability, preserving a paternalistic economic system that provided job security and basic social welfare at the expense of economic dynamism and innovation. Belarus maintains a more rigidly controlled economic system where state-owned enterprises dominate almost all sectors of the economy.[32] This approach has resulted in lower economic efficiency, limited foreign investment, and a more stagnant economic environment.[33]

Both countries' state capitalist models have significant implications for their current economic situations. Belarus, by maintaining a more rigid state-controlled economic model with state-owned entities accounting for 70–75% of GDP, has become increasingly economically dependent on Russia, with limited economic diversification and innovation, reflecting the limitations of its extensive state-control approach. Conversely, Russia's more limited system of state capitalism relative to Belarus allows a greater share of private businesses, especially in non-strategic industries. This has allowed Russia to be more adaptable to global economic changes, particularly in managing international sanctions and redirecting economic relationships, as seen in Russia's "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," published by the Kremlin in 2023 illustrating the state's pivot towards Asian markets following Western sanctions after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[35] From the lens of the Path Dependency theory, it is perfectly illustrated how Russia and Belarus' policies at the fork of the 1990s dramatically shaped the nations' outcomes over the following decades. Faced with similar threats of oligarchic dominance, the two nations pursued policies to protect state authority. The different extent to which Putin and Lukashenko enforced their limitations on private businesses at the beginning of their administrations can similarly be viewed by the countries' proportional dependence on private business today.

Synthesis and Comparison

The economic trajectories of post-Soviet states in the 1990s demonstrate the profound impact of initial policy choices on long-term national development. Through the Path Dependency theory, a clear narrative emerges of how early economic and political decisions created cascading effects that fundamentally shaped each nation's political economy.

Poland stands as the most striking example of successful economic transformation. By actively dismantling Soviet-era economic structures and embracing market-oriented reforms, Poland created a resilient economic model that facilitated integration with Western economic systems. The country's deliberate choice to seek Western support and implement comprehensive institutional reforms allowed it to break decisively from its communist past. In contrast, Russia's approach epitomizes the lasting consequences of path dependency. The economic chaos of the 1990s, characterized by hyperinflation and oligarchic asset acquisition, directly informed Putin's subsequent state capitalist model. Putin's response was not merely an economic strategy, but a comprehensive political recalibration aimed at restoring state control and national cohesion. The initial trauma of the 1990s—massive economic uncertainty and the perceived weakness of the state—became the foundational narrative justifying increased centralization and authoritarian economic management.

Belarus represents an even more extreme manifestation of state control, with Lukashenko maintaining an almost unchanged Soviet-era economic structure. The country's rigidly controlled economic model, where state-owned enterprises significantly dominate the nation's economy, illustrates how initial resistance to privatization can lead to prolonged economic stagnation and external dependency.

The motivations for state capitalism in these countries reveal a nuanced interplay between historical experiences and contemporary political imperatives. Putin's initial policies were fundamentally a response to the 1990s' economic and political fragmentation. However, the continuation of authoritarian economic control is no longer solely about addressing past trauma but has become a self-perpetuating system reinforced by global geopolitical tensions and internal political dynamics. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine further solidified this trend, with international sanctions paradoxically strengthening Russia's state capitalist model. The crisis accelerated economic nationalism, redirected trade relationships, and provided additional justification for increased state control[36], demonstrating how external pressures can reinforce existing path-dependent economic structures.

[32] Panko, Aliaksandr, and Piotr Kozarzewski. "The Evolution of Belarusian Public Sector: From Command Economy to State Capitalism?" *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3586496.

[33] "BTI 2024 Country Report — Belarus." *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 2024. https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BLR.

[34] "Belarus." *World Factbook*, *Relief Central*, https://relief.unboundmedicine.com/relief/view/The-World-Factbook/563032/all/Belarus.

[35] "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

[36] Gorodnichenko, Yuriy, Iikka Korhonen, and Elina Ribakova. "The Russian Economy on a War Footing: A New Reality Financed by Commodity Exports." *Center for Economic and Policy Research*, May 24, 2024. https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/russian-economy-war-footing-new-reality-financed-commodity-exports.

Table 1. Comparison of Belarus, Russia, and Poland's Economies Before and After Reforms

Pre-Reforms			
	Belarus	**Russia**	**Poland**
Economic Model	Soviet-style centralized economy	Market liberalization, oligarchic dominance	State-socialist structures
Privatization Level	Limited privatization	Rapid, chaotic privatization	Moderate privatization
GDP Growth Rates	Modest growth but low economic dynamism	Economic contraction, hyperinflation	Modest growth, transition challenges
Key Economic Policies	Preservation of Soviet economic structures	Rapid deregulation, "shock therapy"	Gradual shift toward liberalization
Post-Reforms			
	Belarus	**Russia**	**Poland**
Economic Model	Centralized economy with limited change	State Capitalism: Consolidated industries, centralization	Fully market-oriented economy
Privatization Level	~70–75% GDP from state enterprises[37]	Consolidation under state-controlled oligarchs	Extensive privatization during reforms
GDP Growth Rates	Stagnant growth	Recovery in the early 2000s	Consistent growth after the 2004 EU entry
Key Economic Policies	Continued state dominance, minimal reform	State consolidation of energy, defense, and banking sectors	"Shock Therapy" reforms, EU integration

Critically, the divergent paths of these post-Soviet states validate the Path Dependency theory's core premise: initial institutional choices create systemic momentum that becomes increasingly difficult to alter. Poland's successful integration into Western economic systems contrasts sharply with Russia and Belarus's continued reliance on centralized economic management, illustrating how early policy decisions can generate long-term, self-reinforcing economic and political trajectories. The research reveals that while the turmoil of the 1990s was the initial catalyst for Putin's state-capitalist approach, the continuation of this model is now sustained by a complex interplay of domestic political pressures, geopolitical challenges, and an increasingly entrenched economic governance system. The path dependency is no longer just about responding to past difficulties but has become a self-perpetuating mechanism of political and economic control.

Counterfactual Analysis

Counterfactual historical analysis provides a critical lens to understand the complex causal mechanisms that shape political and economic transformations. In the case of post-Soviet Russia, exploring alternative historical trajectories is not merely an academic exercise but a vital method of comprehending how specific economic and political choices can fundamentally alter a nation's developmental path. By examining what could have been—if post-Soviet Russia had transitioned to a market economy more gradually and transparently, avoiding the extreme economic turmoil, hyperinflation, and chaotic privatization of the 1990s—one can more deeply interrogate the root causes of Russia's current authoritarian political structure and state-dominated economic model. This hypothetical scenario allows moving beyond descriptive historical analysis and instead probing the critical junctures that transformed Russia from a potential emerging democratic market economy to its current configuration.

In examining the potential alternative trajectory of post-Soviet Russia, a more gradual and transparent economic transition would most likely have fundamentally altered the political and economic landscape of the nation. Given the comparative experiences of Poland and the Baltic states, it is most likely that a more measured approach to market reforms would have substantially mitigated the extreme economic and social dislocations that characterized Russia's 1990s transformation.

Had Russian policymakers adopted an approach like Poland's "shock therapy" but with greater institutional safeguards and more deliberate privatization mechanisms, the country would most likely have experienced a more stable economic transition. The Polish model, which implemented economic reforms with greater transparency and a more structured approach to privatization,[38] provides a compelling alternative scenario. In this hypothetical trajectory, Russia would likely have avoided the catastrophic hyperinflation that decimated personal savings and created widespread economic insecurity. The controlled privatization would have prevented the rapid concentration of wealth among a small group of oligarchs, instead fostering a more diversified and competitive economic environment. The socio-economic implications of such a transition would have been profound, likely facilitating the emergence of a robust middle class, a critical factor in developing democratic institutions and social stability. Unlike the actual historical experience, where economic chaos bred disillusionment with market reforms and democratic ideals, this alternative scenario would have created conditions more conducive to political pluralism. The Ukrainian experience offers a partial parallel, where despite significant challenges, a more diverse economic ecosystem emerged, creating multiple centers of economic and political power.[39]

Critically, the reduced economic volatility would have significantly undermined the primary justification for authoritarian consolidation. Vladimir Putin's rise to power was substantially predicated on promises of economic stability and order in the wake of the 1990s chaos.[40]

[37] Belarus." World Factbook, Relief Central, https://relief.unboundmedicine.com/relief/view/The-World-Factbook/563032/all/Belarus.

[38] Sachs, Jeffrey. "The Economic Transformation of Eastern Europe: The Case of Poland." *Economics of Planning* 25, no. 1 (January 1992): 16. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00366287.

[39] Dabrowski, Marek, and Rafal Antczak. "Economic Transition in Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus in Comparative Perspective." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1995. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1476782.

[40] Traynor, Ian. "Putin Pledges to Make Russia Strong Again." *The Guardian*, March 26, 2000. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/mar/27/russia.iantraynor.

In a counterfactual scenario with more gradual reforms, political leaders would have found it considerably more difficult to centralize power under the pretext of economic restoration. The institutional frameworks would likely have been more resilient, with a more distributed economic base creating natural checks against concentrated political control.

The international economic implications are equally significant: a more stable Russian transition would most likely have attracted sustained foreign investment, creating economic diversification beyond resource extraction. Unlike the current model of state-driven capitalism, this alternative Russia would potentially have developed a more dynamic, innovation-driven economic ecosystem. The Baltic states' successful transitions provide evidence of this potential, demonstrating how structured market reforms can create robust, competitive economies that are less dependent on natural resource revenues. Specifically, Thomas Grennes explores in his work, "The economic transition in the Baltic countries," how the Baltic countries that implemented the most radical reforms, deviating furthest from their Soviet roots, have fared best in today's global economic structure.[41] While the complete uprooting of Soviet economic systems would have been particularly difficult in Russia, certain reforms conducted gradually and transparently would likely have had improved economic and democratic outcomes for the country.

While no historical transformation is without challenges, the counterfactual scenario suggests that Russia could have followed a fundamentally different path. The key differentiator would have been institutional design—creating transparent mechanisms for economic transformation that protect against extreme wealth concentration and foster broad-based economic participation. Such an approach would have most likely created a more resilient political system, one less susceptible to authoritarian consolidation and more responsive to diverse economic and social interests. This exploration is not meant to suggest a utopian alternative, but rather to illuminate how institutional choices and economic policy can profoundly shape political trajectories. The Russian experience of the 1990s represents a critical juncture where different policy approaches could have generated dramatically different outcomes, with implications that would have continued to resonate today.

The Impact of Oil: Application of the Rentier State Theory

While the Path Dependency theory outlines how Putin's policies at the beginning of his presidency were influential in guiding Russia's state capitalism today, the Rentier State theory outlines how additional factors, such as Russia's reliance on natural resource exports, further reinforce this cycle of authoritarianism.

The path Russia took, as the counterfactual analysis suggests, was pivotal. However, the final element that locked this system into place was the country's vast resource wealth. The influx of oil revenue after 2000 provided the perfect fuel for the rentier state mechanism, allowing the state to cement the path-dependent choices of the 1990s. This resource wealth allowed the Kremlin to fund a system of patronage to ensure elite loyalty, raise living standards to secure popular acquiescence, and strengthen its coercive apparatus to suppress dissent—all without relying on broad-based taxation that would have created demands for accountability. This influx of wealth removed the incentive for difficult structural reforms, effectively locking Russia into a resource-dependent, authoritarian model. With Russia's heavy reliance on energy exports, Putin firmly reasserted the state's dominance over natural resources through Federal Law No. 27-FZ of 1995 on Underground Resources: "This Law establishes that those underground resources within the territory of the Russian Federation, including subsoil domain and mineral resources contained therein are state property."[42]

By maintaining control over the nation's most lucrative and strategic industry, the Kremlin has the motivation and financial support to maintain the dominance of the state and enforce authoritarian policies. As oil and gas represent over 60% of national exports in 2022, the Russian economy today exemplifies the quintessential rentier state model. This economic structure provides the Kremlin with unprecedented financial autonomy, effectively decoupling state revenue from domestic economic productivity. The implications are profound: the government can maintain political control without being dependent on tax revenues, which traditionally create accountability mechanisms between citizens and the state. Putin's economic strategy has systematically leveraged this rentier model to consolidate power; by centralizing control over key energy companies and selectively redistributing resource wealth, the state has created a network of economic dependency that extends from oligarchic elites to broader segments of the population. Recently, the Russian state's response to Western sanctions represents a sophisticated adaptation of the Rentier State model. Rather than succumbing to economic isolation, Russia has strategically pivoted towards Asian markets, particularly China and India, to maintain its primary revenue streams. From 2019 to 2022, Russia has increased its exports by 74% to China and over 500% to India, while simultaneously increasing its export value from $416B to $486B in the same time frame,[44] demonstrating its economic resistance and lack of willingness to succumb to Western pressures.

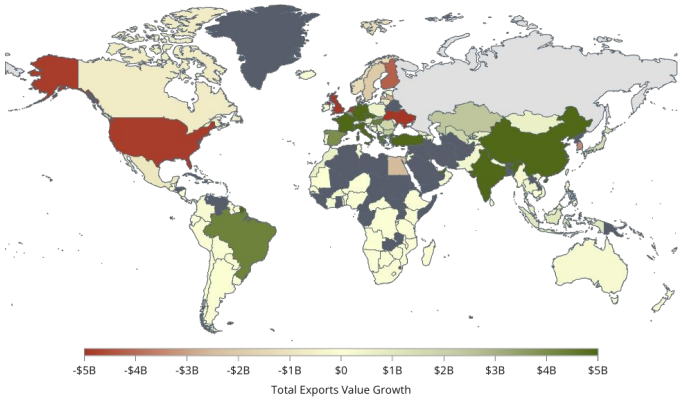
[41] Grennes, Thomas. "The Economic Transition in the Baltic Countries." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 28, no. 1 (March 1997): 22–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/01629779600000191.

[42] Amendments and Additions to Law of the Russian Federation on Subsoil, Pub. L. No. Federal Law No. 27-FZ of 1995 (1995). https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/rus21660.pdf.

[43] "Exports (2022)." The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d. https://oec.world/en/profile/country/rus.

[44] "Destinations (2022)." The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d. https://oec.world/en/profile/country/rus.

Map 1. Total Russia Export Growth by Market (2019–2022)



*Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity[45]

The map above displays Russia's change in exports over the three years, as it faced immense sanctions from the U.S. and its allies amidst its invasion of Ukraine. Despite this, Russia managed to significantly increase trade with markets in Asia, Europe, and Latin America and secure funding for its ongoing war. This geopolitical recalibration serves multiple critical functions beyond mere economic survival. The financial stability achieved through alternative export markets directly reinforces the authoritarian political structure. Continued revenue from energy exports enables the state to maintain extensive internal security mechanisms, sustain military expenditures, and provide minimal social welfare, critical components for preventing domestic political instability. The economic resilience generated by this strategy eliminates potential triggers for widespread social discontent, effectively insulating the current political establishment from internal challenges. Moreover, the successful navigation of international sanctions provides the Putin regime with a powerful narrative of strategic competence and resilience, crucial for maintaining domestic support and justifying the continuation of centralized governance.

The Ukraine conflict has paradoxically strengthened Russia's authoritarian model by forcing a strategic recalibration of its economic relationships. By successfully redirecting energy exports and maintaining economic stability in the face of countless sanctions, the Russian state has not just survived international sanctions but has potentially established more resilient and diversified economic and political strategies. This economic model explains the resilience of Putin's regime despite significant international pressures and domestic economic challenges. By maintaining control over resource revenues, the state can simultaneously suppress opposition, limit economic diversification, and project international power.

[45]"Total Export Growth by Market (2019 - 2022)." The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d. https://oec.world/profile/country/rus?deltaTimeSelector1=deltaTime3#growth-by-market

Conclusion

The complex trajectory of Russian state capitalism represents a nuanced interplay between historical economic challenges and strategic political adaptation. This research has illuminated the profound connection between the tumultuous economic transformations of the 1990s and the subsequent emergence of an authoritarian economic model under Vladimir Putin's leadership. By examining the intricate mechanisms of state control, comparative post-Soviet transitions, and the strategic deployment of resource wealth, the study reveals how economic governance becomes a critical instrument of political power.

The findings demonstrate that Putin's approach to state capitalism was not a predetermined outcome, but a strategic response to the severe economic and institutional fragmentation experienced during the post-Soviet transition. The initial objective of curtailing oligarchic power and reasserting state control over critical economic sectors gradually evolved into a comprehensive system of political and economic management. Through strategic sector control, selective privatization, and centralized economic planning, the Kremlin transformed state-owned enterprises into powerful instruments of political manipulation and economic control.

Theoretical frameworks such as Path Dependency and Rentier State theory provided critical analytical lenses through which to understand these complex dynamics. The comparative analysis of post-Soviet states further underscores the significance of initial economic choices in determining long-term political-economic trajectories. Russia's unique path diverged markedly from other transitional economies, characterized by a persistent resistance to Western economic models and a distinctive approach to institutional development. The counterfactual exploration suggests that a more measured market transition could have potentially fostered more distributed economic power and created conditions more conducive to democratic institutions. The research revealed how resource wealth, particularly from energy exports, has been strategically leveraged to sustain authoritarian governance, creating networks of economic dependency that extend from elite circles to broader societal segments.

However, the study also acknowledges significant methodological limitations. The inherent complexity of political-economic systems means that countless potential influences remain challenging to isolate and comprehensively analyze. Individual leadership dynamics, unpredictable global geopolitical shifts, and the intricate interactions between economic and political structures introduce substantial variability that cannot be fully captured by existing theoretical frameworks.

The broader implications of this research extend far beyond academic discourse, offering a critical lens through which to view contemporary policy and international

relations. Understanding the deep structural origins of Russia's state capitalism compels a sober reassessment of Western expectations for its political evolution. The findings strongly suggest that any hopes for a rapid, post-Putin liberalization are likely misplaced. The system's resilience does not rest on the personal authority of one man, but is structurally entrenched in the path-dependent choices made in the 1990s and fortified by two decades of resource wealth. This analysis helps explain Russia's remarkable resilience and suggests that international sanctions, while intended to punish and deter, may have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the state's grip on the economy, driving further consolidation. Ultimately, this research reveals state capitalism in Russia as a dynamic, adaptive system, deeply rooted in historical experiences yet continuously reshaped by contemporary challenges. It is not a static model but a complex mechanism of political and economic control that reflects the intricate interplay between historical legacies, strategic decision-making, and ongoing global transformations.

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US-Led Coalition Airstrikes And Internal Displacement: Operation Inherent Resolve In Iraq From 2014 To 2018

By: Anton Chung Fransiak

Abstract: While often presumed, the association between airstrikes from above and internal displacement below remains largely unexplored. In such a context, this study probes into the interplay between these two variables preliminarily. It does so by comparing descriptive statistics and correlation analyses for over 13,000 US-led coalition airstrikes and 900,000 internally displaced persons with those for general violent events across province-timeframe pairings during Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq from 2014 to 2018. The study's findings appear to corroborate the claim that internal displacement could have been related to the presence of airstrikes in Iraq from 2014 to 2018 while also suggesting that airstrikes could have been a salient type of violent event with respect to internal displacement. In light of remote warfare's rising global prominence, future studies should aim to collect more comprehensive data, use a regression analysis, and better assess confounding variables to more comprehensively understand the implications of remote warfare.

Key Words: Airstrikes, remote warfare, internal displacement, Operation Inherent Resolve, Iraq

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Proclaiming Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) as "the most precise in the history of warfare," the US-led coalition deployed over 13,000 airstrikes in Iraq from 2014 to 2018.[1] It claimed to take "extraordinary precautions … to minimize the risk of civilian casualties to the greatest extent possible."[2] Yet those airstrikes killed around 600 civilians and injured 400 more.[3] At the same time, 5.5 million Iraqis became internally displaced, warranting scrutiny of the campaign's role in mass displacement.[4] This essay argues that US-led coalition airstrikes may have contributed to internal displacement in Iraqi provinces between 2014 and 2018.

This essay has six sections. First, it reviews existing literature on how general violence and remote warfare relate to internal displacement. Second, it establishes the research gap, introduces the study's expectations, and states the hypotheses about the association of general violence and airstrikes with internal displacement at the provincial level. Third, it outlines the research design, including its methodology and related justifications. Fourth, it presents and discusses the findings in Iraqi provinces from 2014 to 2018. Fifth, it considers its limitations. Last, it concludes by suggesting areas for future research.

Literature Review

To begin broadly, violence precedes internal displacement in conflicts around the world. Melander and Öberg showed that when a violent dispute covered more territory in a country, internal displacement occurred more often in over 2,000 conflicts.[5] In finding this relationship, the study established the basic pattern that violence usually happens before displacement. But while Melander and Öberg confirmed this general relationship, it neither examined why individuals flee violence nor isolated conflicts involving major air campaigns.[6]

Engel and Ibáñez, and Adhikari fill the first gap of why individuals flee violence.[7] Whether arising from violent threats by armed actors, as in Engel and Ibáñez,[8] or from experiencing violence directly, as in Adhikari,[9] physical threats to life were found to be a consensus factor driving people to flee in Colombia and Nepal. In both cases, individuals decided to leave because violence creates fear and uncertainty about future personal safety, which motivates relocation.[10] These studies confirm violence's central role in motivating displacement because it causes individuals to perceive insecurity. However, these studies do not address the role of airpower because they focus on the Nepalese civil war and the Colombian insurgency, where airpower played little to no role.[11]

Tai et al. contributes to filling the second gap by examining violent events in Afghanistan from 2013 to 2017.[12] It found that the chance of displacement increased when violent events occurred, reinforcing the findings of previous studies, but instead in the context of Afghanistan.[13] This study is significant, as it covers a period when the US conducted airstrikes in an area while also having these airstrikes in its dataset.[14] Tai et al. also tracked how the chance of displacement changed over time, finding that displacement was most likely between day 0 and day 30 after a violent event.[15] As such, this study establishes a timeframe for analyzing displacement after violence and confirms that displacement increases when violent events occur in regions affected by US airstrikes. Yet its analysis is too broad to isolate the specific effect of those airstrikes on displacement. displacement increases when violent events occur in regions affected by US airstrikes. Yet its analysis is too broad to isolate the specific effect of those airstrikes on displacement.

While quantitative research on remote warfare and displacement is insufficient, qualitative studies have examined this association. *Escaping the Bombing* found that internal displacement in Syria was correlated with the use of remote weapons in populated areas during its civil war, which coincided with the US-led coalition's OIR campaign.[16] The study also reports pervasive fear of planes and uncertainty about future safety among civilians, which mirrors the findings in Engel and Ibáñez and Adhikari.[17]

[1] Terri Moon Cronk, "Centcom Releases Civilian Casualty Assessments," *U.S. Department of Defense*, April 22, 2016, Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," September 29, 2022.
[2] Terri Moon Cronk, "Centcom Releases Civilian Casualty Assessments," U.S. Department of Defense, April 22, 2016.
[3] Airwars, "Casualty Recording: US-Led Coalition in Iraq & Syria," 2025,
[4] IDMC, "Iraq Displacement Data," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, May 24, 2023
[5] Erik Melander and Magnus Öberg, "The Threat of Violence and Forced Migration: Geographical Scope Trumps Intensity of Fighting," Civil Wars 9, no. 2 (2007), 163, 169-170, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240701207310
[6] Ibid.
[7] Stefanie Engel and Ana María Ibáñez, "Displacement Due to Violence in Colombia: A Household-Level Analysis," Economic Development and Cultural Change 55, no. 2 (2007), 335-365.
[8] Stefanie Engel and Ana María Ibáñez, "Displacement Due to Violence in Colombia: A Household-Level Analysis," Economic Development and Cultural Change 55, no. 2 (2007), 20.
[9] Prakash Aanikari, "Conflict-Induced Displacement, Understanding the Causes of Flight," American Journal of Political Science 57, no. 1 (2013), 86, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00598.x
[10] Stefanie Engel and Ana María Ibáñez, "Displacement Due to Violence in Colombia: A Household-Level Analysis," Economic Development and Cultural Change 55, no. 2 (2007).
[11] Ahmad Saleem, Nepal 1996-2006, No. 31, Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies (US Department of Defense, 2025)
[12] Tai et al., "Mobile Phone Data Reveal the Effects of Violence on Internal Displacement in Afghanistan," Nature Human Behaviour 6, no. 5 (2022), 624 634, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01336-4.
[13] Tai et al., "Mobile Phone Data Reveal the Effects of Violence on Internal Displacement in Afghanistan," Nature Human Behaviour 6, no. 5 (2022), 624, 630, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01336-4
[14] US DOD, "DOD Releases Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," U.S. Department of Defense, June 20, 2017.
[15] Tai et al.,"Mobile Phone Data Reveal the Effects of Violence on Internal Displacement in Afghanistan," Nature Human Behaviour 6, no. 5 (2022), 625-626.
[16] Handicap International, Escaping the Bombing (2018), 4.
[17] Stefanie Engel and Ana María Ibáñez, "Displacement Due to Violence in Colombia: A Household‐Level Analysis," Economic Development and Cultural Change 55, no. 2 (2007), 335–365.

However, because *Escaping the Bombing* analyzes both US-led precision airstrikes and indiscriminate bombardment by other actors, its analysis does not isolate the effects of OIR.

In particular, US remote warfare campaigns have produced social and psychological harms distinct from traditional violence. For the community, they have damaged property, disrupted social activities, reduced access to education, and weakened intra-community trust, as found in Cachelin and Living Under Drones.[18] For the individual, they have been linked to feelings of helplessness and stress-related symptoms, such as vomiting, pain, and aches, as uncovered in Living Under Drones.[19] As Edney-Browne found, they have also caused people to self-monitor their behavior out of fear of being viewed with suspicion by drone operators, leading to withdrawal from social gatherings and nighttime activities.[20]

Theory

On the one hand, while quantitative research exists on the relationship between violence and internal displacement, motivations for leaving, and the time range when individuals flee, almost all of it focuses on general forms of violence. On the other hand, although qualitative reports document the unique effects of remote warfare on individuals and communities, they are typically based on limited samples or case studies. As a result, there appears to be a lack of a large-scale, quantitative analysis examining airstrikes and internal displacement. This study addresses this gap by using provincial-level data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and airstrikes in Iraq between 2014 and 2018 to test whether US-led coalition airstrikes are associated with internal displacement. In addressing this gap, this study aims to (1) contribute to understanding how remote warfare affects internal displacement, (2) lay the foundation for future research about the effects of remote warfare, and (3) inform remote warfare operations of their impact on civilians.

Established first, individuals flee violence. This pattern exists because violent events cause individuals to fear for their safety and create uncertainty about the future, motivating relocation that is most likely to occur between 0 and 30 days after a violent event. In previous studies, internal displacement is the predominant metric used when assessing this flight from violence because it is one of the most likely types of relocation to occur. Unlike other forms of migration, internal displacement does not require crossing the physical barrier of an international border or the psychological barrier of leaving one's home country.[21] It also captures temporary dislocation, which is important for analyzing the small-scale population movements that occur in response to violence.[22] Following precedent, this study expects that IDP outflow is likely to happen when violent events occur:

Hypothesis 1: If a province has conflict events, it will often have internal displacement two months after.

Established second, remote warfare uniquely affects individual psychology and community functions. These effects may arise because drone warfare presents an impersonal, omnipotent threat and creates lasting effects by undermining community trust, disrupting access to education, and impeding social activities. These outcomes set airstrikes apart as particularly potent violent events that may incentivize flight more strongly. Therefore, this study expects that airstrikes will be a salient factor within violent events:

Hypothesis 2: If a province is hit by a US-led coalition airstrike, it will have internal displacement two months after.

The 2014 to 2018 time frame contains the duration of the recent Iraqi conflict. In 2014, violence reignited when the Islamic State (ISIS) declared a caliphate, with the US-led coalition initiating the OIR campaign against it in response.[23] By the end of 2018, ISIS no longer held territory, violence had subsided, and the US-led coalition air campaign had correspondingly declined in the region.[24] Accordingly, this study begins its analysis with the earliest available data in 2014 and concludes following ISIS's defeat in 2018. The dependent variable is the number of IDPs per province. Internally displaced persons, defined by the UN, are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee … who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border."[25] This definition distinguishes IDPs from refugees, who flee their country. As they remain within their country's jurisdiction, IDPs do not have refugee protections under international law and can receive humanitarian aid only after the approval of local authorities.[26] Particularly, Iraqi IDPs

[18] Shala Cachelin, "The U.S. Drone Programme, Imperial Air Power and Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas," Critical Studies on Terrorism 15, no. 2 (2022), 458-59, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.2013025;

[19] Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan (International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law, 2012), 72, 82, 85-86.

[20] Alex Edney-Browne, "The Psychosocial Effects of Drone Violence: Social Isolation, Self-Objectification, and Depoliticization," Political Psychology 40, no. 6 (2019), 7-8, 12.

[21] Chloe Sydney, Nowhere to Return to: Iraqis' Search for Durable Solutions Continues (IDMC, 2018), 5–7, 13.

[22] IDMC, "Traq Displacement Data," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025.

[23] Wilson Center, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," Timeline, October 28, 2019. Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

[24] Wilson Center, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, ajd Fall of the Islamic State," Timeline, October 28, 2019; Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018, 2025.

[25] UNHCR, "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Geneva, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2004, 1.

[26] UNHCR, The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2011), 3.

between 2014 and 2018 often fled from areas where sectarian violence intensified following ISIS offensives, amid a conflict with over 70,000 civilian deaths.[27] These factors made IDPs in Iraq among the world's most vulnerable populations from 2014 to 2018.

At the same time, Iraqis endured remote bombardment by the US-led coalition. Krieg defines remote warfare as violence that "takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and airstrikes."[28] Today's states are increasingly preferring remote warfare because it allows them to project power while minimizing involvement and maintaining plausible deniability on the diplomatic stage.[29] Much of the US-led coalition's bombardment reflected this preference for remote warfare: in August 2017 alone, it used crewed aircraft or drones to deploy over 5,075 weapons in Iraq and Syria—the highest total of any campaign month.[30] While it remains unclear how this campaign's deniability affected international awareness, it may have further endangered Iraqis, and the resulting danger may have been less visible on the world stage. Accordingly, this study's central independent variable is US-led airstrikes by province from 2014 to 2018, contextualized against general violent events in the same period. Both are henceforth referred to as "violence" when concerning general, independent variable methodology.

For the dependent variable, this study uses the IDPs Master Lists from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).[31] This set records the province of origin for Iraqi displaced persons within six relevant windows and is the only known dataset that specifies the origin province for Iraqi displaced persons from 2014 to 2018. Windows were previously coded by the IOM as August 2014, Post September 2014, Post April 2015, Post March 2016, Post October 2016, and July 2017 (see Table 1 for dates), roughly corresponding with the beginning of significant IDP outflow events. Importantly, IOM did not assign each window an established timeframe, only indicating a start month and year. Therefore, the dates were coded using the language in the title: (1) "post" was assigned the first day of the month following the named month; (2) those without post began on the first day of the listed month; and (3) end dates were marked as the day before the next window.

For airstrikes, this study uses Airwars.[32] This dataset contains every recorded US-led coalition strike in Iraq during this period, enabling the comparison of IDP numbers between provinces with and without airstrikes. Competing logs like ACLED and UCDP record remote violence but do not isolate US-led coalition strikes, making them less suitable for assessing the impact of US-led airpower.[33] For general violent events, this study uses UCDP because it captures documented violent events within the given period.[34] As this set includes the Airwars data, it enables a loose comparison of aerial bombardment to general violence, whereas competing datasets such as ACLED do not.[35] The inclusion of dates and coordinates in both enables the mapping of each independent variable to provinces and the specific periods outlined in IOM.[36]

The treatment process consisted of four steps. First, displaced persons' province of origin by period was manually separated from the rest of the data in IOM.[37] Second, the Syrian data was removed from Airwars.[38] Third, for both UCDP and Airwars, coordinates were mapped to provinces, and then province names were standardized to match the list in IOM.[39] Fourth, Airwars and UCDP were each separately paired with IOM for comparison within each window.[40] Following Tai et al.,[41] both independent variables were given a two-month lag period, as the highest chance for displacement is from 0 to 30 days after an event (see Table 1 for dates). This duration allows IDPs 30 days to depart and then one month to arrive in another location.

[27] Conflict Casualties Monitor, "Iraq Body Count," Iraq Body Count, 2025, https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database;
UNHCR, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons on His Mission to Iraq, A/HRC/32/35/Add. 1 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016), paras. 6-9.

[28] Andreas Krieg, Defining Remote Warfare: The Rise of the Private Military and Security Industry, no. 3 (Remote Warfare Programme, 2018).

[29] Jack McDonald, "Remote Warfare and the Legitimacy of Military Capabilities," Defence Studies 21, no. 4 (2021), 528, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1902315.

[30] USAF, Airpower Summary - August 2017 (United States Air Forces Central Command, 2017), 1–2.

[31] IOM, "DTM Iraq — IDPs Master Lists — Round 134," Digital Dataset Round 134, version 134, International Organization for Migration (IOM), February 12, 2025.

[32] Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

[33] ACLED, "ACLED Middle East," 2025; UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1," May 20, 2025,

[34] UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1," May 20, 2025,

[35] ACLED, "ACLED Middle East," 2025, https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool.

[36] IOM, "DTM Iraq — IDPs Master Lists — Round 134," Digital Dataset Round 134, version 134, International Organization for Migration (IOM), February 12, 2025.

[37] IOM, "DTM Iraq — IDPs Master Lists — Round 134," Digital Dataset Round 134, version 134, International Organization for Migration (IOM), February 12, 2025

[38] Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

[39] UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1," May 20, 2025,, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018, 2025, ; IOM,
"DTM Iraq — IDPs Master Lists — Round 134," Digital Dataset Round 134, version 134, International Organization for Migration (IOM), February 12, 2025.

[40] UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1," May 20, 2025, global; Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025,

[41] Tai et al., "Mobile Phone Data Reveal the Effects of Violence on Internal Displacement in Afghanistan," Nature Human Behaviour 6, no. 5 (2022), 625.

Window	IDP Period	Event/Strike Period
August 2014	2014-08-01 – 2014-09-30	2014-06-01 – 2014-07-31
Post Sept 2014	2014-10-01 – 2015-04-30	2014-08-01 – 2015-02-28
Post Apr 2015	2015-05-01 – 2016-03-31	2015-03-01 – 2016-01-31
Post Mar 2016	2016-04-01 – 2016-10-31	2016-02-01 – 2016-08-31
Post Oct 2016	2016-11-01 – 2017-06-30	2016-09-01 – 2017-04-30
July 2017	2017-07-01 – 2018-12-31	2017-05-01 – 2018-10-31

Table 1: IDP Windows And Two-Month Lagged Strike Periods

Importantly, each set does not contain every airstrike, violent event, and instance of internal displacement. As such, some provinces have a value of 0 for the independent or dependent variables. One approach to this constraint is to remove all provinces with 0s, interpreting these values as most likely resulting from missing data and risking inaccurate results if they are included in the analysis. However, this method overlooks that many 0s may reflect provinces where either violence or displacement did not occur. The alternative approach treats these 0s as necessary when considering whether the absence of violence is associated with the absence of displacement. This study adopts the latter view, choosing its methodology accordingly.

Accounting for this selection, this study first examined descriptive statistics that show whether internal displacement occurred within two months after recorded violence in each province-period pair. It did this by isolating province-period pairs with recorded violence and then counting the number of them with zero IDPs two months later. The resulting statistic describes the percentage of provinces that recorded violence and subsequently had IDP outflow within two months relative to all provinces with violence. If many provinces have violence but no observed displacement, this percentage would be lower, thus contradicting the related hypothesis of each independent variable.

Due to the first test showing that the zeros were likely not altering the results, this study subsequently used the Spearman correlation coefficient to compare general violent events and airstrikes. Since the data contains many zeros, has outliers, and is non-linear, Spearman's rank correlation was chosen.[42] It produces a value between +1 and –1 that can be interpreted as representing how close the dependent variable is to being ordered from highest to lowest when the independent variable is ordered from highest to lowest.[43] On the one hand, +1 means that if total violence is ranked from highest to lowest by province, IDP totals are also in the order of highest to lowest.[44] On the other hand, –1 means that if violence is ranked from highest to lowest by province, the dependent variable is in the reverse order of lowest to highest.[45] This method enables the analysis to obtain a standardized value to loosely compare general violent events and airstrikes.

Findings And Discussion

Source	Threshold	Rate (%)	IDP$^+$	N
UCDP	$n_{\text{events}} \geq 1$	$74.\overline{2}$	52	70
UCDP	$n_{\text{events}} \geq 5$	$95.\overline{7}$	44	46
Airwars	$n_{\text{strikes}} \geq 1$	100	31	31

IDP$^+$ = provinces with displacement
N = provinces meeting the threshold
$p^* < .05 \mid p^{**} < .01 \mid p^{***} < .001$

Table 2: Provinces Exceeding Thresholds

Some degree of IDP movement is usually observed after violent events (see Table 2). When a violent event happened, 74.2 percent of the time there was IDP outflow two months later, with a sample size of 70 total province-period instances when violent events occurred. The percentage skyrocketed at five violent events, with a 95.7 percent rate of IDP outflow in 46 cases. While it is likely that neither UCDP nor IOM captures every airstrike or case of displacement, the data suggests that when violent events are recorded, internal displacement is also usually observed: as hypothesized, if a province had conflict events, it often had internal displacement two months after.[46]

Period	Events	Airstrikes
August 2014	$0.28\overline{0}$	N/A
Post September 2014	$0.37\overline{4}$	$0.75\overline{8}^{***}$
Post April 2015	$0.73\overline{5}^{***}$	$0.69\overline{0}^{**}$
Post March 2016	$0.47\overline{6}^{*}$	$0.69\overline{6}^{**}$
Post October 2016	$0.50\overline{7}^{*}$	$0.74\overline{2}^{***}$
July 2017	$0.79\overline{7}^{***}$	$0.56\overline{4}^{*}$

provinces = 18
$p^* < .05 \mid p^{**} < .01 \mid p^{***} < .001$

Table 3: Spearman By Period

For violent events, four out of six windows produced statistically significant Spearman correlations with $p < .05$ (see Table 3). For airstrikes, all five windows with available airstrike data were significant, with no data for the August 2014 window after subtracting the lag period (see Table 3). Importantly, hile UCDP incorporates Airwars, it does not record the number of strikes per event and thus cannot distinguish between single- and multiple-strike operations.[47] In contrast, Airwars specifies the number of strikes, entailing

[42] Lund Research, "Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation," 2018.
[43] Lund Research, "Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation," 2018.
[44] Lund Research, "Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation," 2018.
[45] Lund Research, "Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation," 2018.
[46] UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1," May 20, 2025 Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.
[47] Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

more detailed data.[48] But as Spearman does not measure the number of instances—rather the order—the difference in coding between UCDP and Airwars should not have inflated the correlation.

The Spearman test allows these correlations to be compared across each window. Except for 2017, in three out of four windows, there was no considerable drop in the correlation when comparing violent events and airstrikes when both were statistically significant. Even in the fourth window, Post April 2015, airstrikes still produced a value of 0.69 rounded, which was consistent with the other airstrike Spearman correlations. This pattern suggests that airstrikes may be more than a minor component of general violent events. If airstrikes had little to no effect on IDP movement when isolated from UCDP, their Spearman would be expected to be substantially lower than the Spearman for all violent events.

Limitations

Each of this study's datasets limits it differently. First, as identified in Tai et al.,[49] UCDP falls short of being comprehensive because it manually codes its data from media and other open-source information, such as news outlets and NGO reports.[50] Although it is the only dataset comprehensive enough for this study, its incompleteness is a significant shortcoming, as media is more likely to cover regions with more people and economic activity than rural areas.[51] Second, while it is the only dataset that isolates US-led airstrikes in Iraq from 2014 to 2018, Airwars states that it is limited by its collection method, as it relies on US government reporting.[52] Last, although IOM is the only dataset that tracks displaced persons' province of origin in Iraq during the period of study, it could only have recorded a fraction of the total IDPs in Iraq, as it logs displacement events in person.[53] These dataset limitations constrain this study's generalizability, as each set undercounts data instances.

Furthermore, this study's data analysis methods prevent it from making a stronger claim. On the one hand, the US-led coalition launched missiles at areas that may already have had high displacement levels due to other factors, which the study does not account for. These factors could include violence by groups such as ISIS or more material issues like food, water, or housing insecurity. On the other hand, a high Spearman correlation for airstrikes relative to violent events only suggests airstrikes were not an unimportant type of violent event. Therefore, considering confounding variables and Spearman's limitations, this study cannot infer a causal relationship between airstrikes and displacement.

Conclusion

In summary, this essay argues that US-led coalition airstrikes may have contributed to internal displacement in Iraqi provinces between 2014 and 2018. Using provincial-level data of IDPs and airstrikes in Iraq between 2014 and 2018, it sought to help address the lack of a quantitative analysis exploring the interplay between airstrikes and internal displacement. First, it found that if a province had conflict events, it often had recorded internal displacement with a lag period of two months later. Second, it identified that if a province was hit by a US-led coalition airstrike, it had recorded internal displacement in the same lag period. Third, as a result of the Spearman analysis, airstrikes seem not to be an un-salient type of violent event within this larger grouping. Considering these findings, along with previous literature and the scale of violence that the US-led coalition inflicted on Iraq, it seems indeed that US-led coalition airstrikes may have contributed to internal displacement during the OIR campaign.

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[36] UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1," May 20, 2025 Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025,

[47] Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

[49] Tai et al., "Mobile Phone Bata Reveal the Effects of Violence on Intemal Displacement in Afghanistan." Name Human Behaviour 6, no. S (2022), 629.

[50] UCDP, "UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global Version 24.1,* May 20, 2025,; Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset," Journal of Peace Research 50, no. 4 (2013): 525.

[51] Tai et al., "Mobile Phone Data Reveal the Effects of Violence on Internal Displacement in Afghanistan," Nature Human Behaviour 6, no. 5 (2022), 630, s3 Airwars, *US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

[52]Airwars, "US-Led Coalition Air Strikes in Iraq & Syria, 2014-2018," 2025.

[53] IOM, "DTM Iraq - IDPs Master Lists - Round 134," Digital Dataset Round 134, version 134, International Organization for Migration (IOM), February 12, 2025, https://dom.om. int/datasets/irag-idps-master-lists-round-134,

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The Sources of Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict in China's Relations with Thailand from 2010-2025

By: Shawn Wu

Abstract: Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Thailand in 1975, the two nations have enjoyed a close partnership and relationship, cooperating across a wide range of issues. This sustained cooperation has increased over the 21st century, motivated by China's regional hegemonic ambition in Southeast Asia and Thailand's changing political landscape. As China has become its largest trading partner, Thailand has become one of China's closest allies in Southeast Asia in China's bid to broaden relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to attain regional, and potentially global, hegemony. While the two nations enjoy a relationship that has been built on mutual security interests and has incorporated shared economic goals and modern development, there are tensions that have been fueled by concerns over Thai sovereignty, protecting the relationship between Thailand and the United States (US), and the future negative impacts of Chinese investments. The regional political shifts within the Indo-Pacific have directly impacted the dynamics of Chinese-Thai relations. In the last decade, Thailand has needed to navigate China's rise within the region and globally while preserving its autonomy, regional relationships, and global identity. From 2010 to 2025, China and Thailand have developed a robust relationship driven by shared economic and security interests, but with the growing domestic issues in Thailand, increasing strategic challenges, and regional competition in the Indo-Pacific, there are questions regarding the long-term stability of their relationship. This analysis starts with the foundation of this bilateral relationship and an analysis of China's strategy in Southeast Asia. This will be followed by an analysis of the main sources of cooperation between the two countries, specifically surrounding economic collaboration, Chinese investment, and security cooperation. Finally, competition and conflict within this long-term partnership will be discussed through the lenses of geopolitical and domestic competition.

Key Words: Thai-China Relations, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific Affairs, China in Southeast Asia

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The relationship between the PRC and Thailand was not always friendly. In the 20th century, the number of four-hundred thousand Chinese migrants in Siam, Thailand's former name, had ballooned to almost four million by the middle of the century.[1] With this influx of migrants, the Thai government was concerned about whether the migrants' allegiances were with China or Thailand. To combat this dilemma, the Thai government implemented the Nationality Act. These assimilation policies aimed to liberate the Thai economy from the Chinese economy, exclude Chinese migrants from certain occupations, purchasing land, and forcing them to "adopt Thai names, enroll their children in Thai schools, speak Thai, and renounce any allegiance to China."[2] These policies stripped Chinese migrants of any heritage they brought with them and minimized future opportunities for their children. With diminished Chinese influence, the future held a significant Thai cultural sentiment that was subtly integrated with Chinese culture.

In addition to the treatment of migrants that spurred tensions, political differences have shaped their relationship throughout history. As a communist nation, China supported the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and its desire to become the leading party of Thailand. As communism spread across Southeast Asia, especially in the neighboring country of Laos, Thailand's government had resisted the movement's influence. The Thai people quickly labeled the CPT as a party not for the Thai but for the Chinese, as most members, including leaders, were Chinese.[3] During the Cold War period, the PRC continued to support communist movements across the region, and this became a source of contention between the two countries.[4] During this time, China's official representative in the United Nations (UN) was the Republic of China, located in Taiwan, which was the official Chinese political party in contact with the Thai government. These two situations led to a rocky relationship with the PRC president, Mao Zedong, for most of his tenure. This changed following the Thai Popular Uprising in 1973, when the new Sanya Thammasak government laid the foundation for diplomatic relations with China, especially with the PRC's newfound recognition at the UN.[5]At the same time, during the Vietnam War, North Vietnam's communist troops were "on the verge of taking control of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos."[6] The dire situation regarding the communists sped up the path toward diplomatic ties between the PRC and Thailand, as the Chinese government was keen on countering Soviet influences and the Thai government was interested in reinforcing its national security. Following these negotiations, the PRC and Thailand officially established diplomatic relations in 1975, with a foundation set in mutual security interests. This political standing continued for the next few years, when Thailand and China fortified their partnership by countering Vietnamese and Soviet aggression in Southeast Asia.[7] This started a long partnership that extended far beyond security interests.

To fully understand the relationship between Thailand and China, China's strategy in Southeast Asia needs to be explicitly defined. As China's economic and security interests have expanded in the region, China's desire to become a regional hegemon has also deepened, despite its claims that it will never seek hegemony.[8] With a reduction of troops from the US in the Asia-Pacific region, China has sought to fill the void left by the US.[9] China is taking this opportunity to reflect its interests and values across Southeast Asia and establish itself as the central power in the region.

Key components of China's effort to become a regional hegemon are military modernization, economic initiatives, and Chinese soft power. Defense spending has increased by thirteenfold in the last thirty years, along with an increase in intermediate-range ballistic missiles of more than a factor of fifteen in the last decade.[10] Economic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have undertaken projects in all eleven countries located in Southeast Asia.[11] When it comes to soft power, culture spread through Confucius Institutes, which will be discussed later, and the "Greater China" network is essential to this effort. The "Greater China" network is made up of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs who are able to spread Chinese business throughout the region to establish an "economic empire" in the region.[12] These actions reveal a strategy that is designed to increase influence over the region, including Southeast Asia, and ultimately create a geopolitical sphere where China is a recognized, prioritized, and uncontested regional hegemon.

Currently, China and Thailand's strongest source of cooperation is their economic collaboration. One catalyst that sparked trade between the two countries was the emergence of a new Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, and his cornerstone economic plan of Reform and Opening. His primary focus was to improve China's economic situation through

[1] Enze Han, and Oxford Academic, "The Ripple Effect : China's Complex Presence in Southeast Asia," New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024, 138.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Bob Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency—The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965–ca. 1982," Central Intelligence Agency, June 2016.
[4] "A Legacy of Friendship," Bangkok Post, accessed April 30, 2025,
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Chinese Communist Party Congress, "China Will Never Seek Hegemony or Engage in Expansionism: XI," International Department, Central Committee of CPC, October 16, 2022.
[8] Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," International Security 19, no. 1 (1994): 149–68, p. 150.
[9] Matthew P. Funaiole and Brian Hart, "China's Military in 10 Charts," CSIS, September 2, 2025.
[10] Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," Green Finance & Development Center, 2025.
[11] Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," International Security 19, no. 1 (1994): 149–68, p. 154.
[12] Jeffrey A. Bader, "China's Role in East Asia: Now and the Future," Brookings, September 6, 2005.

development, which had rippling effects on the region. One policy that Deng implemented cut off support for all communist parties in Southeast Asia.[13] This showed the Thai government that future diplomatic missions were purged of ulterior political motives and that trade would benefit both parties. Deng's economic policies increased export demand, and its trade deficit with Thailand during this period helped revive its economy, along with the rest of Southeast Asia.[14] The positive effects of this development have continued into the present day. In 2002, China signed onto the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to promote the expansion of tariff-free trade between ASEAN countries and China, especially with Thailand.[15] By the 2010s, the bilateral relationship between the two countries could not be stronger.

Due to the many economic projects that have commenced with Chinese involvement, it became apparent that investment had to happen with China. Following the ASEAN-China FTA, China moved into the top five of Thailand's trade partners, and within eleven years, Thailand embraced the idea of Chinese investment as China became Thailand's largest trading partner in 2013, and has never lost the title since.[16]

In addition to trade, Chinese investment in Thailand became a large part of their relationship. Since 2013, China has invested heavily in Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a special economic zone that aims to increase economic integration in the eastern region of Thailand. A paramount project in the EEC will be Thailand's plan to revitalize this area into a high-tech industrial and transport hub and a smart city by 2037. To support this mission, China has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to "strengthen investment cooperation in the digital economy."[18] Chinese technological advances will play a paramount role in Thailand's development of a smart city, and China will build upon its already significant investments in the EEC of 289.951 billion Thai Baht (8.7 billion US dollars) between 2018 and 2024.[19] Many of these investments have already been integrated into the technology sector, as China has provided investments for clean energy businesses as well as electric vehicles.[20] These investments have propelled China towards the title of largest source of foreign direct investment in Thailand.[21] These actions will increase investment into Thailand's EEC and give China a chance to pursue its own interests in Southeast Asia.

China's investments in Thailand become clearer when discussed in the context of the BRI. Since China implemented the BRI in 2013, it has provided global infrastructure development to 149 countries. Thailand joined in late 2014 as an early supporter of China's BRI vision. China's investment in Thailand is crucial in its pursuit of becoming a regional hegemon, especially with Thailand's geographical location on the Strait of Malacca, where more than 80% of Chinese oil and energy shipments are sent through.[22] Some of Thailand's most significant BRI projects relate to its position as a Southeast Asian geopolitical hub. As the founding state of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China has been able to directly encourage the bank to grant low-interest loans to Thailand, specifically to fund the development of the Thai segment (from Bangkok to the Nong Khai province) of the Kunming-Singapore railway.[23] The railway construction came after the completion of the Kunming–Bangkok Expressway seven years prior, which established a direct road link between the two nations. This high-speed railway would be fully funded by Thailand and would utilize Chinese technology.[24] This setup is beneficial for the Chinese, as their businesses receive more consumers from this infrastructure project during construction, as well as in the future. The rail segment would be beneficial for travel, employment, and most importantly, social and economic development, as it will connect Bangkok to China and facilitate further relations between the two nations. Additionally, the BRI in Thailand is directly linked with the EEC for synergy in infrastructure and trade. In May 2017, Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak announced that the EEC would directly align with the goals and projects of the BRI through the new rail link.[25] These various infrastructure projects are elevating China's soft power strategy and strengthening its power in Southeast Asia to become a regional hegemon.

Another focus of China's soft power strategy is to influence the Thai community through tourism and cultural investments. The aforementioned infrastructure projects are vital to the continued tourism between both countries. China

[13] Lee Branstetter and Nicholas Lardy, "China's Embrace of Globalization," Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 668.
[14] Bob Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency—The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965–ca. 1982," Central Intelligence Agency, June 2016.
[15] Bader, "China's Role in East Asia: Now and the Future."
[16] Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed." The Pacific Review 31, no. 1: 116–30, 2017.
[17] "Cabinet Approves Operational Plan for Trillion-Baht EEC Smart City Project," The Nation, December 20, 2022.
[18] Signing Ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Strengthening Investment Cooperation in the Digital Economy between the Eastern Economic Corridor Office of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China," Eastern Economic Corridor, February 7, 2025.
[19] Ibid.
[20] "EEC Welcomed Leading Chinese Clean Energy Companies to Discuss Investment Opportunities in the EEC Area," Eastern Economic Corridor , March 1, 2024.
[21] Foreign Direct Investment," Open Development Thailand, August 1, 2024,
[22] Piratorn Punyaratabandhu, and Jiranuwat Swaspitchayaskun, "The Political Economy of China-Thailand Development Under the One Belt One Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities," Chinese Economy 51 (4): 333–41. 2018, 335.
[23] Ibid., 335.
[24] Ibid., 335
[25] Chatrudee Theparat & Lamonphet Apisitniran, "EEC Tied to China's One Belt, One Road," Bangkok Post, May 9, 2017.

has long been Thailand's largest source of foreign tourists, with 662,779 Chinese tourists visiting Thailand in January 2025.[26] The regions encompassed by the EEC are tourism hubs. With the Chinese and Thai investments in the area, an influx of tourists would stimulate the local economies and spur reinvestment into the EEC. One example that has already made a significant impact is the tech company, Alibaba's $320 million investment that connects sought-after Thai agricultural products to Chinese markets, which satisfies Chinese consumers' appetite for the Thai tourism market.[27] Overall, the Chinese FDI has played a considerable role in the development of Thailand and will continue to support Thai initiatives in the future as part of their foreign policy plan. Beyond tourism, Thailand hosts the most Confucius Institutes in Asia. These schools are fully funded by the Chinese and intend to promote "official versions of Chinese history, society, and politics" in Asia.[28] This has led to many Thai nationals having an education from a Chinese university, which provides a constant source of influence and cultural exchange from the Chinese in Thailand's civil society.

China and Thailand have also enjoyed good cooperation surrounding security challenges. Since 1975, when security was paramount for Thai leaders, the security situation has evolved. Their focus has shifted from actively countering threats to maintaining their forces' combat readiness. From 2010 onward, Thailand and China have cooperated on security activities ranging from joint military exercises to procuring military equipment. Annually, China and Thailand have conducted Falcon Strike Air Force exercises, and biennially, they have conducted Blue Strike Navy exercises together.[29] This cooperation is a test of combat readiness due to the lack of a common threat for the two nations. More importantly, these exercises indicate to the world that China focuses on peaceful military cooperation with other nations rather than aggression. It also sends a message to the US regarding its position of importance in Southeast Asia, especially as China tries to expand its regional influence.

Military procurements have also deepened the relationship between Thailand and China. The Thai military's purchases from China reinforces their cooperation in security needs and symbolizes a realignment in Thailand's security policy towards China. Historically, the Thai military has purchased vehicles and arms made in the US, but it has increasingly turned to China as its main supplier. In recent years, Chinese arms sales to Thailand have skyrocketed from $250 million from 2014-18 to $500 million from 2019-23, while American sales have decreased from $190 million to $105 million.[30]

Additionally, in 2017, Thailand purchased 34 armored vehicles, 11 VT-4 battle tanks, and an S26T Yuan-class submarine.[31] This supply of weapons systems from China to Thailand elevates China's status as a security partner to Thailand and diminishes US influence in the area. This deal shows the Thai military's confidence in the Chinese defense industry and strengthens the cooperation between the two nations by exchanging intelligence and training. While these developments may seem pragmatic, they have implications that go beyond the scope of the deals: they signal a growing mutual trust in the security realm between China and Thailand. The modernization of the Thai military with Chinese resources reinforces their strong relationship and has become an essential piece of the cooperation between China and Thailand. Nevertheless, the deepening of ties presents challenges for this relationship.

Despite the growing cooperation between China and Thailand, this relationship faces competition from the historically dominant power in Southeast Asia: the United States. Thailand has to pursue a balancing strategy to keep ties with the Western World while cooperating with China during China's ascension to regional dominance.While Thailand has been conducting exercises with China, they have tended to their relationship with the US with Asia's longest-running joint military exercise, Cobra Gold.[32] Cobra Gold stems from security threats to Thailand in the early 1980s, and these exercises show the strength of defense diplomacy and deterring any threat of invasion.[33] Thailand has established a policy of hedging, where they have "assumed contradictory or unclear policies towards Great Powers."[34] This policy can also be seen politically, where they refuse to take a clear stance on China's affairs in the South China Sea. The hedging behavior exhibited by Thailand reflects its concern over dependence on either power in this polarized region. With Thailand's valuable alliance with the US and proximity to China, they have developed a fluid foreign policy that keeps Thailand from being the center of the global power struggle between the US and China.

Even as Thailand strengthens its relationship with China, other countries have risen to compete with China in Thai affairs. This foreign policy of diversification is strategic and pragmatic as it allows Thailand to preserve its sovereignty while maintaining regional relationships with the rest of Asia, in a time where cooperation is essential. Some of

[26] "3.7 Million Foreign Tourists Visit Thailand in January," The Nation, February 9, 2025,
[27] Patpicha Tanakasempipat, "Alibaba to Invest $320 Million in Thailand, as Rivals Boost Presence," Reuters, April 19, 2018.
[28] "Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society," Council on Foreign Relations, June 7, 2021.
[29] Wassana Nanuam, "Thailand, China Holding 3 Joint Military Exercises," Bangkok Post, July 17, 2023
[30] Rahman Yaacob, "Southeast Asia's Arms Suppliers, by the Numbers," Lowy Institute, January 21, 2025,
[31] Wassana Nanuam, "Army Sets Sights on Chinese Tanks," Bangkok Post, May 9, 2017,
[32] Gregory V. Raymond, "Cobra Gold over Four Decades: Hedging, Alliances and a United States–Thailand Multilateral Military Exercise," Contemporary Security Policy, 2025, 1–25, 1.
[33] Ibid., 11.
[34] Ibid., 6.

the leading partners competing with China, excluding the US, are India with the India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol, and Japan through the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI). India has sought to improve its partnerships with ASEAN countries, preserve the maritime security of the Indian Ocean, and maintain commercial shipping routes through the implementation of joint naval exercises with Thailand.[35] This partnership has supported Thailand's interest in maritime stability while staying neutral in the Indo-Pacific power struggle. Additionally, in direct competition with China's BRI, Japan has sought to increase its influence with its PQI. Japan has already been one of the top investors in the EEC, second only to China, contributing 183 billion Thai Baht (5.5 billion USD) to the zone.[36] Beyond that, the PQI aims to provide infrastructure at a favorable financial cost while utilizing durable materials and local input from the community.[37] These different sources of competition reinforce Thailand's position as a neutral leader in Southeast Asia. These engagements would not substantially harm the Chinese relationship, as Chinese trade and investment continue to flow substantially into Thailand. Still, these initiatives with other Asian countries, in addition to the US, show deliberate policies to avoid over-alignment, which is essential for preserving Thailand's regional independence.

While China's ambition is welcomed by most Thai leaders, especially in the infrastructure sector, there are rising concerns amongst Thailand's domestic populace. The most significant issues with these massive BRI undertakings are the threat of compromised national sovereignty and a debt-riddled future for Thailand. As these projects get delayed and grow in cost, public scrutiny over these engagements increases, especially in the case of the Bangkok to Nong Khai railway. This railway project has been delayed multiple times, mainly due to domestic issues with allocating the proper funds within the fiscal budget while mitigating fiscal risks.[38] As this is a Chinese-run project, the Thai government is unable to strictly control the scope of business, which could lead to cost overruns. If this project is carried out without a good plan or long-term considerations, there could be a critical and adverse long-term effect on Thailand. This lack of control and promise of better infrastructure leads to concerns that Thailand's sovereignty and stability could be compromised.[39] The first phase of the railway project has been funded with domestic resources, but the second phase will have to be financed with foreign loans, which raises the issue of debt-trap diplomacy.[40] This occurs when countries that do not have high economic growth are pressured into debt so that China can be in a political, predatory position.[41] In this situation, countries are either forced into taking out more debt or doing a debt-equity swap with China, with the latter occurring in Sri Lanka, where China took control of a port on a 99-year lease.[42] Thailand has to act carefully with the BRI projects, especially when there is no space in the fiscal budget, so that it can avoid the pitfalls of the debt trap that many other nations in the region and abroad have succumbed to.

In addition to the funding issues of the BRI projects, domestic leaders have also taken issue with the demands made by China in the implementation of the railway. The State Railway of Thailand had to end China's pursuit of developmental rights along the railway and the land around it.[43] Another instance of pushback from the Thai civil society is the end of the project that blasted the rapids in the Mekong River to allow larger vessels to travel to and from China.[44] These two instances are some of the few occurrences of pushback from the Thai people towards the BRI. In the case of the railway, its location in the "stronghold of the military's electoral, civil society, and grassroots opponents" kept it well insulated from any adverse reactions.[45] Despite the political safety of the project, Thai civil society still stands to wonder who is doing the construction. The project will be carried out by Chinese workers who are employed by Chinese enterprises while utilizing Chinese equipment, which shows a disconnect between the expectations of the Thai people and the reality of the situation. Thai involvement in the project is minimal outside of financial backing, which could prove to be unbeneficial for domestic businesses in the country. For the BRI, these domestic sensitivities could potentially be a source of contention and conflict between China and Thailand.

If China's projects seem to be further intrusive or exploitative as it continues to invest in the country, there is a chance that political backlash could minimize future cooperation with the Chinese. This bilateral relationship is built on a very strong foundation, but as with any political endeavor, it is subject to shifting public opinion and domestic political change. From 2010 to 2025, China and Thailand

[35] "Indo-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT)," Byju's, January 16,

[36] EEC (Eastern Economic Corridor) Aiming for Investment Target of 400 Billion Baht in 3 Years, Starting with Roadshow to Japan to Promote Investment Opportunities in Bio – Circular – Green (BCG) Industry and EEC Business Center & Livable Smart City Project.," Eastern Economic Corridor, February 9, 2024.

[37] Takema Sakamoto, "Quality Infrastructure for Quality Growth," Japan International Cooperation Agency, December 13, 2017..

[38] Sivarin Lertpusit, "Evaluating the Benefits of the Current BRI Infrastructure Projects to Thailand: The Case of Cross-Border Trade and the Laos–China Railway," East Asian Policy (Singapore) 16, no. 1 (2024), 58.

[40] Lertpusit, "Evaluating the Benefits of the Current BRI Infrastructure Projects to Thailand: The Case of Cross-Border Trade and the Laos–China Railway," 58.

[41] Amit Ranjan, "China's Infrastructure Projects in South Asia Under BRI: An Appraisal," Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations 5, no. 3 (12, 2019): 1079-1110,VIII-IX,

[42] IIbid., 1097.

[43] Council on Foreign Relations. "Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society."

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

have dramatically expanded their relations through deeper economic ties, increased bilateral investment, and security cooperation. Many different examples highlight this growing relationship, especially with the Belt and Road Initiative. Despite this close partnership, Thailand has tried to avoid dependence on China and maintain its relationships with the US, ASEAN nations, and other Asian countries to preserve its independence, security, and sovereignty in a region dominated by two great powers. The Chinese-Thai relationship has seen cooperation across a multitude of sectors and projects. Still, it is also facing competition and conflict due to China's desire to become a regional hegemon in Southeast Asia. China-Thailand relations have a strong foundation, and with heightened tensions between China and the US in the region, Thailand's foreign policy must be navigated carefully to determine the future of its relationship with China. China must find a way to balance its self-interests with Thai skepticism and preserve this all-important Asian relationship.

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Japan's Proto-China Hawk: Fumio Kishida's Comprehensive US-Japan-ROK Diplomacy in Northeast East Asia from 2021-2024

By: Julian Sherrod*

Abstract: With Fumio Kishida now out of office, it is important to reflect upon his foreign policy and to draw conclusions as to what his goals were, how he aimed to accomplish them, and their results, especially when looking at China. This article seeks to shed light on this, as well as to argue that his foreign policy, while at times appropriate and reasonable, took a hawkish stance towards China that endangered relations without any good reason. He heavily diverged from his predecessors who saw China as an important nation to keep good relations with, and at the very least to maintain economic ties with. Nevertheless, many times Kishida seemed to avoid diplomatic solutions, instead he focused on strengthening the US-Japan-ROK relationship through their shared view of deterring China from not only political and military expansion, but economic as well. Through newly invigorated political and economic cooperation, Japan led the trilateral group, under the banner of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework, to counter Chinese influence in Northeast Asia, for better or for worse. This article also aims to show that Kishida's foreign policy could set a new standard for what a China hawk can be in the future, and that while current Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba is taking a pro-China view as of writing, another candidate may take up the mantle of being a China hawk that Kishida once did.

Key Words: Fumio Kishida, Shigeru Ishiba, Japanese Foreign Policy, US-Japan-ROK relations, military policy

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In 1937, Japan began its full-scale invasion of China. From Beijing to Guangzhou, Japanese garrisons repressed countless Chinese civilians. There were those who argued against this before it happened including those in power in Japan. In 2021, Japan was the exact opposite of this past war-mongering version of itself, having formed amiable relations with the Chinese government. Nevertheless, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) continued to lambast Japan primarily since the 2000's for even the slightest of perceived faults by its population, ministers, leaders, or organizations. In this difficult diplomatic context, with a multitude of viewpoints on China throughout its long history, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida solidified the ROK and the United States (US) against the PRC's aggression by being a standard bearer through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy as a hawk rather than a dove, setting a new standard for future China hawks to follow.

This paper will first explain Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's foreign policy both in terms of grand strategy and then bilateral relations with the ROK and US, and then finally looking at ROK-United States (US)-Japan trilateral relationship's usage to isolate China. It will then look towards the future, arguing that Kishida's hawkishness has not been coopted by the current Ishiba administration but that his influence still lives on through certain initiatives.

A History of China-Japan Relations

First, it is important to understand the types of relations between China and Japan in its long and rich history of diplomacy. Since the dawn of time, China and Japan have had a complex relationship. During the times of the Chinese empires Japan would act, more or less, as a non-willing participant within the Chinese tributary system depending on the era.[1] When China began to reform in the 1890's Japan saw China as a possible partner, as per later Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi's visit, albeit later decrying the attempts to reform into a constitutional government as impossible and harmful.[2] Even Ito's political rival, Yamagata Aritomo, also believed good relations with China were critical for Japanese long-term security.[3] In the post-war era, especially since the normalization of relations under Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei, Japan and China have been political competitors and economic partners. Looking at the tenures of Masayoshi Ōhira, Naoto Kan, and Shinzo Abe, it shows a diverse history of relations, including cooperation, competition, and collaboration respectively.

First, Masayoshi Ōhira can be seen as the epitome of cooperation both domestically and internationally, being known for taking his time thinking but speaking eloquently. Joining the kōchikai (Big Pond Society) faction of the LDP (where Kishida hails from), he promoted what he would later use as his slogan "shinrai to gōi" (Trust and consensus) through both advocating for merit based appointments and compromise, while also advocating under Tanaka for the latter, stating "...I'd like to have you say yes or no only after getting some consensus, first of all among the LDP, and also among the various government ministries, opposition parties, financial and labor circles, and so on."[4] As foreign minister, he assisted both Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda with Japan-Korea normalization of relations while also spearheading rapprochement with China, and Tanaka with China-Japan normalization.[5] As prime minister he showed compromise with the opposition, especially on budgetary matters.[6] Especially with China, he showed he wanted to make relations "deep and broad" emphasizing understanding on both sides.[7] Showing understanding in his diplomacy with other nations as well, his pacific basin cooperation idea called for self-determination, adding a sense of non-intervention into other nations' political situations.[8] This time was practically the pinnacle of China-Japan relations, from which other time frames can be compared.

Second, the administration of Naoto Kan was plagued by issues dealing with Chinese aggression. A likely part of the aggressive Chinese reaction to his administration was the fact that he emphasized stronger ties with the US, much like the Kishida administration as will be shown later.[9] With his emphasis on economic cooperation Kan acted more like Ōhira than his predecessor, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama.[10]

Nevertheless, during his tenure one of the worst incidents regarding the Senkaku Islands, a disputed territory between the two nations, occurred. On September 7th, 2010, a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japanese coast guard vessel, leading to many issues regarding international

[1] David C. Kang, East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 59-61.
[2] Takii Kazuhiro and Takechi Manabu, Itō Hirobumi - Japan's First Prime Minister and Father of the Meiji Constitution (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 158, 179-180.
[3] Roger F. Hackett, Yamagata Aritomo in the Rise of Modern Japan, 1838-1922 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 242-243, 275.
[4] Seizaburō Satō, Ken'ichi Kōyama, and Shunpei Kumon, Postwar Politician: The Life of Former Prime Minister MASAYOSHI ŌHIRA, trans. William R. Carter (New York, New York: Kodansha International Ltd., 1990), 161-165, 289, 446; Satohiro Akimoto, "Is a Grand Kochikai Possible?," Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, March 1, 2022.
[5] Ibid, 201-204, 210-211, 304-307.
[6] Ibid, 454-457.
[7] Ibid, 520.
[8] Ibid, 524-525.
[9] Chol-hui Kim, "Dreaming of a Different China: The Changing China Policy under the Democratic Party of Japan," S-Space: Seouldaehakgyo Gigwallipojiteori (thesis, 2016).
[10] Christopher W. Hughes, "The Democratic Party of Japan's New (but Failing) Grand Security Strategy: From 'Reluctant Realism' to 'Resentful Realism,'" essay, in Japan under the DPJ: The Politics of Transition and Governance, ed. Kenji E. Kushida and Phillip Y. Lipscy (Stanford, California: The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2013), 333–69, 340-341.

law and rising tensions between China and Japan, cancelling any hopes of economic cooperation.[11] This was a time of struggle, one of the most confusing and complex since the end of the war.

Last but not least, Shinzo Abe's administration was unique, as he was known as a nationalist by his dissenters while also promoting China-Japan economic cooperation.[12] Kishida took many of Abe's ideas and transformed them into his own, most notably the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy as will be seen later. This should be seen as the basis for Kishida's multilateral approach to Chinese containment. During Abe's time in office, while there were issues regarding Abe's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine – which interns the souls of Japanese war dead including class A war criminals – there was also economic cooperation through Abe's 2018 trip to Beijing to sign memorandums of understanding.[13] Looking back at Masayoshi Ohira's time in office, Abe shows the same principle of separating economics and politics, but specifically during a time of heightened regional tensions.

This background helps to show that there have been good and bad times between China and Japan, emphasizing that there have been a multitude of strategies and plans, by both hawks and doves as well as between the LDP and opposition parties, regarding stances towards the question of how to deal with China and foreign policy in general. Despite Kishida's hawkishness towards China, which will be proven in this paper, it is not unprecedented. It should not be seen as as shocking or breaking precedent, but rather as a feature of the Kishida administration based in selective parts of Japanese diplomatic history.

Prime Minister Kishida

While many could point to Kishida's adoption of Abe's FOIP to show that Kishida was solely following his predecessors, he has also forged his own path.[14] As Michael Green has written about Japan's grand strategy under Abe's term in office, this section will aim to encompass Japan's grand strategy in East Asia during the Kishida administration. Quickly defining grand strategy, in this context it should be seen as an overarching strategy to guide Kishida's administration with broad goals as well as to inform those that may come after his. His grand strategy encompassed the key elements of Abe's FOIP strategy while simultaneously embracing the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship.

By 2022, the "Rise of China" had already been confirmed, and Japan was considered a middle power by several elites and academics. Between 2021 and 2023 Japan had lost smart power influence according to the Lowry Institute's Asia Power Index, meaning it was less influential on the world stage.[15] Crises of population decline, economic stagnation, and political apathy remained domestically, while issues related to the Senkaku Islands and Japan-US-ROK trilateral cooperation remained abroad, leaving Kishida in a woeful position. These issues are some of the many that plagued his administration, but its achievements should be looked at through his own goals rather than judging only how it dealt with the issues already at hand.

1. A free and open international order based on the rule of law
2. Fully defending the peace and stability of Japan
3. Leading the international community by confronting global-level issues and contributing to humankind[16]

Throughout this paper, all information will be relevant to these three important foreign policy goals outlined by the Japanese Prime Minister's Office. It is important to remember these three key goals for Japanese foreign policy during the time of Kishida and how each action he took both supported and hindered the accomplishment of the goals and the reasoning behind these decisions. Overall, these goals show how Kishida, from the beginning of his administration, wished to unite the trilateral relationship to unite against China.

Kishida's Nation-to-Nation Diplomacy

Japan's neighbors in Northeast Asia have been a focus in Japanese diplomacy since time immemorial. Yamagata Aritomo, one of the founders of Meiji Japan in the late 1800's, was one of the first to describe Korea as a "dagger pointed toward the heart of Japan,"[17] and as part of "...our line of sovereignty,"[18] emphasizing its strategic location.

China has also been an important acquaintance in the region, both as an enemy and a trade partner as mentioned earlier. The US has also been important in the region for centuries, as the US took the Spanish colony of the Philippines and still has economic interests in China. Since the end of World War II, these nations have become crucial to Japanese strategy and policy in Asia. The US has been aware of Japan ever since Commodore Perry's Black Ships approached the gates of Japan, demanding that they open to the world. Since then, Japan has been acutely aware of US influence within East Asia, attempting to appease and challenge it at times. Since the end of the war, Japan has

[11] Daniel Sneider, "The New Asianism: Japanese Foreign Policy under the Democratic Party of Japan," essay, in Japan under the DPJ: The Politics of Transition and Governance, ed. Kenji E. Kushida and Phillip Y. Lipscy (Stanford, California: The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2013), 369–404, 388-391.

[12] S. Nathan Park, "Abe's Nationalism Is His Most Toxic Legacy," Foreign Policy, July 14, 2022.

[13] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "What Was Abe Thinking, Going to Yasukuni?," East Asia Forum, December 29, 2013.

[14] Benny Teh, "Kicking off Kishida's New Free and Open Indo-Pacific Plan," East Asia Forum, May 11, 2023.

[15] "Comprehensive Power," Lowy Institute Asia Power Index: 2024 Edition, 2024.

[16] "Major Policies of the Kishida Cabinet 03/ Diplomacy and Security," Prime Minister's Office of Japan, accessed April 4, 2025.

[17] Michael J. Green, Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022), 24.

[18] Roger F. Hackett, Yamagata Aritomo in the Rise of Modern Japan, 1838-1922 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 216.

been both happy and reluctant at times to have the US-Japan Treaty Alliance where the US provides a security umbrella over Japan, where Japan pays part of the monetary cost in the modern day.[19] In the beginning, the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) challenged the LDP on its pro-US stance by forming a broad coalition against the alliance treaty revision of 1960.[20]

Since 2001, Japan has leaned more and more towards the US-Japan Alliance rather than towards any sort of Chinese political model such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.[21] While there was competition between Japan and China, both economically and politically, it was mitigated by a sense that China-Japan relations were critical for the region. This got worse under Kishida, which will be shown, removing the idea of separating politics and economics in his term. Nevertheless, these choices pushed Japan more towards the US, leading to increased cooperation militarily, economically, and politically.

While not possessing land directly in Northeast Asia, the US' presence has been crucial to the balance of power within Asia as a whole, and very important to Japan's security as shown by Kishida's meeting with a US commander during the very beginning of his second administration.[22] During Abe's terms from 2012-2020, both he and Kishida strengthened the US-Japan Alliance through their roles as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister respectively. They both also attempted to mend relations with the ROK, a key goal of the US as well to ensure trilateral cooperation. The stage was then set for the Kishida administration to have a cooperative US-Japan relationship focused on isolating China and uniting anti-Chinese forces in the region, especially with the ROK.

This period was considered to be one of the best times for US-Japan relations.[23] With Joe Biden in office in the United States and Fumio Kishida's cooperative outlook in Asia with the US, there was a lot of common ground to cover. As Kishida was considered to be a dove originally, US-Japan cooperation was expected to grow but not to the level where there is now a joint US-Japan command.[24] The two also agreed to begin holding regular military exercises together at the end of Kishida's term in 2024 during a summit.[25] Nevertheless, this increased military cooperation and focus on the US-Japan Alliance as a primary concern of Kishida's show how Japan used this relationship to ensure Japan's security as one of his key goals. Despite issues with US troops on Okinawa, which is one of his concerns as well, the alliance remained without any major issues during Kishida's time in office.[26]

Giving a small backdrop to Japan-ROK relations under Kishida, as this is one of the most complex bilateral diplomatic relationships in the region, this section will focus on tensions under Abe and Moon as well as Lee and five Japanese prime ministers from 2017-2020 and 2008-2013 respectively. The former relationships was known for its shortcomings, with impeached ROK President Park Gyun-hee and Abe's plan for the Asian Women's Fund being abolished by Moon when coming into office.[27] For the latter relationship, while Lee had.amiable relations with some Japanese prime ministers, both from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) where Kishida, Abe, and Ōhira come from and their opposition. He nevertheless raised tensions over the Dokdo territorial dispute which led to an era of increased hostility.[28] While it decreased between Abe and Park, it yet again resurfaced under Moon and Abe, especially when dealing with the issue of wartime reparations for World War Two.[29] This leads into the Kishida-Yoon relationship, but not before the end of the Moon administration's time in office when Kishida had just come into power.

As mentioned earlier, President Moon gave the Kishida administration many challenges in the beginning, while the Yoon Suk-yeol administration led to one of the strongest ROK-Japan relationships in history. After the Moon administration left in 2022, Yoon took the reins and fought against the anti-Japanese sentiment in the ROK. By the end of Kishida's administration, and the attempted coup by Yoon, the pair were casually drinking together with no mention of the comfort women issue or about reparations (See Figure 1).

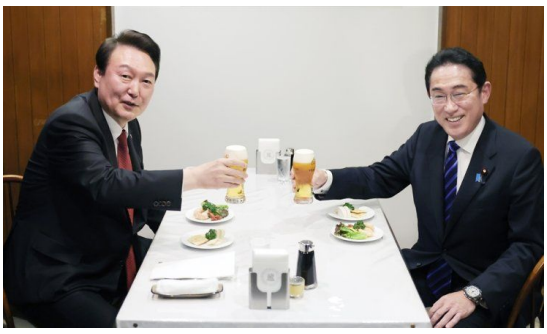


Figure 1: President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida sharing a drink at a restaurant in Japan in 2023. "Yoon, Kishida Bond over Drinks at Popular Eatery," The Korea Times, March 17, 2023.

[19] "Japan Set to Pay Significantly More to Host U.S. Military Bases," The Asahi Shimbun, November 24, 2021.
[20] Nick Kapur, Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 19.
[21] Akihiro Iwashita, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Japan: Moving Together to Reshape the Eurasian Community," Brookings, January 28, 2008.
[22] "Courtesy Call from the Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command," Prime Minister's Office of Japan, November 11, 2021.
[23] Brad Glosserman, "AS GOOD AS IT GETS?," Comparative Connections 25, no. 3 (January 2024): 19–28, 19.
[24] Kazuhiko Togo, "Is Kishida a Dove or a Hawk?," East Asia Forum, October 21, 2021.
[25] Markus Garlauskas, "This Aspect of the Biden-Kishida Summit Will Define the Military Response to an Indo-Pacific Crisis," Atlantic Council, April 10, 2024.
[26] "Major Policies of the Kishida Cabinet 03/ Diplomacy and Security," Prime Minister's Office of Japan, accessed April 4, 2025.
[27] Terrence Matsuo, "The Comfort Women Agreement 5 Years On," Korean Economic Institute: The Peninsula, December 8, 2020.
[28] Malcolm Cook, "South Korea-Japan Relations: Threat and Identity," The Interpreter, December 1, 2016.
[29] Kazuhiko Togo, "Breaking the Impasse in Japan–South Korea Relations," East Asia Forum, September 10, 2019.

Shuttle diplomacy was a key aspect in the Japan-ROK relationship under the Kishida and Yoon administrations.[30] Negotiations between both Kishida and Yoon, as well as their aides, helped to resolve issues that began under the Moon-Abe relationship, and also put forwards an eye towards a positive ROK-Japan future.[31] On top of this, official development assistance (ODA) cooperation continued to allow for lower-level tension reductions through communication and understanding.[32] This all allowed for negotiation at multiple levels and interpersonal relationships to thrive, mitigating high-level issues, such as the Yasukuni Shrine, that tend to come in the way of Japan-ROK rapprochement.

Dealing with regional issues, Yoon and Kishida agreed on solving three key issues, outlined by Lee and Lim:

1. North Korea
2. Wartime Forced Labor
3. Future Cooperation in the *Indo Pacific*[33]

In fact, their foreign policies seemed practically to be in parallel, as Yoon adopted the term "Indo-Pacific" which was first coined by Shinzo Abe.[34] When discussing the threat of North Korea, they both considered each other partners, as well as being "like-minded" when dealing with the Indo-Pacific as a whole.[35] At the end of the Kishida administration there was some tension over Kishida's willingness to meet with Kim Jong-un stating, "I am determined to meet with President Kim Jong-un without any conditions and will miss no opportunity to take actions with all my dedication."[36] On other topics regarding North Korea, they agreed on solving human rights issues as well as the abduction issue[37], showing their broad agreement despite differing levels of importance of each issue to each nation. The US also assisted shoring up Japan-ROK relations, forcing both sides to the table whenever other factors may have pushed them away.[38] These factors helped to solidify the ROK-Japan relationship allowing for broader cooperation on a trilateral basis as will be seen later.

Analyzing the two nations' views on war time issues, they were not in parallel, but they were much calmer and levelheaded than many previous administrations' discussions. Nevertheless, Kishida gave his own apology on May 7th, 2023, where he stated "My heart hurts about the fact that many people endured very difficult and sad experiences under severe circumstances at the time..."[39] according to the Asahi Shimbun. This is not the most comprehensive apology given by a Japanese prime minister, with Tomiichi Murayama having given the "gold standard" apology on August 15th 1995, expressing his "...feelings of deep remorse and state my heartfelt apology."[40] For Yoon, this apology seemed to be enough and did not outrage the Japanese people who seem to believe that Japan has apologized enough according to a 2025 Asahi Shimbun poll.[41]

While Moon had not mentioned China or the FOIP, Yoon mentioned the latter, implying an anti-China stance while aligning himself with Tokyo.[42] At the end of 2022, this was further amplified with a trilateral cooperation document coming from Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul which focused on working on the North Korea issue, but also again emphasized that Yoon was aligning himself more closely with the West rather than Beijing.[43]

Finally, with the trilateral relationship between the US, Japan, and the ROK secure, Kishida turned towards China, aiming to isolate it and counter it whenever possible. As seen with Ōhira, Kan, and Abe, relations have fluctuated over the years, with Kishida's administration being a low point in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, it is still crucial to analyze the primary issues of Japan-China relations during this period and what was done to either mitigate them, or possible aggravate them. Two primary issues to look at are the Senkaku Islands issue and economic exploration by China spilling into Japanese territory, emphasizing the connection between economic and political issues in the Kishida era.

First, the Senkaku Islands dispute has been a thorn in the side of the PRC-Japan relationship especially since 2010. When Kishida took office, the South China Morning Post's Julian Ryall recommended that Kishida get a guarantee of US

[30] Hyun-woo Nam, "Yoon, Kishida Agree to Resume 'Shuttle Diplomacy,'" The Korea Times, March 16, 2023.
[31] "What to Expect from Japan-South Korea Relations after Kishida," Atlantic Council, September 6, 2024.
[32] "Signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation with USAID and KOICA in Ghana: Contributing to the Achievement of Universal Health Coverage," Japan International Cooperation Agency, July 26, 2023.
[33] Ji-young Lee and Andy Lim, "JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA AS LIKEMINDED PARTNERS IN THE INDOPACIFIC," Comparative Connections 24, no. 3 (January 2023): 143–54, 143. (Emphasis author's own)
[34] Ibid
[35] Ibid, 143-54, 144.
[36] Fumio Kishida, "Address by Prime Minister Kishida at the Seventy-Seventh Session of the United Nations General Assembly," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 20, 2022,
[37] For more information, consult Koizumi and Japanese Politics: Reform strategies and leadership style.
[38] "What to Expect from Japan-South Korea Relations after Kishida," Atlantic Council, September 6, 2024.
[39] "Kishida Offers 'Personal Feeling' to Settle Wartime Laborers Issue." The Asahi Shimbun, May 8, 2023.
[40] Yuichi Hosoya, "What to Expect from Abe's WWII Anniversary Statement," East Asia Forum, August 11, 2015.
[41] Kazuaki Isoda, "Survey: 77% Doubt U.S. Will Protect Japan in Military Crisis," The Asahi Shimbun, April 28, 2025.
[42] Ji-young Lee and Andy Lim, "JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA AS LIKEMINDED PARTNERS IN THE INDOPACIFIC," Comparative Connections 24, no. 3 (January 2023): 143–54, 144-145.
[43] Ibid, 143–54, 148.

security for the disputed islands, showing how volatile the situation could become if mishandled.[44] Nevertheless, both sides made little progress on the issues, with the only real incident being a buoy found near the islands which the Japanese government requested the PRC remove. This request was met with a limited response by Xi himself. During this same time frame, Japan had also been denounced by the PRC for its release of the Fukushima treated wastewater, another issue that had limited discussion between Japan and the PRC.[45] This lack of diplomacy can also be indicative of an unwillingness to work with the PRC, sticking to the Japanese claim that the islands are rightly theirs as per their interpretation of international law, while also justifying their other actions in this light.[46]

Second, the PRC was found to have been drilling in disputed waters in the East China Sea. In the same talk mentioning this, Kishida mentioned that he would work closely with US President Joe Biden to achieve a FOIP.[47] This went towards not only promoting international law, but also securing Japan by working alongside the US on shared challenges while also promoting the FOIP to challenge the PRC. When talking about the Senkaku Islands, the exclusive economic zone of the islands could also matter for resource rights, as whoever has the legal right to the islands can exploit the waters around them. For this issue, while China was likely in the wrong, the lack of compromise and cooperation on solving the territorial and resource rights issue shows how both Japan and the PRC were not keen on reducing tensions, especially the former with its unilateral decisions as per the wastewater release.

One issue that strained the US-Japan section of the trilateral relationship slightly was US pressure on Japan to restrict technological exports to China for semiconductor production. While there were not any public complaints, it is likely that there were backroom disputes since one report states that these nations "have different commercial interests, and do not necessarily share U.S. views of strategic competition."[48] Regardless, both Japan and the ROK seem to be implementing the restrictions without much debate or resistance, showing unity in the relationship regardless of differing methods and goals on a tactical level rather than a strategic level. This issue primarily goes to show that on the economic side there was still a balancing act, showing very limited cooperation between Japan and the PRC, albeit with Japan likely caving to US demands to solidify the trilateral relationship.Japanese cooperation with the US later turned into Japanese willingness to promote the FOIP through the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force. Trilateral drills between Japan, the US, and ROK show the three nations' cooperation, but Japan went above and beyond by sending a destroyer through the Taiwan strait to uphold international maritime navigation law.[49] While Japan claimed it was not attempting to provoke Beijing over the issue of Taiwan, this could have also been a move from Kishida in order to cement Japanese dedication to the FOIP through its upholding of international law.[50] Even if these exercises did provoke Beijing, they were legally allowed under international law, going to show that while even if an action angers the PRC, it is not correct to label it as hawkish solely because of that but rather if it is unreasonable or intentionally inflammatory.

These four issues go to show how Kishida promoted international law, ensured Japanese security through the US-Japan Alliance, and attempted to challenge PRC when possible. Regardless of any sort of conflict between the three nations, at the end of the day they compromised and worked together. Through Japanese cooperation with the ROK and the US, Japan was able to hold its own when dealing with the PRC as the latter knew it would not be dealing only with Japan, but rather the whole community which supported the FOIP. But this also goes to show that Kishida's foreign policy strategy was heavily reliant on both its hawkish stance towards China and its lack of compromise and diplomacy. Regardless, it is crucial to also look towards the reasoning that likely informed Kishida's foreign policy strategy.

Key International Factors

Since Deng Xiaoping, China has been rising to the level of the United States economically, militarily, culturally, scientifically, and in many other fields. This is why the background of China since the beginning of the Xi Jinping administration must be examined to fully understand Kishida's diplomatic strategy against Xi.

While their economies are linked very closely with one another, there are still many issues when it comes to economic coercion and over dependence on Chinese goods. Ever since China economically coerced the ROK to removed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system through fines and shutdowns for Korean businesses in China, Japan has been wary that the same will happen to them.[51] China +1 is an economic strategy, developed over time by Japanese companies and supported by the government, to mitigate the effects of the "China shock", which is overdependence on

[44] Julian Ryall, "Message for China as Japan's New Prime Minister Fumio Kishida Gets Biden's Pledge of US Support in East China Sea," South China Morning Post, October 5, 2021.
[45] "Xi Reluctant to Resolve Disputes with Japan during Talks with Kishida," Kyodo News, December 27, 2023.
[46] "Japanese Territory: Senkaku Islands," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed April 4, 2025.
[47] "Tokyo Protests to China over New Drilling Rig in East China Sea," The Asahi Shimbun, May 22, 2022.
[48] Sujai Shivakumar, Charles Wessner, and Thomas Howell, "Balancing the Ledger: Export Controls on U.S. Chip Technology to China," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 21, 2024.
[49] William Gallo, "US-Japan-South Korea Drill a 'New Era' for Defense Ties," Voice of America, October 23, 2023.
[50] Ibid
[51] Baogang He, David Hundt, and Dominic Simonell, "South Korea Pushes Back against Chinese Economic Coercion," East Asia Forum, May 5, 2023.

Chinese manufacturing and resources.[52] While not overtly a conflict in the economic sphere, it has led to limited decoupling between the two nations. China posed a considerable security threat to Japan even before Kishida, especially regarding maritime boundaries and island disputes. While already covered, the Senkaku Islands dispute was very much in the back of Japanese minds when deciding matters of vital national security interest. Another issue was China's growing disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines, using force to settle these disputes rather than international arbitration.[53]

These issues, stemming from before Kishida, explain both the tensions between China and Japan and how the old idea of "separating politics and economics" regarding China would fall by the wayside during Kishida's tenure.[54] This also explains why the US and ROK would have issues with China as well, as China could challenge their own territorial integrity and security as well. National security was also at the forefront of Kishida's mind when forming his foreign policy against China.

Fumio Kishia faced many issues during his time in a wide variety of fields, ranging from political crises to social issues, and even trade and military dilemmas. Firstly, the rise of China has been detrimental to Japanese power in East Asia. Japan has been unable to exercise its once almost hegemonic power due to Chinese economic, and now military, power. While not a pressing matter in and of itself, many issues rose from this system of China rising above other powers in the region and exercising its might. This has shown itself in a practical capacity, with the dispute over the Senkaku Islands escalating over time since especially the arrest of a Chinese fisherman who rammed a Japanese vessel in 2010.[55] As he took office, Chinese military aircraft flying near Japan that caused fighter scrambles nearly doubled from 458 to 722.[56]

In the beginning of Kishida's term, Japan's relations with the ROK were also a national security issue. Moon Jae-in, a staunch progressive, managed to deteriorate China-Japan relations back to the 1960's.[57] Without US pressure, Moon would have pulled out of the information treaty regarding the sharing of sensitive information between Japan and the ROK.[58] On top of this, Moon also fought against the Asian Women's Fund, which was supported by both former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, as discussed earlier, and former President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former ROK dictator Park Chung-Hee.[59] Kishida's first conversation with Moon was already indicative of this, with Moon "urging an 'appropriate' response on wartime issues..." showing the lingering animosity from the ROK.[60] This tension between the two nations posed a serious challenge to any productive diplomacy and stained Japan's international reputation, challenging its moral legitimacy as an international leader.

All these issues weighed heavily on the Kishida administration both before, during, and after his time in office. They all differ in scope, difficulty, and importance, but each one was important to Kishida's capacity to unite the trilateral relationship, especially in forming an anti-China bloc. While Kishida's strategy has led to new developments, a comprehensive and conclusive solution to these problems evaded Kishida, now leaving Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba to forge his own path.

Conclusion

Despite Kishida's anti-China multilateral diplomacy that built off Shinzo Abe's multilateral FOIP strategy, Ishiba has shown a pro-China pivot that may mitigate the consequences of Kishida's time in office.[61] During his time in office, Kishida solidified the trilateral relationship with the US and the ROK to form an anti-China bloc that could push back against growing Chinese economic and military threats, arguably more than Shinzo Abe had. He focused both on combining the three nations' political aims as well as their economic strategies, promoting the China +1 investment strategy on top of agreeing with the US on semiconductor production tool export restrictions, even when the latter was not in their interest. While Japan did not often directly challenge China, it used the FOIP as a rallying flag for those harmed by Chinese violations of international law, allowing those who had traditionally been suppressed by Chinese diplomatic, military, and economic weight to have a voice in the conversation regarding their own maritime, economic, and security issues.

Kishida's hawkish stance also goes against the lessons of Aritomo, Ito, and Ōhira. All three saw the importance of good relations with China, for economic and security reasons. His hawkishness had its roots in both pro-US sentiment as well as anti-Chinese aggression feelings, but this does not take away from the fact that his trilateral

[52] Chi Hung Kwan, "'Japan Plus One' Implies a Boom of Japanese Investment in China," Research Institute of Economy, Trade, and Industry, June 21, 2011.

[53] Keith Johnson, "China's South Sea Aggression Is Backfiring," Foreign Policy, June 6, 2024.

[54] Xin Zhai, "Separating Economics from Politics: Japan's Policy towards China and Balancing between the United States and Taiwan (1952–1972)," International Relations, November 14, 2024, 1–23.

[55] Michael Green et al., "Counter-Coercion Series: Senkaku Islands Trawler Collision," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 18, 2017.

[56] Bōei-shō, "2024-Nendo (Ryō Wa 6-Nendo) Kinkyū Hasshin Jisshi Jōkyō Ni Tsuite (About the Current Situation of Emergency Scrambles in the Fiscal Year of 2024 (Reiwa 6))," Bōei-shō: tōgō bakuryōkanbu, April 7, 2025.

[57] Robert E Kelly, "Moon Jae-in's Foreign Policy Reorientation," The Interpreter, December 2, 2019.

[58] Bill Chappell, "South Korea Says It Won't Pull Out Of Japan Intel-Sharing Pact — For Now," NPR, November 22, 2019.

[59] Yosuke Onchi and Mitsuru Obe, "South Korea Decides to Disband 'comfort Women' Foundation," Nikkei Asia, November 21, 2018.

[60] Reuters, "Japan's PM Kishida and S.Korea's Moon Discuss Lingering Wartime Disputes," Reuters, October 15, 2021.

[61] Yukari Easton, "Is Japan's Sudden Pivot to China Naïve? ," The Diplomat, January 4, 2025.

cooperation against China has only amplified tensions with limited measures to reduce them. Looking back to the lessons of Ōhira Masayoshi, the former leader of the kochikai who was known for his cooperative outlook, Kishida drastically diverged from this philosophy. China is one of Japan's most important neighbors, economic partners, and one of the most important nations in the world. Japan cannot afford to be hawkish during a time of great strife both within and surrounding itself. For this reason, Kishida's hawkish foreign policy that united the trilateral relationship may result more in a datsu-a-ron (out of Asia strategy) and isolate Japan with only a handful of allies rather than a real multilateral and comprehensive solution to Chinese aggression.

As will be further clarified in the implications section, Kishida's hawkishness may serve as a shift from a more moderate competitive stance towards China, such as that of Shinzo Abe, and move it more towards limited separation both economically and politically. It could even be argued that Kishida's active stance towards isolating China with the help of the ROK and the US means that this era was even more so of a low point in China-Japan relations than the time of Prime Minister Naoto Kan who saw the 2010 Senkaku Islands ramming incident. This could set a new precedent for what a China hawk is in the Japanese domestic realm, allowing for more extreme candidates to be considered mainstream in the coming years or decades. There are many more implications than just what a China hawk will be defined as though.

Implications

While Ishiba seems to have taken a pro-China pivot he still appears to be following the same path Kishida did for the time being. He appears to be basing his political strategy from knowledge gained by mentorship from Tanaka Kakuei while being reminiscent more so of Masayoshi Ōhira with the latter's slogan of Trust and Consensus (shinrai to gōi). During his administration thus far, he implemented a proactive cyber security law (nōdōteki saibi bōgyo hōritsu) first proposed in the Kishida administration, which passed with support from both the LDP and opposition parties.[62] Specifically on China, while issues still abound regarding the Senkaku Islands and maritime resource rights which the South China Morning Post has reported on, Ishiba has not resorted to any antagonistic diplomatic measures.[63] While Kishida's legacy may live on in some ways, his hawkish stance on China has not been coopted by Ishiba as of now. His influence lives on through himself as well, with him recently meeting with LDP Policy Research Chairman Motegi and LDP Senior Advisor Taro Aso, shifting those around him to his viewpoint and inspiring people like Sanae Takaichi (favored to become prime minister after Ishiba) to take an even harder stance against China.[64] Nevertheless, if Kishida does come back to office it will surely be important to recognize that Kishida was not a dove, but rather a hawk towards China.

[62] "Nōdōteki Saibi Bōgyo Dōnyū No Hōritsu San'in Honkaigi de Kaketsu・Seiritsu," NHK, May 16, 2025.
[63] Julian Ryall, "China's Moves in Disputed Waters Spark Concerns in Japan about 'Incremental Control,'" South China Morning Post, May 16, 2025.
[64] "Jimin Kishida-Shi Asō-Shi Motegi-Shi Ga Kaidan Natsu No San'in-Sen Jōsei Nado Iken Kōkan," NHK, May 29, 2025.

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