

"Those who have the privilege to know, have the duty to act." — Albert Einstein

GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE

No. 304 September - October 2025 | www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro

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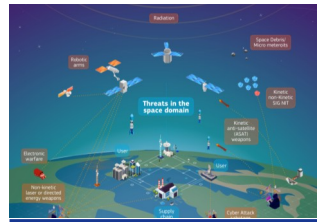
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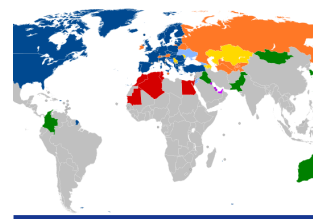
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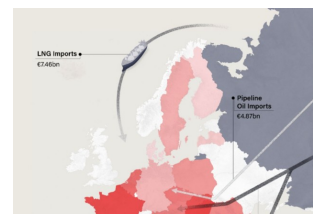
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EDITORIAL



Turning Diplomatic Commitments into Tangible Results Will Mark the Entry of the Entire World into a New Era

PhD. Eng. Stelian TEODORESCU (Romania)

"Success lies where preparation and opportunity meet."

Bobby Unser

On October 30, 2025, US President, Donald Trump, and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, met for approximately 100 minutes in Busan, South Korea. The meeting was the last scheduled meeting of President Trump's

five-day tour of Asia, his first visit to the region during his second term as US President. The Trump-Xi meeting reaffirmed Beijing's strategy of firmly rejecting US decisions and actions in its relations with China. In addition to new pressure points, going far beyond imposed tariffs, export controls, port fees, visa restrictions and sanctions, China responded with its own expanded toolkit, retaliating with a series of measures and finding that rare earth export controls still constitute its "ace up one's sleeve". So, Beijing has responded with a massive expansion of controls on rare earth exports, which could have far-reaching consequences for global high-tech supply chains in various areas. We emphasize this because China has now begun to develop a comprehensive export control regime, not just for rare earths but for a wide range of critical materials and technologies. While it may seem that both sides have simply turned



Source: <https://news.az/news/-new-era-in-us-central-asia-relations-trumps-strategic-vision-redraws-the-map>

back the clock in terms of mutual retaliatory measures, the reality is that this process has helped to stimulate the development of China's defensive and offensive technological and industrial capabilities.

But the US strategies are much broader, and on November 6, 2025, US President D. Trump hosted leaders of five Central Asian countries at the White House, in a meeting that intensifies efforts to acquire rare earth metals needed for the production of high-tech devices, including smartphones, electric cars and fighter jets. D. Trump and the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan held bilateral meetings in the Oval Office before a working dinner. "These nations were once home to the ancient 'Silk Road' that connected East and West," D. Trump emphasized, noting at the same time that "unfortunately,

'Busan (also known as Pusan) is the second largest metropolis in South Korea after Seoul, with a population of 3.6 million. It is also the largest port city in South Korea and the fifth busiest port by cargo tonnage in the world. The city is located in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula.

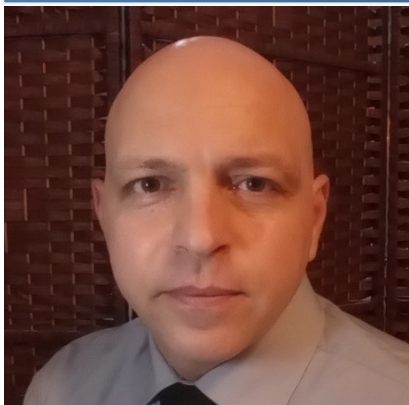
previous American presidents have completely neglected this region.” “I understand the importance of this region, a lot of people don’t know that”, he added. Central Asia holds large reserves of rare earth minerals and produces about half of the world’s uranium, which is essential for nuclear power production. The region needs additional investment to further develop its resources. “In recent weeks, my administration has strengthened America’s economic security by forging agreements with allies and friends around the world to expand our supply chains for critical minerals,” Trump said. “We often spend so much time focusing on crises and problems – and they deserve attention – that we sometimes don’t spend enough time focusing on exciting new opportunities,” said US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. “And that’s what exists now: an exciting new opportunity where the national interests of our respective countries are aligned,” he added. It is significant to note here that on the evening of November 6, 2025, Trump, along with Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio attended a dinner with the leaders of the Central Asian countries in the East Room of the White House in Washington, D.C. Launched in 2015, the C5+1 platform (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) also brings together the United States to advance cooperation on economic, energy and security issues. Trump called Central Asia “an extremely rich region”, saying he wanted to strengthen America’s partnership with the five countries.

“One of the key items on our agenda is critical minerals”, Trump said. The discussions came amid intensifying competition for Central Asia’s vast mineral wealth — which includes uranium, copper, gold and rare earths — as Western nations move to diversify their supply chains away from Moscow and Beijing. The United States is seeking new partnerships to secure critical minerals, energy and land trade routes that bypass its geopolitical rivals. Trump made the remarks before dinner with the leaders of the five nations.

We should not forget that, in turn, on 20 October 2025, the European Union (EU) brought together foreign ministers and representatives of the Member States, as well as those of Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Republic of Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine and Central Asian partners (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) to discuss the Trans-Regional Connectivity Agenda – which aims to connect the EU with Central Asia via Turkey and the South Caucasus. This initiative will coordinate strategic investments to boost trade and socio-economic development through resilient and efficient connections in the fields of transport, energy and digitalization – with sustainability and the green transition at its core. This meeting follows the EU’s strategic approach to the Black Sea region and the EU-Central Asia Summit. At the meeting, the participants affirmed their commitment to deepen cooperation in areas of common interest, to enhance mutual resilience and to promote more connected, secure and prosperous regions. They also discussed ways to strengthen cooperation in the area of common security interests. Building on existing initiatives, the Connectivity Agenda will be essential for future resilience and economic growth across the wider region. The discussions underlined the importance of coordination between the different participants. The European Commission will work on a proposal for a coordination framework based on existing practices and bringing together participating countries, international financial institutions, private investors and interested third parties. The framework will be presented and further elaborated at the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (TCTC) Investor and Connectivity Forum in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on November 27, 2025. In parallel, a mapping of existing analyses and ongoing investments in the four priority areas will guide future discussions among stakeholders on priority investments and soft connectivity measures.

It has now become abundantly clear that each Central Asian country is looking for something different, but they share a common goal: expanding options. In such a context, with Russia under sanctions and China increasing its dominance, the region is eager to avoid overdependence. For its part, the US also has something to prove, now that Washington is keen to demonstrate that it can offer value beyond security cooperation. If concrete results are achieved – such as investment agreements, new energy or transport initiatives, or even a permanent forum for technical discussions – such a development could mark a new phase in US relations with countries that are no longer passive actors in geopolitics, but are actively asserting their position diplomatically, balancing partnership relations and seeking to reach the best agreements. If Washington achieves significant results in such an evolutionary process, it will certainly be positively influenced by how Central Asia defines its future partnerships, and the C5+1 could become a serious and important diplomatic platform for the entire world.

SECURITY AND RESILIENCE - SPACE ENVIRONMENT



Understanding National Security Part IX: The Component of Space Security

PhD (c) Georgios KOUKAKIS (Greece)

Space is critical for the strategic autonomy of the EU and its Member States. The functioning of economies, citizens and public policies increasingly relies on space-related services and data, including those in the field of security and defence. Space also contributes to achieving the EU's political agenda, enabling the digital and green transitions, and enhancing its resilience. Yet, space is an increasingly contested area. Some space powers have the capabilities to target critical space infrastructure. Some of them have developed and tested anti-satellite capabilities that can disrupt or destroy space systems and services. [...] In a geopolitical context of increasing power competition and intensification of threats to the EU and its Member States, EU leaders have identified space as a strategic domain [...].

2023 EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence

Abstract

This article is the ninth part of an article series that aim to present the various components of *national security*, a dimension of security that has recently been under the spotlight due to the numerous crises that have emerged and the plethora of threats that prevail in the contemporary security environment. It focuses on space security, a component of national security that is interconnected with a significant number of policy fields, therefore affects the proper functioning of a state and the well-being of its citizens. Its purpose is to explain the content of this component, present its interconnection with other components of national security, analyse its impact to various policy fields, and finally highlight its importance for peace and stability. The main conclusion of the article is that space security is an emerging component of national security that enhances the rest of the components, thus it must not be overlooked.

Introduction

The contemporary security environment has been characterised as an environment of *polycrises* (multiple crises) and *permacrises* (permanent crises)¹, due to the numerous long-lasting and different types (military, economic, energy, food, health, etc.) of crises that have occurred. In this context, national security is of vital importance for every state, as it contributes greatly to the promotion of its national interests and the wellbeing of its citizens, since security and development are interconnected². One of the components of national security is *space security*, the importance of which has been highlighted during the last decades, as it affects several policy fields.

¹Koukakis, G. (2023). *Permacrises and Polycrises: Outlining the Contemporary Security Environment through References to Strategic Documents of Regional and International Actors*. HAPSc Policy Briefs Series, Vol 4 (2). 55-64. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.36661>.

²Stern, M., & Öjendal, J. (2010). *Mapping the Security–Development Nexus: Conflict, Complexity, Cacophony, Convergence? Security Dialogue*, 41(1), 5–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26301183>.

The article presents the content of space security, a significant component of national security. Its importance lies in the fact that countering space threats is very important for every state, as it ensures the states' *proper function*, the protection of its *national critical infrastructure*, and the well-being of its citizens. Moreover, the *New Space Race*³ between major international actors that has led states to re-evaluate their policy regarding space security in order to enhance their cyber-resilience and overall national security. Thus, the article complements the existing literature as it provides additional information that can help *citizens* understand the need for enhancing space security and *policy makers* plan respective policies in a more effective way.

Its purpose is to explain the content of space security, present its interconnection with other components of national security and policy fields, and highlight its importance for peace and stability. The main conclusion is that space security is an emerging component of national security that enhances the rest of the components, thus it must not be overlooked as this will have major consequences on a large number of policy fields. As far as the structure of the article is concerned, it initially clarifies the concept of security and defines space security in the context of national security. After that it presents the main international collaborative schemes and some recent incidents regarding space security, then proceeds to a brief analysis of the interconnection between space security and other policy fields, and concludes by referring to future challenges and opportunities as far as space security is concerned.

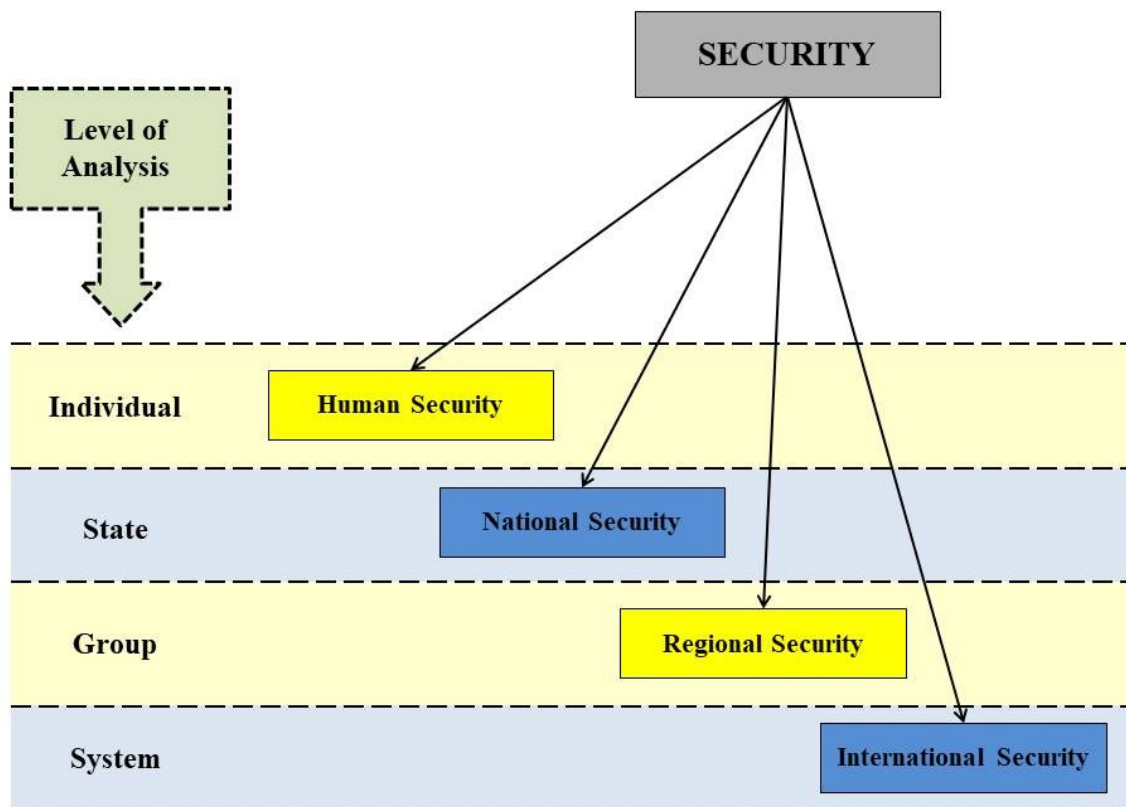


Figure 1: The 4 levels of security
Source: Created by Georgios Koukakis

The Concept of Security

The term *security* originates from the Latin word *securitas/securus* whose first compound is the word *sine* meaning *without* and the second compound the word *cura* meaning *fear, worry, anxiety*, etc⁴. Thus, security is the state in which fear, worry, and anxiety are absent, due to the necessary actions taken by an actor (

³Zanidis, T. (2023). *The New Space Race: Between the Great Powers of our Era*. HAPSc Policy Briefs Series, 4(1), 88–94. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.35187>

⁴Neocleous, M. (2000). *Against security*. *Radical Philosophy*, 100, 7-15. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/against-security>

individual, group, state, organization, etc.) in order to be protected against threats and/or risks. Therefore, security can be categorized according to the level of analysis into *four types*; *Human Security* at the individual level, *National Security* at the state level, *Regional Security* at the group level, and *International Security* at the system level (**Figure 1**).

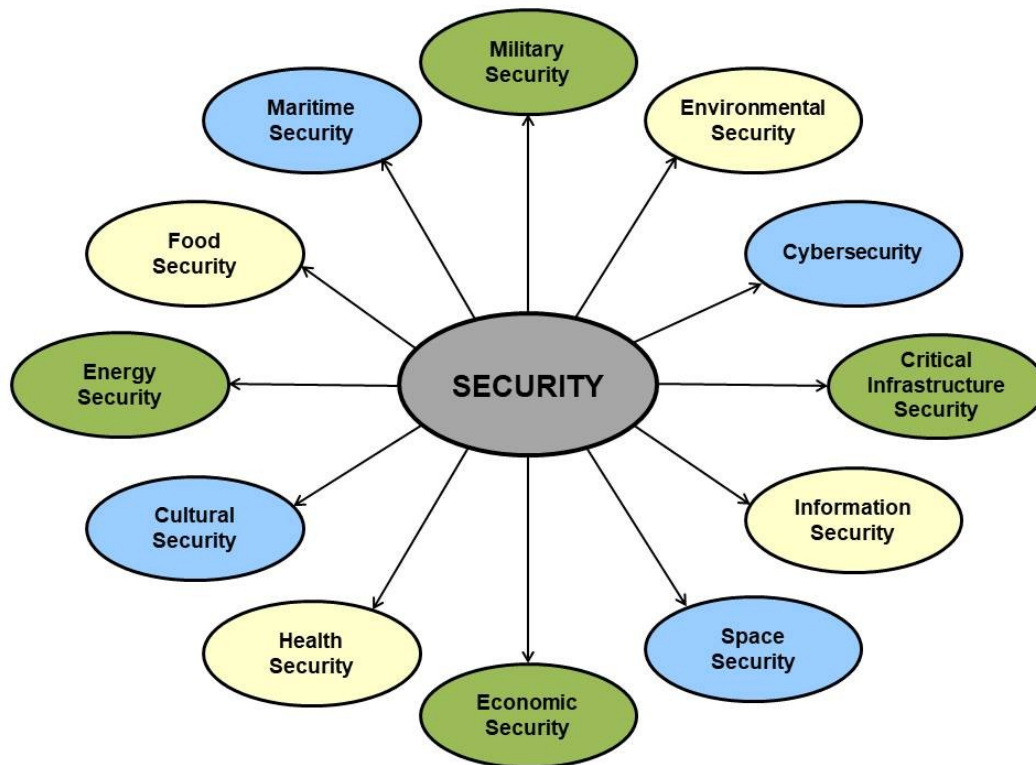


Figure 2: Indicative dimensions/components of security
Source: Created by Georgios Koukakis

At first, security was mainly related to *national security* (the protection of the state), a concept that was introduced by the United States of America (USA) through the *National Security Act* signed in 1947⁵. This new paradigm focused on the internal structure of each state, reflecting its interaction with the security environment, a relation that is based on the state's perception of insecurity⁶. Later on, the United Nations (UN) related security to people and the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment⁷, introducing the concept of *human security* through the *Human Development Report* that was published in 1994⁸. As far as *regional security* is concerned, despite the fact that it (etymologically) comprises the national security of the states of a specific region, it also expresses the strong relations developed among them due to their similar cultural, political and legal systems⁹. Therefore, it enables them to act collectively against common threats and cooperate in several fields in order to facilitate development –as security and development are two closely related terms¹⁰– leading to the establishment of several regional organisations such as the EU¹¹.

⁵Department of State. (n.d.). *National Security Act of 1947 [Official Document]*. [https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/national-security-act#:~:text=The%20National%20Security%20Act%20of,National%20Security%20Council%20\(NSC\)](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/national-security-act#:~:text=The%20National%20Security%20Act%20of,National%20Security%20Council%20(NSC)).

⁶Buzan, B. (1983). *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. Wheatsheaf Books, 69.

⁷Buzan, B. & Hansen, L. (2009). *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. Cambridge University Press, 203.

⁸United Nations Development Programme. (1994). *Human Development Report 1994*. <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr1994encompletostatpdf.pdf>

⁹Graham, K. & Felicio, T. (2005). *Regional Security and Global Governance: A Proposal for a 'Regional-Global Security Mechanism' in Light of the UN High-Level Panel's Report*, Egmont Paper, 4. <http://aei.pitt.edu/8985/>.

¹⁰Krause, K. & Jütersonke, O. (2005). *Peace, Security and Development*, *Security Dialogue*, 36(4), 447-462. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0967010605060449>

¹¹Bailes, A. & Cottey, A. (2006). *Regional security cooperation in the early 21st century*, in Bailes, A. (ed.) *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford University Press, 195–223.

Finally, *international security* is closely related to globalization¹², mostly dealing with global threats through international organizations such as the United Nations¹³. Moreover, security –regardless the institutional level at which it is examined– encompasses several *dimensions/components*, depending on the specific policy field that is endangered and/or the origin of threats/risks (**Figure 2**). These include but are not limited to, the following components: military security, economic security, energy security, critical infrastructure security, environmental security, food security, health security, maritime security, space security, cybersecurity, cultural security, water security, demographic security, and information security.

The content of space security

Taking into consideration the aforementioned definition of security, it is understood that space security –as a component of national security– is the protection of a state’s *infrastructure, citizens, data*, and overall *functioning* from any threat/risk that is related to space. To be more precise, the *United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research* (UNIDIR) provides the following definition:

*“Space security is concerned with the relationship among space objects and activities, and the maintenance of international peace and security, and disarmament, including the prevention of an arms race in outer space. [...] Space security is also commonly understood to refer to measures designed to prevent deliberate harms to a space system, including its component parts, from intended or intentional threats undertaken by another actor”*¹⁴.

Space security must also be distinguished from *space safety*, because these two terms –despite the fact that they can intersect and overlap– are different. According UNIDIR:

*“Space safety is commonly understood to refer to measures aimed at preventing accidental or unintentional hazards to space systems. These hazards can be natural, such as geomagnetic storms, or stem from human-made objects, such as the accidental malfunctioning of a satellite, or collision with a piece of debris. Space safety measures therefore seek to mitigate any non-intentional damage to a space system”*¹⁵.

In order though for the content of space security to be fully comprehended, the following space security factors need to be analysed.

1. **Threats/Risks:** As far as space security is concerned, it needs to be stressed that –just like other components of security– there is a clear distinction between the content of the term threat and the content of the term risk. Therefore, the term *space threat* in most cases –taking into consideration that it depends on an actor’s perception of what constitutes a threat– is used to describe:

*“[...] the danger to the security of a space system or any of its components, that is to say, the possibility of intended or intentional damage (involving agency, or done in a deliberate manner) to space systems”*¹⁶.

On the other hand, the term *space risk* is usually (in some cases actors only use the term space threats, as an overall term that also includes space risks) used to describe:

*“[...] the danger to the safety of a space system or any of its components, that is to say, the possibility of accidental or unintended damage to space systems, or to people depending on the services provided by those systems”*¹⁷.

¹²Cha, V. (2000). *Globalization and the Study of International Security*, *Journal of Peace Research*, 37(3), 391-403. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343300037003007>

¹³United Nations. (2023). *Space Security [Official Document]*. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_annual_report_2023_en_0.pdf.

¹⁴UNIDIR. (n.d.). *What is cyber security?*. <https://spacesecuritylexicon.org/terminology/space-security>.

¹⁵UNIDIR. (n.d.). *Space safety*. <https://spacesecuritylexicon.org/terminology/space-safety>.

¹⁶UNIDIR. (n.d.). *Threat*. <https://spacesecuritylexicon.org/terminology/threat>.

¹⁷UNIDIR. (n.d.). *Risk*. <https://spacesecuritylexicon.org/terminology/risk>.

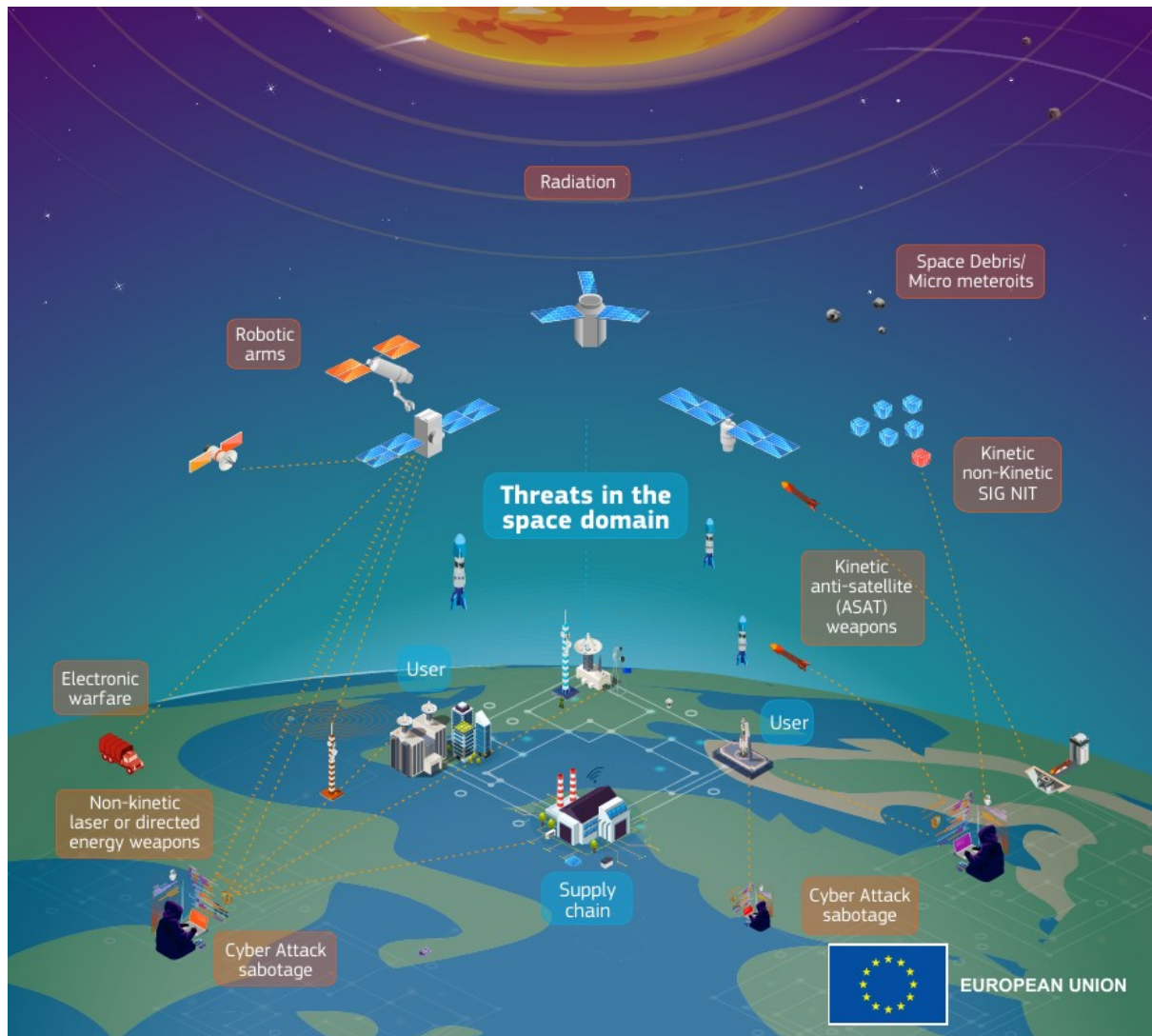
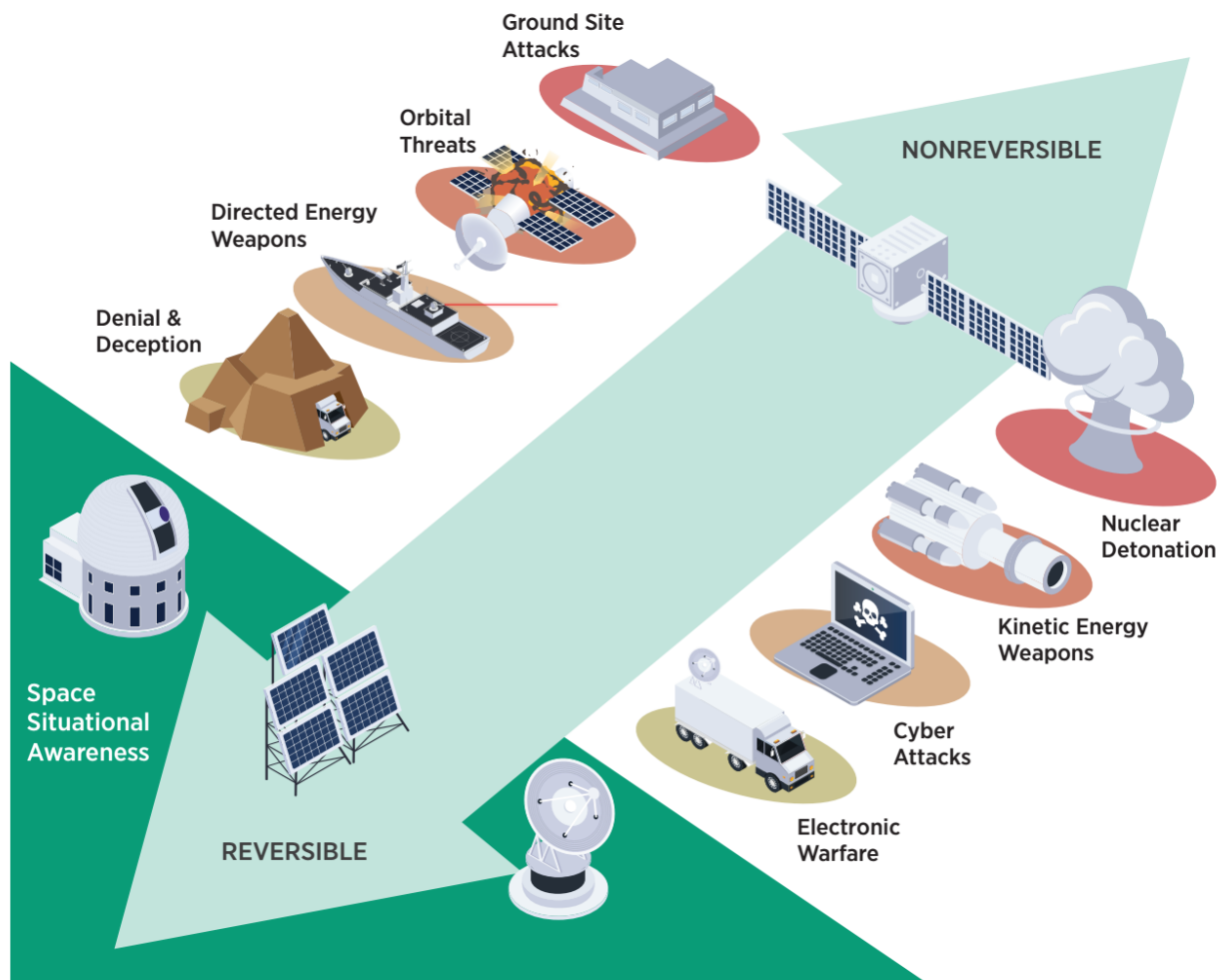


Figure 3: Threats & risks in the space domain

Source: https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3aac0394-8be0-4c2d-8956-54e8af5032f1_en?filename=Infographics%20-%20Threats%20in%20the%20space%20domain.pdf

2. **Means:** As far as the means that an actor may use to (intentionally) threaten a state's space security, they usually include *physical* and *non-physical* means to destroy, prohibit the use (denial of service), or temporarily disrupt the functioning of earth and/or space infrastructure related to space, such as cyber warfare means, directed-energy weapons, ground-based anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles, and space-based weapons¹⁸. Moreover, a state's space security can be threatened unintentionally by a *technical deficiency* (malfunction) or an *accident*.

¹⁸For more information visit: DIA. (2022). 2022 Challenges to security in space: Space Reliance in an Era of Competition and Expansion [Official Document], 43-47. https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Challenges_Security_Space_2022.pdf.



The counterspace continuum represents the range of threats to space-based services, arranged from reversible to nonreversible effects. Reversible effects from denial and deception and EW are nondestructive and temporary, and the system is able to resume normal operations after the incident. Directed energy weapons (DEW), cyberspace threats, and orbital threats can cause temporary or permanent effects. Permanent effects from kinetic energy attacks on space systems, physical attacks against space-related ground infrastructure, and nuclear detonation in space would result in degradation or physical destruction of a space capability.

Figure 4: Means & ways threatening space security

Source: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Challenges_Security_Space_2022.pdf

3. **Ways:** As far as the ways that the aforementioned means are used, the most common ones include *cyber activities* and/or *physical activities* against a state's space infrastructure/services and/or assets. To be more precise some of the most common ways identified by the EU are: (i) kinetic attacks, (ii) laser weapons attacks, (iii) jamming, (iv) spoofing, (v) cyberattacks, and (vi) nuclear attacks¹⁹

4. **Goals/Objectives:** The main goal that an actor aspires to accomplish by prohibiting or disrupting the functioning of a state's space services and cause damage to its related infrastructure/assets is to impose its will by *coercion*. As far as the objectives are concerned, they usually include the *deprivation* of its space resources in order to cause malfunction in several policy fields, cause public unrest to put pressure on the state's leadership or undermine the public's trust to democratic governance in order to promote authoritative parties.

¹⁹For more information visit: Council of the EU/Analysis & Research Team. (2025). *Space: the new battleground of modern warfare [Research Paper]*, 7-10. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/525jyi4x/2024_1015_art_space_11feb.pdf.

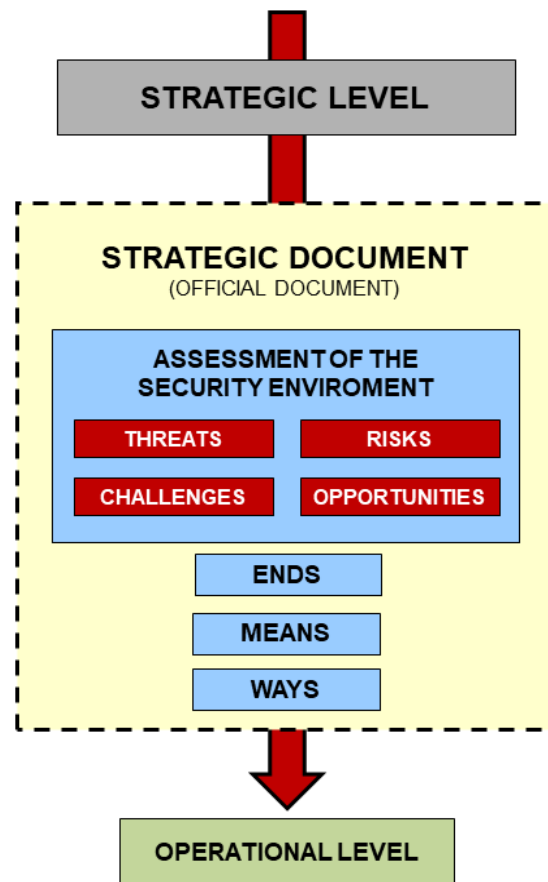


Figure 5: The function of Strategic Documents
Source: Created by Georgios Koukakis

5. **Strategic documents:** Concerning the strategic documents related to space security, they usually include either official *specialised documents* –such as the *Space Strategy 2030* of Finland²⁰, the *National Space Strategy* of the United Kingdom²¹, the *Space Strategy* of Germany²², the *Defence and Security Strategy for Space* of Sweden²³, the *Space Strategy 2021-2027* of Latvia²⁴, and the *Space Strategy 2021-2027* of Cyprus²⁵– or grand strategy documents such as the *National Security Strategy (NSS)* of the United States²⁶, and the *National Strategic Review (NSR)* of France²⁷, that include special chapters/sections regarding space

²⁰Finnish Government. (2025). *Space Strategy 2030 [Official Document]*. https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/166044/VN_2025_8.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

²¹HM Government. (2021). *National space strategy [Official Document]*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-space-strategy>.

²²Federal Government of Germany. (2023). *The German Federal Government's Space Strategy [Official Document]*. https://www.bundeswirtschaftsministerium.de/Redaktion/EN/Publikationen/Technologie/the-german-federal-governments-space-strategy.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1&utm_source=chatgpt.com.

²³Government of Sweden. (2025). *The role of space in a new security situation: Sweden's defence and security strategy for space [Official Document]*. <https://www.government.se/contentassets/f336052c285a464cb8741da433ac703b/swedens-defence-and-security-strategy-for-space.pdf>.

²⁴Republic of Latvia. (2020). *Space Strategy 2021-2027 [Official Document]*. https://www.em.gov.lv/sites/em/files/media_file/the-space-strategy-of-latvia-2021-2027.pdf.

²⁵Cyprus Republic. (2022). *Cyprus Space Strategy 2022-2027 [Official Document]*. [https://dec.dmrid.gov.cy/dmrid/dec/ws_dec.nsf/6418DD2E4393497CC22584F10048B98A/\\$file/Cyprus%20Space%20Strategy%202022-2027.pdf](https://dec.dmrid.gov.cy/dmrid/dec/ws_dec.nsf/6418DD2E4393497CC22584F10048B98A/$file/Cyprus%20Space%20Strategy%202022-2027.pdf).

²⁶Koukakis, G. (2022). *The National Security Strategy of the USA: Background, Recent Developments and Future Considerations Regarding the International Security Environment*. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 3(2), 122–132. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.33792>.

²⁷Republic of France. (2025). *National Strategic Review 2025*. https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_RNS2025_EN_0.pdf.

security. Their main purpose is to provide the framework –by assessing the conditions (threats, risks, challenges and opportunities) of the space security environment, defining the desired ends (goals), necessary means, and preferable ways of using them– in which the related departments of the public sector will implement their respective strategies (**Figure 5**).

6. **Decision-making:** As far as the decision making process related to space security is concerned, due to the fact that it is a quite important policy field that must be coordinated with other actors, the decision for the implementation of a certain space security policy is usually taken in the higher strategic political level (Head of State/Government) by one or more Ministries related to space, usually the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry for Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Climate Action or the Ministry of Science. It must also be noted that –due to their interconnection with a variety of policy fields– space security issues are usually addressed jointly with other relative issues, such as security & defence and/or climate change.

Some of the most basic terms related to space that provide useful insight to and facilitate the comprehension of space security –according to the *National Aeronautics and Space Administration* (NASA) of the United States–are the following:

1. **Atmosphere:** The envelope of gas that surrounds a planet or star²⁸.
2. **Counterspace capabilities:** Capabilities, techniques, or assets that can be used against another space object or a component of a space system in order to deliberately deny, disrupt, degrade, damage or destroy it reversibly or irreversibly, so as to gain advantage over an adversary. Counterspace technologies or capabilities can be offensive and defensive, and can be further classified into different groups including kinetic physical, non-kinetic physical, electronic, and cyber²⁹.
3. **Frequency:** A property of a wave that describes how many wave patterns or cycles pass by in a period of time. Frequency is often measured in hertz (Hz), where a wave with a frequency of 1 Hz will go through 1 cycle each second³⁰.
4. **Laser:** A device that produces a coherent beam of light by stimulating electronic, ionic, or molecular transitions to higher levels so that when they return to lower energies they emit photons³¹.
5. **Magnetic field:** A description of the strength of the force exerted by a magnetic object³².
6. **Orbit:** The regularly repeated elliptical course of a celestial object or spacecraft about a star, planet, or moon. Also, a complete circuit round an orbited body³³. It is generally categorized into four types; *Low Earth Orbit, Medium Earth Orbit, Highly Elliptical Orbit, and Geosynchronous Earth Orbit* (**Figure 6**).
7. **Outer space:** The region beyond the Earth's atmosphere in which there are stars and planets³⁴.
8. **Radiation:** Energy emitted and transmitted in the form of electromagnetic waves (light) or moving subatomic particles (electrons, positrons, etc.)³⁵.
9. **Satellite:** A body, either natural or artificial, that revolves around a larger body. The Moon is a natural satellite of Earth, while the International Space Station is an artificial one³⁶.
10. **Wave:** A vibration in some media that transfers energy from one place to another. Sound waves are vibrations passing in air. Light waves are vibrations in electromagnetic fields³⁷.

²⁸NASA. (n.d.). *Universe Glossary A-G*. <https://science.nasa.gov/universe/glossary/a-g/>.

²⁹UNIDIR. (n.d.). *Counterspace Capabilities*. <https://spacesecuritylexicon.org/terminology/counterspace-capabilities>.

³⁰NASA. (n.d.). *Universe Glossary A-G*. *Ibid.*

³¹NASA. (n.d.). *Universe Glossary H-M*. <https://science.nasa.gov/universe/glossary/h-m/>.

³²*Ibid.*

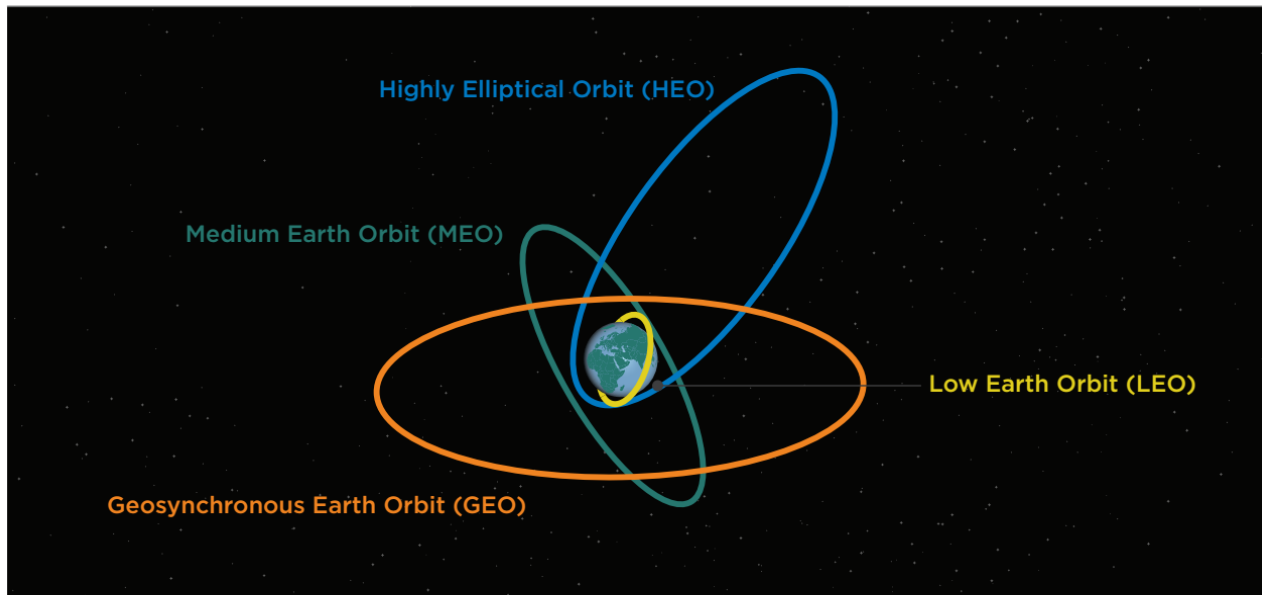
³³NASA. (n.d.). *Universe Glossary N-S*. <https://science.nasa.gov/universe/glossary/n-s/>.

³⁴The Briatannica Dictionary. (n.d.). *Outer space*. <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/outer-space>.

³⁵NASA. (n.d.). *Universe Glossary N-S*. *Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷The other three Global Commons are the High Seas, the Atmosphere, and Antarctica. For more information visit: NASA. (n.d.). *Universe Glossary T-Z*. <https://science.nasa.gov/universe/glossary/t-z/>.



Orbit	Altitude*	Uses
Low Earth Orbit	Up to 2,000 kilometers	- Communications - ISR - Human Spaceflight †
Medium Earth Orbit	Approx. 2,000 to 20,000 kilometers	- Communications - Positioning, Navigation, and Timing
Highly Elliptical Orbit	LEO altitudes at perigee (nearest to Earth) Approx. 40,000 kilometers at apogee (farthest from Earth)	- Communications - ISR - Missile Warning
Geosynchronous Earth Orbit	Approx. 36,000 kilometers	- Communications - ISR - Missile Warning

* The advantages of higher orbits for communications and ISR are near-persistent coverage of most of the Earth in view of the satellite, with the exception of Earth's polar regions where it is limited. LEO satellites cover all parts of the world, including the poles, but for shorter periods based on the speed of the satellite.

† With the exception of nine U.S. Apollo missions to the Moon, all human spaceflight has been completed in LEO.

Figure 6: Orbit types & uses

Source: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Challenges_Security_Space_2022.pdf

International Collaboration

Most states –acknowledging that their common national goals/objectives in several policy fields can be achieved in a more quick and efficient way (also minimizing cost) through cooperation– have been collaborating on space security issues either on bilateral (state-to-state) or multilateral (in the framework of their participation in a regional/international organization) level. They also identified outer space as one of the 4 *Global Commons*, thus “[...] resource domains or areas that lie outside of the political reach of any one nation State”³⁸.

³⁸UNEP. (n.d.). *IEG of the Global Commons*. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Ses4-7.-UNEP-Division-of-Environmental-Law-and-Conventions-Global-Commons.pdf>.

In this context, the United Nations signed the “Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies” (Outer Space Treaty) in **1967** (it entered into force the same year)³⁹, which defined the following nine principles:

1. The exploration and use of outer space shall be carried out for the *benefit* and in the *interests* of all countries and shall be the province of all mankind.
2. Outer space shall be *free* for exploration and use by all States.
3. Outer space is not subject to *national appropriation* by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means.
4. States shall not place *nuclear weapons* or other *weapons of mass destruction* in orbit or on celestial bodies or station them in outer space in any other manner.
5. The *moon* and other *celestial bodies* shall be used exclusively for *peaceful purposes*.
6. *Astronauts* shall be regarded as the envoys of mankind.
7. States shall be responsible for *national space activities* whether carried out by governmental or non-governmental entities.
8. States shall be liable for *damage* caused by their space objects.
9. States shall avoid *harmful contamination* of space and celestial bodies.

Moreover, it needs to be stressed that space plays a very important role in supporting the *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) that the UN have identified in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through several space applications such as *earth observation* and *geolocation*⁴⁰. In the framework of the United Nations states have also signed the following space-related agreements/conventions:

1. Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies or the (Moon Agreement) which entered into force in **1984**⁴¹.
2. Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts, and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space (Rescue Agreement) which entered into force in **1968**⁴².
3. Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects (Liability Convention) which entered into force in **1972**⁴³.
4. Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space (Registration Convention) which entered into force in **1976**⁴⁴.

Furthermore, 10 European states founded in **1975** the *European Space Agency* (ESA)⁴⁵, an intergovernmental organisation that is currently comprised of 23 members; namely Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom⁴⁶. The mission of ESA is:

“[...] is to shape the development of Europe’s space capability and ensure that investment in space continues to deliver benefits to the citizens of Europe and the world”⁴⁷.

³⁹ UN. (n.d.). Outer Space. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/outer-space>.

⁴⁰UNOOSA. (n.d.). Space Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/space4sdgs/index.html>.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵ESA. (n.d.). 50 years of ESA: Celebrating ESA’s 50th anniversary. https://www.esa.int/About_Us/50_years_of_ESA.

⁴⁶ESA. (2021, January 01). ESA Member States and Cooperating States. https://www.esa.int/ESA_Multimedia/Images/2013/02/ESA_Member_States_and_Cooperating_States.

⁴⁷ESA. (n.d.). About ESA. https://www.esa.int/About_Us/Corporate_news.



Figure 7: The anniversary logo of the European Space Agency

Source: https://www.esa.int/About_Us/50_years_of_ESA

The African states –in the framework of their participation in the African Union– have also endorsed the *African Space Strategy* in 2019, having as a goal to deliver space-derived products and services used for decision-making and addressing economic, political, social and environmental challenges, and to create an indigenous space capability, in both the private and the public sectors, for a coordinated, effective and innovative African-led space programme⁴⁸.



Figure 8: The cover page of the 2019 African Space Strategy

Source: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/37434-doc-au_space_strategy_isbn-electronic.pdf

In this context they have defined the following six strategic objectives:

1. **Addressing user needs** – harnessing the potential of space science and technology to address Africa’s socio-economic opportunities and challenges.
2. **Accessing space services** – strengthening space mission technology on the continent to ensure optimal access to space-derived data, information services and products.
3. **Developing the regional and international market** – developing a sustainable and vibrant

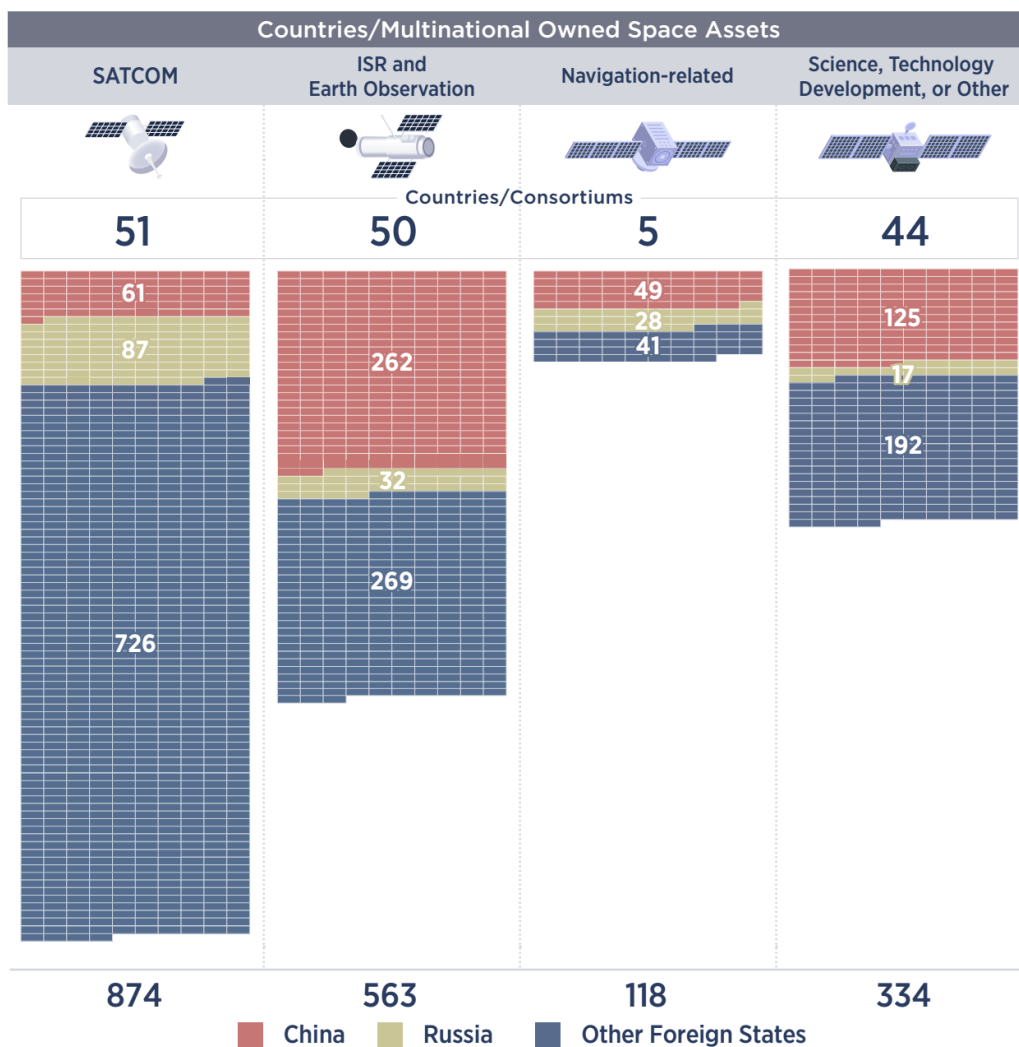
⁴⁸African Union. (2019). *African Space Strategy [Official Document]*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/37434-doc-au_space_strategy_isbn-electronic.pdf

indigenous space industry that promotes and responds to the needs of the African continent.

4. **Adopting good governance and management** – adopting good corporate governance and best practices for the coordinated management of continental space activities.
5. **Coordinating the African space arena** – maximising the benefit of current and planned space activities, and avoiding or minimising the duplication of resources and efforts.
6. **Promoting international cooperation** – promoting an African-led space agenda through mutually beneficial partnerships.

Finally, in **2025** the 32 NATO member-states –in the context of their participation in the Alliance– endorsed the *Commercial Space Strategy* having as an aim “to strengthen the Alliance’s relationship with commercial space partners and improve its ability to leverage the growing array of commercial space services to meet and inform NATO operational and defence planning requirements in times of peace, crisis and conflict”⁴⁹, through the following three strategic objectives:

1. Leverage the use of commercial solutions.
2. Ensure continuous access.
3. Ensure coherence.



Source: Union of Concerned Scientists, 1 January 2022, Satellite Database

Figure 9: Non-U.S. possessed space assets
 Source: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Challenges_Security_Space_2022.pdf

⁴⁹NATO. (2025, June 24). NATO Commercial Space Strategy. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236520.htm.

Contemporary Incidents Related to Space Security

As far as incidents related to space security are concerned, it needs to be highlighted that according to the “2022 Challenges to Security in Space” report issued by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) of the United States, the combined in-orbit Chinese and Russian *space assets* grew approximately 70% during 2019-2021 (**Figure 9**)⁵⁰. Moreover, according to the EU *150 satellite interference incidents* (signal jamming, hacking attempts, etc.) all over the world took place in **2022**⁵¹, while as far as the type of attack is concerned, the most common one according to *European Union Agency for Cybersecurity* (ENISA) is jamming (**Figure 10**).

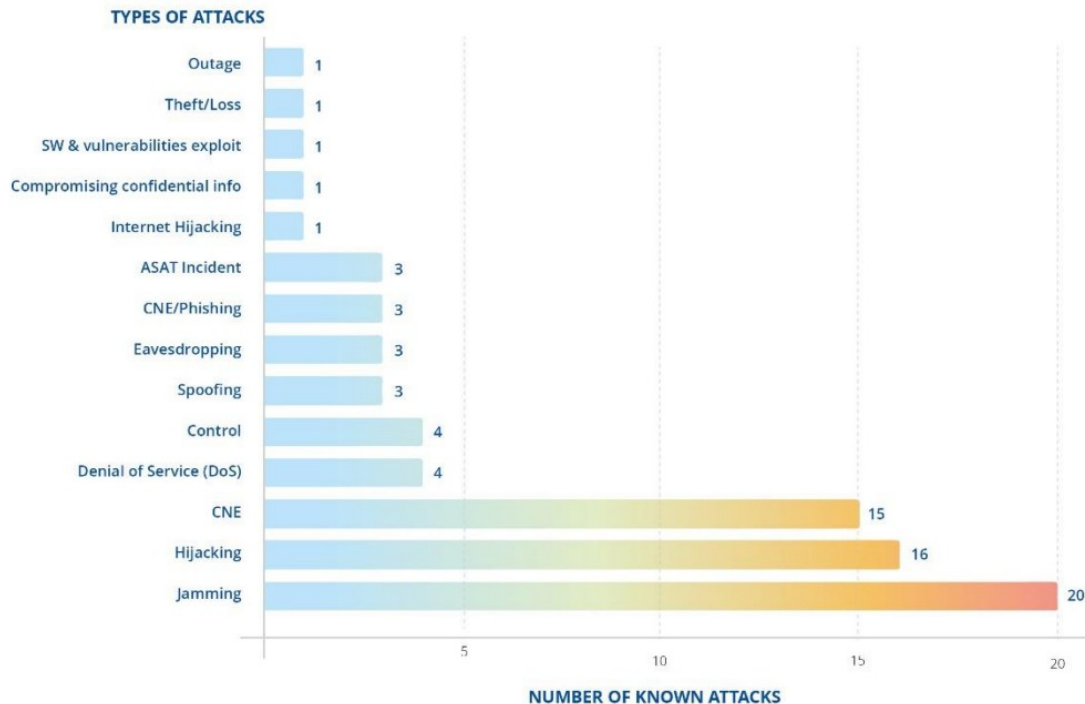


Figure 10: Breakdown of known attacks on satellites per attack type (ENISA)

Source: https://www.enisa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-03/Space_Threat_Landscape_Report_fin.pdf

Even though several space security incidents have occurred during the last decades (**Figure 11**), some of the most known contemporary ones are the following:

1. The *Captain Midnight* incident in **1986**, when a hacker by the name ‘Captain Midnight’ interrupted the HBO’s film titled ‘The Falcon and the Snowman’⁵².
2. The *ROSAT Satellite* incident in **1998**, when the respective US-German satellite was hacked and damaged.⁵³
3. The *LANDSAT 7 Satellite* incidents in **2007** and **2008**, when the respective US satellite experienced interference of its function.⁵⁴

⁵⁰U.S. Department of War. (2022, April, 12). Defense Intelligence Agency Report Details Space-Based Threats From Competitors. <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2997723/defense-intelligence-agency-report-details-space-based-threats-from-competitors/>.

⁵¹European Council. (2025, January 31). Space, security and defence. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/space-security-and-defence/>.

⁵²Boyer, P. (1986, April 29). HBO piracy incident stuns other satellite users. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/29/arts/hbo-piracy-incident-stuns-other-satellite-users.html>.

⁵³Shadbolt, L. (2021). *Satellite Cyberattacks and Security [Technical Study]*. HDI Global Specialty SE, 12. https://www.hdi.global/globalassets/_local/international/downloads/specialty/hdis209_satellite-cyberattack_whitepaper_v8_05july21-1.pdf.

⁵⁴Ibid.

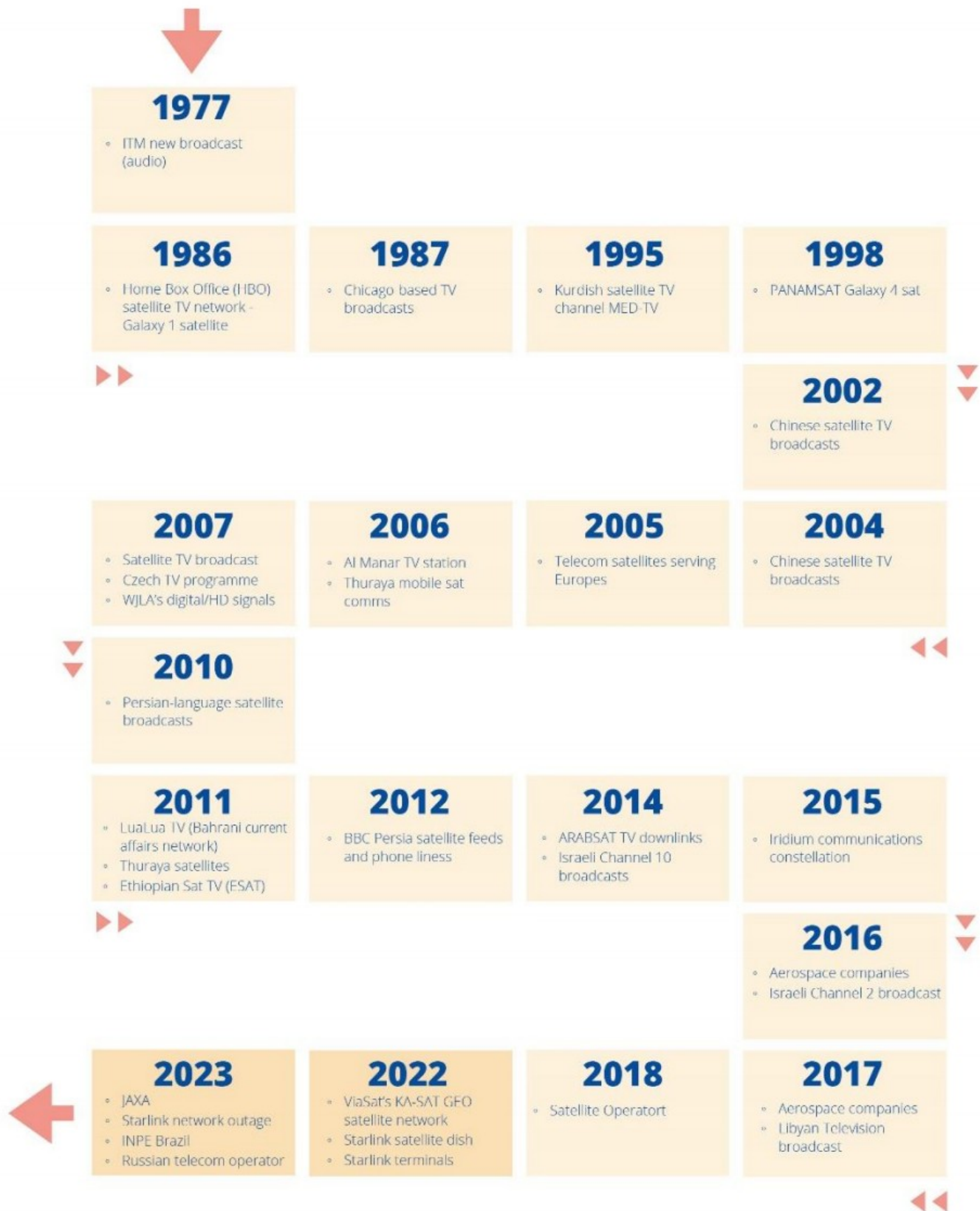


Figure 11: Examples of known attacks on commercial satellite infrastructure/s

Source: https://www.enisa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-03/Space_Threat_Landscape_Report_fin.pdf

4. The *TERRA EOS AM-1 Satellite* incident in **2008**, when the respective US satellite experienced interference of its function.⁵⁵

5. The *NOAA disruption* incident in **2014**, when three systems of the National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service (NESDIS) of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) were compromised by cyberattacks.⁵⁶

6. The cyberattacks of Viasat's *KA-SAT satellite* in **2022** during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when thousands of modems were disabled –and thus satellite internet service was disrupted– in Ukraine and several European states.⁵⁷

7. The *Starlink* incidents in **2025**, when the respective satellite network was disrupted having as a result the drop of connectivity up to 84% worldwide.⁵⁸

The Connection of Space Security with other Policy Fields

As far as the connection of space security with other policy fields is concerned, it must be noted that when space security is threatened, both public and private sector malfunction as they cannot operate properly. In this context, space security is closely related to the following sectors:

1. **Economy:** One of the main sectors affected by the lack of space security is the economy, due to the restrictions in the use of resources, the damage caused in critical infrastructure, and the disruption of several systems that rely on space assets, thus affecting agriculture, trade, maritime navigation, and much more⁵⁹. In fact the World Economic Forum has stressed that:

*“Space is no longer peripheral to our economy or security. It is embedded in everything we do”*⁶⁰.

2. **Security & Defence:** Another sector that is interconnected with space security is the security & defence sector, as a large number of defence systems rely on space assets in order to function. This was recently acknowledged by the EU, through the endorsement of the *2023 EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence* and the establishment of an *Information Sharing and Analysis Centre (ISAC)*⁶¹, also stating that:

*“The EU recognises the strategic nature of space and that space is key for the EU's freedom of action and autonomous decision-making in security and defence”*⁶².

3. **Environment:** The environment is also affected by space security, as most agencies/services that manage/exploit natural resources or measure the environmental conditions rely on space assets –such as in the aforementioned NOAA case of 2014⁶³– to provide them the necessary data.

4. **Health:** The main connection between space security and the health sector has to do with healthcare applications of the *Positioning, Navigation, and Timing (PNT)* technologies, such as emergency response and patient transport, robotic surgery, medical device synchronization, advanced diagnostics and treatment, patient tracking and monitoring, and telemedicine & remote care⁶⁴.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶U.S. Department of Commerce. (2016). *Successful Cyber Attack Highlights Longstanding Deficiencies in NOAA's IT Security Program [Final Report No. OIG-16-043-A]*. <https://www.oig.doc.gov/OIGPublications/OIG-16-043-A.pdf>.

⁵⁷Carlo, A. & Obergfaell, K. (2024). *Cyber attacks on critical infrastructures and satellite communications*. *International Journal of Critical Infrastructure Protection*, 46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijcip.2024.100701>.

⁵⁸Shadi, M. (2025, September 26). *The Global Economic Impacts of Starlink Outages: From Operational Fragility to Pathways of Resilience*. Al Habtoor Research Centre. <https://www.habtoorresearch.com/programmes/global-economic-impacts-of-starlink/>.

⁵⁹Alblooshi, B., Al Khzaimi, H. & Ahmad, H. (2025, October 06). *Why cyber resilience in space is essential for economic security*. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/10/why-cyber-resilience-in-space-is-essential-for-economic-security/>.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹European Commission. (n.d.). *EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence for a stronger and more resilient European Union*. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence_en.

⁶²European Council. (2025, January 31). *Space, security and defence*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/space-security-and-defence/>.

⁶³U.S. Department of Commerce. (2016). *Ibid*.

⁶⁴ESA. (2024, July 17). *Satnav enables medical and emergency response*. https://www.esa.int/Applications/Satellite_navigation/Satnav_enables_medical_and_emergency_response.

5. **Resilience:** Resilience is also affected by space security, as a large number of space threats not only put the *vulnerabilities* of a state's organisational structure and its society to the test, but also affect its ability to *recover*. That is why space resilience –in the context of overall resilience– is nowadays a very important capacities for every actor⁶⁵.

6. **Technology:** Technology has a great impact –both negative and positive– to space security, as its rapid advancement creates new ways and/or methods of *attacking* but also *countering* them.

7. **Public Administration:** The relation between public administration and space security mainly refers to public structures (ministries, agencies, etc.) that rely on space services, assets and/or infrastructure to function. This means that if a hostile actor can cause severe damage to the functioning of a state by disrupting the function or denying access to them.

8. **Intelligence:** Last but not least, intelligence is another sector that is related to space security, as a large number of information that falls into many collection disciplines –such as *Signals intelligence* (SIGINT), *Imagery Intelligence* (IMINT), *Geospatial Intelligence* (GEOINT), and *Open-Source Intelligence* (OSINT)– is being collected nowadays through space assets⁶⁶.

Concluding remarks

Taking into consideration the information presented in this article, it is concluded that space security is an emerging component of national security that enhances the rest of the components, thus it must not be overlooked as this will have negative consequences in many policy fields. In fact, in order for a state to achieve its overall objectives, it must be able to protect its critical space infrastructure and assets from attacks, in order to be able to function in a proper way and protect its citizens and national interests. The main *challenge* that most states are facing concerning space security is the ability to keep up with the technological advancement, in order not only to be able to address space threats but exploit new space capabilities in several policy fields to facilitate development. As for the main *opportunity* that lies ahead, states need to enhance their collaboration in space with both state and non-state actors (especially the private sector) in order to enhance their space threat awareness, strengthen their resilience and increase their space capabilities⁶⁷.

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⁶⁵Koukakis, G. (2023). *Resilience: Highlighting its Importance for Security and Development through References to (National) Security Strategic Documents of International Actors*. HAPSc Policy Briefs Series, 4(1), 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.35186>

⁶⁶ODNI. (n.d.). *What is intelligence*. [https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/what-is-intelligence#:~:text=SIGINT%E2%80%9494Signals%20intelligence%20is%20derived,instrumentation%20signals%20intelligence%20\(FISINT\)](https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/what-is-intelligence#:~:text=SIGINT%E2%80%9494Signals%20intelligence%20is%20derived,instrumentation%20signals%20intelligence%20(FISINT)).

⁶⁷Pawlak, P. & Gery, A. (2024, March 28). *Why the World Needs a New Cyber Treaty for Critical Infrastructure*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/why-the-world-needs-a-new-cyber-treaty-for-critical-infrastructure?lang=en>

WORLD ORDER



MERCOSUR at the Global Crossroads: Rethinking its International Insertion Strategy Amidst Great Power Rivalry

Elvis RODRIGUEZ (Peru)

Abstract

This article analyses the strategic dilemmas facing MERCOSUR amid intensifying global competition between the United States and China. As South America's main integration bloc, MERCOSUR is directly exposed to great-power rivalry, which affects trade flows, foreign investment, and diplomatic alignments. While Washington remains relevant in security and finance, Beijing has become the region's dominant trade partner and a major source of infrastructure investment, creating both opportunities and dependencies. Divergent national strategies—Brazil's balancing, Argentina's dual approach, Uruguay's bilateral initiatives, and Paraguay's alignment with the U.S.—limit the bloc's cohesion.

Three strategic options emerge:

- pursuing autonomy through deeper regional integration;
- diversifying partnerships beyond the two powers;
- continuing with fragmented national responses.

The article argues that Europe, and particularly the pending MERCOSUR–EU agreement, represents the most promising avenue to reduce dependency and modernize the bloc's international insertion.

Ultimately, MERCOSUR's relevance will depend on its capacity to transform external pressures into incentives for greater integration and strategic balance.

MERCOSUR at the Global Crossroads

The strategic competition between the United States and China has become one of the defining features of the contemporary international order. Beyond the military dimension, rivalry extends to trade, technology, investment, and political influence. South America, and particularly MERCOSUR, is directly affected by these tensions. As the main regional integration bloc, it faces the dilemma of how to position itself in this global power struggle.

The challenge lies in choosing among three main paths:

- pursuing strategic autonomy through deeper internal cohesion;
- strengthening ties with the United States and China, despite the risk of tensions;



Source: <https://aduananews.com/en/cancilleres-del-mercosur-concluyen-segunda-reunion-en-argentina-para-fortalecer-el-bloque/>

-diversifying alliances toward Europe and other emerging actors.

This debate is not theoretical—it is reflected in trade policies, foreign investment, and daily diplomacy.

Global Rivalry and Regional Dilemmas

Washington remains a key partner in terms of high-value trade, security, and access to multilateral financing, although its interest in South America fluctuates depending on global priorities. China, meanwhile, has consolidated itself as MERCOSUR's main buyer of raw materials and a growing investor in infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications, creating new opportunities but also increasing dependency. For the bloc, the challenge is to benefit from both partners without becoming merely a battleground of geopolitical competition.

National responses vary. Brazil balances pragmatic openness to China with efforts to preserve autonomy through forums like BRICS. Argentina shares dependence on Chinese demand for agribusiness exports, while maintaining ties with Washington in financial institutions. Uruguay has shown readiness to advance bilateral deals, even outside MERCOSUR's framework, generating internal frictions. Paraguay stands apart as the only member recognizing Taiwan, which aligns it with the U.S. but limits access to Chinese markets. These divergent approaches hinder the bloc's ability to craft a common strategy.

Competing Strategies

Three approaches currently shape MERCOSUR's options:

- Strategic autonomy: strengthening regional integration and reducing external dependency. Though often highlighted in political discourse, internal fragmentation and weak progress in productive integration have limited results.

- Diversification of alliances: seeking ties with actors beyond the U.S. and China. The MERCOSUR–EU Association Agreement, signed in 2019, remains the most significant opportunity, although environmental and agricultural concerns have slowed ratification. Other exploratory links with India, the Middle East, and ASEAN countries show potential but require stronger coordination.

- Fragmented national responses: each country prioritizes immediate needs, weakening MERCOSUR's collective projection.

Critical Assessment and Future Outlook

MERCOSUR's current strategies reveal structural limitations:

- heavy reliance on primary exports;
- macroeconomic vulnerabilities;
- internal divisions.

Nonetheless, diversification toward Europe stands out as a strategic alternative. A comprehensive agreement could balance U.S. and Chinese influence, provide technological cooperation, and reinforce sustainability standards.

Ultimately, MERCOSUR's dilemma is not simply choosing between Washington or Beijing, but determining whether it can project itself as an actor with an independent voice. Success will depend on transforming external pressures into incentives for deeper integration and advancing toward a balanced, diversified strategy that strengthens the bloc's relative autonomy in the international system.

Summary

MERCOSUR Trade with China and the U.S. (2000–2023)

- China surpassed the U.S. as Brazil's top trade partner in 2009.
- Main exports to China: soybeans, minerals, beef.
- Main exports to the U.S.: manufactured goods and energy. Sources: ECLAC, World Bank, UN Comtrade.

Trade Agreements Under Negotiation

- MERCOSUR–European Union Agreement: signed in 2019, still awaiting ratification.
- Exploratory negotiations with India, the Middle East, and ASEAN countries. Sources: MERCOSUR, European Commission.

Simplified Prospective Scenarios

1. Growing dependence on China: liquidity and secure markets, but increased vulnerability.
2. Realignment with the U.S.: financial and security cooperation, though limited by Washington's global priorities.
3. Europe as a balancing partner: technological cooperation, sustainability, and diversification.
4. Relative autonomy through regional integration: only feasible with stronger internal cohesion.

WORLD ORDER



From Pacifism to Power Projection: Japan's Expanding Security Role in the Indo-Pacific

Priyanka DAS (India)

In a reasonably anarchic international system, the primary goal of the state is security, not the supremacy of power. Kenneth Waltz argues in his theory of defensive realism that security-seeking states are encouraged to adopt moderate, defensive policies, and balance-of-power policies. Japan has historically pursued defensive pragmatism while maintaining a security alliance with the United States, but recent changes in international relations have led Japan to shift towards a more proactive stance. The Japan we once knew, as an economic powerhouse with a pacifist policy after World War II, is now changing rapidly. However, with the emergence of more formidable enemies, Japan is now slowly facing various challenges, which has led to their increasingly militaristic policy¹. Japan's postwar pacifist identity is encapsulated in Article 9 of the Constitution of 1947, which rejects war as a sovereign right and prohibits the maintenance of military forces. This constitutional provision has become the basis of national policy. The main source of this article is the post-World War II period, which expressed a collective desire to break away from the military past².



Source: [https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/06/30/the-
indo-pacifics-strategic-transition/](https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/06/30/the-indo-pacifics-strategic-transition/)

For decades, Japan's post-World War II pacifist constitution severely limited the use of military force and restricted the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to a strictly defensive role. However that long-standing policy began to change with the adoption of the 2022 Security Strategy, initiated by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who felt Japan should call on its own self-defense capabilities in the face of the Russia-Ukraine war and changing international politics, and relaxed restrictions on arms exports. Recent announcements paint a changing picture, as Japan seeks to build a more self-sufficient military while deepening its security partnership with the United States³. Japan has demonstrated emerging activism in the Indo-Pacific region, moving beyond its

¹Japan's Evolving Military Doctrine - From Peaceful Pacifism to Strategic Power -<https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/japan-s-evolving-military-doctrine-from-peaceful-pacifism-to-strategic-power>.

²Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution contains "No war" clause. - [https://highcourtchd.gov.in/sub_pages/top_menu/about/
events_files/japanspeech.pdf](https://highcourtchd.gov.in/sub_pages/top_menu/about/events_files/japanspeech.pdf).

³Japan Accelerates Defense Spending Amid Rising Tensions - [https://evrimagaci.org/gpt/japan-accelerates-defense-spending-amid-
rising-tensions-514286](https://evrimagaci.org/gpt/japan-accelerates-defense-spending-amid-rising-tensions-514286).

traditional pacifist posture to take on a more active security and diplomatic role. China's growing assertiveness and its positioning have raised concerns about a more complex regional security environment, and this shift has been evident in its revitalized security strategy, increased security spending, and a network of new and stronger partnerships⁴. Its transformation from a pacifist state to an active security contributor reflects both a sincere evolution and strategic adaptation to changing regional power, particularly the rise of China and the US military build up. As most of the world remembers, Japan was devastated during World War II by the United States, with atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After its defeat, Japan maintained a pacifist policy, enshrined in Article 9 of the post-war constitution. The 1945 to the 1990s were a transformative era for pacifism, evolving from a principled group movement into a mass social and political force⁵. Although Article 9 of the Constitution does not allow Japan to maintain a military, Japan partially armed itself in 1950 and during the height of the Korean War, the United States and Japan signed a security treaty. This resulted in the establishment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). The work on the Self-Defense Forces began in earnest, and grew during the Cold War. The main reasons for this were China's island-building efforts in the South China Sea, North Korea's nuclear weapons, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with China, which led Japan to expand its activities nationwide in accordance with international law. Significant pressure to follow this pacifism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific led Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to amend Article 9 to develop Japan's military doctrine⁶.

Under the 1951 Japan-United States Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, Japan relied on the United States for security guarantees, which was revised again in 1960. This protection allowed Japan to focus on the country's economic recovery, a strategy known as the Yoshida Doctrine⁷. Japan's pacifist approach during the time of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his predecessor was largely seen as negative rhetoric or passive, which emphasized strict constitutional limitations on its military, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF)⁸. Japan's strategic objective was to actively engage in international affairs. In Abe's view, no country in the world can ensure its peace and security alone. Later, the Gulf Crisis of 1990 gave Japan an opportunity to seriously consider international membership. Japan's participation in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) in the 1990s, notably the deployment of the first SDF troops to combat in Cambodia and Timor, marked a significant shift in Japan's history from a pacifist policy that had previously limited the military Self-Defense Forces to a purely domestic role⁹.

The 2015 Defense Department unveiled new US-Japan guidelines, which state that "the Self-Defense Forces will conduct appropriate operations related to the use of force in response to the situation, in which case an armed attack on a country related to Japan that threatens the existence of Japan will be carried out, and Japan will defend itself to protect its own people."¹⁰ Among the key reforms of Abe's "Proactive Contribution to Peace" doctrine was the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013 under the leadership of the then Prime Minister of Japan to centralize and strengthen foreign and security policy. The council, which replaced the ineffective Security Council, is supported by the National Security Secretariat and aims to improve crisis management, intelligence sharing, and strategic coordination within the government bureaucracy¹¹. Notable are the Japan-US alliance and joint initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) cooperation and the QUAD Indo-Pacific Logistics Network, modernization of maritime infrastructure and development of capabilities for disaster response. The QUAD partnership is limited to India, Japan, Australia and the USA so far, but the contribution of their partnership is important to reduce China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region, to prevent other foreign countries from influencing it and to maintain regional stability¹².

⁴Japan's Strategic Reorientation in an Era of Upheavals - https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10146&lid=6466

⁵arm control - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/arms-control>

⁶Japan's Evolving Military Doctrine - From Peaceful Pacifism to Strategic Power - <https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/japan-s-evolving-military-doctrine-from-peaceful-pacifism-to-strategic-power>

⁷The U.S.-Japan Alliance - <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-japan-alliance#:~:text=Signed%20in%201951%20alongside%20the,focus%20on%20rebuilding%20its%20economy>

⁸The rhetoric has been strong, but has it been matched by action - <https://spfusa.org/publications/gauging-japans-proactive-contributions-to-peace/#:~:text=From%20its%20inception%2C%20the%20Abe,the%20principle%20of%20international%20cooperation>

⁹20th Anniversary of Japan's Participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations - https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2013/html/chapter3/cp3_sf1.html

¹⁰What is Collective Self-Defense? - <https://spfusa.org/publications/collective-self-defense/>

¹¹Japan's Security Policy - https://www.mofa.go.jp/jp/nsp/page1we_000080.html

¹²Joint Statement from the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington - <https://in.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-from-the-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting-in-washington/#:~:text=We%20plan%20to%20host%20the,End%20text>

Following the historic defense policy shift of 2022, Japan is rapidly developing and acquiring advanced capabilities in cyberspace, space, and counter-attack missiles. This strategic realignment is being driven by the deteriorating regional security environment involving China, Russia, and North Korea¹³. Japan, on the other hand, uses Official Development Assistance (ODA) and infrastructure diplomacy as soft power tools to strengthen its strategic presence by building economic interdependence and fostering good relations. These efforts provide critical infrastructure, technical assistance, and economic support that advance and secure Japan's economic interests, increase its regional influence, and strengthen alliances against geopolitical challenges.¹⁴

Japan's growing security posture has shifted from a belligerent pacifist identity to one of greater assertiveness and strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. This shift is not a sudden departure from tradition but a gradual adaptation to changing regional dynamics, compounded by the rise of China, North Korean provocations, and uncertainty surrounding US commitments. Through initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, the reinterpretation of Article 9, and increased defense cooperation with partners such as India, Australia, and the United States, Japan has positioned itself as an ideological and strategic power. Yet, Japan's path is not one of "active pacifism" an attempt to project power responsibly within constitutional and moral bounds. Its challenge is to balance national security imperatives with the pacifist ideals deeply embedded in its political culture and public consciousness. As Japan continues to redefine its role in the Indo-Pacific, their experience provides a compelling example of how middle powers can navigate the tension between ideological restraint and strategic imperatives in an era of great-power competition.

¹³Japan's Active Cyberdefense Law: A New Era in Cybersecurity Strategy - <https://www.tripwire.com/state-of-security/japans-active-cyberdefense-law-new-era-cybersecurity-strategy#:~:text=Japan's%20Active%20Cyberdefense%20Law:%20A%20New%20Era%20in%20Cybersecurity%20Strategy,-Posted%20on%20August&text=On%20May%2016th%2C%202025,in%20a%20little%20more%20depth>

¹⁴From Aid to Alliance: The Role of Japan's Aid Diplomacy in Shaping India-Japan Strategic Relations - https://www.ejsss.net.in/uploads/172/15746_pdf.pdf

WORLD ORDER



US-China Trade Wars - Is It Sustainable?

Gargi AWASTHI (India)

President Donald Trump said high threatened tariffs with China were not viable as tensions between the world's two largest economies intensify ahead of an expected face-to-face meeting with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping.

Later, Trump and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent expressed optimism that upcoming talks with the Chinese could yield a broader trade deal that would deescalate a crisis that has seen the US threaten to raise US import taxes on Chinese goods rise to as high as 145%. Taken in conjunction, the remarks signaled an effort by Washington to calm fears of a global downturn and a cutoff in trade between the two economies.

That came after China announced a series of export restrictions on rare earth materials, and threatened to disrupt a series of 90-day truces, the most recent of which is set to expire Nov. 10, that have moderated tariff levels.

The tariff pause was intended to allow the US and China time to resolve broader disputes over trade, but those efforts suffered a setback as Washington expanded some restrictions on technology and proposed levies on Chinese ships entering US ports and Beijing responded with similar moves and outlined tighter export controls on rare earths.

China has a near-monopoly in the processing of rare earths – crucial for the production of everything from smartphones to fighter jets. Rare earth minerals are essential for the production of a whole range of technology such as solar panels, electric cars and military equipment. For example, a single F-35 fighter jet is estimated to need more than 400kg (881.8lb) of rare earths for its stealth coatings, motors, radars and other components.

China's rare earth exports also account for around 70% of the world's supply of metals used for magnets in electric vehicle motors. Beijing has worked hard to gain its dominance of the global rare earth processing capacity, said critical minerals researcher Marina Zhang from the University of Technology Sydney. The country has nurtured a vast talent pool in the field, while its research and development network is years ahead of its competitors, she added.



Source: <https://academy-for-investors.com/understanding-the-2025-trade-war-key-lessons-for-investors/>

While the US and other countries are investing heavily to develop alternatives to China for supplies of rare earths, they are still some way from achieving that goal. With its own large deposits of rare earths, Australia has been tipped as a potential challenger to China. But its production infrastructure is still underdeveloped, making processing relatively expensive, Ms Zhang said. “Even if the US and all its allies make processing rare earths a national project, I would say that it will take at least five years to catch up with China.”

What are the port fees imposed by the two sides?

A White House executive order named “Restoring America’s Maritime Dominance” directed the US Trade Representative (USTR) to impose charges on owners and operators of Chinese-built, owned, or operated vessels entering the US by October 14 as follows:

Vessel operators must pay \$50 per net ton for Chinese-owned or operated vessels arriving at a US port, to be increased to \$140 by April 2028. Vessel operators of Chinese-built vessels arriving at a US port must pay \$18 per net ton or \$120 per container, which will be increased to \$33 and \$250, respectively, by 2028. Fees are to be charged for a maximum of five times per year for individual vessels. Long-term users of China-operated vessels carrying US ethane and liquified petroleum gas (LPG) are exempt till December 10

Who are the main players in the global maritime trade?

China dominates the global commercial shipbuilding industry, followed by South Korea and Japan, according to data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Beijing built 53 percent of commercial ships in 2024, while the US produced only 0.1 percent of such vessels. Chinese state-owned China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) is the most significant player in the industry, and built more commercial vessels by tonnage in 2024 than all of the US shipbuilders have done since 1945, according to CSIS.

The state-owned CSSC also notably manufactures naval warships, and contributes to China’s status as having the largest naval fleet by ship numbers – at 355 vessels by 2020, according to a US Department of Defense report, compared with the US’s 293 naval vessels at the time.

Why did the US impose curbs on Chinese-built ships?

The US is attempting to loosen China’s grip on maritime dominance. Washington first began mulling taking action against China’s shipbuilding capabilities in May 2024, after five US trade unions petitioned the USTR for “relief” against what they called China’s “unreasonable” practices in the maritime and shipbuilding sector, citing extensive state-led support for the Chinese shipbuilding and maritime sectors, which the US argues gives Beijing an unfair edge over competitors.

The USTR thereafter launched investigations into Chinese shipping trade practices. In January 2025, after President Trump was sworn into office, the department determined that Chinese actions “burdened and restricted” US commerce, and that action would be taken. Over several weeks, US trade unions and lobbyists testified at public hearings regarding the action to be taken, before Trump’s Executive Order “14269 – Restoring America’s Maritime Dominance” was published in April.

In March, President Trump, in an address to Congress, promised that his administration would “resurrect” the US shipping industry and added that he would create an “office of shipbuilding”. “We are also going to resurrect the American shipbuilding industry, including commercial shipbuilding and military shipbuilding,” Trump told lawmakers, prompting applause from House Republicans. “We used to make so many ships. We don’t make them any more very much, but we’re going to make them very fast, very soon. It will have a huge impact to further enhance our national security.”

In a statement following Trump’s speech, Matthew Paxton, president of the Shipbuilders Council of America, praised the president’s move. “By fully utilising the existing domestic shipyard capacity, the shipyard industrial base can meet the growing demands of national defence, restore American competitiveness, and create thousands of skilled jobs in communities across the nation,” he said.

How will the tariffs affect global trade?

Analysts say the move on both sides is disrupting global trade operations already. Chinese container carrier COSCO¹ could bear the most burden from the US fees, expected to cost the industry \$3.2bn, while shipping intelligence firm Clarksons Research said in a report that China’s new port fees could significantly affect oil tankers, which account for 15 percent of global capacity, the Reuters news agency reported.

¹China COSCO SHIPPING Corporation Limited (hereinafter referred to as COSCO SHIPPING Group or the Group) is an SOE headquartered in Shanghai. It is the merged entity of China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO) and China Shipping (Group) Company (China Shipping). The vision of COSCO SHIPPING is to undertake the mission of globalizing Chinese economy, consolidate advantageous resources, take global shipping, integrated logistics, and shipping related financial services as core business, and develop diversified industrial clusters, so as to build a world-leading business entity that provides integrated logistics and supply chain services.

Major shipping links, including Danish-owned Maersk, German Hapag-Lloyd, and French CMA CGM, have reportedly swapped China-linked ships from their US shipping lanes, according to Reuters.

China and the US have started charging additional port fees on shipping vessels as trade tensions between the world's two largest economies soared back, following China's rare earth export controls in response to new trade restrictions imposed by the Trump administration.

The port fees from both sides went into force on Tuesday and have caused fear among analysts, who say maritime trade has become a key battlefield between the two nations.

In a separate but related move, China on Tuesday imposed sanctions on five subsidiaries of South Korean shipbuilder Hanwha Ocean, which it said "assisted and supported" US investigations into Chinese trade.

The US was the first to levy additional fees on Chinese-owned ships back in April in a bid to loosen Beijing's hold on the global maritime industry and bolster US ship manufacturers. That decision followed an investigation under the Joe Biden administration that revealed China dominates global maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding using "unfair policies and practices" such as funnelling state funds into shipbuilding.

China hit back at the US and said it would also charge similar fees on the same day US tariffs were set to go into effect.

In a statement on Tuesday, China's Ministry of Commerce said: "If the US chooses confrontation, China will see it through to the end; if it chooses dialogue, China's door remains open."

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The state-owned CSSC also notably manufactures naval warships, and contributes to China's status as having the largest naval fleet by ship numbers -at 355 vessels by 2020, according to a US Department of Defense report, compared with the US's 293 naval vessels at the time. While analysts point out that the US maintains the strongest navy based on firepower, China's shipbuilding dominance has raised security concerns in Washington for several years.

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What are the other trade curbs announced, and will this lead to an all-out trade war?

China, which has a monopoly on critical rare-earth metals used to manufacture electronics, tightened export controls on five of them on October 9 under its "announcement number 61 of 2025", including holmium, erbium, thulium, europium, and ytterbium. That's in addition to curbs on seven metals announced earlier in April. President Trump, in retaliation, has threatened to raise tariffs on Chinese goods to 100 percent from November 1.

The US imposed heavy tariffs on Chinese goods earlier in Trump's presidency, in an attempt to address what Washington views as imbalanced trade relations. Those tariffs were eventually eased after the two countries came to an agreement in September for a 90-day pause that is set to expire on about November 9.

However, tensions are again high following the new rare earth tariffs by China, and the port levies announced by both countries. Analysts have previously warned that a full-scale trade war between the US and China could hit global markets badly and prompt a recession.

Bilateral tariffs have increased on average to 17% between the US and China, and the Phase One Agreement signed in January 2020 between the two countries only leads to minor reductions in the tariffs to 16%. The trade conflict has led to a sizeable reduction in trade between the US and China in 2019 and is accompanied by considerable trade diversion to imports from other regions, leading to a reorganization of value chains in (East) Asia. The simulation analysis shows that the direct effects of the tariff increases on the global economy are limited (0.1% reduction in global GDP). The impact of the Phase One Agreement on the global economy is even smaller, although the US is projected to turn real income losses into real income gains because of the Chinese commitments to buy additional US goods. The biggest impact of the trade conflict is provoked by rising uncertainty about trade policy and the paper provides a framework to analyze the uncertainty effects.

SECURITY AND RESILIENCE - NATO



Khayal
ISKANDAROV
(Azerbaijan)

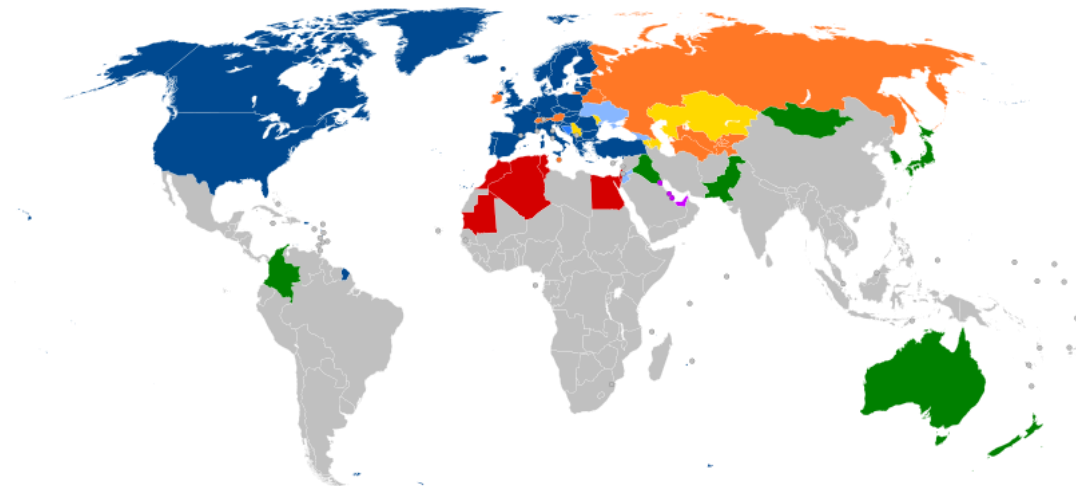
Mugabil
HUSEYNOV
(Azerbaijan)

Vidadi
JAHANGIROV
(Azerbaijan)

NATO's Cooperative Security and the Strategic Role of Partnerships

NATO's partnerships are not a substitute for membership, but they are a vital bridge between the Alliance and countries that share our values and want to contribute to global security.

Lord Robertson, former NATO Secretary General



Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has evolved from a purely defensive alliance into a dynamic security organization that extends its influence through partnerships beyond its traditional boundaries. These partnerships aim to enhance cooperative security, strengthen regional and global stability, and enable partner forces to operate seamlessly with NATO members – a concept known as interoperability (Iskandarov et al., 2023). Over the past three decades, NATO has developed a comprehensive framework of programs and mechanisms, including professional military education, joint exercises, and tailored partnership initiatives, to support the modernization of partner militaries and foster intellectual, procedural, and technical interoperability.

The strategic rationale for NATO partnerships reflects both the changing global security environment and the diverse needs of partner countries. While NATO continues to focus on traditional military threats, it also addresses soft security challenges such as cyber threats, climate change, energy security, and transnational

risks including migration and human trafficking (Fasola, 2024). Through its adaptive and flexible approach, the Alliance provides partners with tools to reform defense institutions, align national capabilities with NATO standards, and contribute meaningfully to collective security.

Numerous academic studies explore NATO's transformation and partnership policies, analyzing its evolution from a Cold War alliance to a global security actor. Duffield (1994) aims to explain the factors behind NATO's enduring relevance and resilience right after the Cold War ended. Frühling and Schreer (2010) argue that NATO should frame its partnerships in terms of public-security goods and the pursuit of strategic interests. Reisinger (2012) conducts historical and institutional analysis of PfP, IPAP/IPP and the Planning & Review Process. Flockhart (2014) presents how NATO's partnership tools evolved after 2010, clear background on policy drivers and institutional constraints. Eichler (2021) offers a geopolitical and strategic context for NATO enlargement, which is valuable for framing the potential risks and benefits of expansion. Fasola (2024) conducts critical appraisal of NATO's partnership architecture with practical recommendations. Rubinson and Feldman (2025) employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to examine the determinants of NATO's engagement with partner countries. They argue that the Alliance tends to prioritise relationships with states that exhibit a higher potential to make substantial strategic contributions to its objectives. Petersson (2025) provides a comprehensive overview of the origins, rationale, policies, and institutional structure underpinning NATO's partnership frameworks. This paper examines NATO's partnership framework, emphasizing the role of interoperability and professional military education in strengthening defense capacity. It explores how partnerships have evolved in response to regional dynamics, geopolitical divergences, and emerging threats, highlighting the Alliance's continuing relevance as a facilitator of security, stability, and cooperative engagement in Europe and beyond.

The Role of Partnerships in Enhancing Military Interoperability and Professional Education

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO acknowledged the necessity of operating beyond its conventional boundaries to preserve peace and stability across Europe. Expanding the Alliance through the inclusion of new members became a central focus. In this context, cooperation with partner countries increasingly dominated discussions. A key goal was to ensure that partner forces could operate seamlessly together, which in turn brought the concept of interoperability back into prominence (Iskandarov et al., 2023).

Since 1994, NATO has established partnerships to engage with countries that cannot or choose not to join the Alliance. It emphasised the "new security environment" after the Cold War but retained the traditional tasks of collective defence, consultation, and stable Euro-Atlantic area (Steinberg et al, 2002). Achieving future strategic objectives required NATO to expand its cooperation beyond traditional borders, underscoring the urgent need to engage with partners. This approach made collaboration between partner and member forces essential for out-of-area operations (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017). Partnership frameworks such as the Partnership for Peace and the Mediterranean Dialogue emerged as key initiatives, fostering cooperation with neighboring countries and supporting their efforts to enhance national capabilities.

Over the past three decades, the number of partner nations has grown, the agenda has diversified, and NATO's objectives have broadened. Cooperation among allied and partner militaries, particularly in education and training, is crucial for achieving interoperability to address current security challenges. NATO provides guidance through professional military education for officers and non-commissioned officers, serving as a model for national curricula and promoting intellectual interoperability and professionalism. The rapid advancement of military education in Central and Eastern Europe highlights the effectiveness of these efforts, making NATO's partnership framework a valuable tool for enhancing collaboration with partner countries. In the following years, the Alliance launched various programs and mechanisms, such as the Operation Capabilities Concept, Membership Action Plan, Defence Education Enhancement Programme, Individual Partnership Action Plan, and Individually Tailored Partnership Programme to foster closer and more comprehensive cooperation with its partners (Iskandarov et al., 2023, p. 129; p. 131).

As expressed in all four of the post-Cold War Strategic Concepts, the goal of NATO is to safeguard security together. The three core tasks of NATO, as stated in the present Strategic Concept (2022), are deterrence and defense crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. The 2022 Strategic Concept emphasizes that political dialogue and practical cooperation with partners, grounded in mutual respect and benefit, strengthen stability beyond NATO borders, enhance security at home, and support core Alliance tasks. Partnerships are vital for protecting the global commons, boosting resilience, and upholding the rules-based international order. Continuous improvement in military effectiveness, with interoperability as essential, is crucial for successful coalition operations. Among the core tasks, cooperative security is primarily about partnerships. As a result, cooperative security is a large endeavor with many components. Its three components are to build

partnerships, support non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control, and help prospective candidates get ready to join NATO. Interoperability is a crucial component of building partnerships and getting new nations ready to join as possible members (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017). Interoperability is supported through implementing NATO standards (STANAGs), doctrines, and tactics, joint training, participation in multinational exercises, applying lessons learned, and conducting tests and demonstrations. In short with the new NATO missions and engagement in operational theatres there has been a dramatic shift from a single nation fighting on its own to coalitions where multinational units, down to the level of platoons, are working together. Current Strategic Concept also underscores the critical role partners play in maintaining peace and stability throughout Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Indo-Pacific, as well as the importance of partner states in strengthening the Alliance's resilience against current and emerging security threats. Additionally, it emphasizes that enhancing practical cooperation and political-military engagement with partner states enables them to achieve greater interoperability with Allied forces in the execution of NATO's core tasks (Fasola, 2024).

NATO Defence Ministers' action plan defines interoperability across three main dimensions:

- Technical (hardware and systems)
- Procedural (doctrine and procedures)
- Human (language, terminology, and training)

Some sources also include information as a fourth, transversal dimension. Achieving technical and procedural interoperability is impossible without a strong human dimension, which is closely tied to intellectual interoperability. As NATO allies and partners collaborate to build defense institutions, human capital programs must educate national security professionals in innovative ways and equip them with diverse skill sets (Iskandarov et al., 2023, p. 130).

Foreign policy objectives and the worldwide security landscape have evolved dramatically over time, and this has been reflected in the way that NATO's partnerships have developed in response to these changes as well as internal conflicts and divergent viewpoints. In this age of profound change, it can be challenging to understand exactly where these developments are leading us. The main actors expect the international system to change, despite the widespread belief that nothing has changed fundamentally since the revolutionary changes that followed the end of the Cold War and converted the system from bipolar to unipolar. The partnership policy of NATO can be viewed as a "tool" to help achieve overarching strategic goals. Within the framework of common foreign policy goals, NATO's approach to partnership has always been adaptable, flexible, and practical. Over the decades that the Alliance has been working with partners, the nature, purpose, and degree of ambition of NATO's partnerships have changed dramatically (Iskandarov et al., 2023).

Navigating Divergent Regional Interests: NATO's Cooperative Security in the Post-Cold War Era

NATO has developed partnerships with 35 partner countries (as of 2025) through various frameworks such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), and Partners Across the Globe, encompassing a geographic span from West Africa to Central Asia. These partnerships have played a pivotal role in the evolution of the Alliance, enhancing interoperability among forces and promoting the export of NATO standards and military professionalism.

The outcomes have demonstrated the worth and significance of this extensive collaboration. NATO's partnerships definitely contribute to broader international security. Proving the significance of NATO for partners is imperative. First and foremost, NATO is a dynamic organization. To ensure the national security of both member and partner countries, the Alliance plays a critical role in transforming both through its decisions and programs and by offering mechanisms that help them adapt to the changing security environment. There is a sense in which the Alliance's survival is guaranteed since the principles that unite NATO members outweigh their differences. As the preeminent military-political alliance globally, NATO is poised to enhance its initiatives in security, defense, and education, while also formulating new programs and mechanisms, thereby offering broader opportunities for partner nations. NATO consistently seeks to align its activities with the evolving security landscape, as outlined in its strategic concept. The security threats that have emerged in the 21st century can be categorized into two distinct groups: hard security threats, which encompass military conflicts, and soft security threats, which pertain to various security challenges beyond the realm of military confrontations. The notion of soft security encompasses a range of concerns, including energy security, cyber security, climate change, poverty, illegal migration, and human trafficking, whereas hard security primarily focuses on military security issues. While hard security threats remain its main focus, NATO presently employs a diverse array of strategies to address all the aforementioned security challenges. In this context, enhancing collaboration with NATO is crucial for partner nations.

NATO's education and training have significantly evolved. While historically focused on enabling

member forces to operate effectively together, today the Alliance maintains a global network of training institutions, conducts regular exercises, and runs training missions worldwide. NATO supports partner countries in reforming their defence education and training through various mechanisms. Participation in these initiatives allows partners to exchange knowledge, access NATO expertise, and engage in Alliance activities. Partnership education and training programs are primarily bilateral, aimed at strengthening cooperation and interoperability between NATO and its partners (Iskandarov et al., 2023, p. 139).

The current global security landscape is significantly more complex than it was several decades ago. Consequently, NATO, as the focal point of international security, must adapt to the challenges faced by its member states and partners. The Alliance's need for partnerships is more critical than ever. In nearly all nations, the military serves as a vital symbol of statehood. A substantial number of partner countries have expressed their dedication to the peacekeeping missions conducted worldwide. Their armed forces frequently participate in NATO exercises and peacekeeping initiatives. Throughout this collaboration, many partner nations have positively embraced NATO's appeal for the modernization of their military capabilities. They, naturally, meticulously reflect on the programs and mechanisms that serve as a framework for achieving interoperability with the Alliance, as well as the structural reorganization in alignment with NATO standards.

Although NATO welcomed the majority of its members, who were previously partners, during the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, cooperative security was recognized as one of NATO's core tasks in the new Strategic Concept established in 2010, alongside collective security and crisis management.

The primary concern for all partner nations is security and stability, yet differing national interests and external influences create significant divergences. For instance, in Russia's so-called "near abroad", specifically the South Caucasus, Georgia considers NATO involvement essential, Armenia aligns with the CSTO, and Azerbaijan pursues practical cooperation without seeking NATO membership. In Eastern Europe, Ukraine seeks NATO membership, Belarus perceives NATO as a threat, and neutral Moldova utilizes practical partnership mechanisms. In Central Asia, NATO membership is unrealistic, so countries balance relations with NATO and Russia. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the most active partners, while neutral Turkmenistan avoids NATO tools, although it could have followed Azerbaijan and Moldova's approach. These divergences hinder NATO's regional approach, yet all countries share a concern for regional stability (Iskandarov et al., 2023, p. 141).

Nevertheless, all partner nations aim to strengthen their military capabilities, with professional military education (PME) forming a cornerstone of armed forces development. Given the need for reforms in their defence education systems, NATO offers dynamic tools to enhance PME programs, ensuring that personnel receive the appropriate training to effectively build overall capacity.

Conclusions

NATO's partnerships have evolved into a cornerstone of the Alliance's strategy for promoting regional and global security. By extending cooperation beyond its membership, NATO has enabled partner countries to enhance their military capabilities, align with international standards, and operate effectively in multinational coalitions. Interoperability encompassing technical, procedural, and human dimensions remains central to these efforts, reinforced through professional military education, joint exercises, and tailored programs that address the diverse needs of partner nations. The Alliance's flexible and adaptive approach has allowed it to respond to complex geopolitical dynamics, emerging security threats, and the divergent interests of partner states. NATO partnerships serve not only as a mechanism for military capacity-building but also as a tool for advancing cooperative security, promoting stability, and supporting the rules-based international order. By addressing both hard and soft security challenges, NATO ensures that its partners are prepared to contribute to global peacekeeping and crisis management efforts while enhancing their national defense institutions. Ultimately, NATO's partnership framework demonstrates the enduring relevance of cooperative engagement in a rapidly changing security environment. By fostering interoperability, professional development, and practical collaboration, NATO strengthens the resilience of its partners and reinforces the Alliance's capacity to safeguard international security, stability, and shared values across Europe and beyond.

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AFRICA - ETHIOPIA



The Ethiopian Rebus: the Delicate Balance between Imperial Aspirations and Interethnic Fault Lines

Lorenzo Maria RICCI (Italy)

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a country with a millennia-old state tradition, tracing its origins back to biblical times. According to the *Kebrā Negast*, a 14th-century work that became the cornerstone of national pedagogy, the first Ethiopian emperor was Menelik, born from the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This legendary ruler, upon returning from his only journey to Jerusalem, is said to have brought the Ark of the Covenant back to the Horn of Africa. In the perspective of the *Kebrā Negast*, this represented a genuine passing of the torch, with the Ethiopians assuming the role of the new Israelites¹.

Always according to the *Kebrā Negast*, the Kingdom of Axum was ruled by the descendants of Menelik². Over time, their domains extended from present-day Eritrea and north-central Ethiopia to eastern Sudan, western Yemen, and southern Saudi Arabia. In the early 4th century AD, this monarchy became one of the main centers of Miaphysite Christianity – a doctrine later rejected by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. This demonstrated to the *Kebrā Negast*'s authors how distinctive the Ethiopian people are as defenders of the original Christian faith.

The decline of the “new Israelites” began with the Arab expansion of the late 7th century AD.

Threatened at sea, Axum withdrew inland, concentrating on the highlands of what are now north-central Ethiopia and north-western Eritrea. During this phase of decay, the *Kebrā Negast* recounts how the Solomonic dynasty was dethroned by a non-Semitic family: the Zagwe. Belonging to the Agaw ethnic group, the new rulers were portrayed as impostors, despite their Christian faith and their great contribution to Ethiopian culture.

This humiliation was only rectified at the end of the 13th century, when Yekuno Amlak, an Amhara aristocrat and direct descendant of the last Axumite king, rose to power. Not by chance, the entire narrative framework of the *Kebrā Negast* was devised precisely to legitimize the new ruling dynasty; a family that would continue in power via various branches until 1974, the year of the deposition of the last Solomonic emperor, Haile Selassie.



Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Eritrea/Independent-Eritrea>

¹M. M. ADAMU, «The Legend of Queen Sheba, the Solomonic Dynasty and Ethiopian History: An Analysis», *African Research Review*, Vol. 10, no. 1, 2024.

²G. TIRUNEH, «The *Kebrā Nagast*: Can Its Secrets Be Revealed? », *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 & 2, pp. 51-72, 2014.

Faced with such a fascinating epic, an outside observer would expect a strong sense of identity shared by all Ethiopians. However, the Kebra Negast is the sole output of the Christian Semitic-speaking populations of the north-central highlands (Amhara, Tigrayan and Tigrinya). This cultural substrate gave rise to a wider common identity among the inhabitants of northern Ethiopia and western Eritrea: the so-called Habesha. Nowadays, this shared sense of belonging extends to the Agaw, who have lived in the same area for millennia.

Understandably, such a sophisticated identity did not easily take root beyond its initial boundaries. The contemporary configuration of Ethiopia is, in fact, the product of military campaigns waged from the second half of the 19th century onward³. Several Cushitic-speaking peoples of Islamic or pagan faiths, including the Oromo, Sidama, Afar, and Somali, bear the brunt of this cultural expansion.

Some Oromo clans of Shewa and Wollo, geographically adjacent to the Amhara, were co-opted by the imperial power and adopted their neighbors' religion and culture⁴. Nevertheless, most of these communities preserved their distinct cultural identity; a diversity that resurfaced during the end of Haile Selassie's reign and during the following communist regime of the Derg (1974–1991). In the 1960s, the Arsi Oromo staged an actual guerrilla war against the imperial forces, which was eventually crushed in 1970, but triggered a broader resistance movement. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was established in 1973 as a political organization with an armed branch that would launch an insurgency against the Derg in the coming years.

Paradoxically, the Tigrayans - culturally Habesha but strongly opposed to the Amhara-centric policies of both the imperial and socialist eras –were eventually responsible for overthrowing the regime. Assisted by the independence fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) militia reached Addis Abeba in 1991⁵. Recognizing that they only represented a minority (6% of the population), the TPLF leadership rebuilt the country along ethnic lines, establishing autonomous regional administrations based on ethnolinguistic divisions. At the same time, the TPLF created the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an umbrella group comprising all ethnic political groups, and imposed it as the dominant coalition. This constitutional framework ensured Ethiopia's economic progress, but it did not erase internal tensions.

The Oromo, the country's largest ethnic group, making up about 35% of the population, continued to protest against their sociopolitical marginalization. Already in the mid-1990s, the OLF's outlawing led to the continuation of violent conflict in western Oromia. Furthermore, substantial land expropriations brought about by Addis Abeba's expansion sparked widespread demonstrations in 2014. A surge of anger that will have profound implications for the entire country⁶.

Meanwhile, in southern Ethiopia conditions in the Somali Region remained dire. The cultural disparities between its inhabitants and Ethiopian identity were a constant source of friction. It is not a coincidence that Somali factions in the region had previously staged many revolts, including collaborating with Mogadishu's soldiers during the Somalia-Ethiopia conflict of 1977-1978. Inevitably, nationalist sentiment found expression in the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a political movement that converted into an armed group in 1994 in response to the TPLF's harsh policies; an insurgency that opposed federal forces for more than twenty years⁷.

Following the 1991 regime change, also the Amhara people began to criticize the country's new institutional framework. The constitution was particularly condemned by the community's elites, who pointed out how it encouraged ethnonationalist discourse among the new regional governments. This circumstance created a climate of terror among Amhara minorities living throughout the country, who were frequently harassed and violently attacked by locals⁸.

Nevertheless, these interethnic fractures did not deter the TPLF from asserting itself on the international stage. Ethiopia intervened on two key fronts, reflecting its role as the hegemonic force in the Horn of Africa.

In 1998, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) launched a full-scale offensive on the Eritrean Defense Force (EDF) officially over a border demarcation dispute.

³H. T. TILAHUNE, «Imperial Ethiopia: Conquest and the Case of National Articulation», *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2016.

⁴B. YATES, «From hated to Hābāsha: Oromo identity shifts in Wällo and Shāwa during the late nineteenth century», *African Identities*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 194-208, 2016.

⁵A. BEHRE, *A political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, ideology and mobilisation in Ethiopia*, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2008.

⁶M. KELECCHA, «Oromo Protests, Repression, and Political Change in Ethiopia, 2014–2020», *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 183-226, 2021.

⁷T. HAGMANN, «The Political Roots of the Current Crisis in Region 5», *Social Science Research Council*, 21/9/2007.

⁸R. ABADIR, «Who are the Enemies of Amhara and other Ethiopians? », *The Habesha*, 1/5/2013.

Actually, the conflict stemmed from a systemic issue: Ethiopia's loss of maritime access after Eritrea's secession. The situation became more pressing for Ethiopia's struggling economy, which was compelled to pay expensive fees to utilize Eritrea's two key ports (Massawa and Assab)⁹. The battle ended in 2000 thanks to Algerian diplomatic mediation, but the contentious issue of Ethiopia's access to the sea remained unsolved. As a result, Addis Abeba and Asmara cut diplomatic relations and militarized the whole border, exacerbating tensions by training opposition militias on each other's territory. Eritrea, in particular, provided asylum for OLF, ONLF, and Patriotic Ginbot 7 insurgents¹⁰.

Six years after the end of the Eritrean conflict, Ethiopia intervened militarily in Somalia with US approval. The operation was meant to demolish the Union of Islamic Courts, a group of militias that had taken control of much of central and southern Somalia. Addis Abeba feared a potential collaboration between Islamist militias and ONLF rebels. Thus, in December 2006, the government approved the deployment of approximately 50,000 troops into Somalia to fight the Union. The ENDF, backed by US air power and special troops, easily reached Mogadishu, causing the Islamist coalition to fall. However, the invasion quickly turned into a nightmare. Somali militias regrouped and launched an insurgency against the occupying army, which was unable to stabilize the country¹¹.

Military adventures were exacerbated by tensions with Egypt. Historically, the Egyptians have always opposed the rise of any power capable of controlling access to the southern Red Sea. Hence the long-standing rivalry between Cairo and Addis Abeba. Between 1874 and 1876, the Khedivate of Egypt sent two expeditionary corps to attack the Ethiopian Empire, but failed miserably, with Emperor Yohannes IV annihilating both expeditions¹². To make matters worse, Egypt saw the start of building of the Blue Nile's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in 2011 as a danger to its national security. Cairo strongly opposed the initiative, which exacerbated the two countries' already fragile relations¹³.

Overall, the Tigrayan leadership faced ongoing internal and external challenges, which gradually undermined the TPLF's hold on power. Deep ethnic divisions, worsened by nearly thirty years of Tigrayan authority, eventually led to its downfall. By 2018, the Oromo's mass protests had become untenable, prompting a tactical cooperation between the Oromo and Amhara. With the strong support of the country's two major ethnic groups, the TPLF found itself in a minority position within the EPRDF. This historic move resulted in the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's first Oromo prime minister, which appeared to usher in a new era for the country.

2. The First Four Years of Abiy Ahmed's Premiership and the War in Tigray (2018-2022)

Once in power, Abiy Ahmed sought to distance himself from the TPLF's ethno-federalist policies.

With strong support from the Oromo and the Amhara, the new prime minister embraced a pan-Ethiopian rhetoric aimed at reducing the prevailing ethnonationalism among the country's numerous communities. This intent was clearly demonstrated by the dismantling of the EPRDF. Thus, three of the four EPRDF constituent parties—the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM)—merged to become the Prosperity Party (PP). Other ethnic parties previously allied with the EPRDF also joined the new entity, including the Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front (BGPDUF), the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (ESPDP), the Gambella People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), and the Hareri National League (HNL)¹⁴. Only the TPLF refused to join the PP, denouncing the unification process as illegal¹⁵.

At the same time, Abiy and his allies began purging important posts within the federal apparatus in order to weaken the influence of Tigrayan party officials. The first to be ousted were ENDF Chief of Staff Samora Yunis and National Intelligence Director Getachew Assefa, who were both TPLF members. Moreover, the end of the Tigrayan-led administration established the political environment for reconciliation between

⁹K. HAMILTON, «Beyond the Border War: The Ethio-Eritrean Conflict and International Mediation Efforts», *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, Vol. 11, pp.113-136, 2000.

¹⁰A. R. A. SHABAN, «Ethiopia's ex-rebel group Ginbot 7 returns from Eritrea base», *Africa News*, 13/8/2024.

¹¹N. A. BAMFO, «Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in 2006: Motives and lessons learned», *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Vol. 4, No 2, pp. 55-65, 2010.

¹²A. E. ROBINSON, «The Egyptian-Abyssinian War of 1874-1876», *Journal of the Royal African Society*, Vol. 26, No. 103, pp. 263-280, 1927.

¹³S. MOHYELDEEN, «The Dam That Broke Open an Ethiopia-Egypt Dispute», *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 12/1/2021.

¹⁴«Ethiopia's new party is welcome news, but faces big hurdles», *The Conversation*, 10/12/2019.

¹⁵«Prosperity Party is 'Illegitimate' - TPLF», *Addis Insight*, 6/1/2020.

federal authorities and many armed opposition organizations. One example is the OLF which signed a peace agreement with the federal government in August 2018. The agreement permitted the Oromo nationalist party to compete in elections and become formally registered with Ethiopia's National Electoral Board (NEBE). However, some elements of the group's military wing, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), refused to join the peace process and continued their insurgency in western Oromia, OLF's traditional stronghold. This decision was formalized in April 2019, when the OLA released a statement announcing its separation from the OLF¹⁶.

In October 2018, it was the ONLF's turn. The Somali separatist movement reached an agreement with the federal government after thousands of political detainees were released. This momentous event signified the ONLF's comeback to political life, as it was officially registered with the NEBE¹⁷.

These domestic successes would not have been achievable without Abiy's outreach to Eritrea. Following twenty years of open animosity, the Oromo prime minister unexpectedly opened discussions with Asmara. The diplomatic efforts were rewarded with a historic peace deal between the two countries, which officially ended the brutal conflict of 1998-2000. The agreement gained Abiy the Nobel Peace Prize and, more importantly, facilitated reconciliation between Addis Abeba and many opposition groups, due to the decisive mediation of the Eritrean regime, which had previously been their principal backer.

However, not all Ethiopian ethnic groups fully supported Abiy's reform agenda. Amhara nationalist elements, in particular, wanted the return of the districts of Humera, Welkait, and Tsegede, which were historically Amhara territory but were given to Tigray after the TPLF took power. Tensions erupted on June 22, 2019, when a gang of armed individuals stormed government buildings in Bahir Dar, killing the president of the Amhara Region and two top regional officials. At the same time, in the federal capital, a bodyguard assassinated the ENDF Chief of Staff and a retired general. Both attacks were allegedly orchestrated by Asaminew Tsige, the Amhara Regional State's Head of Security, notorious for his Amhara ultranationalist rhetoric. In any case, the attempted coup failed, and Asaminew Tsige was assassinated by police while attempting to leave¹⁸. Nonetheless, the episode exposed Amhara nationalism's deep resentment; a spirit of vengeance that the federal government would later try to use for its own gain, underestimating its influence among the population.

If the situation in Amhara predicted stormy times ahead, in Tigray, a confrontation with Abiy Ahmed's government appeared to be approaching. As previously stated, the TPLF leadership never concealed its disdain for Abiy's regime. As the new federal administration steadily placed loyal officials, Tigrayan leaders began returning to their home territory, fleeing Addis Abeba for fear of punishment from the authorities. Tigray's relations with the federal government worsened further following the peace agreement with Eritrea, an alarming sign for Tigrayans who maintained strained relations with their northern neighbors since the 1998-2000 conflict¹⁹.

Thus, the Ethiopian - Eritrean rapprochement deepened the TPLF's sense of encirclement, as it feared potential attacks from both north and south. Yet, this prospect did not lead Mekelle to adopt a more conciliatory stance toward Addis Abeba. On the contrary, once confined to their regional stronghold, the TPLF leadership took an openly defiant posture toward the central government. In March 2020, the party criticized the decision to postpone national elections due to the pandemic, calling any extension of Abiy's mandate illegitimate²⁰. The point of no return was inevitably reached in September 2020, when the TPLF held its own regional elections in defiance of Addis Abeba's ban; a provocative act that exposed the federal government's weakness in Tigray²¹. Subsequent Tigrayan claims that Ethiopian troops were stationed inside Eritrea heightened tensions even further.

Eventually, Tigrayan fighters were the first to open fire, assaulting the ENDF Northern Command headquarters in Mekelle, Tigray's capital, on the night of November 3-4, 2020. This strike plunged Ethiopia into a state of civil war.

The subsequent pincer offensive, coordinated by the ENDF and the Eritrean army, resulted in Tigray's rapid occupation. The operation also included Amhara Region security forces (the so-called Amhara Special Forces - ASF) and Fano militias, which were formed in 2016 during mass protests against the TPLF. However, the Tigrayan forces, renamed the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), regrouped and launched a prolonged guerilla campaign. The ENDF and its Amhara allies were forced to retreat by late June 2021, but the siege imposed on Tigray remained in place.

¹⁶«OLF politics, military splits», *The Reporter*, 6/4/2019.

¹⁷M. GABOBE, «Guns are silent, but war lingers for Ogaden's former women rebel fighters», *Al Jazeera*, 17/12/2024.

¹⁸M. PLAUT, «Behind Ethiopia's attempted coup», *Martin Plaut*, 24/6/2019.

¹⁹B. BRUTON, «Ethiopia and Eritrea Have a Common Enemy», *Foreign Policy*, 12/7/2018.

²⁰T. MUGABI, «Ethiopia's scheduled election stirs tensions», *Deutsche Welle*, 18/8/2020.

²¹«Ethiopia's Tigray region defies PM Abiy with 'illegal' election», *France 24*, 9/9/2020.

Despite the encirclement, the TDF counterattacked southward, infiltrating deep into the Amhara Region and, by November 2021, even threatening Addis Ababa itself. Meanwhile, the TPLF announced a deal with the OLA to tie down government troops in Oromia; a critical moment for Abiy, who was now facing threats in his own home region²².

The deployment of foreign-made drones - the Chinese Wing Loong II, the Iranian Mohajer-6, and the Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 - shifted the balance back in favor of federal forces. With these weapons, Ethiopia's air force targeted the enemy's supply lines, forcing the TDF to retreat to Tigray in January 2022. This withdrawal produced a new stalemate, with Tigrayans suffering from famine as a result of the ENDF and its allies' siege. Capitalizing on this advantage, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces launched a new offensive on multiple fronts, rapidly advancing into Tigrayan territory. Despite the heavy casualties suffered, the Ethiopian led coalition was on the verge of victory, heading its columns towards Mekelle. Only the US intervention succeeded in slowing the military operation, threatening additional sanctions against Addis Abeba. At this point, Abiy Ahmed agreed to sit down with the Tigrayan establishment and negotiate a peace deal. The result was the so-called Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, which was signed in Pretoria on November 2, 2022. A historical achievement that brought long-awaited peace to war-torn Tigray.

However, the terms and conditions of the peace treaty prompted a number of concerns about its implementation. First and foremost, the Ethiopian government's ability to compel EDF to withdraw from the region. Indeed, Asmara was well-known for its hawkish attitude toward the Tplf-led Tigrayan administration. As a result, the Eritrean government was excluded from the negotiations. The Eritrean regime opposed the decision and ordered its troops to stay along the border, occupying key towns and villages. Early indications of an unexpected decline in Ethiopia's "special relationship" with Eritrea²³.

Second, the territorial dispute between Amharas and Tigrayans over the Humera, Welkait, Tsegede, and Raya districts was unresolved. Amhara Special Forces and Fano militias have occupied these areas since the beginning of the conflict, having long advocated for their return following their "unjust" incorporation into Tigray in 1994. Mekelle refused to accept the state of the art, urging the federal government to drive Amhara militias out of Western Tigray (Humera, Welkait, and Tsegede districts) and Southern Tigray (Raya district) in order to move forward with TDF disarmament and refugee return. Requests deemed unacceptable by Amhara nationalists, who began to bear a serious grudge against Abiy's executive for their exclusion from the talks in South Africa.

Finally, the Pretoria Agreement failed to address the armed insurgency in Oromia. During the Tigray War, the OLA benefited greatly from the ENDF's focus on northern regions. As a result, the armed insurgents broadened their attack scope, targeting regional security forces and federal units outside their traditional strongholds in western Oromia. They improved their operational capabilities by conducting numerous incursions in eastern Oromia and the area surrounding Addis Abeba²⁴.

In essence, the South African peace agreement relieved the exhausted Tigrayan population, which bore the brunt of this fratricidal war that claimed over 600,000 lives. At the same time, the agreement provided a little respite for Abiy's government following criticism and Western condemnation of his conflict resolution strategy. However, the financial problems plaguing the country both internally and externally were simply ignored, as evidenced by the reemergence of these issues.

3. The Current Situation: Two Armed Insurgencies and Rising Tensions with Eritrea

Rhetorically, the central government always portrays itself as an actor in complete control of the territory and capable of projecting its influence abroad to promote Ethiopian national interests. Furthermore, State-backed media outlets and PP cadres stress the concept of *Medemer* (meaning "synergy" in Amharic) to overcome divisive narratives and embrace a common identity for all Ethiopians. A philosophy explained in the Prime Minister's eponymous book, published in October 2019.

However, this display of self-confidence does not reflect the reality on the ground. In fact, the prosperity program promised by the Prime Minister when he was appointed appears to be far from being implemented. Despite official data showing that the economy expanded by 9.2%, many questions remain about the consistency of these statistics. Federal officials attribute this extraordinary result to the macroeconomic reform implemented in July 2024 and milestones in infrastructure projects such as the GERD.

²²«Ethiopia armed group says it has alliance with Tigray forces», *Al Jazeera*, 11/8/2021.

²³N. HOCHET-BODIN, «Eritrea's shadow looms over Ethiopian peace process», *Le Monde*, 15/11/2022.

²⁴N. GBADAMOSI, «Ethiopia's Other War», *Foreign Policy*, 16/11/2022.

Yet, many critics stressed the negative impact of this financial policy on the local economy. In fact, the Ethiopian Birr has depreciated dramatically since last year, losing more than 100% of its value against the US dollar²⁵. Not to mention the hardships that health workers and teachers face when their salaries are not paid for months. A contingency that compelled many medical professionals to strike last May, despite the authorities' crackdown. Strikes that could soon resume if the healthcare workers' grievances won't be addressed by mid-November²⁶. Furthermore, this economic growth could hardly be explained given the impact of insurgencies' on commercial activities in Oromia and the Amhara Region, as well as Tigray's dire economic conditions following the civil war. To get a sense of the situation, the Amhara Region fell short 75% of meeting their revenue target for the second semester of 2023 due to the Fano insurgency²⁷. Conflicts that deserve an in-depth analysis in order to understand their deeply rooted causes.

a. The Current Insurgencies

At the time of writing, the Amhara Region is Addis Abeba's primary security concern. The causes of this two-year war can be traced back to the Pretoria Agreement. As previously stated, Amhara felt betrayed by Abiy's government following the Tigray peace deal, and resentment toward federal authorities grew.

Sensing further unrest and fearing ethnic clashes across the country, the ruling party passed a law in April 2023 dissolving all regional forces and incorporating them into the Federal Police. The legislation was met with strong opposition from Amharas, who saw the ASF and Fano militias as a defensive line against other ethnic groups. Despite criticism, federal forces mobilized in large numbers to forcibly disarm Amhara paramilitary groups. A decision that sparked mass protests across the whole region, since Amhara militias were the only ones officially disbanded. As a matter of fact, to this day, all the other regional forces are still recognized as lawful organizations (see Liyu police in the Somali Regional State or Oromia Special Force in Oromia)²⁸.

In late April 2023 unidentified gunmen murdered Girma Yeshitila, head of the Amhara Prosperity Party and Abiy's close advisor. The Prime Minister immediately blamed Fano militiamen for the assassination, while Amhara activists pointed their fingers toward federal authorities. Either way, this episode marked the start that continues to this day.

Since then, the Amhara Region has been in complete disarray due to the Fano insurgency, with large segments of the local population supporting the rebels. Ironically, the government's attempt to disband ASF backfired completely. As a matter of fact, many former ASF members chose to join Fano groups, rather than be incorporated into federal forces²⁹.

This new wave of battle-hardened recruits has significantly improved Fano's military capabilities. As a result, the rural areas of the Amhara Region are largely under insurgent control, with Fano militiamen free to launch successful hit-and-run attacks against ENDF garrisons or pro-government militias stationed in small towns or major cities. (see 2023 seizure of Lalibela airport, 2023 occupation of Gondar or 2024 armed clashes in Bahir Dar)³⁰. The resistance movement has additionally shown consistency and resilience in the face of constant airstrikes carried out by ENDF drones. Furthermore, Fano militias have improved their tactical skills by switching to conventional warfare during the ongoing offensive in northern Amhara Region.

The main adversity encountered by the insurgents has been the absence of a unified command. For this reason, Fano leaders tried to establish an umbrella organization. However, internal rifts have given rise to two different entities: Amhara Fano National Force (AFNF), which comprises the majority of Fano factions³¹, and Amhara Fano People's Organization (AFPO), led by former opposition leader Eskinder Nega³².

Only during the current campaign in Wollo and South Gondar have the AFNF and AFPO decided to put aside their differences and collaborate, despite initial infighting³³. After all, in recent months new favorable conditions have emerged on the field, which Fano fighters must exploit as a unified force. In fact, an unexpected tactical entente has been forged in northern Amhara Region. According to several sources, TDF units,

²⁵«Ethiopia's 8.4% Projected Growth Clashes with Reality of War, Currency Collapse and Economic Hardship», Borkena, 13/4/2025.

²⁶L. BADER, «Ethiopian Health Professionals to Resume Striking», Human Rights Watch, 12/9/2025.

²⁷«Amhara region Revenue Bureau falls short of targets amid security crisis», Addis Standard, 29/1/2024.

²⁸D. MUMBERE, «Amnesty International asks Ethiopia to disband controversial Liyu police unit», Africa News, 13/8/2024; «Commander of Oromia Region Special Forces Reportedly Killed», Borkena, 12/9/2025.

²⁹S. VERA, «Who is Fano? Inside Ethiopia's Amhara rebellion», The New Humanitarian, 12/11/2024.

³⁰«Fighting Resumes Between Ethiopian Government and Militants», Voice of America, 1/3/2024.

³¹«Ethiopian Amhara Fano Factions Unite, Announce Central Command», DNE Africa, 10/5/2025.

³²«AFPO's Principled Stance & The US Government's Road to Regime Change », Borkena, 28/5/2025.

³³«Gondar Witnesses Major Milestone As Two Fano Groups Leave Animosity Behind», Borkena, 14/10/2025.

as well as Fano militiamen, participated in the attack on Woldiya³⁴. A development sparked by common grievances against the federal government, even though the two entities have opposing perspectives on structural issues such as the aforementioned territorial disputes.

Three years after the Pretoria Agreement, little has changed in the relationship between Addis Abeba and Mekelle. Between November 2022 and March 2025, the new ad interim Tigrayan administration, led by TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda, built positive relations with Abiy's government. As a result, the ENDF eased the partial reincorporation of the disputed Southern Tigray zone (Raya district for Amharas) by the end of April 2024. Nonetheless, many other issues were left unsolved. To name a few, the TDF disarmament process made little progress and the IDP returns to Western Tigray (Welkai, Humera and Tsegede districts for Amharas) was not allowed due to the presence of Amhara militias in the area.

Therefore, by mid-March 2025, tensions escalated between Getachew Reda and the hardline TPLF faction. The latter gained the upper hand, forcing Reda to seek refuge in Addis Abeba. A stalemate that led to the appointment of General Tadesse Werede, TDF chief commander, as Tigray's new interim president. Even though this designation was intended to strike a balance between Abiy's government and the TPLF establishment, the situation quickly deteriorated. In May 2025, the NEBE stripped the main Tigrayan party of its federal recognition, canceling its name from the political party register in Ethiopia³⁵. Moreover, Addis Abeba backed the formation of a dissident Tigrayan armed group, the so-called Tigray Peace Force (TPF), recruiting men from Getachew Reda's supporters in Southern Tigray, his native region³⁶.

Faced with such challenges, the TPLF leadership turned towards north hoping to seal a game-changing deal with its historical rivals in Asmara. Taking advantage of the abysmal relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Tigrayan officials began collaborating with Afewerki's regime, eager to secure new partners to hinder Ethiopia's race to Assab port (topic on which we will return later)³⁷. As a consequence, a multiethnic anti-Abiy bloc is forming in the north, ready to welcome new partners from other parts of the country.

Specifically, all eyes are focused on the Oromia Region. Unofficial sources allegedly reported a tacit alliance between OLA and AFNF groups operating in Gojjam³⁸. However, the sociocultural situation is different from the Amhara Region and Tigray. Here, federal government still enjoys support from a substantial portion of the population due to ethnic affinity with the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, security in the region has long vanished³⁹. OLA has greatly expanded its operational radius, frequently staging armed attacks in Central and Eastern Oromia or blocking key roads (see the Addis Abeba-Djibouti Road blockade in January 2025)⁴⁰. A significant accomplishment for OLA, especially given the heavy blow inflicted to the organization in December 2024. In fact, after months of infighting, Sagni Nagasa, head of OLA Central Command, defected to the Oromia Regional government, sharing details about OLA hideouts, operational procedures and tactics with authorities⁴¹.

Events that spurred the nationalist organization to regroup and reduce attacks outside their strongholds in Western Oromia at the start of the year⁴². Now, OLA has resumed its operations in Central Oromia, and this is no coincidence. These actions clearly demonstrate basic coordination among the various Ethiopian rebel groups. A complex plot, with the mastermind probably located on the Mareb River's northern shores.

b. Eritrea's Role in Sabotaging Ethiopia's Imperial Ambitions

As previously stated, Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afewerki's honeymoon essentially ended with the Pretoria Agreement. Asmara was deeply concerned about its own survival, having been outmaneuvered by Ethiopia's Prime Minister and with a powerful neighbor reconciled on its doorstep. The Eritrean regime did not hesitate to stress its dissatisfaction with the Tigray settlement, denouncing it as a "Western ploy" during a televised interview⁴³. Therefore, Asmara actively pursued diplomatic engagement with neighboring countries and other foreign powers. In February 2023, Afewerki visited Kenya and, a few months later, Russia, with a move openly aimed at breaking Eritrea's isolation. More importantly, Eritrean officials laid the groundwork for stronger

³⁴T. BEKIT & Y. NAGISH, «Ethiopia accuses Eritrea of preparing for war as Red Sea tensions rise», *Bbc*, 9/10/2025.

³⁵A. TEKLE, «Election Board, TPLF Feud Culminates in Proscription. What Next?», *The Reporter*, 17/5/2025.

³⁶«Addis Abeba backs creation of armed Tigrayan opposition in Afar region», *Africa Intelligence*, 14/5/2025.

³⁷D. TESFA & M. VAN REISEN, «The Ximdo Gamble: TPLF-Eritrea Alliance and the Fragile Peace in Tigray and the Horn of Africa», *GAIC-Papers*, 21/7/2025.

³⁸«Fano and OLA alliance: Ethiopia's ceasefire pact against Abiy Ahmed explained», *Ethiopia Autonomous Media*, 17/9/2025.

³⁹A. TEKLE, «The Silent Conflict: What Is Really Happening in Oromia?», *The Reporter*, 10/5/2025.

⁴⁰«Oromo Liberation Army Fighters Block Ethiopia Djibouti Road», *News Addis*, 16/1/2025

⁴¹«News: Oromia regional government appoints three former OLA commanders after peace deal», *Addis Standard*, 21/2/2025.

⁴²«Ethiopia situation update (19 February 2025)», *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data*, 21/2/2025.

⁴³«Uncertainty in the Horn as a wary Eritrea seeks new alliances», *Ethiopia Insight*, 8/3/2023.

bilateral ties with Egypt, which has long sought to counter Ethiopia's influence in the Horn of Africa.

But diplomacy wasn't the only card in Afeworki's hand. Since 2000, the Eritrean regime trained and sheltered Ethiopian rebel groups (including OLF/OLA and ONLF), establishing ties with their leaders. Furthermore, during the Tigray war, the EDF provided military training to thousands of ASF paramilitaries and Fano militiamen, further strengthening their bond on the battlefields. From Asmara's perspective, these armed groups serve as fifth columns capable of ensuring a multilayered defensive line deep within Ethiopian territory. Unsurprisingly, many observers pointed out Eritrea's potential involvement in supporting the Fano insurgency⁴⁴.

So, in October 2023, in an attempt to quell internal dissent and unify public opinion, Abiy gave his first inflammatory speech on Ethiopia's "natural rights" to a Red Sea outlet. A propaganda climax ending with an explicit military threat, whether these "natural rights" will be denied to Ethiopians⁴⁵.

To make things worse, on January 1st, 2024, Ethiopia announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the self-proclaimed state of Somaliland. A deal that granted exclusive use of a port and construction of a naval base in exchange for Hargeisa's international recognition and other economic benefits.

In light of these developments, Eritrea quickly formed a tripartite security alliance with Egypt and Somalia to strengthen its deterrence against Ethiopian maritime adventurism⁴⁶. As a result, Cairo and Asmara supported Mogadishu's stance, requesting that its sovereignty be respected and assisting its security forces in combating pro-Ethiopian Somali actors (see Jubaland and South-West State)⁴⁷.

Only successful Turkish mediation reduced tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, with the former agreeing not to implement the MoU with Somaliland. Not a good outcome for the Eritrean regime, which knows that without a Somali port, Abiy's attention will be completely focused on the port of Assab. A game-changing event that brought Somalia to measure its approach to Ethiopia, switching to a friendly register, as evidenced by Somalia's President's attendance at the GERD inauguration and the offer of various ports to Ethiopia in the southern part of its territory⁴⁸. As a result, Eritrea and Egypt have further stepped up their strategic partnership, with the latter renewing its support for Eritrean territorial integrity as well as officially aligning their positions on Sudan's civil war (both sided with Al Burhan's government)⁴⁹. However, Ethiopia's focus on the port of Asseb has brought about reconciliation between Asmara and Mekelle, putting an end to 25 years of hostility to face a common foe.

An entente that is giving Eritrea extra leverage in its relationships with Addis Abeba, as Abiy's administration cannot sustain a potential conflict with its northeastern neighbor, while the ENDF is overstretched in the Amhara region, Oromia and Tigray.

An excellent tactical move which the Ethiopian authorities are trying to counter with massive training and deployment of regional paramilitary forces. Ironically, after imposing the 2023 ASF disbandment in the Amhara Region, the central government is backing the formation of a new regional paramilitary force: the so-called Amhara Strike Force. As previously analyzed, a pattern which is being followed also in Tigray through the establishment of TPF. Meanwhile, in Oromia, the regional government is implementing forced conscription to swell the ranks of Oromia Special Force⁵⁰.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, Addis Abeba appears to behave erratically, oscillating between internal collapse and imperial ambitions. A cyclical pattern that has repeated itself numerous times throughout Ethiopia's thousand-year history. However, as demonstrated in this article, the factors causing external and internal instabilities are inextricably linked. To reverse this deadly historical trend, Abiy's government should engage proactively with major opposition groups in order to quell domestic unrest and foster genuine change in the country. Unfortunately, Ethiopia's political tradition is based on an authoritarian model, which has influenced both the current ruling party and its opponents.

⁴⁴T. SAKR, «Ethiopia's Fano Rebellion: The Amhara Resistance Reshaping the Horn of Africa», *DNE Africa*, 22/12/2024.

⁴⁵T. MHAHA, «Abiy Ahmed's imperial ambitions are bad news for Africa, and the world», *Al Jazeera*, 14/11/2023.

⁴⁶M. EL DOH, «The Egypt-Eritrea-Somalia Alliance: A Strategic Counterbalance to Ethiopia», *Geopolitical Monitor*, 23/10/2024.

⁴⁷«Jubaland Crisis Deepens Amid Ethiopian Involvement», *Halqabsi News*, 8/12/2024; *JAMA*, «Somalia's Regional Rift Widens as Southwest State and Somaliland Back Ethiopia», *The Somali Digest*, 30/8/2024.

⁴⁸«Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud Remark On GERD, Red Sea», *Borkena*, 8/10/2025.

⁴⁹R. ABU SHAMALA, «Egypt affirms support for Eritrea's sovereignty, territorial integrity amid tension with Ethiopia over sea access», *Anadolu Ajansi*, 30/10/2025.

⁵⁰E. GEREMEW, «Report says Ethiopia forces military recruitment, including minors», *Voice of America*, 10/1/2025.

Abiy's rise to power was a clear manifestation of this attitude. Although the country's first Oromo prime minister officially embraces democratic values, the authorities prohibit any form of dissent through legal and illegal means⁵¹.

As a result, all indications are that Addis Abeba will continue to engage in armed conflict with rebel groups, increasing military and security spending. This is a difficult tactic to sustain in the long run, given Ethiopia's external ambitions, and it may lead to the government's collapse, as it did with the Derg and the Solomonic dynasty.

⁵¹G. PARAVICINI, «*In Ethiopia, a secret committee orders killings and arrests to crush rebels*», *Reuters*, 23/2/2024.

EUROPE



The Rimland as a Strategic Area: Implications for Eastern European Security

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Introduction

The analysis of contemporary Russia's geopolitical actions requires a careful examination of the historical and geographical factors that have shaped its strategic mindset. From this perspective, Russia's foreign policy reflects a historical continuity in the way it perceives and manages the dimensions of space, security, and power, highlighting recurring strategic guidelines that have influenced its geopolitical decisions over time.

In October 1552, Muscovite Russia annexed a non-Russian sovereign state for the first time – the Khanate of Kazan, justifying the campaign as a fight against infidels and a mission to defend Orthodox Christianity. In reality, however, this action marked the beginning of an expansionist paradigm of an imperial nature, driven by the need for security. Positioned in a vast continental plain, lacking natural barriers to defend its southern and eastern borders, Russia has been, over the centuries, a vulnerable agrarian power, obsessively concerned with the strategic control of peripheral spaces.

Five centuries later, in 2022, the same logic seems to be repeated: the war of aggression against Ukraine, beyond the political and military pretexts enunciated by the Kremlin, reflects the same desire for security and the same structural inability of Russia to trust in a multipolar and interdependent world.

To understand this continuity of Russian geopolitical behavior, it is useful to refer to the fundamental theories of classical geopolitics. In the first decades of the 20th century, Halford Mackinder formulated the Heartland theory, according to which “whoever controls the Heartland controls the World Island, and whoever controls the World Island controls the world”. In his conception, the Heartland represents the continental core of Eurasia, a vast space spanning “from the Arctic to the deserts of Central Asia, and from the Volga to eastern Siberia”, characterized by strategic depth, abundant natural resources and a central position inaccessible to maritime powers. Eurasia, thus understood, becomes the “Heart of the World”¹ – and Russia, located at its center, emerges simultaneously as a potential hegemon and a vulnerable area².



Source: <https://www.themarketforideas.com/heartland-vs-rimland-a905/>

¹Halford J. Mackinder, „The Geographical Pivot of History”, în *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, nr. 4, 1904, p. 421.

²Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, National Defense University Press, Washington D.C., 1942, p. 106.

Nicholas Spykman, however, would qualify this perspective through the Rimland theory, stating that global balance depends not on the dominance of the continental center, but on the control of its rim – the coastal area that surrounds the Heartland and connects maritime and continental powers³. In this sense, Eastern Europe acquires a special geopolitical significance: a pivotal space, a zone of contact and confrontation between the Eurasian continental core and its maritime periphery.

The relevance of these theories is not limited to the 20th century. From the containment policy during the Cold War to contemporary security strategies, this continental-maritime dynamic continues to shape the perceptions and actions of the great powers. In the current context, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the militarization of the Black Sea and tensions in the Baltic space bring back to the forefront the fragility of the balance in Eastern Europe – a key space in the global security architecture.

Starting from these premises, the article aims to analyze the significance of the Heartland and Rimland theories, their historical and contemporary applicability, as well as the strategic role that Ukraine plays today in the security dynamics of Eastern Europe.

Interpretations of the Rimland Theory

In the American geopolitical school, Spykman's theory was the basis of the containment doctrine, through which the United States tried to limit the expansion of the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 1950s. The central idea was clear: the Heartland, dominated by Moscow, could not be attacked or conquered directly, but could be isolated by a strategic belt placed in the Rimland – Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In this logic the main security alliances of the era were created: NATO (1949), with an essential role in stabilizing the European flank and in integrating Greece and Turkey – states located at the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, in the extended Black Sea region – as well as CENTO (1955) and SEATO (1954), intended to limit Soviet influence in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Although the latter two alliances did not achieve their strategic objectives, they remain relevant examples of the application of the Spykmanian logic of countering continental powers by controlling the Rimland.

The intellectual architect of this strategy was George F. Kennan, American diplomat and author of the famous Long Telegram (1946) and of the article signed under the pseudonym "X" in Foreign Affairs (1947), entitled *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*. Kennan argued that Soviet expansion was fueled by a combination of communist ideology and a historical tradition of Russian geopolitical insecurity, making the Soviet Union a revisionist power. In his view, the solution was not direct confrontation, but the gradual and consistent limitation of Moscow's influence through the political, economic, and military consolidation of the "free world".⁴

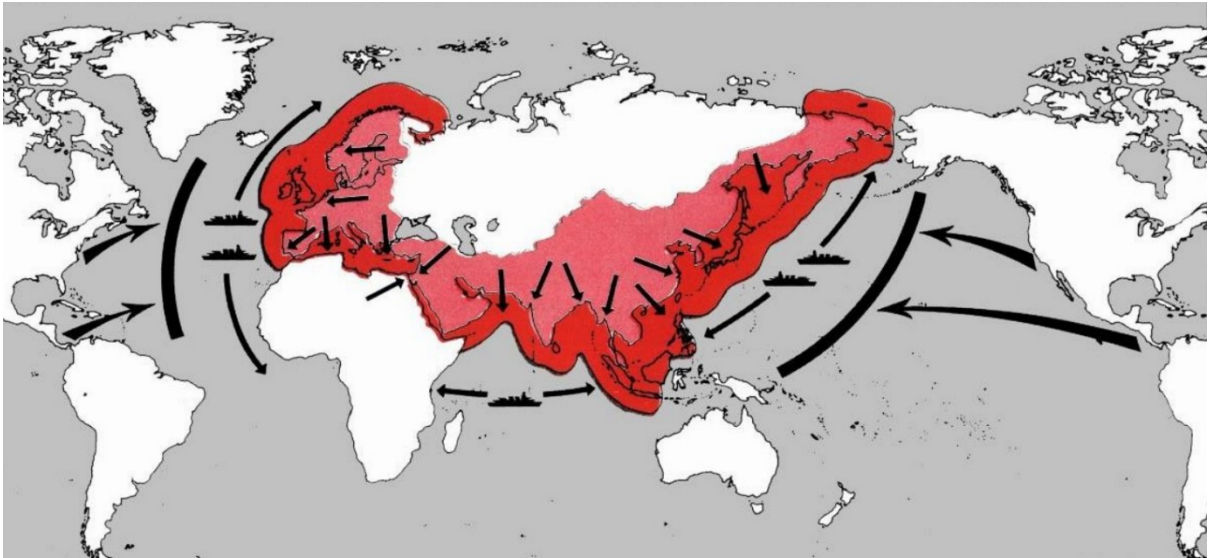
Based on this analysis, American President Harry S. Truman formulated in 1947 what would become known as the Truman Doctrine, whereby the United States committed itself to supporting "free peoples who are resisting attempts at subjugation by armed minorities or external pressure"⁵. Greece and Turkey were the first states to benefit from this doctrine, thus becoming strategic links in the security chain of the Eurasian Rimland and, later, NATO members.

Although the Truman Doctrine and Kennan's concept did not directly involve the states of Eastern Europe, which were already within the Soviet sphere of influence, they laid the foundations for a Western security architecture that, after the collapse of the USSR, facilitated the expansion of NATO and the integration of the former communist states of Eastern Europe into the Euro-Atlantic system. In a broader sense, the policy of containment reconfigured the Eurasian strategic periphery as a space of sustainable geopolitical competition between the continental center (Heartland) and the maritime edges – a dynamic that remains visible today, in the tensions in the wider Black Sea region and in the conflict in Ukraine.

³Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, Harcourt, New York, 1944.

⁴George F. Kennan, „*The Long Telegram*”, trimis din Ambasada SUA la Moscova către Departamentul de Stat, 22 februarie 1946, în U.S. National Archives, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.html>.

⁵Truman, Harry S., „*Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey: The Truman Doctrine*”, 12 martie 1947, Washington D.C., in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>.



Source: Nicholas J. Spykman, The Geography of the Peace, Harcourt, New York, 1944, Harta 48 – Maritime versus Amphibian Conflict.

After 1991, with the collapse of the USSR, the logic of the Rimland did not disappear, but adapted. NATO's expansion to the East – starting with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary (1999), followed by Romania and the Baltic states (2004) – represented a continuation of the Spykmanian strategy of consolidating the Eurasian rim. In the eyes of Washington and Brussels, the integration of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO and the EU was not a simple act of geopolitical opportunism, but a preventive measure to stabilize the East European Rimland and prevent the resurgence of a continental hegemony.

In the mirror, for the Russian Federation, these processes were perceived as a repetition of the containment of the 1950s, but applied in a new form. If the USSR considered the Western alliances an attempt to encircle the Soviet Heartland, post-Soviet Moscow viewed NATO expansion in exactly the same terms. In Russian doctrinal documents – from the National Security Strategy (2000, 2009, 2015, 2021) to the Foreign Policy Concept (2023) – one can constantly find the idea that the West is trying to limit Russia's influence by advancing its military and institutional infrastructure in its neighboring space⁶.

This perception explains why Eastern Europe remains the central space of friction. In Western logic, NATO expansion in the 1990s and 2000s consolidated the Eurasian contact edge and prevented the reconstitution of a hegemonic continental power. In Russian logic, the same processes meant a direct intrusion into the vital space of the Heartland, equivalent to the continuous weakening of the buffer zone separating Moscow from the West.

The Applicability of Rimland

Theory in Eastern European Security Located between the continental core of the Russian Heartland and the maritime powers of the West, Eastern Europe constitutes the essential link connecting the northern flank (the Baltic Sea) to the southern flank (the Black Sea and the Western Balkans). In terms of classical geopolitics, whoever controls this intermediate space controls the balance of power in Eurasia.

Eastern Europe today comprises a mosaic of states with varying levels of Euro-Atlantic integration and varying geopolitical orientations. A significant part – Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, the Baltic States, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Slovenia – is fully integrated into NATO and the European Union, forming the western core of the continental Eastern European periphery. They host allied bases, missile defence systems and multinational troops, becoming the main bulwarks of deterrence against Russian influence. Poland and Romania play a crucial role, through their positioning on the direct border with the Heartland and through their central logistical role in the Euro-Atlantic military architecture.

⁶Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023*, <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/>.

In the Western Balkans, NATO member states that are not yet members of the European Union – Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia – are contributing to the expansion of the security corridor in the south of the continent, while Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a complex case, caught between Euro-Atlantic aspirations and Serbian-Russian influences. Serbia, although formally aspiring to join the European Union, continues to cultivate a deep strategic relationship with Moscow, representing a continental bridge between the Heartland and the Balkans. To a more subtle extent, Hungary adopts a balanced position between Brussels and Moscow, practicing a contemporary type of geopolitical balance.

The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, candidate states in the EU accession process, represent the most sensitive core of the Eastern Rimland. The war launched by the Russian Federation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022 had immediate consequences for the Republic of Moldova, transforming it into a staging ground for Russia's hybrid warfare operations. The European path of both countries has been closely interconnected since the beginning of the invasion, both countries submitted applications for accession in March 2022 and jointly received candidate status in June of the same year, and on December 14, 2023, the European Council took the historic decision to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine⁷.

At the opposite pole, Belarus remains a loyal ally of the Russian Federation, politically, militarily and economically integrated into the Russia-Belarus State Union. Its geographical position provides the Heartland with a direct corridor to Central Europe, transforming it into a continental outpost. Similarly, the presence of the separatist region of Transnistria in the east of the Republic of Moldova provides the Russian Federation with an additional lever of control over the Rimland borders.

The Security Architecture of Eastern Europe in the Context of the Contemporary Rimland

The security architecture of Eastern Europe today reflects a dual geopolitical reality: the consolidation of the eastern flank under the Euro-Atlantic umbrella and the persistence of competition with the Russian Federation for control of strategic borders. This structure is not static, but the result of a process of continuous adaptation to the transformations of the international order, in which technology, regional alliances and information warfare play roles as important as conventional military force.

NATO's eastern flank – from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea – is today the centre of gravity of the European Rimland. The military presence is ensured by an integrated network of Allied structures: the *Enhanced Forward Presence* multinational battle groups (in Poland and the Baltic states), the regional commands in Szczecin and Bucharest, the anti-missile bases in Deveselu and Redzikowo, as well as the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base, transformed into a strategic NATO hub in south-eastern Europe. In parallel, the permanent *Air Policing* missions and the annual exercises *Defender Europe*, *Saber Guardian* and *Steadfast Defender* test the interoperability of Allied forces and the capacity to react rapidly to regional crises.

This infrastructure is financially and logistically supported by two major processes. The first is the decision adopted at the NATO Summit in The Hague (June 2025), which enshrined the gradual increase in defense spending to 5% of GDP, with a target date of 2035, of which 1.5% is intended for investments in innovation, research and the defense industry⁸. The goal is clear: to strengthen strategic autonomy and technological capabilities to maintain a competitive advantage in the face of hybrid and conventional threats. The second process is the launch of the European program "ReArm Europe", later renamed "Readiness 2030", in the spring of 2025⁹. Through this plan, the European Union mobilizes over 800 billion euros to stimulate joint weapons production, the modernization of critical infrastructure and the logistical integration of European military networks. These two initiatives – one Euro-Atlantic, the other European – define the new phase of strategic densification of the Rimland, where NATO provides the security umbrella and the European Union provides the industrial and financial infrastructure.

In contrast, the Russian Federation seeks to restore the lost balance through a combination of military force, economic pressure, and hybrid operations. In recent years, Belarus has become Moscow's main continental outpost, hosting Russian troops and tactical nuclear facilities. The Zapad-2025 joint military exercises,

⁷European Parliament resolution of April 19, 2023 on the challenges facing the Republic of Moldova. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0112_RO.html

⁸NATO, *The Hague Summit Declaration issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2025)*, 25 iunie 2025, in *NATO Official Texts*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

⁹European Commission, *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, Bruxelles, 2020 (Re-Arm Europe Plan)*, in *European Commission*, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0_3867b4373019_en?filename=White%20paper%20for%20European%20defence%20%E2%80%93%20Readiness%202030.pdf

held from September 12 to 16, 2025, involved over 100,000 servicemen and included scenarios of combined attacks and the use of Iskander-M missiles. In parallel, Russia has strengthened its presence in Kaliningrad, expanded naval maneuvers in the Baltic Sea, and tested Zirkon hypersonic systems in the Barents Sea. These actions do not necessarily aim at direct confrontation with NATO, but rather at maintaining constant pressure on the eastern flank and projecting the image of a resilient continental power.

Beyond the military aspect, competition is also manifested in informational and economic terms. Russia uses media influence networks, disinformation campaigns and energy tools to destabilize pro-Western governments in the region. In response, the European Union and NATO are developing mechanisms for societal resilience, investments in alternative energy and cooperation in the field of cybersecurity. Thus, the confrontation between the liberal-maritime and the continental-authoritarian order is expanding beyond the traditional battlefield, becoming a duel for the control of infrastructures, information and public perceptions.

Ukraine within the Rimland Theory

From a realist perspective, Ukraine today represents the most relevant test of the Spykmanian theory: its existence and political orientation directly determine Russia's ability to project itself as a Eurasian power with imperial ambitions. Zbigniew Brzezinski's classic formula - "without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire"¹⁰ - remains a useful heuristic key for contemporary analysis; Brzezinski has emphasized since the 1990s that control of Ukraine maintains the strategic continuity of the Russian Heartland.

The war that broke out in February 2022 became a confrontation between two geopolitical paradigms. Russia sought to reestablish dominance over a territory it considers an integral part of the Heartland, while NATO and the European Union perceived the invasion as an attempt to undermine the strategic balance of the European Rimland. The result was a structural reconfiguration of the security architecture in Eastern Europe: the expansion of NATO through the accession of Finland and Sweden, the consolidation of the military presence in Poland and Romania, massive military support for Kiev, and the accelerated rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with European institutions.

Beyond the military dimension, the conflict has produced a profound change in geopolitical perception. Ukraine has moved from a buffer zone to a pivot state – a term used by Zbigniew Brzezinski to designate nations whose political orientation directly influences the regional balance of power¹¹. In Spykmanian logic, the loss of Ukraine would be equivalent to the amputation of Russia's natural border to Europe, reducing the strategic projection capacity of the continental center and transforming the Black Sea into a space dominated by Western alliances.

In 2025, Ukraine remains a fragmented state, but resilient in the face of devastating Russian military attacks, a situation largely supported by the provision of significant military support from Euro-Atlantic allies, as well as extensive collaboration in strategic areas such as cyber defense, military training, and the modernization of logistical infrastructure. At the same time, regional initiatives such as Bucharest 9 and the Three Seas Initiative increasingly include Ukraine in security and energy connectivity dialogues. Thus, the Eastern Rimland is becoming not only a space of confrontation, but also one of gradual integration, where regional cooperation counterbalances geopolitical pressure.

For the Russian Federation, the loss of influence over Ukraine is a blow to its international status and a clear highlight of the state's structural vulnerabilities. The loss of control over Ukraine implies a diminution of Russia's ability to project power in the region and a weakening of its position in relation to NATO and the European Union.

In this context, Russia's neo-imperial and expansionist strategies, which continue to pose a threat to neighboring states, clearly manifested by the military intervention in Ukraine, have revalidated, over eight decades after its formulation, Spykman's theory: the world balance is decided in the border regions, where civilizations, trade routes and strategic alliances intersect.

The current context of international politics will determine the future architecture of Eastern European security, and the prospects for restoring regional stability will be strongly influenced by the evolution of the war, as well as by the capacity of regional and international actors to design and coordinate strategic responses in the process of restoring the post-conflict security order.

¹⁰Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 47.

¹¹*Ibidem*, p. 46.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Eastern Europe is currently at a moment of historical rupture. More than eighty years after the formulation of the Rimland theory, Nicholas Spykman's intuitions are confirmed with surprising clarity: the global balance of power is not decided in the great continental centers, but in the marginal spaces, where interests clash and alliances are tested. The region between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea has once again become the core of the geopolitical competition between the Western liberal order and the continental-authoritarian project represented by the Russian Federation.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that borders are no longer just lines of defense, but areas of civilizational definition. The states that make up the Eastern European geopolitical edge – Poland, Romania, the Baltic States, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova – no longer play the role of vulnerable peripheries, but of strategic nodes of the Euro-Atlantic architecture. The consolidation of this security ring represents one of the most important geopolitical achievements of the last decade, transforming Eastern Europe from a buffer zone into a corridor of stability and cooperation.

For NATO, the essential challenge is to maintain strategic cohesion in the long term. The commitments made at the 2025 Hague Summit – increasing defense spending, developing the European arms industry, expanding logistics infrastructure – must be backed up by a unified political vision that avoids fragmentation between the regional priorities of the members. The Eastern flank is no longer a periphery of the Alliance, but its operational center. Investments in modern capabilities, integrated air defense, cyber infrastructure and rapid military mobility must become the reference standard of the next decade.

For the European Union, the “Readiness 2030” program marks the beginning of a profound transformation: the transition from a simple economic union to a strategic power. Technological autonomy, coordination of arms production and integration of civilian infrastructures into common logistical networks can give Europe the capacity to assume a greater share of responsibility for its own security. In parallel, coherence between EU and NATO foreign policy is essential to avoid duplication of structures and to streamline military spending.

In the mirror, the Russian Federation is facing its own systemic limits. International isolation, economic pressures and dependence on the asymmetric relationship with China are gradually reducing Moscow's ability to project global power. However, Russia remains a major continental power, capable of generating instability in its neighbourhood. Therefore, any Western strategy must combine firm deterrence with diplomatic openness, avoiding both uncontrolled escalation and a return to a logic of permanent confrontation.

Regionally, the trilateral cooperation between Romania, Poland and Ukraine and multilateral initiatives should be strengthened and extended to the Republic of Moldova and the Balkan states. These platforms can provide the necessary framework for a functional integration of the Rimland – not only militarily, but also energetically, digitally and infrastructurally.

Finally, from a broader strategic perspective, maintaining the balance in Eastern Europe increasingly depends on societal resilience: education, responsible media, energy security and democratic cohesion. The real strength of Western alliances lies not only in technology or defense budgets, but in their ability to inspire trust and stability in a region where, for a century, borders have been constantly contested.

EUROPE



Energy Security and European Union Geopolitical Transformation

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Energy security has become one of the central priorities in the European Union's geopolitical transformation, especially in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine and the resulting challenge of dependence on Russian fossil fuels. This article will examine the concept of energy security in the current European context and explain its importance in light of recent events.

The term Energy security is understood as the reliable, affordable, and accessible supply of energy. Historically, Europe's reliance on external imports, especially from Russia, exposed member states to supply disruptions and strategic vulnerabilities. There were a few crises, like the 2006 and 2009 gas disputes, which should've prepared the European Union for what happened in 2022. However, the EU decided not to reduce its reliance, which resulted in Russia supplying approximately 45% of the EU's gas and 27% of its oil in 2022, right before the invasion.

In late March 2022, President Vladimir Putin issued a decree requiring "unfriendly" countries, including all EU member states, to pay for Russian gas in rubles. This was a direct violation of existing long-term contracts, which were almost universally denominated in euros or US dollars. The move was a political gambit designed to force European companies to engage with the Russian Central Bank, thereby propping up the ruble and avoiding financial sanctions. When Poland and Bulgaria refused to comply with the new payment mechanism, Gazprom retaliated by stopping all gas supplies to them in late April, demonstrating that the threat was real.

As a result, for European households, the 2022 energy crisis translated into the most dramatic increase in energy costs in a generation. The transfer of higher energy costs from suppliers to consumers was unstoppable, although fixed-term agreements offered a temporary buffer. According to Eurostat data, the average price of natural gas for household consumers in the EU reached an all-time high of €0.113 per kilowatt-hour (kWh) in the second half of 2022, a period marking the peak of the crisis.

To fight this crisis, the EU response required speed and unity. In May 2022, the European Commission unveiled the REPowerEU plan, a comprehensive and ambitious strategy to end the bloc's dependence on Russian fossil fuels "well before 2030". While the plan has achieved some success, it has also encountered challenges.

EU Energy Security Overview

The REPowerEU plan was built on three main pillars: Diversifying Energy Supplies, Saving Energy, and Accelerating the Clean Energy Transition. To diversify energy supplies, diplomatic and commercial efforts were needed to secure alternative sources of pipeline gas and LNG from reliable international partners. This included the creation of the EU Energy Platform for joint purchasing of gas, leveraging the bloc's collective market power. The plan also focused on saving energy by reducing the gas demand of member states by 15% compared to the five-year average. This measure was voluntary and critical for balancing the market and ensuring storage facilities could be filled.

Additionally, the crisis presented a powerful new opportunity for the European Green Deal. REPowerEU explicitly linked energy security with the accelerated deployment of renewable energy sources like wind and solar, as well as the rollout of technologies like heat pumps. The narrative shifted from renewables as "green energy" to a pathway to strategic autonomy.



Figure 1: EU imports of Russian fossil fuels.

Source: <https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/eu-imports-of-russian-fossil-fuels-in-third-year-of-invasion-surpass-financial-aid-sent-to-ukraine/>

The implementation of the REPowerEU strategy led to a dramatic and rapid realignment of Europe's energy supply map. The shift away from Russia was stark and quantifiable. The share of Russian gas in the EU's total import mix decreased from 45% in 2021 to just 19% by 2024, with pipeline gas imports falling even more steeply. The share of Russian oil in the EU's import portfolio shrank from 27% to a mere 3% over the same period.

However, while the EU successfully projected an image of unity in its strategic response to the energy crisis, by 2025 the implementation of the decoupling from Russia had proven to be a fractured and uneven process. Member states are pursuing divergent paths shaped by their unique pre-existing vulnerabilities, political ideologies, and economic calculations. This has led to the emergence of a "two-speed" energy divorce, where some nations have executed a radical pivot, while others have resisted, delayed, or found their dependencies paradoxically deepened. In the third year of full-scale war, EU imports of Russian fossil fuels (€21.9 billion) still surpass financial aid (€18.7 billion) provided to Ukraine. It is an extraordinary contradiction undermining the effectiveness of sanctions and Europe's strategic objectives. Although Russia's overall fossil revenue dropped by 3% yearly, loopholes and global market shifts have limited the effectiveness of EU measures.

The effectiveness of sanctions was also undermined by Russia increasing its "shadow" tankers to re-route embargoed oil to non-sanctioning countries, enabling it to bypass the oil price cap. The data from August 2025 reveals the significant scale and dual threat posed by Russia's "shadow fleet." During that month alone, 125 of the 400 vessels exporting Russian crude oil and related products were identified as shadow tankers. The age of this fleet is a particular concern, with thirty-eight of these ships being at least 20 years old, raising serious questions about their safety and seaworthiness. The operation of this fleet helps explain why the sanctions on Russia's Urals grade crude were 70% less effective in their third year than in the previous one. Despite this diminished impact, the sanctions still succeeded in reducing Russian revenues by 6%, equivalent to €2.6 billion.

However, beyond undermining sanctions, the presence of these poorly insured and aging vessels creates a substantial financial liability. A potential oil spill from one of these tankers could result in cleanup and compensation costs exceeding €1 billion, a burden that would ultimately be borne by the taxpayers of affected coastal nations.

The Outliers

Energy dependence on Russia is structured around three key fossil fuels: pipeline gas, oil, and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). A further dependency also exists within the nuclear energy sector. According to data from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), the EU imported €1.15 billion in Russian fossil fuels during August 2025. Most of these imports, 85%, were purchased by just five member states: Hungary, Slovakia, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. While Hungary and Slovakia imported Russian crude oil and pipeline gas, the imports to France, the Netherlands, and Belgium consisted entirely of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Two of these countries represent a unique case.

Among these importers, Hungary and Slovakia stand out as significant outliers. Their approach often differs from other EU and NATO partners, a stance heavily influenced by their deep-rooted dependence on Russian energy. This energy reliance is closely linked to the political agendas of their leaders, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Prime Minister Robert Fico of Slovakia. Both governments use this dependence to justify pro-Russian and Eurosceptic policies, which directly shape their position on the war in Ukraine.

Hungary has not only maintained but actively strengthened its energy ties with Moscow. In 2024, its imports of Russian natural gas were expected to approach 7 billion cubic meters (bcm), far exceeding its long-term contract of 4.5 bcm. Its oil dependency is even more stark: in 2023, Russian crude, delivered via the Druzhba pipeline¹, accounted for a staggering 74% of its oil imports. Furthermore, Hungary remains completely reliant on Russia for nuclear fuel for its Paks power plant, with alternative supplies not expected until 2027.

Slovakia shares a similar predicament. It is "fully dependent" on Russian oil from the Druzhba pipeline, with a contract extending to the end of 2029. In 2023, Russian crude made up 84% of its imports. While direct gas transit from Russia via Ukraine has ceased, Slovakia now receives Russian gas indirectly through Hungary. Although diversification contracts cover about 70% of customer needs, a significant portion of its supply still originates in Russia. Progress has been made in diversifying nuclear fuel supplies through new contracts; however, the historical reliance remains a critical factor.

This significant reliance on energy shapes the political actions of both governments. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has cultivated a foreign policy that he frames as pragmatic and sovereign-minded, but which aligns ideologically with Moscow. His government views Russia as an essential regional power with whom it must engage to secure favorable energy deals. This relationship is also a tool in Orbán's long-running battles with the EU over democratic values and funding. In Vladimir Putin's Russia, Orbán finds a powerful, authoritarian counterweight to the liberal democratic consensus of Brussels, allowing him to challenge the EU from within. This symbolizes a significant reversal from Orbán's earlier anti-Russian stance, which shifted dramatically after 2014.

In contrast, a sharp political U-turn defines Slovakia's situation. Before 2023, the country was a big supporter of Ukraine and one of its largest donors relative to its GDP, providing critical military hardware like S-300 air defense systems and fighter jets. However, the 2023 election brought Robert Fico back to power on a platform that explicitly promised to end military aid to Ukraine and normalize relations with Russia. Fico's government has since pivoted to a pro-Russian, Eurosceptic position, criticizing EU sanctions and military support for Kyiv while resuming cultural ties with Moscow and Minsk.

¹The decision to construct a crude oil pipeline from the (then) USSR to its ally countries joint in the socialist bloc was taken by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance convening in Prague in December 10, 1958. The construction started in 1960, with each country responsible for their section (the pipeline became a property of that country). Pipes were manufactured in the Soviet Union and Poland, valves and fittings in Czechoslovakia. The German Democratic Republic delivered pumps and Hungary provided automation and communications equipment. The pipeline cost approximately 400 million rubles to build. More than 15 million cubic meters of earth were moved to lay down 730 000 tons of pipe. Druzhba crossed 45 major rivers on its road to Central Europe. The whole pipeline was put into operation in October 1964. Druzhba Pipeline is one of the biggest crude oil pipeline networks in the world. The total length of the pipeline system including all its branches is around 5500 km. The official beginning of the Druzhba network is in Almetyevsk in the Russian Federation, where pipelines carrying crude oil from Siberia, the Urals and the Caspian Sea meet. Druzhba runs to Mozyr in Belarus, where it splits into a northern and a southern branch. The northern branch continues via Belarus and Poland to Germany. The southern branch runs through Ukraine, splitting in Uzhgorod into Druzhba 1 continuing to Slovakia (where it splits again and goes to the Czech Republic in one branch and Hungary in another) and Druzhba 2 continuing to Hungary. The current capacity of Druzhba is 1,2–1,4 million barrels a day, with possibility to increase up to 2 million barrels a day.

The most significant paradox in the EU's strategy is the treatment of Russian LNG. While pipeline gas imports were drastically cut, EU imports of Russian LNG have actually increased since 2022. Because LNG was not included in the EU sanctions regime, a loophole was created that allowed Member States with major regasification terminals to continue, and even expand, their purchases. In 2024, overall Russian gas imports (pipeline and LNG combined) saw an 18% year-on-year increase, from 38 bcm to 45 bcm, a rise driven almost entirely by LNG shipments. This has made several Western European countries, including France, Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands, major importers of Russian LNG.

In terms of imports of Russian fossil fuels, France was the third-largest buyer, importing EUR 157 mn of Russian fossil fuels, all in the form of LNG. However, not all of this gas is consumed domestically - a study shows that some LNG entering through the Dunkerque terminal² is subsequently delivered to Germany. The Netherlands was the fourth biggest importer, importing EUR 65 mn of Russian LNG, while Belgium, in fifth place, purchased EUR 64 mn, also entirely in LNG. Still, LNG imports from Russia are currently in the process of being legally prohibited within the EU, following newly approved draft regulations by the European Parliament and the European Commission in 2025. Import of Russian LNG is allowed under transition rules, but a total ban is set to take effect only from 1 January 2026.

Renewable Energy Rise

As a third pillar of the REPowerEU plan, there is an improvement in renewable energy. The easiest way for a country to produce its own energy if it doesn't have relevant resources is to use nature. The period from 2022 to 2025 was characterized by a dramatic and reactive increase of the European Union's renewable energy policy framework. While the long-term strategic direction was already set by the European Green Deal, the geopolitical shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 acted as a powerful catalyst. It transformed the energy transition from a primarily climate-driven imperative into an urgent matter of energy security and strategic autonomy, compressing a decade's worth of planned ambition into a few short years. Proposed by the Commission in July 2021, 'Fit for 55' is the main legislative act designed to deliver on the European Green Deal's overarching goal of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. However, to drive the acceleration of implementation of REPowerEU, Renewable Energy Directive (RED) III was established as a new legally binding EU-level target. Its goal is to have the share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption of at least 42.5% by 2030. While progress remains uneven across sectors and Member States, the period from 2022 to 2025 has been defined by record-breaking deployment, particularly in the electricity sector, which is undergoing a fundamental structural transformation.

RED III targets covered transport, industry, and buildings, with a focus on reducing greenhouse gases and increasing the share of renewables in the sectors. And there are results of this law. According to Eurostat, the share of energy from renewable sources in the EU's gross final energy consumption (G FEC) rose from 23.0% in 2022 to a new high of 24.5% in 2023. This upward trajectory continues a long-term trend that has seen the bloc's renewable share almost triple from just 9.6% in 2004. However, the progress is not a stable process. Preliminary data from 2025 illustrates the dynamic and sometimes volatile nature of this progress. In the first quarter of 2025, the share of renewables in net electricity generation saw a temporary decrease to 42.5%, down from 46.8% in the same period of 2024. Moreover, the highest shares of renewables in early 2025 were recorded in Denmark (88.5%), Portugal (86.6%), and Croatia (77.3%).

Speaking of solar energy deployment, it has exposed a profound and critical vulnerability - an overwhelming dependency on China's manufacturing ecosystem. Approximately 95–98% of all solar panels installed across the EU are imported from China. European energy security has become linked to a single external supply chain, which is quite dangerous, as China has strong ties with Russia. Another danger lies in the erosion of the domestic manufacturing base that leads to significant job losses.

The sheer scale of the EU's dependence is staggering, with China dominating every stage of the solar value chain - from polysilicon and wafers to cells and modules. It is estimated that 90% of all globally manufactured solar panels contain key components originating from China. This overwhelming reliance presents severe geopolitical risks that extend far beyond market economics. Efforts within the EU to reshore solar manufacturing and mitigate these risks face formidable barriers. European producers struggle with production costs that can be up to 100% higher than their Chinese complements, a direct result of China's integrated supply chains and massive

²The Dunkerque terminal is not unique, but refers to various port facilities, such as the ferry terminal, the liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal and the container terminal. The ferry terminal, operated by DFDS, serves routes to the UK and Ireland. The LNG terminal, the second largest in continental Europe, serves both France and Belgium, and the container terminal, called Terminal des Flandres, specializes in handling containers and general cargo, with increasing capacity.

economies of scale.

In response to this strategic vulnerability, the European Union is actively developing policy measures designed to reduce this critical dependency. A central proposal under consideration is the implementation of a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). This policy instrument would impose a tariff on imports originating from nations with less severe environmental and climate regulations. By doing so, the CBAM aims to level the economic playing field, effectively closing the cost gap between domestic manufacturers and their foreign competitors, thereby raising a more resilient and competitive industrial base within the EU.

Continuing to explore the topic of current challenges, the European Union's electricity grid finds itself at a critical turning point in 2025. The system is dealing with severe pressures stemming from aging infrastructure, significant delays in development, and an unprecedented flow in electricity demand. Compounding these issues is the urgent need to integrate vast new capacities of renewable energy to meet climate targets. Recent crises, notably the significant blackout across the Iberian Peninsula in April 2025, have starkly exposed vulnerabilities in the grid's resilience and in the coordination between member states. The primary challenges straining the grid are a confluence of inadequate capacity for renewables, outdated infrastructure, and rapidly escalating demand. The speeded push for renewable energy has created severe bottlenecks, with an estimated 1,700 GW of projects currently stalled due to insufficient grid capacity or protracted connection procedures. In response to this crisis, the European Commission and Parliament have made grid modernization a central policy priority for 2025. Acknowledging the scale of the task, it is estimated that €584 billion in investment is required by 2030 to upgrade the grid, with a particular focus on distribution networks. To facilitate this transformation, the EU is developing a comprehensive "European Grids Package," expected for commission adoption in the fourth quarter of 2025.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the 2022 energy crisis, caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, served as a facilitator for the European Union's geopolitical and energy transformation. The subsequent REPowerEU plan successfully initiated a fast and significant decoupling from Russian fossil fuels, demonstrating the bloc's capacity for swift, unified action in the face of an existential threat. However, this transition has been neither simple nor complete.

The situation with energy security in the European Union is a complex problem. On the one hand, loopholes in allowing importing LNG gas, along with the permission to Slovakia and Hungary to import pipeline gas and crude oil, worsen the situation, resulting in spending more on fossil fuels to Russia than helping Ukraine in its war. On the other hand, a rise in right-wing parties all along Europe, pro-Russian political figures are starting to control the European Union from the inside. The implementation gap needs to be eliminated by finding a personal approach to each country and its situation. Furthermore, the hastened push for renewable energy has exposed a new and critical vulnerability: an overwhelming dependence on China's solar manufacturing supply chain. This, combined with an aging and exploited electricity grid, underscores that the EU has, in many ways, exchanged one set of dependencies for another. Therefore, while the EU has made substantial progress in reducing its reliance on Russia, the path to true energy security is fraught with new challenges. Achieving genuine strategic autonomy will require sustained investment, unified internal policy, and a clear-eyed strategy to mitigate the complex geopolitical risks that define the new energy landscape. To enhance the effectiveness of its energy sanctions against Russia, the European Union must now address several critical vulnerabilities and policy gaps. A primary concern is the growing "shadow" oil tankers operating outside of standard maritime regulations. These vessels not only represent a significant environmental threat due to their poor condition and lack of proper insurance but also actively undermine the sanctions regime by transporting Russian oil illegally. It is therefore vital for the EU to limit the operation of these ships by implementing a more robust system of monitoring and port-state inspections, specifically targeting suspicious vessels that cannot provide the required legal documentation.

Beyond the issue of illegitimate transport, the EU must also close a significant loophole in its existing regulations. While the import of oil products refined from Russian crude is banned, the current rules allow these same products to be imported if the refining process occurs in a third country. This avoidance effectively weakens the intended impact of the sanctions and should be prohibited. Furthermore, broader actions are needed to tighten economic pressure. These measures should include lowering the G7 price cap on Russian oil, increasing the resources dedicated to monitoring and enforcing compliance, and finally, extending the sanctions to include the Russian fossil fuels that are still legally permitted into the EU, such as Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) and certain pipeline fuels. By taking these wide-ranging steps, the EU can create a more strong and effective sanctions framework.

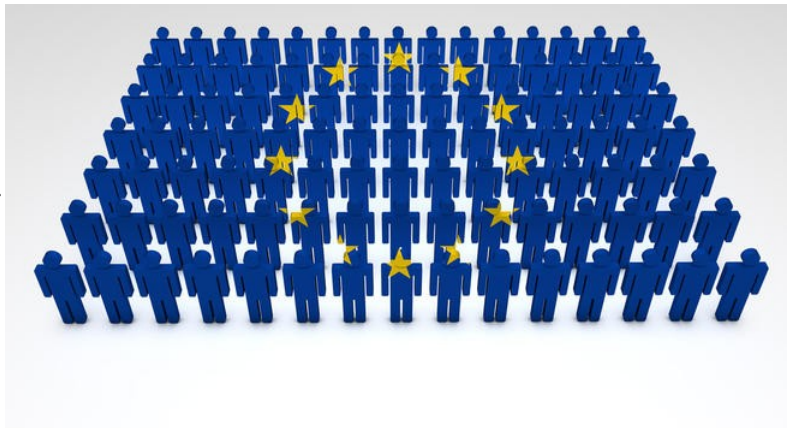
EUROPE



A Humiliating Summer for the European Union (EU)

PhD. Jean MARSIA (Belgium)

This summer, for failing to recognise geopolitical and economic realities, the leaders of the main Member States of the European Union (EU) and the President of the European Commission suffered bullying and humiliation. Europeans, especially exporters, were harmed. Europe's impotence and lack of relevance are evident everywhere: on our eastern flank, in the Mediterranean and in the conflict in Palestine. Europe was absent from the signing in the White House of the peace agreements between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the President of the European Commission was able to support Ukraine at the Washington summit, alongside five European leaders.



Why this Obliteration of Europe?

Our primary weakness is our inability to cope with the hybrid war that Vladimir Putin has been waging on us since 2007. The war in Ukraine has shown how much Europe's defence depends on the United States of America, even though the share of their overall defence spending allocated to the protection of Europe is very small. Depending on the calculation method, estimates range from a minimum of 4% to a maximum of around 15%¹. However, according to the *Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance* disclosed by the *Washington Post* on March 29, 2025², the United States of America want to focus their forces on a possible conflict with China in Taiwan. It therefore seems likely that, in the event of a Russian attack on a European State, the United States of America would provide Europe with only limited nuclear deterrence assistance, in defiance of Article V of the NATO Treaty. However, according to several European intelligence services, if Putin were to be victorious in Ukraine, he would probably first target Transnistria, Moldova and perhaps Belarus, and then attempt to cut off the Baltic States from Europe. Other scenarios are possible. As Keir Giles has found³, a map of their homeland intended for Russian children is on sale in Moscow. It extends Russia to Ukraine, Belarus, Central Asia, the Baltic States and Poland. Putin has repeatedly said that he wants to give Russia the zone of influence that belonged to the USSR. Russia is testing our defences a little more

Source: <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/united-states-europe/>

¹See Keir Giles, *Who will defend Europe. An awakened Russia and a sleeping continent*, London, Hurst & Co, 2024, p. 55.

²See sn, "Secret Pentagon memo on China, homeland has heritage fingerprints" in *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/29/secret-pentagon-memo-hegseth-heritage-foundation-china/>, 29/3/2025; sn, "Uitgelekt document: VS zouden Europa beperkt steun bieden bij Russische aanval" in *De Morgen*, Live Oekraïne, 2/4/2025.

³See Keir Giles, *Who will defend Europe. An awakened Russia and a sleeping continent*, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

every day. On the night of 9 to 10 September 2025, at least 19 Russian drones entered Polish airspace. Only 3 Russian drones were shot down, showing the weakness of Europe's air and missile defenses. Poland has asked for the activation of Article IV of the NATO treaty, which provides for consultations between allies in the event of a threat to one of its members, and not of Article V, which Ukraine considered to be an avowal of weakness⁴.

The Atlantic Council in The Hague, from 24 to 25 June 2025, confirmed our dependence on defence, which S. Niinistö had denounced in 2024. The allies agreed to Trump's request to allocate 5% of their GDP to their security and defence. This will not deter Putin from testing the strength of the North-Atlantic Alliance in the years to come, because the rise in our defense spending mainly increases the waste and boosts import of American systems, which harms our economy.

The second factor of weakness is that of our economy. Twelve months after the September 2024 Draghi report on European competitiveness, which warned of the economic stall vis-à-vis the United States of America and China, and which formulated 170 proposals to revive Europe, only 10% of these have been implemented.

Like M. Draghi, let us note that the EU's economic weight does not give it any geopolitical power, despite its 450 million consumers. The EU, once described as a geopolitical dwarf but an economic giant, is now nothing more than a giant with feet of clay.

At the G7 summit, held in Canada, from 15 to 17 June 2025, the leaders of the main EU member States and the President of the United States of America clashed over Ukraine and a minimum tax on the profits of US multinationals.

A Europe Flouted

Europe then suffered a first unequal treaty, such as the Nanking Treaty, inflicted on China in 1842. This was the result of a crushing military defeat, while it was freely that in Turnberry, Scotland, on 27 July, U. von der Leyen sought to appease Trump, to please the EU's largest exporters, Germany and Italy. She disdained our will of strategic autonomy and of fighting against climate change, she accepted customs duties increased to 15% on European exports, and duties reduced to zero on our imports from the United States. She gave up on taxing their digital services sector. She did not activate the anti-coercion instrument, which would have allowed us to penalise our "allies" across the Atlantic. Without having the slightest competence, mandate or budget to do so, U. von der Leyen has pledged to invest \$600 billion in the United States of America, to buy \$750 billion worth of hydrocarbons in three years and "hundreds", according to Trump, of billions of dollars in armaments.

The arguments used by the President of the Commission to justify her capitulation in Turnberry are the stability and predictability of our transatlantic trade. They lost their relevance within a few weeks. Trump threatens new tariffs on the EU if it dares to tax American digital services and/or to dismantle its regulations in this area. However, on 5 September 2025, Google was fined €2.95 billion for violating European competition rules with its advertising technologies. The Commission considers that, since 2014, "Google has acted to favour its own online display advertising technology services to the detriment of competing advertising technology service providers, advertisers and online publishers". The Commission orders the company to end its self-referencing practices and to end its conflicts of interest in the context of advertising technology. Google has 60 days to inform Brussels of the remedies it would propose.

The European Commission should have confronted the Trump administration, which only understands the balance of power, even if it meant enduring a few difficult weeks. This is what China has done, with success. It is to be hoped that the European Parliament will refuse to implement this unequal Turnberry agreement as it stands. Immediately after the State of the Union address, many Renew MEPs, S&D and Greens spoke out in this vein⁵, as did representatives of the more left- and right-wing groups in the hemicycle.

A Europe Ignored, then Robbed

During the meeting between Trump and Putin near Anchorage, Alaska, on August 15, 2025, the Russian dictator, who has since been particularly ungrateful, was welcomed on the red carpet and with demonstrations of friendship. Continental Europeans have been treated as they were at Yalta: the future of the conflict in

⁴See M. BO, A. FO, Belga, "La Russie dément avoir visé la Pologne et l'accuse de vouloir "aggraver" le conflit" in 7sur7, [58](https://www.7sur7.be/monde/la-russie-dement-avoir-vise-la-pologne-et-laccuse-de-vouloir-aggraver-le-conflit~adddfc47/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F, 10/9/2025.</p>
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Ukraine is envisaged without them, the partition of Ukraine that is being prepared resembles that of Germany in 1945. On 18 August, a delegation of heads of State and government escorted Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House. The exacerbated flattery of the Europeans and the spectacle staged for American television channels, in which Donald Trump behaved like an emperor receiving his vassals, have made teeth grind. In exchange, the Europeans only obtained vague promises from Donald Trump of American support for the troops they could deploy on the ground after a ceasefire in Ukraine. The bill is heavy: military aid to Kiev, nearly 100 billion € of American armaments, will be entirely at the expense of the Europeans, who will also have to pay a 10% surcharge! Since the year 2000, our leaders have clearly taken Europe out of the group of powers that make history. Its marginalisation is patent: fragmented, sparsely populated, because Europeans make up only 5% of the world's population, its economy is lagging behind the United States of America and China. Under these conditions, Europe's strategic autonomy is a chimera. Never before has the fact that Europe has not federated, that it is not a federal State, cost us so much. By vassalizing us, our rulers prevent us from mastering our destiny. They put us at risk of recession and aggression. Their disunity and the lack of a credible European defence make them almost insignificant on the international stage, even in trade matters. Europe is nothing more than a prey for the imperialist powers that seek to dominate the world and destabilise our democracies, particularly by interfering in our electoral processes.

The USA, under Trump, Are No Longer Reliable

Europeans, even those who had blind and long faith in NATO, are gradually waking up to the risk posed to us by the second Trump administration. It is not fulfilling its obligations under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, by which the Americans, and others, including Russia, "guaranteed" Ukraine's territorial integrity. It is possible that it will decide to deny its duty, under the North Atlantic Treaty, and withdraw from Europe, as it did from Afghanistan, because it shows deep contempt for its long-standing allies, both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific. The United States of America risks losing their allies and having to face in isolation a bloc that challenges its hegemony, composed at least of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, but which will undoubtedly be much larger, because China has woven a global network. It has become unreasonable to rely on NATO, i.e. on the United States of America led by Trump, especially since NATO has failed for 75 years to make the defence spending of European States more efficient.

China also Tends to Abuse Its Power

The EU's trade deficit with China has doubled in five years. After flooding our markets with consumer goods and plundering our technologies, it is overtaking Europe in terms of innovation. Products that will no longer find a market in the United States of America will be offered to us at low prices, and we will be obliged to buy them, because we absolutely need rare earths, these materials that are essential for many advanced technologies, which are a virtual Chinese monopoly.

Don't Get Lost in a Cul-de-sac!

Despite having 1.5 million active military personnel and performing defence industries, which would be enough to build a force capable of deterring any possible aggressor, European political "leaders" only propose submission to the United States of America, at a high price: nearly half of the planes, missiles and armoured vehicles that equip armies in Europe come from across the Atlantic. Others come from South Korea, Brazil, Israel or Turkey. This is because these politicians generally only consider their personal and partisan interests in the short term. Some, more altruistic or more sensitive to lobbying, take their national interests into account. In the middle powers, the most ambitious dream of having the leadership in Europe. Those who care about the interests of Europeans can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The lack of real unity is evident at every meeting of European leaders, the family photo is deceptive. In its current institutional configuration, Europe is not in a position to put in place effective diplomacy and deterrent defence. This should include a complete and legitimate politico-military chain of command, as well as an autonomous intelligence service. It would be foolish to follow certain European politicians and diplomats who want to commit us once again to the path of an intergovernmental "European" defence, because they reject the Federation announced on 9 May 1950 by Robert Schuman. These irresponsible people seem confused enough to draft a European Defence Union on the basis of various provisions of the Treaties and EU law⁶, which only need a very unlikely unanimous

⁶See Elsa Bernard, Quentin Loiez, Stéphane Rodrigues (eds.), *L'Union européenne de la défense. Commentaire article par article*, Brussels, Bruylant, 2024.

decision by the European Council to enter into force. Europe, if it proves them right, would once again take the path that since 1954 has repeatedly proved to be a dead end.

Citizens as Drivers of Change

The indignation of European citizens at von der Leyen's capitulation in Turnberry⁷ should lead to a movement towards a federal Europe. Some States, members of the EU and the NATO, could start to put an end to the vassalisation of Europe. As with the Schengen area or the euro zone, this coalition of willing States would expand.

For Belgian Prime Minister De Wever, who delivered the H. J. Schoo lecture in The Hague on 4/9/2025, which marks the beginning of the parliamentary year in the Netherlands⁸, "closer cooperation between the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg" is "a necessary political objective for our future." To increase our strategic autonomy, especially in the field of defence and the defence industry, he said that we need better cooperation between EU member States and the further integration of military and naval capabilities. The Belgian and Dutch Navies will celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of their cooperation next year. Since Article 350 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU gives the Benelux the possibility of faster and deeper integration than the EU, B. De Wever envisages the Benelux becoming a confederation.

De Wever's proposals are a step in the right direction, but our strategic autonomy cannot be achieved through NATO-type cooperation, or through EU integration, or through a confederation, because the latter either turns into a federation or dissolves. The Swiss Confederation, founded in 1291, became a federal government in 1848 after the *Sonderbund* Civil War. In *Federalist Paper* No. 20, of 11 December 1787, James Madison described the calamitous confederal organization of the 7 "United Provinces" of the Northern Netherlands in the eighteenth century⁹. The United States of America replaced the Articles of Confederation of 1776 with the federal constitution of 1787, having experienced inadequate governance during the War of Independence. Germany became a federal State in 1949, having finally learned the lessons of its past. As for the Confederation of Independent States, conceived by M. Gorbachev in 1990 to succeed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, it very quickly malfunctioned and then blew out.

Only a federation could give us strategic autonomy. To be consistent with his analysis, B. De Wever should propose a European federation.

Finally, What Should We Do?

Decades of rejection of the federation of Europe and neglect of defence explain why we have sunk so low. This must be fixed before it's too late. Let us hope that a new generation of Statesmen and women will pull us out of the disaster we are facing.

By federating, Europe could still change the course of history. It would cease to be the vassal of the United States of America, and it could command respect from China. A vanguard of willing member States should launch a federal core encompassing foreign policy, defence, migration and taxation.

To give precedence to the European common good over the particular interests of national States, so that Europe can exist geopolitically in an increasingly hostile world, it should become a State, governed by a federal constitution. The S&D continues its efforts to identify and support the first government to be persuaded to initiate the federative process.

Note: This article appeared in *AGEFI Luxembourg* in September 2025, p. 18, under the title « Un été humiliant pour l'Union européenne » and is on line at the page <https://seurod.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/AGEFI-septembre-2025-page-18.pdf>.

⁷On the eve of her State of the Union address, the Commission President's action is judged very harshly: 75% of respondents believe that she has badly defended European interests; a majority of Europeans (60%) - including Germans (54%) - want her to resign. See Jean-Yves Dormagen, « Trump et les Européens après l'été de « l'humiliation » : 10 points sur le nouvel Eurobazooka » in *Le Grand Continent*, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/09/09/10-points-eurobazooka/>, 9/9/2025.

⁸See <https://premier.be/nl/nieuws/toespraak-bart-de-wever-hj-schoo>.

⁹See James Madison, *The Federalist*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0201>.

BLACK SEA REGION

Asymmetric Advantage: How Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) Are Reshaping Security in the Black Sea Region

Irakli KHAREBASHVILI (Georgia)

Introduction

Defense policy in the 21st century has become dynamic and technology-driven, altering the nature of warfare and strategic priorities. Artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous systems are at the forefront of this transformation, revolutionizing the military industry with unprecedented data processing speed and independent operational capabilities. Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) – a type of weapon capable of identifying, assessing, and destroying targets without direct human intervention – represent one of the most innovative and complex aspects of this process. Owing to artificial intelligence and machine learning, LAWS can make decisions independently, creating new possibilities in military strategy.

These technologies acquire particular significance for small states, including those in the Black Sea region, which often face limitations in military, financial, and demographic resources. LAWS can offer an asymmetric advantage, reducing the disparity relative to larger military powers and enhancing defensive potential with lower expenditures. This article examines how LAWS are changing the security dynamics in the Black Sea region, focusing on the asymmetric advantages they offer to the region's small states, using Georgia as an illustrative example.



Source: <https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/news-in-english/emerging-importance-of-wider-black-sea-area-security-id110015.html>

Context of the Black Sea Region and the Need for Asymmetry

The Black Sea region, much like the South Caucasus, has long been a focal point of international relations due to its strategic location, energy corridors, and geopolitical tensions. Small states in the region, including Georgia, historically face significant military asymmetry when compared to the conventional military capabilities of larger regional and global actors, particularly the Russian Federation. Competition in terms of traditional armaments, troop numbers, and military budgets is practically impossible under such conditions. The Russia-Ukraine war has even more clearly highlighted the vulnerabilities of regional security and the necessity of developing alternative, asymmetric defense strategies. In this context, advanced technologies, specifically LAWS, offer a potential solution to this strategic dilemma.

Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems: Asymmetric Force Multiplier

Lethal autonomous systems enable small states to effectively employ the principle of "asymmetric force". This involves utilizing unconventional and unexpected military capabilities in confrontations with an adversary, capabilities that are less dependent on human resources, military scale, or traditional types of armament. The strategic and tactical value of LAWS in this context is defined by several key advantages.

One primary advantage is cost-effectiveness. The production and deployment of LAWS, particularly kamikaze drones, often require significantly fewer financial resources compared to traditional, high-cost military platforms such as tanks, combat aircraft, or naval vessels, which these systems can neutralize. This allows countries with smaller budgets to establish a credible deterrent potential. Furthermore, autonomous systems can operate in high-risk zones or execute dangerous missions without direct human physical involvement, significantly reducing the threat to military personnel's lives and minimizing human casualties. This factor is particularly critical for nations with limited demographic resources.

From an operational perspective, LAWS are distinguished by efficiency, speed, and precision. Owing to AI algorithms, these systems can process vast amounts of data at unprecedented speeds and make decisions in real-time. This increases reaction speed, tactical flexibility, and the ability to accurately identify and destroy targets. The use of "swarm" tactics, where numerous, often small-sized drones operate coordinately towards a common objective, further enhances effectiveness and significantly complicates the operation of an adversary's traditional and modern defense systems.

Moreover, LAWS provide small countries access to advanced military capabilities that previously might have been available only to large and technologically developed states. This includes deep reconnaissance, precision strikes over long distances, effective operation in difficult terrain (mountainous, forested) and urban environments, as well as capabilities for conducting electronic warfare. Concurrently, autonomous systems significantly enhance intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and preventive functions. Platforms equipped with advanced sensors and AI analytics (e.g., drones) ensure continuous, real-time monitoring of large areas, early detection of threats, and increased situational awareness at relatively low costs.

The transformative potential of these technologies was clearly demonstrated during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Azerbaijan effectively utilized Turkish and Israeli-made drones (including those with partial autonomous capabilities), playing a decisive role in gaining military superiority. This conflict confirmed that inexpensive drones and AI-powered systems can effectively neutralize high-cost equipment and personnel. The Israeli model, which integrates domestic high-tech production (e.g., Harpy, Harop drones), AI-based targeting systems (Lavender, Gospel), and semi-autonomous defense systems ("Iron Dome"), serves as an effective example of how a small state can convert technological advantage into a strategic lever.

The Role of LAWS in Shaping Black Sea Security: The Perspective of Small States

LAWS represent a crucial means for small states to enhance their defense potential and achieve asymmetric advantage. The principles applicable to such states are largely relevant to the small states of the Black Sea region as well, which face similar geopolitical and security challenges. Considering the complex geopolitical situation, territorial challenges, and limited resources of small states, the integration of LAWS involves several priority areas.

First and foremost, border control and the protection of territorial integrity are critical. Autonomous surveillance drones and unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) are indispensable for continuous monitoring and rapid response in hard-to-reach or high-risk border zones. Kamikaze drones and Swarm systems can conduct preventive strikes or coordinated operations in response to border violations or aggressive mobilization. Ground platforms, such as the Estonian THeMIS, would be particularly effective for patrolling, reconnaissance, and defensive response in the difficult terrain (e.g., mountainous and forested) characteristic of such countries.

A second significant area is strengthening air defense. For states with limited air defense capabilities, the integration of Swarm-type drones can become an effective and cost-efficient response to adversary air attacks, including those involving drones, helicopters, and low-flying objects. Developing or acquiring semi-autonomous systems similar to Israel's "Iron Dome" (though adapted to local needs) would also be a significant step forward.

The third sphere is logistical support. The complex geographical terrain often characteristic of small states in the region poses significant challenges to military logistics. Autonomous ground (e.g., THeMIS) and aerial transport platforms can ensure the safe, rapid, and reliable delivery of supplies, equipment, and ammunition to hard-to-reach or dangerous zones with minimal human involvement.

Finally, LAWS play a crucial role in strategic intelligence and decision support. AI-based analytical systems can integrate, process, and assess threats using multi-source intelligence data (sensors, drones, satellites, OSINT, etc.) in real-time. This enhances situational awareness and improves the quality and speed of strategic decision-making.

The integration of these technologies into the defense systems of small or resource-constrained states not only increases military potential and operational flexibility but also strengthens the deterrent effect and contributes to the consolidation of technological sovereignty.

Challenges and Risks

Despite the strategic advantages, the integration of LAWS is accompanied by significant ethical, legal, technological, and strategic challenges.

Ethical and legal dilemmas are the most acute. The necessity of upholding the principle of "Meaningful Human Control" and defining what level of control constitutes "meaningful" remains a subject of debate. The issue of accountability (the "Accountability Gap") in case of errors or violations of international humanitarian law by the system is also unresolved. Existing international legal frameworks, including the Geneva Conventions, do not yet fully address these new challenges.

Technological reliability and security remain concerns. The dependability of AI algorithms, their reliance on data quality, the risks of technical malfunctions (Software/Hardware), and vulnerability to cyberattacks pose serious threats. Incorrect system operation or hostile takeover could lead to catastrophic consequences.

Global and regional security risks include the danger of uncontrolled proliferation of LAWS, especially to non-state actors or unstable regimes, which could increase the risk of conflict escalation and undermine regional and global stability. There is also the potential for a new type of technology-based arms race among leading powers, which would further complicate the strategic position of small countries.

Conclusion

Lethal Autonomous Systems (LAWS) represent a transformative technology capable of significantly altering security paradigms, particularly in strategically complex regions like the Black Sea. For small states, often operating under conditions of limited financial, military, and human resources, LAWS offer a unique opportunity to gain critically needed asymmetric advantage. Integrating these systems into defense structures allows such countries to significantly enhance their defense potential, increase operational flexibility, and reduce dependence on traditional armaments. As the analysis demonstrates, the potential areas of application for LAWS for the small states of the Black Sea region are diverse and strategically valuable. Effective border control in difficult terrain, cost-effective enhancement of air defense capabilities against modern threats, optimization of logistical chains, and improvement of strategic intelligence and decision-making processes are key areas where autonomous systems can bring about real change.

The adoption of these technologies not only increases the immediate military capabilities of small states but also strengthens their deterrent potential and promotes progress towards technological sovereignty. Consequently, the prudent and responsible integration of LAWS, taking into account international norms and ethical standards, represents a significant strategic lever for the resource-constrained states of the Black Sea region to bolster their own security and play a more active role in regional dynamics.

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WESTERN BALKANS



Kosovo - Extremely Fragile Overall Situation and a Bleak Future After a Volatile Election Year at Parliamentary and Local Levels

PhD. Eng. Stelian TEODORESCU (Romania)

"The principle is to be in competition with yourself. It's about being better today than you were yesterday."

Steve Young

After holding the last local elections on October 17, 2021, Kosovo held the first round of local elections for 2025 on October 12, amid an ongoing political crisis at the central level. According to preliminary data from the Central Election Commission (CEC), the race for mayors has ended in 21 municipalities, while run-off elections will be held in 17 municipalities. A second round is scheduled for November 9, 2025, as no candidate obtained a majority (50%) of the votes cast by eligible Kosovar citizens. The total number of political parties that nominated candidates for the local elections in Kosovo, including independent candidates, was 92. The Central Election Commission (CEC) reported a voter turnout of 39.58% of the more than 2 million eligible voters who cast their ballots - approximately 3.4% less than in the previous local elections in 2021 (the turnout in the first round of the 2021 elections was slightly over 43% of eligible citizens).



Source: <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/27/outcomes-from-kosovos-2025-parliamentary-election/>

We believe that the results of the local elections in Kosovo tend to complicate the political strategies of the main political parties, but especially of the interim Prime Minister Albin Kurti, and could provide the European Union (EU) and the US with new leverage to promote the still stagnant normalization of the Serbia-Kosovo file. The vote in the parliamentary elections on February 9 and the local elections on October 12 have shown that political parties are struggling in key urban centers such as Pristina, Prizren and Mitrovica. Meanwhile, the Belgrade-backed Serbian List (LS) has made a comeback after boycotting the last elections in 2023, winning nine Serb-majority municipalities outright and likely heading for a second round against another Serb rival party. The local elections took place against a backdrop of deep institutional gridlock and ethnic tensions that have emerged and intensified since the February 2025 electoral process, which has left a legacy of bitter irony between Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority and ethnic Serb minority.

Therefore, in local elections, mayors and members of the Municipal Assemblies are elected by proportional representation on open lists, with seats reserved for national minorities, in each municipality in Kosovo.

According to Article 36, paragraph 1, of Law No. 03/L-040 on Local Self-Government, the number of members of the Municipal Assembly of a municipality shall be proportional, depending on the number of citizens in that municipality, with the exception of the Municipal Assembly of Pristina, which, according to paragraph 2, is composed of 51 members.

In such a context, in the other municipalities, depending on the number of citizens in the respective municipality, the number of elected representatives is as follows:

- for 10,000 citizens, the Assembly of that municipality is made up of 15 members;
- for a number of citizens between 10,001 and 20,000 citizens, the Assembly of that municipality is made up of 19 members;
- for a number of citizens between 20,001 and 30,000 citizens, the Assembly of that municipality is made up of 21 members;
- for a number of citizens between 30,001 and 50,000 citizens, the Assembly of that municipality is made up of 27 members;
- for a number of citizens between 50,001 and 70,000 citizens, the Assembly of that municipality is made up of 31 members;
- for a number of citizens between 70,001 and 100,000 citizens, the Assembly of the respective municipality is made up of 35 members;
- for a number of citizens over 100,000 citizens, the Assembly of the respective municipality is made up of 41 members.

The Self-Determination Movement (Vetëvendosje / LVV) leads with about 27% of the votes cast nationwide, if the votes for its mayoral candidates in all municipalities are combined, while the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) leads in the standings for the seats in the Municipal Assemblies, the party of the interim Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, taking second place in the mayoral race in the capital Pristina and in most other major cities. According to the assessment made by the political analyst, Dritëro Arifi, there were no major winners in this electoral process. "The result was a surprise, but not a big one. There were interesting subtleties in the expansions or contractions of the parties - not in the number of votes, but on the political map", D. Arifi emphasized. LVV won categorically in three municipalities - Podujeva, Kamenica and Shtime. It came first in two municipalities where the second round will be held, Gjilan and Fushë-Kosovë, and second in ten municipalities, including Pristina, Prizren, South Mitrovica, Gjakova, Peja, Kaçanik, Obiliq, Rahovec, Viti and Vushtrri. In Pristina, the incumbent mayor, Përparim Rama, nominated by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), obtained 34% of the vote, closely followed by Hajrulla Çeku from the LVV. This party, led by Albin Kurti, has made progress since the 2021 local elections. Four years ago, it did not win a single municipality in the first round, while this time it has three clear victories, even though the number of municipalities in which it ranks first has decreased from five to two. Meanwhile, the number of municipalities in which it ranks second has increased from eight to ten.

The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), a political party that is a member of the Council of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), achieved a very good result, receiving the most votes for the Municipal Assemblies at the national level, over 175,000 votes. The PDK, on the other hand, won decisively in three municipalities - Skenderaj, Ferizaj and Hani i Elezit. It took first place in four municipalities where the second round will be organized - South Mitrovica, Kaçanik, Prizren and Vushtrri - and second place in two municipalities, Dragash and Klinë. So, the PDK will participate in the second round elections for six electoral districts on 09 November. The PDK advanced and became the main political force in Pristina. In the elections for the Municipal Assembly of Pristina, it achieved its best result, ranking as the second largest party, with over 21,000 votes obtained. The party's candidate for mayor of Pristina, Uran Ismaili, came in third in the election race, receiving almost three times more votes than in the last mayoral race in 2021. Commenting on the election night, the party's president, Memli Krasniqi, said: "Citizens, democracy and trust in the future have won. We continue with dedication and faith in reconfirming victories in every municipality where we are on the ballot."

However, if we compare it with the results obtained in 2021, it can be seen that the PDK has registered a decline. One of the biggest losses occurred in Drenas, a municipality that Memli Krasniqi's party had traditionally won since the post-war period. The PDK's outright victories decreased from four municipalities to three, the municipalities in which it took first place decreased from six to four, while the municipalities in which it is in second place decreased from four to two.

Analyzing the results obtained by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), it can be clearly seen that, in the electoral elections of 12 October 2025, this political formation won outright in two municipalities, Istog and Lipjan. It took first place in six municipalities that will also participate in the second round - Pristina, Peja,

Obiliq, Viti, Dragash and Junik - and second place in three: Gjilan, Fushë-Kosovë and Suhareka. The party led by Lumir Abdixhiku achieved almost the same results compared to 2021. The number of municipalities in which they won outright remains unchanged at two, while the number of municipalities in which it will participate in the second round as the main party increased from five to six. Meanwhile, this year it came in second place in three municipalities, compared to four in 2021.

The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) managed to win outright only in Deçan. It came in first place in four municipalities where the second round will also be held - Gjakova, Klinë, Rahovec and Suhareka - and came in second place in one, Junik. AAK remains at a similar level to the previous elections. Outright victories decreased from two to one, while the number of municipalities in which it came in first place remained unchanged at four.

But here, the first round of local elections in Kosovo, which took place on October 12, 2025, also marked the return of the Serbian List (LS) in the Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo, after boycotting the early elections in 2023. The Belgrade-backed LS returns to the institutions in northern Kosovo, the first local election being marked by the categorical victory of the Belgrade-backed LS in the Serb-majority municipalities. The party won nine out of ten mayoralties outright. LS won the elections in the first round in most Serb-majority municipalities, such as Leposavić, Novobërdë, Štrpce, Zubin-Potok, Zvečan, Gračanica, Ranilug, Partesh and North Mitrovica, but this party will also go to a second round in Klllokot.

In late 2022, the LS mayors of four northern municipalities resigned over a heated dispute with the Pristina government over vehicle license plates. This led to early elections in 2023, which the LS boycotted, resulting in a voter turnout of less than 10%. Mayors from ethnic Albanian parties were elected and held office until this year, despite the tensions their election caused. The Serbian List completely dominated the Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo, winning a close to the maximum percentage of the total votes cast by eligible voters. This time, the LS faced greater competition, especially in Mitrovica, but still won in the first round. "Despite the fact that they wanted to dissolve us, ban us, provoke us, call us traitors and thieves, people have recognized that we are patriots, that we are not traitors, that we love our people," the president of the Serbian List, Zlatan Elek, told a press conference. In such a context, the LS was congratulated by the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić.

For Brussels, the return of the LS represents an opportunity to put pressure on Pristina regarding institutional compliance and inclusion. Augustin Palokaj, Brussels correspondent for the Kosovo news agency Koha, noted that there is a particular EU interest in northern Kosovo, where it expects "the return of Kosovo Serbs to Kosovo institutions." Previous efforts by the LVV to decertify the LS and restrict Serbian-language media from reporting on the elections have drawn a direct rebuke from Brussels. "Any exclusion of political actors runs counter to the fundamental principle of meaningful democratic participation of all communities in the electoral process," the European External Action Service stressed in a statement at the time.

It is worth noting that the first round of local elections in Kosovo on 12 October 2025 was described as peaceful, although observers noted various procedural irregularities. However, they did not question the results. There were also many surprises in parts of Kosovo, with the current mayor of Drenas/Glogovac, Ramiz Lladrovci, running as the candidate of his own initiative "Champion for Drenas", outperforming PDK candidate Petrit Hajdari in the polls. A similar run-off is expected in Prizren, between PDK's Shaqir Totaj and LVV's Artan Abrashi. In a press conference, PDK spokesperson Vlora Citaku declared her party the winner of the local elections. "PDK won the most municipalities outright and is leading in the largest number of constituencies in the run-off," V. Citaku claimed.

In conclusion, however, it should not be overlooked that the first round of local elections in Kosovo took place in the context of multiple institutional or other crises that have been manifesting for some time in the Western Balkans, but especially in the context of the crisis triggered in Kosovo by the parliamentary elections held on 9 February 2025. Although LVV received the most votes then, it still proved very difficult to form a parliamentary majority.

Speaking about the results obtained, A. Kurti described his party's results as "very good" although it no longer managed to achieve a majority. "These results show that our movement has not only maintained its growth, but has also grown as a major political force at the local level", A. Kurti emphasized.

Meanwhile, Lumir Abdixhiku, the leader of the LDK, took to social media to state that his party had won "over 180 thousand votes for the Municipal Assemblies and is undoubtedly the first party in these local elections."

Memli Krasniqi, the president of the PDK, also thanked voters for their support for "the best model of local governance – that of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)."

So, both in the parliamentary and local elections, as expected, a very close and interesting race took

place in Kosovo, resulting in another confidence given to political leaders, but also an entry of a significant number of municipalities into the second round of local elections that will be held equally closely on November 9, 2025.

A second round of voting was held on November 9, 2025, in municipalities where no candidate received a majority (50%) of the votes. On 11 November 2025, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) filed a complaint with the Electoral Complaints and Appeals Commission (ECAP), alleging electoral fraud and vote manipulation after the vote count was initially canceled on 10 November 2025, but resumed the next day, following a decision by the Supreme Court to continue it under police supervision. The final results of the elections for mayors of municipalities in Kosovo were as follows: Serbian List (SL) (10), LDK (7), LVV (7), PDK (6), AAK (5), Turkish Democratic Party of Kosovo (KDTP) (1), Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA) (1) and Independent (1).

However, it should not be overlooked that the local electoral process took place and will continue to take place in the context of a significant political crisis at the national level in Kosovo generated both before, but especially after the parliamentary elections. Why? Because after the parliamentary elections that took place on February 9, 2025, on October 10, 2025, two days before the first round of local elections, the long-awaited election of the last of the five vice-presidents of the Kosovo Assembly was achieved, with the President of the Kosovo Parliament, Dimal Basha, declaring him inaugurated, despite the objections of the largest Serbian party, LS. "I am pleased to announce that, with 71 votes in favor, I have elected the last vice-president of the parliament and declared the Parliament constituted," said the President of the Parliament, D. Basha, on October 10, 2025, after the vote for Nenad Rašić. "The procedure was absolutely correct. The nine LS MPs were proposed and rejected." The Belgrade-backed LS party, which in turn represents Kosovo Serbs, said it opposed the decision because it claims that N. Rašić, elected last of the five vice-presidents of the Kosovo parliament, is not one of its members. None of the candidates for vice-president proposed by the LS received enough votes. D. Basha told the media that the Kosovo Constitution does not specify which Serbian party the Serbian vice-president must belong to, only that he should be from the Serbian community.

Kosovo's legal framework provides for the election of three vice-presidents from the Albanian community, one from the Serbian community and one from the other non-majority ethnic communities. The failure to elect an ethnic Serbian vice-president at the end of August 2025 led to the LS filing a complaint with the Constitutional Court. The court's verdict, published on 8 October 2025, obliged parliamentarians to elect a Serbian vice-president and inaugurate the Parliament within 12 days, but, as can be seen, in the context of the scheduling and holding of local elections in Kosovo.

Given 15 days to put together a coalition capable of obtaining majority support in parliament to form a new government in Kosovo, A. Kurti chose not to urgently chair talks with potential allies, but instead went to Amsterdam to attend the congress of the Party of European Socialists; a few days later, he went to London for a summit of Balkan leaders. However, it should not be overlooked that A. Kurti was tasked with forming an alliance that 61 parliamentarians could support in order to form a new government in Pristina.

As expected, on October 26, 2025, the interim Prime Minister, A. Kurti, failed to gain enough support in the Kosovo Parliament to form a new government, plunging the country further into political chaos and, inevitably, bringing it closer to new early parliamentary elections, most likely to be held later this year. Out of the total of 120, only 56 deputies voted in favor of a future administration proposed and led by A. Kurti, five less than the minimum number required to approve the formation of the new Kosovo government (i.e. a minimum of 61 favorable votes were needed). Another 52 voted against the formation of a new government by A. Kurti, and 4 other politicians abstained. "This result is a direct consequence of the lack of political dialogue and the failure to reach agreements that would allow the normal functioning of the country's institutions," the Kosovo Democratic Institute (KDI), a non-governmental organization that promotes democratic governance and transparency, said on social media.

In such a context, on November 4, 2025, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, nominated the former Speaker of the Parliament, Glauk Konjufca¹, to occupy the position of Prime Minister of Kosovo and form a new government in Pristina, in order to try to avoid early elections, despite the resistance of opposition parties to the candidacy of this politician. G. Konjufca has 15 days to present a new government to enter the approval procedures by parliament.

¹Glauk Konjufca (born 25 July 1981) is a Kosovar activist, journalist and politician who served as the Speaker of the Assembly of Kosovo from 22 March 2021 to 26 August 2025. Before being elected Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, he was a deputy in the Assembly of Kosovo, leader of the LVV parliamentary group, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, and Acting President of Kosovo until the election of his successor, V. Osmani.

The months of political deadlock in Kosovo have contributed to the halting of reforms, the blocking of infrastructure projects and the freezing of some funds from the EU and the World Bank, and have also seriously affected the process of international recognition of Kosovo and, implicitly, the process of Kosovo's integration into the EU. V. Osmani urged the parliament to support G. Konjufca as prime minister for the good of the country, so that the state budget for 2026 and several international financial agreements can be approved. "As president, I have assessed that it is in the interest of Kosovo to try to form a government so that these important decisions are not postponed for several more months," V. Osmani said at a press conference on the evening of November 4, adding that he would have to call early elections if the parliament also rejects G. Konjufca.

After the rejection of A. Kurti's candidacy, on October 26, 2025, the opposition leaders in Pristina wanted to let the Kosovar electorate know that they would also reject G. Konjufca and called for early elections, arguing that the new candidate for the position of prime minister is an ally and advisor of A. Kurti. However, it should not be overlooked that it is true that G. Konjufca, aged 44, was proposed by LVV, A. Kurti's political party, which finished first in the February 2025 elections, but did not obtain a majority and was unable to reach an agreement with other parties on the formation of a new government.

The opposition parties refuse to govern with A. Kurti, criticizing this Kosovar political leader for the way he has managed relations with Kosovo's Western allies and for his actions in the ethnically divided north of the country where the situation is managed by the Serbian minority. Even A. Kurti has admitted that a new parliamentary election could be the only remaining solution to stabilize the situation in Kosovo. In the same context, some analysts have emphasized that even such a last resort option could not resolve the significant crisis that has arisen in Kosovo. "The new elections will not bring major changes in terms of the distribution of mandates," said Agon Maliqi, an analyst for Kosovo and a member of the Atlantic Council, in a press release. In such a context, the Speaker of the Kosovo Parliament, D. Basha, stated that the responsibility for what will happen next lies with the President of Kosovo, V. Osmani. Memli Krasniqi, leader of the second largest party in the Kosovo Assembly, PDK, stated that he would ask V. Osmani to go to the polls immediately, with other political parties and even political analysts declaring their agreement with such a decision-making option.

In the months of political deadlock since A. Kurti's LVV won the parliamentary elections in February 2025, but lost its majority, and, implicitly, the deeply divided political class in Kosovo is resigned and expects new early elections. Indeed, we can appreciate that A. Kurti also knew that his chances of forming a supportive coalition for the formation of a new government led by him are almost zero. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), opposition parties, have publicly refused to join forces with LVV, while A. Kurti has made it clear that he will not accept a pact with the second largest party, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). However, it remains to be seen what the results will be in the second round of local elections on November 9, as past practice has shown that a victory in the first round does not guarantee a final victory in the second round and there may be very big surprises that are difficult to predict.

Kosovo has remained under punitive EU measures for more than two years, limiting financial support in response to the treatment of the Serbian minority by the Pristina government and unilateral actions in northern Kosovo. The US suspended strategic dialogue talks in September over similar concerns, demanding de-escalation from Pristina. Despite growing international pressure, Kurti has shown little willingness to change the course of developments for some time. Meanwhile, Kurti is facing growing political problems in Pristina. During the last parliamentary elections, LVV achieved a good result but did not obtain a majority, which led to months of failed negotiations to form a coalition that would form a parliamentary majority and repeated unsuccessful attempts to elect the leadership of the Parliament in Pristina. Moreover, Kosovo still does not have a government formed after eight months of major political deadlock. The Constitutional Court of Kosovo intervened to grant LVV a mandate to form a coalition, but both major Albanian opposition parties refused to cooperate with the political formation led by A. Kurti.

The political failure comes at a critical time for Kosovo, one of the poorest countries in Europe. Ambassadors from the Quinte countries - the US, UK, Germany, France and Italy - have called for the rapid formation of a stable and functioning government - essential, they stressed, to unlock frozen funds, address key domestic and international priorities and advance Kosovo's path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. The EU's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, said progress was needed if Kosovo was to benefit from the bloc's €6 billion Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

Key issues that have contributed to the political impasse could generate a total political deadlock for an indefinite period and that could influence not only the second round of local elections on 9

November 2025, but also the evolution of Kosovo in the medium and long term. In such a context, Kosovo will face ongoing disputes regarding its international recognition, as well as a “paralysis” of the activity of the legislative and executive institutions in Pristina.

As a result, international pressure will increase from both the US and the EU to de-escalate tensions with the Serbian minority in the four municipalities in northern Kosovo. The amplification of such developments could lead to early parliamentary elections, most likely in 2026, and significantly affect the prospects for resolving the Serbia-Kosovo file that the EU wants to finalize in order to continue the accelerated integration of the entire Western Balkans region. In support of such a forecast, we could bring as an argument the continuation by A. Kurti of an extremely sharp attitude manifested and declaratively on October 13, 2025: “If there is no A. Kurti III government, we are, without a doubt, ready for new parliamentary elections.” Aleksandar Sljuka, a researcher at the Mitrovica-based New Social Initiative, argued that A. Kurti is unlikely to give in without clear consequences and stressed: “A. Kurti has little incentive to change course unless there is a clear and consistent signal from Brussels that his current approach has real political costs.”

It is significant to emphasize here that the opposition parties, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), voted against A. Kurti's candidacy. It remains unclear whether the country's president will ask the second or third-placed parties to form a new government. Both political parties have stated that they believe that new parliamentary elections should be held and have refused to govern with A. Kurti, criticizing the way he has managed Kosovo's relations with its Western allies and his actions in the ethnically divided north of Kosovo, where a Serb minority lives. A. Kurti, a left-wing Albanian nationalist, came to power in 2021, when a coalition led by the LVV received over 50% of the vote and secured a majority of seats in parliament.

In such a context of recent developments in Kosovo, it is imperative to emphasize that the President of Kosovo, V. Osmani, and the interim Prime Minister, A. Kurti, have publicly accused Serbia of interfering in the electoral process in Kosovo, “buying” the Serbian community to vote for LS, and have demanded a reaction from the EU, which did not give a concrete answer to the question of the international media about whether it is aware of Serbia's interference in the electoral process in Kosovo. However, the EU observation mission for the parliamentary elections in February 2025 found that the Russian state media RT Balkan and Sputnik Serbia - supported by the Kremlin - published dozens of materials about the elections in Kosovo during the electoral campaign, with “manipulative content”, the main target being the Serbian community in northern Kosovo.

WESTERN BALKANS - EUROPE



Western Balkans between European Attraction and Multipolar Influence: Geopolitics of Belonging and Power Competition in the Heart of the European Continent

Stefania Coco SCALISI (Italy)

The Western Balkans, a region comprising six countries — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia —, have long been regarded as Europe’s geopolitical “*Maginot Line*”, a line of symbolic fortifications, obstacles and weapon to deter Russia from absorbing them into its sphere of influence. However, much like the fate of the real Maginot line, Europe is mostly failing, leaving a region suspended between integration and fragmentation, stability and volatility, East and West.

Albeit remaining a strategic priority for the EU, Western Balkans’ countries have been the object of interest also of Russia and China, both eager to establish a firm foothold in one of the world’s most complex and contested regions. While the European Union (EU) continues to dominate economically and normatively, Moscow and Beijing have progressively consolidated their presence through political leverage, soft power, and strategic investments. This has produced a complex equilibrium of “controlled instability” — a term used by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2024) to describe the delicate balance that prevents large-scale conflict but perpetuates fragility, nationalism, and institutional weakness.

The following analysis compares the strategies, instruments, and outcomes of the three main external actors in the region, highlighting the interplay between European attraction, Russian political-cultural influence, and Chinese economic penetration.

The EU and the Hamletic question: to enlarge or not to enlarge?

If it took three acts for Hamlet to pose himself the famous question that tormented his soul, it is taking the European Union almost three decades to decide what to do with the Western Balkans.

The cornerstone of the EU’s engagement dates to the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), launched in 1999 as a framework to guide the Western Balkans toward eventual membership through bilateral



Source: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/53/5304.htm>

Agreement (SAA), which regulates trade, political dialogue, and legal approximation to the EU *acquis*. These agreements, together with the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), have provided the foundation for modernization and institutional strengthening. Yet, progress has been uneven, with many governments showing commitment in principle but inconsistency in implementation, resulting in what analysts describe as “conditionality fatigue.”

Candidate status represents the formal recognition of a country’s membership perspective, but it also entails a demanding reform agenda in areas such as rule of law, judicial independence, and regional cooperation. Montenegro and Serbia are currently the most advanced candidates, having opened most negotiation chapters. Albania and North Macedonia launched formal negotiations in 2022 after years of political delays, while Bosnia and Herzegovina received candidate status in 2022, and Kosovo remains a potential candidate pending recognition issues and dialogue with Serbia. Progress in the accession negotiations is strictly monitored through detailed screening processes and 33 thematic chapters, and every stage requires consensus among EU member states—an element that makes enlargement not only technical but deeply political.

To inject new credibility and momentum, the EU adopted in 2020 a revised enlargement methodology and, in 2023, introduced the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. This plan aims to accelerate integration through gradual participation in the EU Single Market, enhanced regional cooperation, and increased financial support linked to performance. It includes a €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility, providing grants and concessional loans to those countries that meet specific governance and economic benchmarks. This “money-for-reform” approach marks a shift toward a more pragmatic and results-oriented enlargement policy, designed to deliver visible benefits before full accession.

EU Enlargement Status — Western Balkans (as of October 2025)

Country	Current Status	Negotiation Progress	Key Obstacles / Issues
Montenegro	Candidate country (since 2010)	All 33 chapters opened; 3 provisionally closed	Political instability, corruption, slow judiciary reforms
Serbia	Candidate country (since 2012)	22 chapters opened; 2 provisionally closed	Lack of alignment with EU foreign policy (Russia), Kosovo normalization, rule of law
North Macedonia	Candidate (since 2005); negotiations opened in 2022	Screening process ongoing (fundamentals cluster)	Bilateral tensions with Bulgaria, weak rule of law
Albania	Candidate (since 2014); negotiations opened in 2022	Screening ongoing jointly with North Macedonia	Rule of law, corruption, judicial reform
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Candidate country (since 2022)	Pre-negotiation phase: no chapters opened	Deep political divisions, secessionist rhetoric (Republika Srpska), weak institutions
Kosovo	Potential candidate	No candidate status; SAA in force since 2016	Non-recognition by 5 EU states, stalled normalization with Serbia

The table above shows the progress currently made by each country, and what are the main setbacks on their path to membership. What appears to be missing, however, is a genuine commitment—not only from those states, but also from the European Union—to go the extra mile and advance the process decisively. Albeit all the potential efforts, it is ultimately the EU that must set the tone of the discussion and determine its *tempo*. Yet, in recent years, the Union seems increasingly absent from the table. Torn between the ambition to pursue what has been arguably its only truly successful foreign policy—enlargement—and the difficulties of

integrating countries still far from meeting the EU's standards, particularly in the fields of civil rights and the rule of law, the EU, much like the Shakespearean hero, remains trapped in a state of perpetual indecision. But unlike Hamlet, whose tragedy was confined to his own kingdom, the Union's hesitation affects a far wider geopolitical space, one whose political leanings will inevitably determine the balance of power in a strategically vital region of the world.

From Soviet Union to Russia: Western Balkans as a family affair

The ties that connect Russia and the Western Balkans are strong and go beyond the period when the former Soviet Union included them into its sphere of influence. Undeniably, there are strong cultural and historic foundations to this relationship rooted in shared Slavic heritage, Orthodox Christianity, and collective memories of resistance against Western domination — that continue to shape public sentiment and political alignments across parts of the region, particularly in Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As Cligendael said in his research, the role of the Orthodox Church remains pivotal to understand this connection. The Church, indeed, does more than spiritual work. It shapes and influences the political discourse, by stressing the cruciality of Slavic heritage and its aversion to Western values. In 2017, during Montenegro EU accession campaign, the Church played a key role in boycotting it, openly opposing membership, framing it as a betrayal of Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood and mobilizing widespread street protests under the banner of defending national identity and religious freedom. Often understated, the role of the Church is a useful key to understand political behavior of Balkan leaders and the public opinion, considering also that religious narratives promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church are further amplified by a dense ecosystem of pro-Russian media and disinformation outlets, such as Sputnik Srbija and RT Balkan, which translate spiritual and cultural affinity into political loyalty. These platforms merge religious symbolism with anti-Western rhetoric, portraying the EU and NATO as moral and existential threats to Orthodox identity. By reinforcing messages of victimhood, sovereignty, and resistance, they blur the line between faith and ideology, creating a hybrid information environment where Moscow's geopolitical narratives circulate organically through trusted cultural and religious channels rather than overt propaganda.

In this *humus*, Russia flourishes. Another bow to its arrow is gas. It is no mystery that both Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina are importing 100% of their energy supply from Russia. If depending on a sole provider is almost like being hamstrung, when the exporter is Russia the chances that the knot will be tighter are high. Russia has long treated energy as a political leverage, a bargaining tool that has often used against the EU, a stronger political rival, which Russia did not fear to threaten to obtain concessions or weaken European unity. In the Western Balkans, the dynamic is subtler yet equally effective. Gazprom's ownership of Serbia's NIS oil company, its participation in the Banatski Dvor gas storage facility, and the operation of the Balkan Stream pipeline have cemented Russia's presence in the region's energy architecture. These assets offer Moscow not just economic dividends but political access points to local elites, allowing it to intertwine energy security with questions of foreign policy alignment. Energy, therefore, becomes both a material necessity and a geopolitical narrative — a symbol of reliability and brotherhood that masks structural dependency and limits diversification.

The real limit to Russia's strategy is its lack of diversification. Like Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina which are failing to diversify their source of gas imports, relying only on energy as the real bargaining tool of its strategy risks to make the Russian plan inherently weak. Despite backed up by the Church, which provides moral and cultural legitimacy across parts of the region, energy remains Russia's only true ace. However, much to its despair, even the most aligned countries- notably Serbia- are starting to look at other sources of import. Projects such as the Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline and Krk LNG terminal offer concrete alternatives, while the EU's joint gas-purchasing scheme and funding under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans further weaken dependency.

In essence, while Russia's influence still carries weight, it is increasingly constrained by its own strategic inertia. Like the European Union, Moscow must recognize that regional patience is not infinite. A credible long-term presence in the Western Balkans will require genuine political engagement and economic investment, not mere exploitation of dependency or nostalgia. Otherwise, the countries of the region — weary of waiting for decisive action — may eventually anchor themselves elsewhere, setting their allegiances once and for all.

Two Dogs Strive for a Bone, and the Third Runs Away with It: China in the Western Balkans

China and the Western Balkans share a history of strong diplomatic relations. At the forefront of it, it's

the rapport between China and Albania, which dates to 1949 and grew stronger over the '60s, when the deterioration of Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha and the Soviet Union tightened the relationship with Mao Zedong's communist China. The latter started investing in the small and isolated country, signing off a significant agreement in 1961, under which Beijing committed to provide technical assistance to Albania for the construction of industrial facilities — spanning chemical plants, food and textile factories, building-materials production, and steel mills. Similarly, when Tito disappointment toward URSS grew stronger, the non-aligned China showed up as an alternative commercial partner for Yugoslavia. Thus, in 1977, Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito paid his first official visit to China, marking a symbolic thaw in relations between Beijing and Belgrade. The following year, Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng reciprocated with a historic visit to Belgrade, laying the groundwork for a pragmatic, non-aligned partnership between the two socialist states.

Today, Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans is primarily economic. As part of China's grand strategy of using financial diplomacy as a tool to penetrate not just markets but countries' political and social structures, Beijing is quite active in the region with broad investments and economic support. The two main tools to achieve its interests are the "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) and the former "16+1" China–Central/Eastern Europe cooperation framework, which brought China to heavily invest in large-scale project such as the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade (constructed by China Road and Bridge Corporation) and the ongoing Belgrade–Budapest high-speed railway project. Chinese companies have also invested in energy and mining sectors, notably Serbia's Borin copper mine, while technology firms such as Huawei have expanded into telecommunications and surveillance infrastructure. Yet, most of these funds do not take the form of traditional foreign direct investment, but rather state-backed loans granted to finance major infrastructure projects executed by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). This "loan-for-construction" model enables Beijing to combine development financing with strategic access, consolidating both economic presence and political goodwill. The result of this approach is that trade between China and the Western Balkans tripled from 2012 to 2021, reaching US \$8 billion, though heavily imbalanced—around 85 percent in China's favor. This asymmetric relationship offers short-term gains in connectivity and investment but carries structural risks: opaque procurement, environmental degradation, debt exposure, and reduced alignment with EU norms on transparency and governance.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the Western Balkans have become a significant pole of attraction in the international arena. The reasons are many and help explain the interest of three major global players: the European Union, Russia, and China. For the EU, the region represents a natural next step in its enlargement policy, given its geographical proximity and shared values with member states. Geography also plays a central role in China's interest; by supporting the region's economic development, Beijing strengthens its foothold in Europe and gains influence over key economic and political crossroads. Russia, on the other hand, views the Western Balkans not only as natural partners—having once been within its sphere of influence during the Cold War—but also as a strategic buffer against further EU and, consequently, NATO expansion into the region. Russia is playing a layered game which entails both natural resources and -quite literally- prayers, as the Orthodox Church has been leveraged as a modern Trojan Horse to tighten the links between Western Balkans and the ancient motherland. On the contrary, Chinese strategy seems more straightforward as Beijing is offering money in exchange for nothing, at least on paper. The type of economic relationship that China creates is based on imbalances: imbalance of commercial trade, financial imbalance, imbalance of power.

Between Russia and China, the EU has to take a stand. Whether proceeding with the membership process or halting it, a decision must be taken as keeping things in a indefinite limbo is not a viable option. In a world where geopolitical power is rapidly shifting from Europe to the rest of the world, the EU margin of maneuver is steadily eroding. Western Balkan countries remain valuable potential partners, but their patience cannot last forever. It is time to overcome the impasse and move forward, otherwise, the EU risks once again watching from the sidelines as the world moves on without it.

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WESTERN BALKANS - NATO



Adapting NATO's 3.5+1.5 Framework: A Strategic Outlook for the Western Balkans

Todor Goranovic (Montenegro)

Fiscal Ambition, Governance Integrity, and Resilience as Deterrence

Introduction

When NATO leaders gathered in The Hague in 2025, they did more than agree on a new defence spending target. By establishing the **5 percent mandate** – 3.5 percent of GDP for core military capabilities and another 1.5 percent for national resilience – they fundamentally reframed deterrence within the Alliance¹. The decision replaced the often-criticized two – percent benchmark that measured inputs rather than outcomes. The new formula recognizes that contemporary security depends as much on industrial capacity, cyber networks, and societal preparedness as on the number of tanks or troops.

For NATO's **southeastern flank**, this change is transformational. The Western Balkans – an area of geopolitical contest where Euro-Atlantic, Russian, and now even Chinese influences meet – must now translate fiscal targets into sustainable capability and credible deterrence. The road to 2035 will separate those who allocate new funds for lasting reform from those whose political fragmentation or institutional fragility erodes the opportunity.

The 5 percent rule also redefines the very notion of burden sharing. Measure is no longer purely quantitative. Instead, the formula links **output, reform, and resilience**, reflecting a broader understanding that NATO's deterrence in the hybrid era rests as much on social cohesion and industrial integration as on conventional firepower.

Croatia – Ambition Coupled with Oversight

Croatia has regarded the mandate as a **platform for full-spectrum modernisation**. Large procurement programmes – Rafales, HIMARS, Black Hawks, and Leopard 2A8 tanks – are transforming its inventory, positioning Zagreb as arguably the Balkans' most capable military actor². Participation in **PESCO** projects and a €1.7 billion loan from the **SAFE** programme are further embedding Croatia's defence industry deeper into Europe's cooperative supply chain.



Source: <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-and-national-security-analysis/nato-spending-plan-assessment-white-paper>

¹NATO. *The Hague Summit Conclusions*. Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2025.

²Croatian Ministry of Defence. *Defence Modernisation Report 2025–2035*. Zagreb: MOD Publications, 2025.

Meeting the 5 percent investment target will require a **cumulative expansion of roughly 150 percent by 2035**, according to NATO projections. Although this rise will unfold gradually over the decade, it still demands sustained political and institutional discipline. The real challenge lies less in fiscal capacity than in maintaining procurement transparency and governance integrity through a prolonged investment cycle. OECD and GRECO evaluations (2024–25) continue to flag partial implementation of anti-corruption and oversight mechanisms, while the *Balkan Defence Monitor* notes that defence-procurement disclosures remain incomplete³⁴⁵.

Strengthening audit capacity, depoliticising contracting, and ensuring independent procurement oversight will determine whether ambitious investments translate into credible deterrence. If managed prudently, Croatia could emerge as a **regional anchor** for NATO operations along the Adriatic and a connective hub between Southern and Central Europe. The country's success or failure will serve as a stress test for whether mid-sized European states can align fiscal expansion with operational efficiency.

Albania – Infrastructure as Strategy

For **Albania**, the 5 percent threshold represents both leverage and test. Backed by NATO funds, Tirana is transforming the Kuçova airbase into a logistics and maintenance hub, while a new naval port at Porto Romano is designed to anchor operations across the southern Adriatic⁶. The creation of the **KAYO defence firm**, aimed at reviving domestic production, signals an ambition to reconnect Albania to trans-Atlantic industrial chains. Reaching the benchmark will require **steady, decade-long growth in defence investment** – ambitious but feasible if linked to NATO and EU co-funding. The challenge is not the pace of increase but the ability of public institutions to manage sustained expansion. **OECD** and **GRECO** assessments continue to identify weaknesses in procurement oversight and coordination between central and local authorities, while the European Commission's 2024 Progress Report warns that Albania's public-administration reform remains at an "early stage."⁷⁸⁹ The scale of projected expenditure – alongside parallel demands for climate-resilience projects estimated at about **\$6 billion** over the next decade¹⁰ – risks overextension.

Albania's success will hinge on **institutional maturation**: whether procurement law, anti-corruption controls, and auditing mechanisms can match the speed of investment. If they can, Albania will not only consolidate NATO's southern presence but also demonstrate how smaller allies turn geography into operational leverage.

Montenegro – Small Power, Smart Priorities

Though Montenegro's population and economic base are modest, its **geostrategic weight** remains significant. Control of Adriatic access routes, alongside proven cybersecurity expertise, gives Podgorica an out-sized role in niche domains of NATO operations¹¹. Focusing its limited resources on the **resilience pillar** – cyber defence, counter-disinformation, and critical-infrastructure protection – offers Montenegro a path of selective ambition. The experience of the 2016 coup attempt and the 2022 major cyberattack underscores why digital defence now equals territorial defence on the Alliance's periphery.

Financially, the climb is steep: reaching the 5 percent investment benchmark would require an estimated **140 percent** budgetary expansion by 2035.³ Achieving this through gradual, annual increases is feasible, but

³OECD. *Public Integrity Indicators: Croatia Country Fact Sheet 2025*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025. <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-sub-issues/public-integrity/country-fact-sheets/OECD-Public-Integrity-Indicators-Croatia-Country-Fact-Sheet-2025.pdf>

⁴GRECO. *Second Compliance Report on Croatia (Fifth Evaluation Round)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Group of States against Corruption, 2024. [https://mpudt.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Antikorupcija/GrecoRC5\(2024\)4-Final-eng-2nd%20Compliance%20Report-Croatia-PUBLIC.docx.pdf](https://mpudt.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Antikorupcija/GrecoRC5(2024)4-Final-eng-2nd%20Compliance%20Report-Croatia-PUBLIC.docx.pdf)

⁵Balkan Defence Monitor. "Transparency in Defence Sector Governance." *Balkan Defence Monitor* (2024). <https://balkandefencemonitor.com/bdm-by-topic/transparency/>

⁶Albanian Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, *Adriatic Defence Infrastructure Plans*, Tirana, 2025.

⁷OECD. *Public Governance Review: Western Balkans 2024 – Strengthening Integrity and Accountability*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024.

⁸GRECO. *Fourth Evaluation Round – Second Compliance Report on Albania*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Group of States against Corruption, 2023.

⁹European Commission. *Albania 2024 Report: Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*. Brussels: European Commission, DG NEAR, October 2024.

¹⁰World Bank, *Climate Expenditure Review: Albania*, Washington D.C., 2024.

maintaining fiscal discipline and political stability over a decade remains the critical test. Looking ahead, Montenegro's most credible opportunity lies in dual-use and cyber-resilience industries rather than heavy manufacturing. The country can channel existing IT and engineering talent toward defence-related software, secure-communication tools, and unmanned-systems support services. Participation in EU and NATO investment frameworks – such as the NATO Innovation Fund, DIANA, European Defence Fund, the SAFE facility, and PESCO's cyber and CBRN-surveillance projects – would enable Montenegro to join regional supply chains without large capital expenditure.

Such an approach would transform Montenegro's constraints into comparative advantage: agility, digital expertise, and alliance credibility. Its value to NATO ultimately rests in demonstrating that **innovation and partnership can substitute for scale** – that even the smallest allies can contribute to deterrence through precision, resilience, and institutional reliability.

North Macedonia – Legal Reform Meets Strategic Agility

As one of NATO's newest entrants, **North Macedonia** has advanced reform with vigour unusual for a small state. Donating its Soviet-era tanks to Ukraine signalled a clean doctrinal break and symbolic solidarity. This step was complemented by donations of Soviet-made helicopters, Su-25 aircraft, and extensive stocks of ammunition and equipment to Ukraine. Its restructuring around mobile, NATO-interoperable units equipped with **Strykers** and **JLTVs** shows a grasp of modern operational requirements¹². Additionally, early steps toward domestic **UAV and munitions manufacturing** reveal ambition beyond simple procurement.

The main constraint lies in law and capacity. Current investment legislation restricts public participation in private defence ventures, limiting industrial sustainability precisely as modernisation costs accelerate¹³. OECD SIGMA and EU progress reports note that fiscal-planning and procurement oversight frameworks remain underdeveloped¹⁴. Without legislative alignment and a clearer medium-term defence-investment strategy, Skopje's innovative defence blueprint risks outpacing its financial base – an instance of strategic imagination running ahead of structural reform.

Yet these hurdles have not eroded political will. North Macedonia's willingness to integrate reforms under NATO's Defence Planning Process and its consistent implementation of capability targets illustrate how new allies can model discipline and accountability, often surpassing larger members in reform credibility¹⁵.

Slovenia – Wealth, Hesitation, and the Politics of Trust

Among its Balkan peers, **Slovenia** easily possesses the fiscal breadth to meet the 5 percent target. Its emphasis on **dual-use resilience projects** – €23 million for aerial-firefighting aircraft and €28 million for advanced flood-response systems – reflects a national ethos that equates security with societal robustness¹⁶. The approach aligns neatly with NATO's 1.5 percent resilience pillar, showing that public investment in civilian preparedness can still advance alliance goals¹⁷.

The primary obstacle, however, is not in resources but in politics. The 2025 confrontation within the governing coalition over defence budgets exposed a deep divide between advocates of classical deterrence and those prioritizing welfare-state spending¹⁸⁻¹⁹. Slovenia thus illustrates a broader European paradox: economic capacity exists, but **political consent** remains fragile.

¹²North Macedonian Ministry of Defence, *Armed Forces Transformation White Paper*, Skopje, 2024.

¹³Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia. *Law on Public-Private Partnerships and Strategic Investments (consolidated text)*, 2024. Skopje, 2024.

¹⁴OECD SIGMA. *Public Financial Management and Accountability in the Western Balkans 2024*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; European Commission. *North Macedonia 2024 Report: EU Enlargement Package*. Brussels: DG NEAR, 2024.

¹⁵NATO. *Defence Planning Capability Review – North Macedonia 2024*. Brussels: NATO International Staff, Defence Policy and Planning Division, 2024.

¹⁶Government of Slovenia, *Integrated Resilience and Civil Protection Strategy*, Ljubljana, 2025.

¹⁷NATO. *Resilience and Civil Preparedness: Updated Baselines under the 2023 Vilnius Communiqué*. Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2023.

¹⁸“Coalition Fractures over Defence Budget,” *Delo*, 27 March 2025.

¹⁹Slovenian Press Agency (STA). “Coalition Rift Over Defence Spending Deepens Ahead of 2025 Budget Vote.” *STA Daily Bulletin*, 12 March 2025.

Bridging that gap requires persuasion rather than merely budgetary arithmetic. If Ljubljana can frame the 5 percent rule as peace insurance rather than militarism, it could turn domestic scepticism into pragmatic coalition building – proving that legitimacy itself functions as a national security instrument.²⁰

Regional Pattern: Opportunity and Endurance

Across the Balkans, the 5 percent directive operates as both **catalyst and stress test**. It unearths opportunities – industrial scaling, technology transfer, and deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic frameworks – but also exposes deficits in governance, coalition stability, and fiscal resilience. The divergent responses suggest three emerging models:

1. **Transformers** (e.g., Croatia, Albania): countries that use the rule for broad-based reform and capacity building.
2. **Optimizers** (e.g., Montenegro, North Macedonia): those leveraging limited means through strategic specialization.
3. **Hesitant Modernists** (e.g., Slovenia): countries with resources but constrained by political ambivalence.

NATO’s challenge is to prevent these categories from hardening into tiers. The risk of an implicit “two-speed Alliance” – where wealthier northern states surge ahead while southern and eastern allies strain – could deepen perceptions of inequality²¹. Countering this requires robust **European funding mechanisms** such as the European Defence Fund, the **SAFE** facility, and integrated research under PESCO to serve as scaffolding for collective growth.

On the societal level, communication matters. Public scepticism toward higher defence spending is potent in states where memories of conflict are fresh and social disparities persistent. Governments must articulate how resilience investments – cyber defence, infrastructure hardening and disaster response – directly benefit citizens. Only when voters perceive tangible domestic value will fiscal ambition translate into enduring legitimacy.

Country-Specific Ambitions vs. Challenges

COUNTRY	TPOLOGY	KEY AMBITION	KEY CHALLENGE
Croatia	Transformer	✈️ Full-spectrum Modernization (Rafales, HIMARS)	🏛️ Governance & Procurement Transparency
Albania	Transformer	🚚 Logistics Hub (Kuçova Airbase, Porto Romano)	🏛️ Limited Administrative Capacity
Montenegro	Optimizer	💻 Niche Specialization (Cyber Defense)	€ Steep Financial Climb (~140% Increase)
North Macedonia	Optimizer	↔️ Interoperability (Strykers, JLTVs)	🏛️ Legal & Financial Framework Gaps
Slovenia	Hesitant Modernist	🛡️ Dual-Use Resilience (Firefighting, Flood Response)	🗳️ Political Will & Coalition Divides

Table 1. Country-Specific Ambitions and Challenges under NATO's 3.5 + 1.5 Framework (2035 Outlook).

While typological distinctions help illustrate different trajectories, the underlying constraints are far from isolated. Weak procurement governance, administrative bottlenecks, fiscal rigidity, and coalition volatility recur across the region in varying intensity. In this sense, the five percent framework functions less as a fiscal goal and more as a governance stress test – revealing how institutional maturity, not just resources, defines credibility within NATO’s southeastern flank. At the same time, regional opportunities are equally interlinked. The convergence of EU and NATO investment frameworks – through NIF, NSIP, PESCO, the SAFE facility, and the European Defence Fund – offers smaller allies collective avenues for scaling capability and industry. Shared participation in infrastructure and dual-use innovation projects can offset individual fiscal limits. For the Western Balkans as a whole, such cross-border participation represents more than economic alignment; it is a path toward strategic interdependence that anchors the region’s security within Europe’s broader deterrence architecture.

²⁰European Commission. Eurobarometer 102.4 – Public Trust in Institutions and Security Perceptions in the EU. Brussels: DG COMM, May 2024.

²¹European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Bridging the Capabilities Gap in Europe’s Periphery, Paris, 2024.

Conclusion: From Benchmark to Barometer

The **5 percent mandate** is not simply an accounting reform; it is a **strategic recalibration** of how NATO perceives power. On the southeastern flank, it turns attention toward the interdependence of capability and governance – tanks linked to trust, budgets tied to credibility.

The region's future hinges less on absolute spending than on how effectively each nation blends **financial discipline, institutional integrity, and public engagement**. In this sense, the Balkans may become a proving ground for NATO's broader experiment: can an alliance of unequal economies evolve a shared model of security through resilience-based investment?

If inequality widens, the new rule could undercut cohesion. But if it drives efficiency, transparency, and innovation, it may transform the Balkans from geopolitical periphery into evidence of NATO's adaptability. The essential equation endures: **it is not how much the Allies spend – but how wisely, fairly, and cooperatively they do so.**

WESTERN BALKANS - NATO



NATO's Weak Flank in South-Eastern Europe: Serbia's Rearmament, Hybrid Threats and Regional Instability

Eduard VASILJ (Croatia)

Common Security or Just a One-Sided Multibillion-Dollar Business?

In recent years, NATO has shifted much of its attention and resources to its eastern flank, with a focus on Poland and the Baltic states. The latest incidents of airspace violations and drone espionage ultimately led to joint actions, such as the creation of a European airspace and drone defence shield, as well as the Eastern Flank Watch Initiative. The southeastern flank, on the other hand, remains dangerously neglected, even though it faces a multidimensional threat scenario: political destabilisation, hybrid influence operations and Serbia's growing military capabilities, backed by foreign policy support from Moscow, Beijing and other partners.

Hybrid risks and political destabilisation in the region

The case studies are clear: in Montenegro, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces, in particular the Democratic Front including the New Serb Democracy (NOVA), have repeatedly attempted to influence elections and government formation.

These political currents have deepened social divisions and increased vulnerability to external attempts at control. Reports point to massive interference in the coup attempts of 2016 and 2022, which can be considered direct interventions in democratic processes. It should be noted that these parliamentary parties also have access to sensitive NATO information, as Montenegro is a NATO member, which could enable Russian or Serbian intelligence services to gain access. This situation poses an acute threat to NATO's security.

Bosnia and Herzegovina also remains fragile: the Republika Srpska and its political representative, Milorad Dodik, regularly fuel institutional tensions and jeopardise the fragile balance of the Dayton Agreement. Kosovo is also under severe pressure from Serbian and Russian destabilisation strategies, with Russia actively supporting Serbia at the international level, further strengthening Belgrade's room for manoeuvre.

Furthermore, hybrid influence operations and interference in the 2024 Romanian presidential elections clearly demonstrated how coordinated social media campaigns and opaque financial flows can undermine democratic processes; similar patterns were later observed in Moldova. This hybrid combination of domestic polarisation, foreign influence, and latent nationalist revanchism makes the south-eastern flank particularly vulnerable – precisely where NATO has so far concentrated comparatively few resources.



Source: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-natos-eastern-flank>

The Response to NATO Uncertainty: Regional Military Pacts

JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, which raised doubts about the reliability of US alliance commitments, triggered a significant response in Southeastern Europe. Several countries in the region quickly sought their own security guarantees and concluded bilateral or regional agreements: On 18 March 2025, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo signed a military cooperation agreement in Tirana governing joint exercises, logistics and strategic coordination; On 1 April 2025, NATO member Hungary and Serbia agreed on a military agreement, the practical consequences of which already included deliveries of BTR-80A armoured personnel carriers and several MIG29 fighter jets. On 5 September 2025, Slovenia and Croatia finally agreed on a bilateral defence agreement to strengthen joint operations.

These agreements are an expression of a deeper crisis of confidence in the alliance's supposed protective function and show how states in the region are seeking independent security guarantees. Serbian President Vučić's statement regarding his neighbours' military agreements speaks for itself: *"They have a strong NATO background. They expect Bulgaria to join them. And we must not be blind; similar alliances were formed in the same way before World War I. We must be aware of the intention, because someone did not do this to eat shrimp, but to work directly against the interests of the Serbian people."*

Serbia's Military Parade (20 September 2025): Domestic Intimidation and a Foreign Policy Signal

The military parade in Belgrade on 20 September 2025 was more than just a display of military might: it also served as a clear demonstration of domestic political power in response to a protest movement against the government that had been ongoing since December 2024. President Aleksandar Vučić uses national symbolism and military spectacle to stabilise his domestic political position; the concept of *'srpski svet'* ('Serbian world') provides the ideological framework for this. This domestic political logic is closely linked to foreign policy strategy: military strength and political intransigence are means of securing power and enforcing territorial ambitions vis-à-vis neighbours.

The concept of the *'srpski svet'* bears a strong resemblance to the ideology of the *'Russian Sphere'* and to the Greater Serbian wars of aggression in the 1990s. Notably, President Vučić remains the only active politician from that era, when he was a member of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) led by convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj. Fittingly, the parade also featured wartime flags of the Yugoslav People's Army.

Foreign Weapon Systems at the Parade

Various foreign weapon systems were presented at the parade, which, given their range, can be interpreted as a direct threat to neighbouring countries. However, the main attraction remained the products of Serbia's own arms industry, which has grown enormously in recent years and has now become one of the country's largest employers. It was particularly striking that modern systems also came from NATO countries such as France, which caused additional irritation in the region.

Among other things, French Dassault Rafale fighter jets (typical combat radius in the range of approximately 1,800–2,000 km), Israeli multiple rocket launchers (Elbit PULS/MLRS systems) with ranges of up to around 300 km, and Israeli MALE/reconnaissance drones (e.g., Hermes variants) with very high endurance and ranges. In addition, there were Chinese air defence systems such as FK 3 / HQ 22 with engagement ranges of approximately 100–170 km, as well as loitering and kamikaze drones from the United Arab Emirates (EDGE Group) with reported operational distances of over 200 km. The combination of Western, Israeli, Chinese, and Emirati systems creates operational versatility that significantly unsettles neighbouring countries in their strategic calculations. Russia remains, as always, a strategic and long-term supplier, with an imminent delivery of Tor-M2KM missile defence systems expected in Belgrade; in May this year, Kh-31 missiles were delivered to the Serbian Air Force.

Military Modernisation of Neighbouring Countries

As a direct response to Serbia's rearmament, NATO partners and partner countries in South-Eastern Europe have accelerated their own modernisation programmes and, in some cases, made concrete purchases.

Military spending in 2024 highlights the imbalance and rapid increase in defence spending compared to the previous year: Serbia spent around USD 2.32 billion (+10.5%), Croatia around USD 1.63 billion (+8.7%), Slovenia around USD 0.95 billion (+7.9%), Albania around USD 0.54 billion (+8%) and Kosovo around USD 0.17 billion (+6.25%).

Croatia is negotiating and procuring more modern tanks and long-range artillery; Leopard 2A8 battle tanks have been ordered from Germany and HIMARS systems from the United States, which have been named as central elements of the modernisation programme (for HIMARS types, practical precision ranges are in the region of up to around 300 km, depending on the missile used). The first Bayraktar drones from Turkey have already arrived, with Croatia continuing to expand its own drone capabilities. The establishment of a production facility for the manufacture of domestic ammunition has been envisaged.

Albania is also strengthening its reconnaissance and drone capabilities (including reports on Bayraktar types and additions of loitering munitions) to improve ISR capabilities and coastal/border security. Among other things, Javelin anti-tank missiles are being procured, with the country also planning to produce ammunition domestically.

Kosovo has strengthened its fleet of light armoured vehicles, communications and surveillance systems, and tactical drones; media reports also discuss the acquisition of multiple launch rocket systems to increase range. In the coming years, MLSRS/Black Hawk helicopters are also to be purchased.

Slovenia is modernising its artillery and air defence (reports mention modern howitzers and air defence projects, as well as supplementary reconnaissance systems such as IRIS-T). Slovenia is also investing in its air force and has ordered Leonardo AW139M multi-purpose helicopters.

These procurements are clearly a response to the changed threat situation, but at the same time, they entail high costs for the countries concerned and reinforce the perception that the alliance in the region is more interested in enabling arms purchases from its own producers than in providing immediate, visible guarantees of protection.

Political Consequences and Regional Uncertainty

The logical consequence of these developments is deep uncertainty in the neighbourhood: countries such as Croatia, Albania, Slovenia, and Kosovo are confronted not only with a revision of foreign policy, but also with a material shift in the military balance.

The fact that systems originating from NATO countries are appearing in Serbia, while Serbia at the same time maintains intensive relations with Russia and China, raises serious questions about export controls, political coherence, and the relationship between the arms industry and alliance security. Furthermore, the question remains unanswered as to how Russian weapons systems continue to find their way to Serbia via NATO territory despite the embargo.

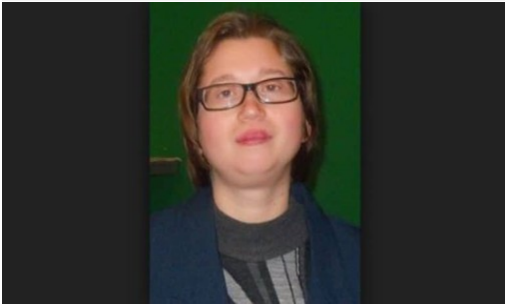
In the event of a crisis, governments in the region expect not only a functioning market and billion-pound contracts for the arms industry, but also clear and credible backing under Article 5 – in other words, concrete security guarantees from the alliance that are transparent in parliamentary and diplomatic terms. Without this political security, national modernisation programmes risk merely financing regional armament without actually ensuring political stability.

Conclusion

The south-eastern flank is not a marginal issue: the combination of hybrid influence, political polarisation in countries such as Montenegro, the ongoing destabilisation strategy towards Kosovo, diplomatic backing from Russia, and Serbia's accelerated rearmament with systems from both East and West creates a serious, multi-layered strategic problem.

A credible, coordinated, and visible European-Transatlantic response is therefore urgently needed; otherwise, the region risks turning into an instrument of external power projection with direct security implications for NATO itself. The question is whether this is genuinely about common security or merely about sustaining an annual military business worth between five and seven billion dollars.

WESTERN BALKANS - NORTH MACEDONIA



North Macedonia on the Edge of the Abyss: Between Identity Revenge, Ethno-Fracture and the Dangerous Flirtation With the Serbian-Russian Axis

Mona AGRIGOROAIEI (Romania)

North Macedonia is going through one of the most complex and challenging periods in its post-Ohrid history, and the country's internal dynamics reflect deep-seated tensions that threaten not only political stability but also the social and ethnic cohesion of the state. Although North Macedonia has been a NATO member since 2020 and formally declares itself pro-European, the internal reality contrasts sharply with these official declarations. In recent months, the society and political class in Skopje have witnessed a series of events that highlight the fragility of institutions and the vulnerability of the state to external pressures.

At the heart of this complexity are the historical ethnic tensions between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority, which, although representing about a quarter of the population, exerts a disproportionate influence on domestic politics. The Albanian minority is not a homogeneous bloc: the main party, DUI (Democratic Union for Integration), coexists and competes with other formations, such as VLEN (a coalition representing the Albanian minority), creating a fragmentation that complicates political negotiations and government decisions. This ethnic fragmentation intersects with a volatile electoral reality, in which political alliances change rapidly, and governments often become unstable or unable to implement coherent structural reforms.

In parallel, North Macedonia is also subject to external geopolitical pressures, being located in an extremely sensitive region, between the interests of the great European power, traditional Russian influences and the projections of Turkey or other regional actors. This combination of factors makes the country more of a geopolitical and diplomatic testing ground than a consolidated state with strong institutions. External interventions, whether diplomatic, economic or media, add to internal instability, accentuating the feeling of vulnerability and political fragmentation. To fully understand the current dynamics, it is necessary to take a chronological look at North Macedonia's evolution since the signing of the Ohrid Agreement in 2001, which ended the armed conflict between Macedonian and Albanian forces. The agreement established the principles of a more balanced coexistence and introduced political and administrative reforms aimed at ensuring increased rights for minorities, but their implementation has often been inconsistent and marked by tensions. In the following years, the transition to a functioning democracy has been slowed by internal political conflicts, endemic corruption, and the lack of a real consensus on development priorities.



Source: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/19122024-the-western-balkans-at-a-crossroads-an-old-war-from-in-new-geopolitical-compositions-part-ii-oped/>

Thus, Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, today seems more like a political and social laboratory than a metropolis of a stable state. For external observers, this situation raises serious questions about the country's European future and its ability to navigate between internal and external pressures. In the absence of coherent policies and genuine interethnic dialogue, North Macedonia risks remaining in a state of prolonged uncertainty, in which symbolic progress and accession to international organizations do not automatically translate into lasting internal stability. North Macedonia's path to its current political and ethnic crisis unfolds as a complex arc of historical, electoral-political, and geopolitical tensions, with each stage closely linked to its predecessors and external pressures. In 2001, the country witnessed one of the most dramatic crises in its post-independence history: the armed confrontation between Albanian insurgents and state forces. The fighting in Tetovo, Kumanovo and the Skopje region threatened to escalate into a general conflict, and the stability of the state was seriously endangered. The intervention of the international community, through NATO and the OSCE, was decisive in de-escalating the situation, and the negotiations led to the signing of the Ohrid Agreement, a document that represented a delicate compromise between the sovereignty of the state and the demands of the Albanian minority. The agreement provided for proportional representation of Albanians in institutions, expanded language rights, and reforms in local administration and the police. However, from the very beginning, implementation was formal and fragmented, as mutual distrust and divergent political interests undermined the effective application of the provisions.

Between 2002 and 2007, the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement continued to be slow and inconsistent. Coalition governments used the provisions of the Agreement more as an electoral tool than as a real guarantee for the Albanian minority. This period was characterized by a fragile balance: the Macedonian majority consolidated its power and identity discourse, and the Albanian parties, led by DUI, were internally conflicted, their fragmentation limiting the effectiveness of negotiations. The result was a formal stability, but with latent tensions, in which each reform or administrative decision was perceived as a political gain or as a threat to the ethnic identity of the others.

In the period 2008–2016, the government of Nikola Gruevski brought a significant change in the way the Agreement was implemented. VMRO-DPMNE partially used the provisions of the Agreement to consolidate the Macedonian majority, presenting respect for the rights of the Albanian minority as a symbolic gesture in election campaigns. In reality, the reforms were often implemented selectively, as a political bargaining chip. This period was marked by heightened polarization, control over the media, and political administration of the state, culminating in major scandals related to illegal wiretapping and corruption, which severely weakened public trust in institutions. The forced resignation of N. Gruevski in 2016 opened a window for resetting interethnic relations and for more consensual governance.

In the period 2017–2020, the SDSM-DUI coalitions attempted to relaunch interethnic dialogue, adopting measures such as the law on the Albanian language at the national level, which gave the Albanian minority a more solid legal and administrative status. However, this period was complicated by the change of the country's name in 2018, following the agreement with Greece, which aroused strong resentment among the Macedonian majority, who perceived the change as a threat to national identity. In parallel, Bulgaria's blockages in the European process have heightened the sense of isolation and fueled sovereignist discourses, highlighting that European integration remains fragile and dependent on external factors. At this stage, Albanian parties have continued to be divided: DUI and other smaller formations are trying to negotiate compromises, but there are internal tensions over political strategies and alliances.

The VMRO-DPMNE victory in 2024 marked a turning point. The government led by Hristijan Mickoski brought back to power a sovereignist discourse, emphasizing national autonomy and reducing the visibility of ethnic compromises. In parallel, foreign relations were recalibrated: Skopje appropriated ties with Serbia and adopted tones more compatible with Russian rhetoric, which raised questions about its European orientation and relations with NATO. In this context, the **VLEN Coalition** became the central actor in Albanian politics, consolidating the fragmented unity of the minority. VLEN, consisting of Alternativa, BESA, Lëvizja Demokratike and the Alliance for Albanians, adopted strong positions against DUI, criticizing its collaboration with SDSM and rejecting any compromise that could weaken the autonomy and rights of the Albanian community.

VLEN developed strategic relations with Kosovo, aiming not only at diplomatic and economic support, but also at the cultural consolidation of the Albanian community in North Macedonia. This cross-border connection has given it legitimacy among the Albanian electorate, especially in cities with a majority or significant Albanian population, such as Tetovo, Gostivar and Kumanovo. This dynamic has accentuated political fragmentation, increasing polarization between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority and making interethnic dialogue more difficult than ever.

Thus, the course of North Macedonia can be understood as a succession of ethnic crises, political maneuvers and external influences that, cumulatively, have led to the current situation of instability. Each Albanian government and coalition has added its own dimension: from the formal use of the Ohrid Agreement, to the consolidation of the identity and sovereignty discourse, to cross-border alliances that modify the internal power relations. The result is a country that, despite its NATO membership and European aspirations, remains extremely vulnerable, a political and geopolitical testing ground, where stability depends more on the delicate balance of alliances than on state institutions.

VLEN's links to what is often referred to as the "Serbian world" are subtle but highly significant in the context of regional politics and internal power plays in North Macedonia. This Albanian coalition does not show direct sympathy for Belgrade's political or nationalist agenda, but uses its connections with conservative and nationalist Serbian parties, cross-border economic networks, and religious and media-religious institutions to test the waters of a regional alliance that could counterbalance Western pressures, especially those coming from Brussels and NATO. This strategy is pragmatic and calculated: Serbia offers a model of ethnic and regional negotiations in which external conditionality is reduced, and examples of compromise and local adaptation can be used as a benchmark by VLEN to consolidate its domestic position and create a negotiating pole independent of Skopje. In practice, the Albanian coalition uses these channels to demonstrate that it has political autonomy and the ability to influence the domestic and regional agenda without being exclusively dependent on the central government or Western actors.

This strategic interaction with Serbia is not limited to simple diplomatic contacts. VLEN explores economic ties and business networks that cross the border, facilitating trade flows and investments that strengthen its authority in cities with significant Albanian populations, such as Tetovo, Gostivar and Kumanovo. In parallel, collaborations with religious and media-religious institutions in Serbia contribute to the consolidation of a cross-border cultural identity, providing electoral legitimacy and symbolic support in front of the Albanian electorate. These tactics allow VLEN to build its image as a defender of the Albanian community, in opposition to both the DUI, perceived as a compromiser, and the Macedonian majority, perceived as restrictive and rigid.

The linguistic and constitutional conflict, which was a symbol of post-Ohrid tensions, was reignited with the Constitutional Court's decision to re-evaluate some passages of the Albanian language law adopted in 2018. This law, which gave the Albanian minority a consolidated status in the administration and public system, is interpreted differently by political actors: for DUI, any modification or reinterpretation represents a direct threat to post-Ohrid stability, the risk being the diminution of the role of the Albanian minority in local and central government. For VLEN, however, this situation represents a strategic opportunity: the coalition positions itself as the main defender of Albanian rights, demonstrating firmness and gaining the support of the electorate dissatisfied with DUI's concessions. The Macedonian majority, on the other hand, perceives any concession as an attack on the cultural and identity sovereignty of the state, and the result is a deep polarization that no longer remains symbolic, but translates into legislative blockages, urban protests and concrete risks of destabilizing the central government.

The electoral analysis of recent years confirms these trends. In the 2016 elections, the SDSM-DUI coalition had built a fragile but sufficient majority for governance, but this was sustainable only through constant compromises and by maintaining a delicate balance between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. Between 2018 and 2020, the SDSM's loss of credibility on the issue of changing the country's name and external compromises gradually eroded the support of the Macedonian majority. In 2024, VMRO-DPMNE gained considerable ground in the traditionally Macedonian regions, consolidating the sovereignist discourse, while VLEN attracted the Albanian electorate disillusioned with DUI, fragmenting the political scene and increasing interethnic tension. This electoral reconfiguration not only strengthens the sovereignism of the majority, but also creates internal fault lines that can be exploited by external actors to influence government decisions and the legislative agenda.

Geopolitically, the combination of the VMRO-DPMNE government, VLEN's pragmatic relations with Serbia, and the rise of the Albanian coalition create an extremely volatile terrain. Serbia and, indirectly, Moscow, use these cracks to promote anti-Western narratives and undermine trust in NATO and the EU. Moscow, through diplomatic channels and regional media, fuels discourses that question the benefits of joining Euro-Atlantic structures and amplify the identity fears of the Macedonian majority. At the same time, VLEN's support for Kosovo and its cross-border ties creates a strategic counterpoint: legitimacy for the Albanian community and a pole of pressure in internal negotiations with the government in Skopje, forcing the authorities to accept political and administrative concessions in order to maintain stability.

Internally, these tensions are also manifested in a strong politicization of public institutions and local

administration. Legislative deadlocks, frequent changes of local governments, and external party pressures on administrative decisions increase instability and create an environment in which major political decisions are often postponed or compromised. In addition, the media, including online platforms and religious channels, play an active role in propagating political and ethnic narratives, accentuating polarization and the difficulties of interethnic dialogue. This dynamic makes North Macedonia's stability depend more on the delicate balance of internal and regional alliances than on the strength of formal institutions, transforming the country into an extremely vulnerable terrain to external influences, but also to internal tensions.

Overall, the combination of the rise of VLEN, the consolidation of VMRO-DPMNE's sovereignist discourse, pragmatic ties with Serbia, and external pressures represents a complex mix of factors that amplify the state's fragility. Every electoral, legal or political decision has consequences that are felt at the local, national and regional levels, and North Macedonia remains, despite its NATO membership and European aspirations, an extremely volatile terrain, a laboratory of ethnic and geopolitical politics, in which stability depends on negotiation skills and maintaining a very fragile balance between ethnic groups and regional actors.

This complicated equation, although formally framed within NATO and EU parameters, reveals how fragile North Macedonia's political balance is and how much its stability depends on the delicate interplay between internal and external forces. Any setback in the rights of the Albanian minority could reignite tensions similar to those of 2001, while any escalation of Macedonian sovereignty discourse could trigger legislative gridlocks, urban protests, or even governance crises. Strategic ambiguity or the inability to negotiate sensitive compromises quickly becomes an invitation for Serbia and Russia to extend their influence through political, cultural, and economic channels, exploiting ethnic fissures and institutional vulnerabilities.

Essentially, North Macedonia is caught between three main forces: the Macedonian majority, which claims sovereignty and controls central institutions; the Albanian minority, fragmented between the DUI and the emerging VLEN coalition; and external actors testing internal weaknesses to extend their influence in the region. This combination of factors creates an extremely unstable terrain, where any imbalance can quickly transform political and identity tensions into acute crises. The lesson of the last 25 years is clear: any crisis not transformed into a sustainable consensus can turn into a disguised strategic reorientation, and North Macedonia risks becoming a testing ground for external influences if it does not simultaneously manage national identity, ethnic balance, and geopolitics.

The simultaneous rise of VMRO-DPMNE and the Albanian VLEN coalition has created an unprecedented political context. VMRO-DPMNE, through its sovereignist rhetoric, has reconfigured the Macedonian political scene, reasserting control over the identity discourse and consolidating central institutions in the face of minority pressures. In parallel, VLEN reconfigured the Albanian political scene, appealing to voters dissatisfied with the DUI, strengthening strategic ties with Kosovo, and testing the influence of Serbian political, economic, and cultural networks, thus creating a pole of power that operates almost independently of the central government. The interaction between these two forces, in the context of external pressures, generates a complex network of negotiations, alliances, and confrontations, in which each decision has direct implications for the country's internal stability and European trajectory.

The chronology of events in North Macedonia between 2001 and 2025 outlines an arc of political tensions and recalibrations that explains the current fracture. In 2001, the armed confrontation between Albanian insurgents and state forces culminated in the Ohrid Agreement, intended to stabilize the country through proportional quotas in institutions, linguistic rights, and administrative reforms for the Albanian minority. During the period 2002–2007, the implementation of the provisions was slow and inconsistent, affected by mutual distrust and political manipulation, while tensions remained latent in regions such as Tetovo, Gostivar and Kumanovo, cities where the Albanian minority represented a significant part of the population.

Between 2008 and 2016, the government of Nikola Gruevski used the Ohrid Agreement partly as a tool to consolidate the Macedonian majority and as a bargaining chip for fragile parliamentary coalitions. During this period, political and ethnic polarization was accentuated by control over the media, state administration, and illegal wiretapping scandals, which weakened public trust in institutions. Gruevski's resignation in 2016 opened a window for resetting interethnic dialogue.

In the period 2017–2020, the SDSM-DUI coalition attempted to relaunch interethnic dialogue by adopting **the law on languages at the national level**, giving the Albanian minority a more solid legal and administrative status. In parallel, the name change negotiations in 2018, following the agreement with Greece, caused dissatisfaction among the Macedonian majority, perceived as a threat to national identity. Between 2019 and 2022, Bulgarian pressure on constitutional amendments and the stagnation of the European path have increased the sense of frustration, and the sovereignist rhetoric of VMRO-DPMNE has regained ground among the majority population.

The 2024 elections represented a turning point. VMRO-DPMNE gained power, marking the beginning of an era of **consolidated sovereignty** and selective regional dialogue, especially with Serbia and, indirectly, with Moscow. In parallel, the Albanian coalition VLEN has asserted itself as an independent political force, critical of the DUI, attracting the disaffected electorate and strengthening ties with Kosovo for diplomatic, economic and cultural support. This combination has created an extremely fragile balance, in which the Macedonian majority, the Albanian minority and external actors are caught in a complex game of influence, pressure and strategic negotiations.

Against this background, the risks to internal stability are multiple. Any setback in the rights of the Albanian minority could provoke urban protests and political mobilizations similar to those of 2001. Any misstep by the Macedonian government or Albanian coalitions could escalate tensions and cause legislative gridlock. At the same time, strategic ambiguity or the inability to manage the ethnic balance could turn North Macedonia into a testing ground for external influences from Serbia, Russia, or other regional actors.

North Macedonia, through the dynamics of the rise of VMRO-DPMNE and VLEN, through its subtle flirtation with Serbia and through the strategic ties of the Albanians with Kosovo, is at a crossroads that may decide not only its European trajectory, but also its ability to maintain internal cohesion and avoid reactivating past violence. This combination of factors – fragmented domestic politics, external pressures, linguistic and identity tensions – makes every decision matter, and any misstep could transform an identity crisis into a geopolitical reconfiguration that will mark the future of North Macedonia for decades to come.

The VMRO-DPMNE victory in 2024 marked a fundamental turning point in North Macedonian politics, bringing a strong sovereignist discourse back to power and profoundly redefining the government agenda. Under the leadership of Hristijan Mickoski, the government adopted a strategy focused on strengthening national identity, reaffirming the authority of central institutions, and promoting a pragmatic foreign policy, but clearly oriented towards protecting Macedonian interests. In parallel, relations with Serbia were calibrated to maximize economic and political gains, while maintaining tones compatible with Russian rhetoric, especially in the energy and infrastructure fields. This approach was perceived internally as a clear signal of protecting sovereignty and cultural identity, but it also sent a message abroad: North Macedonia is capable of managing regional relations autonomously, without submitting to Western pressure. Domestically, the government had to navigate an extremely delicate context, marked by persistent ethnic tensions. The Albanian minority, still influenced by the post-Ohrid precedent, represents a significant part of the population, concentrated in cities such as Tetovo, Gostivar, and Kumanovo. In these areas, Albanian political leaders continue to exert considerable influence on local decision-making and public opinion, forcing the majority government to find the balance between reaffirming sovereignty and maintaining internal stability.

Ethnic polarization was exacerbated by legislative and constitutional disputes, especially over languages and the administrative rights of the Albanian minority. Constitutional Court decisions that reassessed certain provisions of post-Ohrid legislation reignited old tensions. The government, supported by VMRO-DPMNE, approached these decisions cautiously, maintaining its sovereign position and rejecting any concessions perceived as a surrender of state authority. In parallel, the Albanian minority and its political leaders continued to exert pressure to maintain and expand their rights, which led to a series of complex negotiations, local protests, and temporary legislative blockages.

From a geopolitical perspective, the VMRO-DPMNE victory reconfirmed the importance of North Macedonia as a strategically sensitive terrain in the Balkans. Pragmatic relations with Serbia were maintained, aiming at economic, infrastructural and energy cooperation, while ties with Kosovo continued to be carefully monitored to avoid escalating internal tensions. Russia, through diplomatic and media channels, sought to exploit sovereignist rhetoric to undermine Western influence and increase skepticism towards NATO and the EU. In this context, VMRO-DPMNE had to balance between maintaining decision-making autonomy, avoiding international isolation and preventing the escalation of interethnic tensions.

Legislative blockages and urban mobilizations continued to be an everyday reality. The government had to carefully manage the adoption of necessary reforms in administration, education and local politics, so as not to cause major dissatisfaction among the Albanian minority. At the same time, any decision considered a concession to external or internal pressures risked being perceived as weakness, fueling opposition rhetoric and reducing popular support.

Thus, the post-2024 period is characterized by a complex interdependence between consolidating internal sovereignty, managing the Albanian minority, and carefully navigating external relations. North Macedonia's internal stability, social cohesion, and European trajectory directly depend on the government's ability to negotiate sensitive compromises, maintain institutional authority, and control the political, media, and cultural narratives that influence both the majority and the minority. Every legislative decision, every diplomatic step,

and every public communication gesture is closely monitored and can have direct effects on the country's fragile balance.

The VMRO-DPMNE victory in 2024 was not only a political change, but also a reconfirmation of North Macedonia's role as a strategic point in the Balkans. Mickoski's sovereigntist governance, coordinated with the strategic influence of other leaders, manages an extremely volatile terrain, where the balance between identity, ethnic cohesion and foreign relations is essential for maintaining stability in the medium and long term. North Macedonia has entered a phase in which the success of the government depends on the ability to simultaneously juggle internal tensions and regional pressures, and any error or hesitation can quickly transform a latent conflict into a major political crisis.

The electoral analysis confirms this trend and reveals how domestic political developments have been closely linked to perceptions of foreign policy and national identity.

In the 2016 elections, SDSM and DUI managed to build a fragile but functional majority based on the promise of implementing reforms and maintaining the post-Ohrid balance. However, this coalition was vulnerable to external factors and to public perception of the compromises accepted in international negotiations, especially in the name talks with Greece and constitutional reform.

The coalition's fragile majority was structurally exposed to pressures on the international stage, especially those aimed at accelerating the European path and NATO integration. In parallel, domestic perceptions of national identity, minority rights and local autonomy were very sensitive to any adjustment perceived as a forced compromise. In this context, the electoral support of the Macedonian majority proved extremely volatile, responding not only to promises of reform, but also to narratives related to sovereignty, cohesion and the protection of national values.

Between 2018 and 2020, the SDSM government's loss of credibility over the name change and other external compromises gradually eroded the support of the Macedonian majority. Frustration with the perception that national sovereignty was being undermined fueled the sovereigntist rhetoric subsequently promoted by VMRO-DPMNE, which managed to capitalize on identity grievances and reconsolidate the traditional Macedonian electorate. This strategy was supported by effective mobilization in historical Macedonian areas, such as Skopje, Bitola, Prilep or Veles, where the sovereigntist message resonated strongly, especially among the urban population and the middle-class electorate, sensitive to economic problems and the perception of losing control over state institutions. The sovereigntist rhetoric also emphasized national symbols, the memory of past conflicts and the reaffirmation of a sense of historical continuity, creating an emotional framework that consolidated support for VMRO-DPMNE.

The 2024 elections reinforced this trend: VMRO-DPMNE gained significant ground in traditional Macedonian areas, but also in urban communities where dissatisfaction with previous compromises translated into votes for the sovereigntist party. At the same time, the Albanian political scene became more fragmented, accentuating the complexity of the legislative process and the difficulties of governing. The Albanian minority, dissatisfied with the DUI and its handling of compromises with the SDSM, began to reorganize, attracting new leaders and coalitions that demanded stronger and more independent representation. This fragmentation not only increased electoral polarization, but also introduced an additional layer of complexity in the negotiation of ethnic and legislative policies, making the process of governing more difficult and creating internal fault lines that can be quickly exploited by external actors or domestic political groups with specific agendas.

Geopolitically, the combination of the VMRO-DPMNE government, pragmatic relations with Serbia, and the reconfiguration of the Albanian scene creates an extremely volatile terrain. Serbia, through diplomatic, economic, and cultural channels, as well as indirectly through Russian influence, aims to exploit internal fissures to promote anti-Western narratives and amplify distrust in NATO and the EU. These interventions are not only direct from a military or political point of view, but also symbolic and cultural, aiming to build a climate of skepticism among the Macedonian population, but also among the Albanian minority, in order to influence government decisions and the country's strategic alignment. At the same time, international pressure from the EU and NATO remains constant, demanding administrative reforms, strengthening the rule of law, and maintaining an ethnic balance, which increases the pressure on the sovereigntist government.

The support and ties of the Albanian minority to Kosovo create a strategic counterpoint: on the one hand, they lend legitimacy to minority policies and demands, and on the other hand, they provide a pole of pressure in internal negotiations with the majority government. This dynamic generates a delicate balance: the government must protect sovereignty and institutional integrity, but must simultaneously negotiate sensitively to avoid escalating ethnic tensions and administrative destabilization. This double pressure emphasizes the importance of political communication strategies, internal diplomacy, and legislative compromise mechanisms.

This complicated equation, although formally framed within NATO and EU parameters, highlights the

fragility of North Macedonia's political structure. Every perceived setback in the rights of the Albanian minority can reignite 2001-style tensions, and every intensification of Macedonian sovereignty discourse can trigger legislative blockages, urban protests, or even government crises. In addition, any strategic ambiguity or hesitation in managing foreign relations is an invitation for Serbia and Russia to expand their influence through political, cultural, and economic channels, which transforms the internal situation into a testing ground for the state's resilience. Thus, North Macedonia finds itself caught between three main forces: the Macedonian majority that claims sovereignty and controls state institutions, the fragmented Albanian minority that seeks stronger representation, and external actors that constantly test internal vulnerabilities. Ethnic cleavage, political reconfiguration and regional games make internal stability more fragile than ever, and the history of the last 25 years clearly shows that any crisis not transformed into consensus can quickly evolve into a disguised strategic reorientation, transforming North Macedonia into a testing ground for external influences if identity, ethnic balance and foreign policy are not managed simultaneously.

North Macedonia, through the rise of VMRO-DPMNE and VLEN, through the subtle flirtation with Serbia and through the strategic ties of the Albanians with Kosovo, is at a crossroads that may decide not only its European trajectory, but also its ability to maintain internal cohesion and avoid reactivating the ghosts of past violence. Every wrong step risks transforming an identity crisis into a geopolitical reconfiguration that will definitively mark the future of this fragile country. The chronology of events in North Macedonia between 2001 and 2025 outlines a line of political tensions and recalibrations that explain the current fracture. In 2001, the armed confrontation between Albanian insurgents and state forces culminated in the Ohrid Agreement, a pact designed to stabilize the country through proportional quotas in institutions and linguistic rights for the Albanian minority. This agreement represented an attempt at reconciliation, but its implementation was marked by structural difficulties and latent tensions.

In the immediate period between 2002 and 2007, the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement provisions was slow, often superficial, marked by mutual distrust between Macedonian and Albanian parties, but also by political manipulations that exploited local grievances. Regions such as Tetovo, Gostivar or Kumanovo remained epicenters of ethnic tensions, with periodic protests and local conflicts reflecting the lack of effective implementation and the feeling that the state was failing to ensure the balance between the majority and the minority.

Between 2008 and 2016, the government of Nikola Gruevski implemented the Partial Agreement, using it more as a tool to consolidate the Macedonian majority and as a bargaining chip in negotiations for fragile parliamentary coalitions. During this period, VMRO-DPMNE consolidated its electoral base through messages of stability and economic prosperity, but in parallel, ethnic fractures remained unresolved. The instrumentalization of the Ohrid Agreement created a perception among the Albanian minority that their rights were being undermined, and this generated fertile ground for future political reconfigurations and the emergence of new actors on the Albanian scene.

After the wiretapping scandals of 2015–2016 and Gruevski's resignation, the political scene entered a phase of recalibration. The SDSM-DUI coalition attempted to revive interethnic dialogue by adopting the Albanian language law at the national level, in parallel with the negotiations to change the country's name in 2018. This period was criticized by the Macedonian majority, who perceived the compromise on the name and the expansion of minority rights as an undermining of national identity and sovereignty. Although the government's actions were intended to strengthen the European path and NATO integration, they were interpreted by the traditional Macedonian electorate as evidence of a loss of control over domestic politics.

Between 2019 and 2022, Bulgarian pressure on constitutional amendments, the stagnation of the European path, and domestic economic problems increased the feeling of frustration and distrust in the SDSM government. In this context, VMRO-DPMNE and its sovereigntist rhetoric began to regain ground. The party promoted a discourse centered on protecting national identity, strengthening state institutions, and criticizing perceived disadvantageous external compromises. Electoral mobilization was concentrated both in large cities, such as Skopje and Bitola, and in rural areas, where messages about sovereignty and cultural continuity had a strong impact.

This dynamic intensified until 2024, when VMRO-DPMNE achieved a significant electoral victory, consolidating its base in traditional Macedonian areas and attracting votes from segments of the urban population dissatisfied with the compromises of the past. In parallel, the Albanian political scene experienced a sharp fragmentation, with the rise of new leaders and coalitions that challenged the DUI and promoted a more independent and firmer representation of the Albanian community. This change brought additional complexity to the legislative process and transformed interethnic negotiations into a delicate balancing act between state stability and minority demands.

Geopolitically, the situation became particularly volatile. Serbia and, indirectly, Russia used these fissures to amplify distrust in European institutions and NATO, promoting narratives that undermined internal cohesion and destabilized the political balance. In parallel, the Albanians' strategic ties with Kosovo confer legitimacy and support to minority policies, creating a pole of pressure in negotiations with the majority government and highlighting the vulnerability of the Macedonian political structure.

Thus, between 2001 and 2025, North Macedonia went through a continuous cycle of tensions, recalibrations and political reconfigurations, which explains the current fracture: the balance between majority and minority remains extremely fragile, and each political decision or strategic compromise can trigger chain effects. The European trajectory, internal stability and social cohesion now depend on the leaders' ability to simultaneously navigate between internal pressures, minority claims and external influences, in a context in which recent history functions as a guide and a warning for the risks of destabilization.

The 2024 elections brought VMRO-DPMNE to power, marking not just a simple political alternation, but the beginning of an era in which Macedonian sovereignty becomes the core of the government agenda. This orientation is not limited to symbolic discourses, but involves concrete actions to consolidate political control over key state institutions, review agreements perceived as compromising national sovereignty, and promote a rhetoric that responds to the identity grievances of the traditional electorate. VMRO-DPMNE capitalized on resentments related to the Prespa agreement and tensions with Bulgaria, transforming them into a coherent electoral platform, aimed at reconsolidating support in the historical Macedonian regions and redefining the citizen's relationship with the state.

At the same time, the Albanian coalition VLEN reconfigured the minority political scene, appealing to voters dissatisfied with the DUI and emphasizing local autonomy, linguistic rights, and strengthening ties with Kosovo. This dynamization of the Albanian minority introduced additional complexity into the legislative process, as the majority government must simultaneously negotiate with several actors with divergent interests, each with its own electoral legitimacy. The fragmentation of the minority has transformed the Parliament into a terrain where decisions can no longer be imposed unilaterally without major political risks, and negotiations become procedural, long, and often tense.

The electoral analysis by region highlights a sharp polarization: VMRO-DPMNE gained ground in the east and north of the country, where historical resentments over international compromises are strong, thus consolidating an urban and rural voting bloc in cities such as Skopje, Bitola, Prilep, or Veles. In parallel, VLEN has gained influence in cities with significant Albanian populations—Tetovo, Gostivar, and Kumanovo—transforming these urban centers into epicenters of political, cultural, and symbolic mobilization. This configuration not only fragments the Parliament, but also amplifies ethnic tensions, as each legislative or administrative decision can be perceived as a unilateral advantage for one side or as an identity threat for the other.

Foreign relations play a decisive role in this equation. Selective dialogue with Serbia offers a model of pragmatic regional negotiation, based on limited compromises and economic and cultural cooperation without direct external pressure. In parallel, Russia exploits anti-Western narratives, promoting skepticism towards NATO and the EU, thus accentuating the perception of internal vulnerability and stimulating sovereignist rhetoric. This context makes every move of the government — from legislative decisions to diplomatic statements — closely monitored, not only by the country's citizens, but also by external actors seeking to maximize influence in the region. At the same time, VLEN's support for Kosovo constitutes a pole of strategic pressure on the government, which must balance between legitimizing minority claims and protecting the prerogatives of the majority.

Legislative blockages, political mobilizations, and urban protests become concrete tools of negotiation and pressure, transforming the domestic political scene into a strategic testing ground. Every misstep, whether it be setbacks in respecting minority rights or excessive sovereignist rhetoric, can trigger chain reactions — from parliamentary contestations and urban protests to regional tensions involving Serbia or Moscow. Thus, domestic stability depends not only on the government's administrative competence, but also on its ability to anticipate electoral reactions, mediate ethnic conflicts, and simultaneously manage multiple external pressures. In essence, the post-2024 election period marks a turning point. Domestic political balance can no longer be maintained solely through traditional coalitions or historical compromises; the success of governance depends on the leaders' ability to navigate between majority sovereignty, Albanian minority claims, and external geopolitical influences. Every legislative, administrative or diplomatic decision has the potential to cause ripple effects, affecting the internal stability, ethnic cohesion and European path of North Macedonia. In this context, the country functions as an extremely delicate system, in which the balance between identity, autonomy and geopolitics determines not only the success of governance, but also the strategic future of the region.

It remains an extremely complex focal point in the Western Balkans, and post-2024 developments have accentuated the fragility of the internal political structure and its strategic interdependence. VMRO-DPMNE's rise to power marked a stage of consolidated sovereignty and redefinition of foreign policy, in particular through selective dialogue with Serbia and, indirectly, with Moscow. This orientation offers the government options for maneuver on the external stage, but at the same time opens vulnerabilities that can be exploited by actors with divergent interests. In parallel, the Albanian coalition VLEN has reconfigured the minority political scene, building strategic ties with Kosovo for diplomatic and economic support, but also exploring subtle relationships with Serbian political, cultural and economic networks, to strengthen its position in internal negotiations. This interdependence generates a testing ground for external influences, where every legislative or administrative decision can be quickly exploited to destabilize the internal balance. Serbia, through political, economic and religious contacts, offers a model of pragmatic regional negotiations, free from external pressures, while Russia exploits internal vulnerabilities to amplify anti-Western narratives and skepticism towards NATO and the EU, transforming internal politics into a geopolitical laboratory, with major risks for ethnic stability and state cohesion. are shaping up as critical periods, marked by a convergence of internal and external factors that may determine the political and strategic future of North Macedonia. Any setback in respecting the Ohrid Agreement could reignite 2001-style tensions, while the intensification of Macedonian nationalist discourse risks triggering urban protests, legislative blockages, and even government crises. Strategic ambiguity can be quickly exploited by Serbia and Russia, while the VLEN coalition, through its support for Kosovo and its subtle connections to Serbian networks, becomes an actor capable of shaping the ethnic and political balance, forcing the government to constantly juggle between consolidating the sovereignty of the majority and respecting the rights of the Albanian minority. In this context, internal stability depends not only on the government's capacity to implement coherent policies, but also on the ability to mediate latent conflicts and anticipate the reactions of external partners. Looking back, from the armed crisis of 2001 and the adoption of the Ohrid Agreement, to the name change in 2018, Bulgarian pressures on constitutional amendments and European blockages, to the rise of VMRO-DPMNE and the consolidation of VLEN, an arc of tensions is emerging that is constantly accumulating and reactivating. This chronology reveals that North Macedonia can no longer be understood only as a NATO member state or as a formal pro-European actor, but as a space where national identity, domestic politics and regional geopolitics intersect in an extremely volatile picture. The government's capacity to maintain internal cohesion, to negotiate effectively with external actors and to prevent the reactivation of ethnic conflicts is being tested more than ever, and each decision may have long-term consequences, affecting not only the internal balance, but also North Macedonia's position in the region. Looking at the scenarios for the coming years, up to 2030, the situation can evolve in several directions. In the most optimistic scenario, the VMRO-DPMNE government manages to maintain a balance between the sovereignty of the majority and the rights of the Albanian minority, VLEN remains an actor involved in constructive negotiations, and the external influence of Serbia and Russia is managed through a firm diplomatic dialogue and continued alignment with European standards. This option would strengthen the country's European path, reduce the risk of ethnic conflict, and allow for the economic and institutional development of North Macedonia. For the region, North Macedonia serves as a barometer of post-conflict fragility and ethnic and geopolitical interdependencies.

Stability or instability in Skopje has the potential to influence the entire Balkan Peninsula, from migratory and economic flows, to strategic alignments and diplomatic relations between neighboring states and Western partners. The success of the Macedonian government in maintaining internal cohesion, the European path and a balanced dialogue with external actors has implications not only for North Macedonia, but can significantly contribute to the stability of the entire region, to energy and economic security and to the consolidation of Western influence in the Western Balkans. Thus, the post-2024 period marks for North Macedonia not only an internal political recalibration, but also a crucial phase for defining its strategic position in the region. In a context of complex interdependencies and multiple external pressures, the decisions of the government in Skopje will have long-term consequences, and the ability to navigate between internal and external interests, to manage political fragmentation and to prevent the reactivation of ethnic tensions will determine not only the future of North Macedonia, but also the stability and security of the entire Balkan space, with a direct impact on Romania and its strategic partners. In an intermediate scenario, ethnic tensions and political fragmentation would continue to generate legislative blockages and periodic instability, with the government alternating between concessions and measures to consolidate sovereignty, while external actors test internal vulnerabilities to promote their own interests. In this case, the European path would be affected, and the latent instability could generate significant economic and social pressures, with an impact on investments and regional cooperation. In the pessimistic scenario, the intensification of the Macedonian nationalist discourse, combined with the

escalation of internal rivalries among the Albanian minority and the subtle intervention of external actors, could lead to a major political crisis, the reactivation of 2001-type tensions and even the partial destabilization of state institutions. This option would amplify regional fragility, reduce North Macedonia's credibility with Western partners and transform the country into a testing ground for external influences, with direct effects on the security and stability of the entire Balkan space. The relevance of this situation for Romania is obvious. Romania, as a NATO member state and an actor involved in the stability of the Western Balkans, has a direct interest in maintaining a climate of security and cohesion in North Macedonia. Internal instability in Skopje can influence ethnic minorities in neighboring states, affect security flows, and diminish the effectiveness of regional cooperation in the economic and energy fields. Romania must monitor political developments and support European mediation and consolidation mechanisms, thus contributing to preventing the escalation of tensions and protecting strategic interests in the region.

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Georgios KOUKAKIS is a graduate of the Hellenic Military Academy (2002), the Hellenic Army War College (2020) and the Hellenic Supreme Joint War College (2023), with a strong professional and academic background in the field of security & defence, international relations, and adult training. He holds a Master of Arts in International Relations in “Governance, Development and Security in the Mediterranean” (2020) from the Department of Mediterranean Studies of the University of the Aegean (Rhodes, Greece) and is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at the same University, focusing on the Defence Diplomacy & National Security of Greece. Moreover, he is a Senior Researcher and Secretary General of the “Center for International Strategic Analyses” (KEDISA), a member of the “Hellenic Institute of Strategic Studies” (HEL.I.S.S.), a Research Associate of “HERMES Institution of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy”, a member of “ALLILON” (the Global Network of Greeks and Friends of Greece for Solidarity in the Professional Field) and a member of the “Mercury Negotiation Academy” (MNA). He has participated as a speaker in several seminars/conferences regarding international relations in the fields of foreign policy, security and defense, while several of his articles and research papers have been published in many scientific journals and websites. His research interests include National Security, Grand Strategy, EU Affairs, Greek Foreign Policy, Military Diplomacy, Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Cultural Diplomacy, and International Organizations (NATO, UN, EU, OIC, EfM, etc.). He is the co-author of the book “National Security: Myths and Reality” (in Greek) that was published in April 2023, the author of the book “Armed Conflict & National Security in the 21st Century” (in Greek) that was published in April 2025, and the Academic Head of the educational programme series “Security Studies in the Mediterranean” of the Continuing Education-Lifelong Learning (CE-LL) Center of the University of the Aegean.



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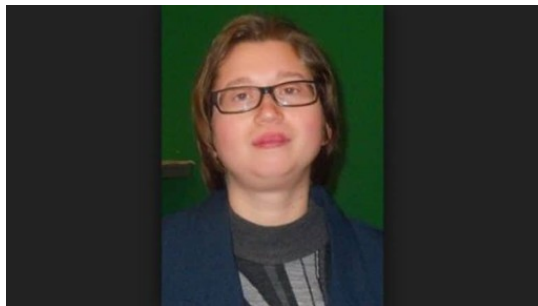
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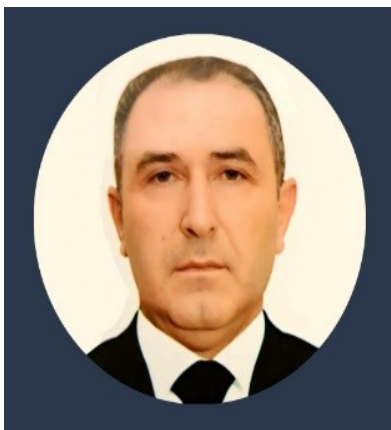
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