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Reimagining Diplomacy: A Theoretical Analysis of AI Agents, Data Science, and Quantum Integration in Human-Centered Decision Processes

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Reimagining Diplomacy: A Theoretical Analysis of AI Agents, Data Science and Quantum Integration in Human-Centered Decision Processes

Ertuğrul Altun

Introduction

“Sovereignty now resides as much in data and algorithms as it once did in territory.”

The advancement of technology in the field of international relations has led to a shift in how algorithms are understood and used. Historically, written records were the primary means through which societies understood global history and social structures. During key periods of social development, particularly with the emergence of writing, societies produced their own forms of data and interpreted their historical context through these records.

In the contemporary era, defining the global order and analysing individuals has become more direct and systematic due to data-driven methods. This shift can be explained as follows: in earlier periods, the interpretation of historical phenomena relied largely on archaeologists and written artefacts, whereas today the understanding of contemporary society increasingly depends on data analysts who interpret large-scale data, including behavioural patterns.

As demonstrated by Kiggins (2018), this transformation has significant consequences for state decision-making and policy formulation. A central issue in understanding this change concerns its impact on structural arrangements within the international system. This study seeks to identify and examine the crises arising from this transformation in social life and to define the nature of these crises. According to Neyer (2021), technological innovation, particularly system-level technological innovation, is likely to lead to the re-territorialisation of sovereignty practices. This renewed emphasis on territorial sovereignty is associated with changes in the rules governing the international order and shifts in the behavioural costs faced by political actors. An additional concern relates to how this evolving state system is affected both positively and negatively, and how states are expected to respond to these changes.

The primary objective of this article is to address these issues, with particular emphasis on how digitalisation should be defined in the context of the developing world. At the core of this discussion is the role of international relations in the transition from human-centred decision-making to increasingly autonomous systems (Kiggins, 2018). Furthermore, Mustafea et al. (2025) argue that artificial intelligence and autonomy should not be viewed solely as technical

developments, but as a broader technological shift that is reshaping multiple sectors, including international relations and the global economy.

Consequently, states and institutions have begun to employ AI-based tools to influence diplomatic decision-making, shape economic policy, and improve international trade processes. Accordingly, this article will examine, in sequence, the concept of big data and its application in international relations, the effects of combining big data with AI agents on diplomatic decision-makers, and the advantages and disadvantages this development has created for the balance of power in international relations.

Application of Big Data and AI Agentic in Diplomacy

In contemporary international relations, there has been a gradual shift from a human-centred paradigm toward a model increasingly shaped by mathematical and computational processes. As a result of this transformation, state-level decision-making mechanisms have moved beyond relatively simple, rule-based calculations toward more complex and uncertain systems influenced by advanced data processing and algorithmic analysis. This shift does not eliminate human agency but changes the conditions under which decisions are made.

To better understand this transformation, Kiggins (2018) draws on Wendt's theoretical framework of anarchy and hierarchy to analyse state behaviour. From this perspective, state institutions are not independent actors but integral components of the decision-making process. As Wendt argues, these institutions can be understood as structures shaped by individuals through shared norms and practices. Within the field of International Relations (IR), such theoretical objects institutions, norms, and organisations have long been central to analysis. However, as Kiggins (2018) cautions, there is a risk that increasing levels of abstraction may obscure the human element embedded within these structures. While human decision-making remains fundamental to IR, excessive conceptualisation can make this core element less visible.

This concern becomes particularly relevant when examining the growing role of data-driven systems in decision-making. Before proceeding further, it is therefore necessary to clarify the concept of big data. Big data refers to both the existence of vast and increasingly unmanageable volumes of information and the analytical methods developed to process this information in ways that enhance predictability and support decision-making. In this sense, big data represents not only a technical challenge but also a structural shift in how knowledge is produced and used.

Within this framework, big data can be understood in three interconnected ways. First, it serves as the foundational data infrastructure that enables artificial intelligence systems to function. Second, it constitutes a resource that cannot be effectively governed solely through national regulatory frameworks, given the borderless nature of the digital environment. Third, it influences broader dynamics of authority, legitimacy, and objection or contestation within global politics. Together, these dimensions highlight how data increasingly shapes power relations beyond the confines of the state.

Building on this argument, Schmitt (2023) suggests that AI-related policies are no longer formed exclusively within domestic policy spheres but are increasingly shaped at international and global levels. This development reflects the fact that AI technologies operate within a digital ecosystem that transcends national borders. Consequently, the information circulating within this ecosystem exerts direct or indirect influence on state behaviour, decision-making, and policy coordination.

Within this evolving context, one of the most pressing challenges concerns the definition of sovereignty, which remains a foundational element of the nation-state. As digital technologies reshape authority and control, states are compelled to reconsider how sovereignty is exercised and protected. This, in turn, raises questions about the diplomatic strategies and legal frameworks that states may develop through international cooperation to address the risks and uncertainties that digitalisation and AI pose to sovereignty.

In the digital era, characterised by the rapid expansion and circulation of information, sovereignty must be examined within the broader context of digitalisation. This examination necessarily includes artificial intelligence and its ongoing development, which remains an evolving process rather than a completed one. It also requires attention to the potential effects that AI may have on decision-making once it reaches more advanced and widely implemented stages. As Kiggins (2018) notes, digital technologies have the capacity to transform relationships of authority and control. At the same time, he cautions against the assumption that digitalisation automatically strengthens the state's ability to govern or monitor these processes.

Rather than enhancing state control, the increasing complexity of big data and artificial intelligence systems may, in practice, constrain the state's capacity for comprehensive oversight. This concern aligns with the broader argument that sovereignty should not be understood solely as a legal or normative principle, but as a historically contingent practice closely linked to global power distributions, the exercise of legitimate authority, and forms of

political control (Mustafea et al., 2025). From this perspective, sovereignty remains a foundational element of the nation-state, yet its modes of exercise are undergoing significant transformation.

Digital technologies play a central role in this transformation. Internet infrastructures, cross-border data flows, algorithmic decision-making systems, and AI applications not only challenge territorially defined state authority but also compel states to reconsider how sovereignty is exercised and protected (Mustafea et al., 2025). These technologies alter the spatial, institutional, and functional boundaries of authority, making sovereignty less dependent on physical borders and increasingly tied to control over digital environments.

This shift also reshapes internal power structures within states. As Kiggins (2018) argues, AI systems that are accessible to society at large may influence governmental authority, particularly affecting state actors responsible for information gathering, analysis, and demand. The growing prevalence of manipulative or opaque information further complicates this dynamic, reducing clarity and undermining the reliability of the information upon which political decisions are based. In this sense, AI does not merely support decision-making but actively reshapes the informational environment in which decisions are made, with implications for both domestic politics and international relations.

These developments raise fundamental questions about accountability, a core component of sovereignty. The internal functioning of algorithmic systems is often poorly understood, even by decision-makers who rely on their outputs. The logic of these systems, including the training data, embedded assumptions, and cause-and-effect relationships, frequently remains opaque. When foreign policy decisions or security operations are informed by algorithmic assessments, it becomes unclear where responsibility lies: with political leaders, software developers, or the supposedly neutral authority of data itself. This ambiguity weakens traditional accountability mechanisms that underpin sovereign authority.

The risks associated with digitalisation extend beyond decision-making processes to issues of security and territorial integrity. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence should therefore not be viewed solely as technical instruments, but also as potential sources of vulnerability. The Stuxnet incident demonstrated that a state's critical infrastructure could be disrupted by autonomous digital actions, such as malware operating without continuous human control. Such actions challenge sovereignty by bypassing territorial boundaries and undermining the state's ability to guarantee security within its borders. These risks are

particularly acute for developing and underdeveloped states, where limited digital infrastructure and regulatory capacity increase vulnerability to external digital threats.

Understanding these risks requires closer attention to how automated decision-making systems function in practice. Generally, this process involves the automatic collection of data, followed by algorithmic analysis, the generation of probabilistic outcomes or policy options, and, finally, human selection among these options. In many cases, decision-makers are encouraged to choose the option presented as having the highest probability of success. However, this raises questions about how these probabilities are produced and whether they can be trusted. As Kiggins (2018) observes, algorithmic models often function as “black boxes,” offering recommendations without sufficiently transparent explanations. As a result, the data and assumption layers that shape outcomes remain invisible at the policy level, despite their decisive influence.

These concerns resonate with Neyer’s (2021) argument that sovereignty is not a fixed legal status but an “essentially contested” concept whose meaning shifts in response to changes in international power relations and state preferences regarding authority delegation. In the post–Cold War period, the dominant global governance paradigm reinterpreted sovereignty not as absolute state authority but as the capacity to participate in international problem-solving processes. According to Neyer (2021), this liberal optimism did not imply the erosion of sovereignty but rather its contextual redefinition. However, he argues that this interpretation is now facing a serious crisis.

A key reason for this crisis lies in the nature of digital technologies themselves. Neyer (2021) rejects the view of technology as a neutral tool, instead conceptualising it as a structure embedded in power relations, shaped by normative choices, and capable of conditioning political action. Digital infrastructures, particularly the internet, have enabled non-state actors, most notably large technology companies, to acquire unprecedented influence. This shift complicates traditional sovereignty arrangements by redistributing authority beyond the state.

Moreover, Neyer (2021) contends that digital technologies tend to generate insecurity rather than strengthen global governance. Big data, cyber weapons, AI-enabled surveillance, and algorithmic decision-making transform both external threat perceptions and internal security practices. In response to these perceived risks, states are increasingly inclined to reassert sovereignty along territorial lines. In this context, sovereignty is no longer understood as a shared or delegated authority but as a defensive boundary that must be protected.

At the same time, alternative perspectives suggest that digitalisation does not simply weaken sovereignty but reshapes its modes of exercise. Srivastava and Bullock (2024) argue that states are adapting by extending sovereign control beyond territory and population to include data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures. From this perspective, sovereignty evolves into a governance practice that operates across physical and digital domains, rather than being confined to geographic borders.

Taken together, these arguments indicate that sovereignty in the digital age is neither disappearing nor remaining unchanged. Instead, it is being reconfigured through the interaction of artificial intelligence, big data, digital infrastructures, and shifting power relations. This reconfiguration challenges existing assumptions about authority, accountability, and control, while compelling states to continuously renegotiate how sovereignty is exercised in an increasingly digital international system.

From a theoretical perspective, this reconfiguration of sovereignty in the digital age also extends to the realm of diplomacy and foreign policy practice. As sovereignty becomes increasingly mediated by data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures rather than exercised solely through territorial control, diplomatic action and foreign policy decision-making unfold within these same structural conditions. Consequently, decision-making mechanisms in foreign policy emerge as sites where technological rationalities intersect with institutional authority, shaping how states identify interests, interpret information, and respond to international developments. In this sense, diplomacy does not represent a separate domain but functions as an extension of digitalised sovereignty, where power, authority, and control are operationalised through technologically mediated decision-making processes.

Within this digitally mediated configuration of sovereignty, the increasing incorporation of artificial intelligence systems, particularly agentic AI, into foreign policy and diplomatic practice further deepens the transformation of decision-making authority and institutional rationality. As conceptualised by Porter et al. (2025), agentic AI systems are not defined solely by their capacity to process large volumes of information, but by their ability to pursue complex objectives with limited direct human oversight while operating in dynamic and uncertain environments. When integrated into policy analysis, intelligence assessment, early warning systems, or strategic planning processes, such systems become embedded within the institutional architectures through which states interpret international reality, prioritise information, and articulate national interests. In this sense, agentic AI does not operate as an auxiliary instrument applied to diplomacy from the outside, but rather as an infrastructural

component of the decision-making environment itself, shaping how information is filtered, ranked, and operationalised across multiple stages of foreign policy formulation.

From this perspective, foreign policy decision-making increasingly reflects a data-centric and algorithmically mediated rationality. Musiani's (2022) emphasis on infrastructuring is particularly relevant here, as it highlights that diplomatic and strategic decisions are not produced in abstraction but are conditioned by the socio-technical infrastructures that enable the collection, storage, circulation, and analysis of vast quantities of data. As state informational assets become digitised and embedded within hybrid public–private infrastructures, the authority to define threats, assess risks, and anticipate international developments is progressively exercised through data-intensive analytical systems. Agentic AI systems, operating within these infrastructures, extend this process by introducing new degrees of autonomy, adaptiveness, and temporal compression into policy workflows, thereby reconfiguring not only how decisions are made but also the speed and scope at which decision-making unfolds.

This transformation carries significant implications for the enactment of sovereignty in international relations. Sovereignty becomes increasingly materialised through control over data infrastructures, algorithmic capacities, and computational systems that underpin foreign policy action, rather than being expressed solely through territorial authority or formal diplomatic representation. As Musiani (2022) argues, digital sovereignty is enacted through situated socio-technical practices rather than merely asserted through legal or discursive claims. In this sense, the deployment of agentic AI within diplomatic and strategic institutions constitutes a concrete mechanism through which sovereignty is operationalised, contested, and reproduced. Decisions shaped by such systems inevitably reflect the structural conditions of the infrastructures in which they are embedded, including dependencies on specific data sources, proprietary algorithms, computational resources, and technological providers.

In contrast to perspectives that frame digitalisation primarily as a source of sovereign erosion, Srivastava and Bullock (2024) emphasise that digital technologies enable sovereignty to be exercised in new forms. States increasingly seek to establish authority not only over territory and population but also over data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures. Sovereignty thus evolves into a governance practice that extends beyond physical borders and is enacted across transnational digital spaces, where control is asserted through regulatory frameworks, technical standards, and infrastructural arrangements.

At the same time, foreign policy decision-making mechanisms emerge as key sites where technological rationality intersects with institutional authority. Neyer's (2021) concept of "system-level technological innovation" provides a useful analytical framework for understanding this interaction. According to Neyer (2021), digital technologies do not simply accelerate access to information; they transform how knowledge is produced, categorised, and interpreted. As a result, the data informing foreign policy decisions is not neutral or objective but structured by technical designs and normative assumptions embedded within digital systems.

Within this framework, diplomacy increasingly functions not as a distinct normative domain oriented toward consensus-building, but as an extension of digitalised sovereignty through which authority, control, and strategic positioning are enacted. Neyer's (2021) critique of global governance supports this argument by highlighting how the insecurity generated by digital technologies undermines cooperative diplomatic practices. Rather than facilitating trust and multilateral problem-solving, big data analytics, cyber capabilities, AI-enabled surveillance, and algorithmic decision systems contribute to heightened threat perceptions and competitive dynamics.

Consequently, diplomacy becomes less focused on producing normative consensus and more oriented toward managing technological dependencies, securing informational advantages, and protecting digital infrastructures considered critical to national security. Debates surrounding internet governance, data localisation policies, and cybersecurity norms illustrate how technical standards and infrastructural arrangements have become central subjects of diplomatic negotiation. However, as Neyer (2022) suggests, these negotiations often reproduce existing power asymmetries through technical expertise and regulatory complexity, embedding geopolitical competition within ostensibly neutral processes. In this sense, foreign policy decision-making under conditions of agentic AI and digital infrastructures reflects the convergence of technological rationality, institutional authority, and sovereign practice, with diplomacy operating as a mechanism through which digitalised sovereignty is enacted rather than as an autonomous sphere of international engagement.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the advancement of digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, big data, and agentic AI systems, has reshaped sovereignty, diplomacy, and foreign policy decision-making in contemporary international relations. It has demonstrated

that decision-making processes have shifted from predominantly human-centred frameworks toward data-intensive and algorithmically mediated environments, without fully eliminating human agency. By drawing on existing theoretical approaches, the analysis has shown that sovereignty has remained a foundational element of the nation-state, while its modes of exercise have been transformed through digital infrastructures, cross-border data flows, and algorithmic systems. In this context, sovereignty has not disappeared, but has been reconfigured through socio-technical practices that increasingly structure authority, control, and accountability.

The article has further shown that diplomacy has functioned less as an autonomous normative domain and more as an extension of digitalised sovereignty. Diplomatic practices have been shaped by data-driven analytical systems, AI-enabled assessments, and infrastructural dependencies that condition how states interpret information, define interests, and respond to international developments. The integration of agentic AI into policy analysis and strategic planning has embedded algorithmic rationalities within institutional decision-making mechanisms, thereby influencing not only the outcomes of foreign policy decisions but also the temporal, cognitive, and organisational conditions under which these decisions have been made. As the analysis has indicated, these developments have raised persistent concerns regarding transparency, accountability, and the distribution of responsibility within sovereign decision-making structures.

At the same time, the article has highlighted that digitalisation has not uniformly eroded sovereignty. Instead, it has shown that states have sought to reassert and adapt sovereign authority through control over data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures. In line with this perspective, sovereignty has increasingly been enacted across both physical and digital domains, while diplomacy has become a key arena in which technological standards, data governance, and cybersecurity norms have been negotiated. However, these negotiations have often reflected underlying power asymmetries embedded in technical expertise and infrastructural control, reinforcing the argument that digital technologies have reshaped, rather than neutralised, geopolitical competition.

Looking forward, the analysis has suggested that the future use of artificial intelligence in diplomacy and foreign policy decision-making has required greater institutional awareness of the infrastructural and normative assumptions embedded within AI systems. Rather than treating AI as a neutral decision-support tool, diplomatic institutions have needed to integrate mechanisms that preserve human oversight, ensure accountability, and maintain transparency within algorithmically mediated processes. The article has therefore indicated that future

diplomatic practice has benefited from approaches that have aligned AI-assisted decision-making with existing institutional responsibilities, while remaining attentive to the risks that autonomy, opacity, and infrastructural dependency have posed to sovereign authority. In this sense, the continued relevance of diplomacy has depended on its capacity to adapt decision-making mechanisms to digital conditions without relinquishing the core principles of responsibility and control that have underpinned sovereign action in international relations.

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Güney Kore’de Otonom Savunmanın Yükselişi: Yapay Zekâ Tabanlı Askerî Teknolojilerin Güvenlik Paradigmasını Dönüştürmesi

Merve Güllü Göktaş

Giriş

25 Haziran 1950’de Doğu Asya jeopolitiğinde, Soğuk Savaş döneminin en belirleyici “sıcak” askerî çatışmalarından biri başlamıştır. 1950-1953 yılları arasında Kuzey Kore ve Güney Kore silahlı kuvvetleri arasında cereyan eden Kore Savaşı, yalnızca iki Kore devleti arasındaki askerî güç dengesini etkilememiştir. Aynı zamanda, Güney Kore’nin güvenlik doktrininin yapısını da şekillendirmiştir. Bölgesel ve küresel aktörlerin doğrudan ile dolaylı askerî müdahaleleriyle savaş; siyasi, askerî ve ekonomik boyutları itibarıyla uluslararası sistem düzeyinde çok katmanlı sonuçları meydana getirmiştir. Savaşın ardından imzalanan ateşkes antlaşmasıyla, Kuzey ve Güney Kore’yi ayıran 38. paralel sınır hattı askerî açıdan tarafsız bir tampon bölge olarak belirlenmiştir. Bu gelişmeler kapsamında Güney Kore, Kuzey Kore tarafından gerçekleştirilen askerî tehdit algısına karşı yeni bir güvenlik stratejisi benimsemiştir. Söz konusu strateji doğrultusunda Kore Cumhuriyeti Silahlı Kuvvetleri (ROK), Batı merkezli askerî reformlar temelinde yeniden yapılandırılarak modernize edilmiştir. Bahsedilen gelişmeye paralel olarak askerî teçhizatların tasarım ile mekanik yapıları geliştirilmiştir. Otonom ve yapay zekâ sistemiyle çalışan yeni nesil savunma teknolojileri envantere dâhil edilmiştir.

Bu çalışma, Doğu Asya’nın gelişmiş teknolojik altyapısına sahip başat bölgesel aktörlerinden biri olan Güney Kore’nin geliştirmekte olduğu insansız, ağ merkezli ve yapay zekâ tabanlı askerî ekipmanları incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, söz konusu teknolojilerin modern güvenlik doktrinleri üzerindeki etkisini analiz etmeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu bağlamda, Kuzey Kore’nin otonom temelli balistik füze sistemleri ile modern askerî teknolojilerinin oluşturduğu güvenlik tehdidine karşı Güney Kore tarafından geliştirilen yeni nesil askerî teknolojiler analiz edilmektedir. Bu teknolojilerin savaş alanında kullanımlarının güvenlik paradigmasını hangi dinamikler çerçevesinde şekillendirdiği sorusuna yanıt aranmaktadır. Belirlenen araştırma sorusuna yanıt bulabilmek amacıyla, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) ve RAND Corporation tarafından yayımlanan güvenlik ve savunma raporları incelenmiştir. Ayrıca, Güney Kore Hükûmeti’nin resmî savunma belgeleri analiz edilmiştir. Güney Kore’nin modern askerî envanterinin güncel biçimde ele alındığı yerel basın organları olan The Chosun Daily ve The Korea Herald başta olmak üzere ulusal ve uluslararası

medya kaynakları değerlendirilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda, araştırma sorusunun çok boyutlu biçimde değerlendirilmesi için kapsamlı bir literatür taraması gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Tarihsel Arka Plan: Kore Savaşı Sonrası Güney Kore'nin Teknolojik Odaklı Modernizasyon Süreci

1950-1953 yılları arasında, bölgesel askerî güçler ile uluslararası aktörlere ait orduların katılımıyla gerçekleşen yoğun çatışmaların ardından Kuzey Kore ile Güney Kore arasında bir ateşkes antlaşması imzalanmıştır. Bu süreçte Güney Kore, Kuzey Kore'yi temel askerî tehdit olarak tanımlamış ve savunma odaklı bir güvenlik politikası benimsemiştir (SIPRI, 1998). Söz konusu politika, savaş sonrası dönemde zayıflayan askerî kapasitenin yeniden inşa edilmesini amaçlamıştır. Güney Kore, askerî operasyonel kabiliyetlerini güçlendirmek amacıyla Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile savunma ve askerî iş birliği anlaşmaları gerçekleştirmiştir. İlgili iş birliği kapsamında, Kore Cumhuriyeti Silahlı Kuvvetleri (ROK) için harekât ve saldırı yeteneklerinin geliştirilmesine yönelik eğitim programları uygulanmıştır (SIPRI, 1998). ROK bünyesindeki birliklerin askerî mühimmat ve teçhizatı, modern sistemler ekseninde yeniden yapılandırılmıştır. Sahadaki operasyonel etkinliği artırmayı hedefleyen askerî reform süreci kapsamlı bir biçimde başlatılmıştır (Jina, 2022).

Kore Savaşı'nın ardından Güney Kore'nin askerî kapasitesinin olumsuz etkilenmesi, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nden sağlanan askerî yardımlara olan bağımlılığı artırmıştır. Söz konusu bağımlılık, ulusal güvenliğin sürdürülebilirliği açısından stratejik bir güvenlik riski olarak değerlendirilmiştir (Moon-Lee, 2008). ABD kaynaklı mühimmat tedariki ve askerî yardımlara olan bağımlılığı azaltmak amacıyla 1970'li yıllarda yeni bir politika yönelimi benimsenmiştir. Bu dönemde Güney Kore, artan Kuzey Kore tehdidine karşı sınır güvenliğini güçlendirmeyi ve yerli savunma sanayisinin kapasitesini artırmayı temel hedef olarak belirlemiştir (Cordesman-Ayers, 2017). Belirlenen amaç doğrultusunda, teknoloji odaklı askerî reform programları geliştirilme süreci ivme kazanmıştır.

1970'li yıllarda Park Chung-hee yönetimi altında, ROK birlikleri geleneksel askerî güç anlayışından uzaklaşarak teknoloji temelli bir yapıya evrilmiştir. Yerli üretim askerî teçhizat kapasitesini artırmaya yönelik kapsamlı yatırım programları hayata geçirilmiştir. Güney Kore merkezli savunma sanayisinin kurumsal temellerini oluşturmak amacıyla vergi indirimleri ve devlet destekleri sağlanmıştır (Sharma, 2025). Savunma sanayisinin yerelleştirilmesi ve kapasite olarak güçlendirilmesi amacıyla *Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA)* kurulmuştur. Bu kapsamda, "*Koreanization of Korean Defense*" olarak adlandırılan güvenlik

politikası doğrultusunda, ilk kez Güney Kore menşeli silah sistemleri, mühimmat ve tank tasarımları geliştirilmeye başlanmıştır (Paik, 2024). Park Chung-hee yönetimi sırasında, ABD'nin Güney Kore'deki askerî varlığını kademeli olarak azaltmasıyla birlikte yerli savunma sanayisinin rekabet gücünün artırılması stratejik bir öncelik hâline gelmiştir. Bu süreçte, planlı ve sistematik biçimde modern bir yerli savunma sanayisi inşa edilmiştir. Ek olarak, konvansiyonel savaş ekipmanlarının yurt içinde üretimine başlanmıştır.

Soğuk Savaş'ın son dönemlerine doğru, 1980'lerin başından 1990'ların ortalarına kadar uzanan süreçte, Roh Tae-woo yönetimi altında yeni bir askerî konsept benimsenmiştir. Bu konsept, Kuzey Kore kaynaklı olası saldırıların bertaraf edilmesini hedeflemiştir. Ayrıca, misilleme kapasitesi ile güçlü caydırıcılık ilkelerini merkeze alan gelişmiş savunma kabiliyetlerine dayalı bir güvenlik anlayışı üzerine inşa edilmiştir (SIPRI, 2013). Güvenlik politikasında ortaya çıkan yeni söylem doğrultusunda, ROK birliklerinin operasyonel yeteneklerini artırmak amacıyla askerî ekipmanların modernleştirilmesi ile konvansiyonel silah sistemlerinin tasarımsal açıdan geliştirilmesi öncelik kazanmıştır (Tae-Hwan, 2009). Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesiyle birlikte, jeostratejik bir rakip konumundaki Kuzey Kore nükleer silahlar ve balistik füzeleri askerî envanterine dâhil etmiştir. Bu durum, bölgesel ve uluslararası güvenlik açısından önemli bir askerî tehdit unsuru olarak değerlendirilmiştir (Austero, Lubang vs, 2020). Söz konusu gelişme, Kore Yarımadası'ndaki askerî güç dengelerini doğrudan etkilemiştir.

Soğuk Savaş'ın son dönemlerinde, askerî çatışmaların karakteristik yapısında teknik bir değişim meydana gelmiştir. Geleneksel cephe hatlarına dayalı konvansiyonel savaş anlayışı yerini çok boyutlu bir savaş konseptine bırakmıştır. Yeni konseptte, sensörlerin keşif ve gözetleme amaçlı kullanıldığı, internet ağları üzerinden kesintisiz ve güvenilir istihbarat akışının sağlandığı bir yapı öne çıkmıştır. Orta menzilli füze sistemleri, nükleer silahlar, insansız hava araçları ve otonom ekipmanlar modern savaş anlayışında yaygın biçimde kullanılmaya başlanmıştır (Cordesman-Ayers, 2017). Savaş modelinde yaşanan söz konusu yapısal dönüşüm doğrultusunda Güney Kore Hükümeti, saldırı ve savunma kapasitesinde yeni nesil teknolojilerin belirleyici rol oynadığı modern bir güvenlik doktrini geliştirmiştir. Bu doktrin; konvansiyonel olmayan yöntemleri, ağ tabanlı savaş tekniklerini ve yapay zekâ destekli askerî platformları merkeze alan bir savunma anlayışı meydana gelmiştir (Bechtol-Boo vd., 2016). Böylece yeni nesil teknolojiler, askerî strateji oluşturma ve operasyonel planlamanın temel belirleyicisi hâline gelmiştir.

Güney Kore'nin Yapay Zekâ Tabanlı Silah Sistemlerinin Merkezde Olduğu Güvenlik Paradigması

Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesinden 2010'lu yıllara kadar uzanan dönemde, uluslararası güvenlik ortamında tehdit algıları belirgin bir şekilde değişim geçirmiştir. Ağ tabanlı savaş konseptinin yaygınlaşması ve insansız askerî teknolojilerin devlet aktörleri tarafından kullanımının artması, ulusal güvenlik stratejilerinin yeniden yapılandırılmasını zorunlu kılmıştır. Bu çerçevede, Cumhurbaşkanı Roh Moo-hyun döneminde 2006 yılında yayımlanan *Savunma Reformu 2020 (Defense Reform- DR 2020)* belgesinde, yeni bir askerî konsept benimsendiği açıklanmıştır. Belgede, ROK birliklerinin kara, deniz ve hava alanlarında yüksek operasyonel saldırı kabiliyetine sahip dijital ve otonom sistemlere dayalı çeşitlendirilmiş bir askerî envantere geçiş öngörülmüştür. (The National Defense White Paper, 2006).

Roh Moo-hyun döneminde, farklı harekât alanlarına yönelik modern teknik tasarımlar geliştiren orta ölçekli savunma sanayii firmaları öne çıkmıştır. Hanwha, Korean Aerospace Industries, Hyundai Rotem, LIG Nex1 ve Hyundai Heavy Industries gibi firmaların algoritma tabanlı, otonom askerî sistemlere yönelik araştırma ve geliştirme faaliyetleri, Güney Kore Hükûmeti tarafından vergi teşvikleriyle desteklenmiştir (Wooyeal, 2024). Bu kapsamda, F-5 E/F savaş uçağı, Hyunmoo orta menzilli füzesi, hipersonik Harpy füze platformu, mobil zırhlı M48 Patton, M113 platformları ile çeşitli savaş gemileri seri üretime geçilmiştir. Ayrıca, ROK birliklerinin kullanımına sunulmuştur (The National Defense White Paper, 2008).

2018 yılında Güney Kore tarafından yayımlanan *Defense White Paper-2018* belgesine göre, Kuzey Kore'nin kitle imha silahlarına sahip olması Güney Kore'nin ulusal güvenliği açısından kritik bir tehdit unsuru olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda, silahlı kuvvetlerin yapısal dönüşümünü hızlandırmak amacıyla yapay zekâ, nesnelerin interneti ve robotik sistemler kullanılmaya başlanmıştır (The National Defense White Paper, 2018). Böylece Güney Kore, askerî tehdit algısındaki değişime uyum sağlayan ve teknolojik gelişmeyi merkezine alan yeni bir askerî doktrin inşa etmeyi amaçlamıştır. 2019 yılında Moon Jae-in yönetimi, otonom silah sistemleri, insansız hava araçları ve robotik platformların dijital kabiliyetlerini geliştirmeyi amaçlayan yapay zekâ odaklı ulusal bir güvenlik stratejisi açıklamıştır. Modern askerî konsept doğrultusunda şekillenen bu strateji kapsamında, yaklaşık 35 milyar dolar tutarında kapsamlı bir fon yatırımının yapıldığı bildirilmiştir (Jina, 2022). Reuters'ın 2019 yılındaki haberine göre, Kuzey Kore kaynaklı güvenlik endişeleri ve bölgesel askerî gerilimleri azaltmayı hedefleyen yönetim, savunma harcamalarını yüzde yedi oranında artırmıştır. Ayrıca,

balistik füze donanımlı denizaltıları, savaş uçakları ve gelişmiş füze sistemleri gibi yeni askerî teçhizatların üretimine yönelmiştir (Reuters, 2019).

2020 yılında Güney Kore, savunma sektöründe modernizasyon çalışmalarını hızlandırmıştır. Robotik teknolojiler ve yapay zekânın komuta-kontrol sistemlerine entegre edildiği askerî mühimmatlar seri üretime alınmıştır. Bu gelişmeler, Güney Kore'nin küresel savunma sanayisindeki rekabet kapasitesini güçlendirirken uluslararası konumunu da daha görünür hâle getirmiştir. Ayrıca, savunma yatırımları yeni nesil teknolojilerin kullanımını kapsayacak şekilde çeşitlendirilmiştir (Park, 2024). SIPRI'nin 2021 yılında yayınladığı '*Trends in International Arms Transfers*' raporuna göre, gelişmiş teknik tasarımlara sahip yerli üretim askerî mühimmatların ihracatı küresel pazarda artmıştır. Güney Kore, yaklaşık yüzde 3'lük payla küresel silah ihracatçıları arasında sekizinci sıraya yükselmiştir (SIPRI, 2021).

2022 yılında Güney Kore Devleti tarafından yayımlanan *Defense White Paper- 2022* belgesinde, savaş alanı kavrayışının genişletildiği ve uzay boyutunun da askerî operasyon alanlarına dâhil edildiği ifade edilmiştir. Belgeye göre, kuantum fiziği, yapay zekâ, silahlı otonom robotlar ve uydu teknolojileri gibi yüksek maliyetli yeni nesil savunma teknolojilerine yönelik araştırma ve geliştirme faaliyetleri için 5 trilyon wonluk bütçe (yaklaşık 4 milyar ABD doları) bütçe ayrıldığı belirtilmiştir (The White Paper, 2022). Aynı kaynakta, ileri teknolojilerle donatılmış askerî sistemlere çeşitli örnekler sunulmuştur. Bunlar arasında Korea Aerospace Industries tarafından geliştirilen KF-21 savaş uçağı, balistik füzeler, otonom silah sistemleriyle donatılmış Dosan Ahn Chang-ho sınıfı denizaltılar, sensör ve lazer destekli tanklar yer almaktadır. Ayrıca, helikopter operasyonları ve denizden karaya harekât görevlerine uygun LPH sınıfı çok amaçlı savaş gemisi ROKS Marado öne çıkmaktadır. Otonom sistem ve yüksek atış kabiliyetiyle modernize edilen K9A1 obüsler de bu kapsamda değerlendirilmektedir (The White Paper, 2022).

RAND Corporation tarafından 2025 yılında yayımlanan '*The Republic of Korea Is a Key Partner for the United States in Artificial Intelligence Competition with China*' başlıklı belgesine göre, Güney Kore'nin ulusal güvenlik doktrininde yerli savunma sanayii şirketleri stratejik bir rol üstlendiği belirtilmiştir. Bu şirketler arasında Samsung Electronics, SK Hynix, SK Telecom, Kia Heavy Industry ve Sapeon Korea yer almaktadır. Bahsedilen savunma firmaları, yeni nesil teknolojilerle desteklenen insansız askerî sistemlerin seri üretimini gerçekleştirerek, küresel pazarda askerî-teknolojik iş birliğini artırmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu çerçevede, zırhlı K2 Black Panther tankı, yapay zekâ tabanlı yazılımlarla geliştirilen K3 tank sistemi, insansız hava aracı olarak kullanılan KF-21 savaş uçaklarının Avrupa, Orta Doğu ve

ABD'ye ihracatı gerçekleştirilmektedir (RAND, 2025). Ayrıca, Güney Kore'nin bölge dışı stratejik ortakları arasında yer alan Polonya, Norveç ile yürütülen savunma iş birlikleri kapsamında, Hanwha Aerospace tarafından geliştirilen insansız K9 Thunder obüs ve K239 Chunmoo çoklu roketatarın ihracatı sürdürülmektedir (RAND, 2025). Bu gelişmeler, Güney Kore savunma sanayisinin uluslararası rekabetçi pazardaki etkinliğinin giderek arttığını göstermektedir.

SIPRI tarafından 2017 yılında yayımlanan *Mapping Study on the Development of Autonomy in Weapon Systems* raporunda, Kuzey Kore ile olan sınır hattının gözetlenmesinde otonom özelliklere sahip çeşitli robotik silah sistemlerinin kullanıldığı belirtilmiştir. Bu kapsamda, Super aEgis II ve Hanwha Techwin tarafından geliştirilen insan müdahalesi olmaksızın otomatik ateşleme yapabilen SGR-A1 sistemleri sınır bölgelerinde konuşlandırılmıştır. Bahsedilen robotik sistemlerin temel işlevi, sınır hattında olası tehdit unsurlarını tespit etmek ve etkisiz hâle getirmektir (SIPRI, 2017). BBC News tarafından 2015 yılında yayımlanan habere göre, otonom silah sistemine sahip Super aEgis II robotunun Kuzey ve Güney Kore'yi ayıran sınır hattında güvenlik faaliyetlerini etkin bir şekilde yürütmek amacıyla konuşlandırıldığı belirtilmiştir (BBC News, 2015). Bahsedilen gelişmeler, Güney Kore ordusunun yapay zekâ destekli ve ileri mekanik özelliklere sahip robotik sistemleri farklı askerî görevlerde etkin biçimde kullandığını göstermektedir. Nitekim, DoDaam Systems tarafından geliştirilen Super aEgis II robotu, otonom hedef belirleme ve otomatik ateş açma özellikleriyle uluslararası düzeyde dikkat çekmiştir. Robotik sistemlerin Katar ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'ne ihraç edilmesi, Güney Kore'nin savunma alanındaki stratejik ortaklık kapasitesini artırmış ve askerî-teknolojik etkinliğini güçlendirmiştir (Shapiro, 2019).

Uluslararası sistemde, yeni nesil teknolojilerin askerî mühimmatlara entegrasyonu konusunda devletler arasındaki rekabet giderek artmaktadır. Güney Kore, bu rekabet ortamında lider aktör olmayı stratejik bir hedef olarak benimsemektedir (RAND, 2024). Bu doğrultuda, yapay zekâ merkezleri, robotik teknolojilere odaklanan savunma sanayii projeleri ve askerî amaçlı veri toplama altyapıları gibi askerî-teknoloji girişimlere yatırım yapmaktadır (Longpre, Storm-Shah, 2022). Ayrıca, diğer devletlerle yürütülen uluslararası savunma iş birliği çerçevesinde askerî ekipman ihracatı artırılmakta ve küresel savunma pazardaki payının genişletilmesi amaçlanmaktadır. The Chosun Daily' nin 2025 tarihli haberine göre, yapay zekâ destekli ve otonom niteliklere sahip Hyunmoo-5 balistik füzesi, uzun menzilli roketler, Cheongung insansız hava aracı ve imha robotu gibi modern ekipmanların, kademeli olarak ihracatı gerçekleşmektedir (The Chosun Daily, 2025). Söz konusu askerî ekipmanların

uluslararası pazarlara ihracatı, ülkenin küresel savunma sanayii alanındaki rekabetçi pozisyonunu güçlendirmektedir.

Güney Kore, algoritma temelli yapay zekâ sistemine dayalı askerî platformları karar alma süreçlerinde, sınır güvenliğinde, düşman hedef tespitinde ve taarruz operasyonlarında yaygın biçimde kullanmaktadır (Leys, 2018). Bu durum, geleneksel savunma doktrinlerinin operasyonel işlevselliğini belirgin ölçüde sınırlandırmaktadır. Yeni nesil askerî teknolojilerin saha uygulamalarına entegrasyonunu hızlandırmak amacıyla yapay zekâ odaklı savunma firmalarına uzun vadeli yasal ve finansal teşvikler sağlanmaktadır. Bahsedilen destekler arasında vergi indirimleri, fikrî mülkiyet ve sözleşme süreçlerinin kolaylaştırılmasına yönelik düzenlemeler yer almaktadır (RAND, 2025). Böylelikle, Güney Kore’de yeni nesil askerî teknolojilerin benimsenmesi ile ulusal savunma stratejilerinin sahadaki uygulanabilirliği arasındaki etkileşim giderek artmaktadır.

Sonuç

Kore Savaşı’nın ardından Güney Kore, büyük ölçüde geleneksel kara birliklerine dayalı bir askerî yapıya sahipken, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nden sağlanan mali destekler sayesinde silahlı kuvvetlerini kademeli olarak modernize etmiştir. Bununla birlikte, savunma alanındaki yapısal dönüşümün en belirgin ivme kazandığı dönem 1970’li yıllar olmuştur. Bu süreçte, yerli savunma sanayisinin askerî teçhizat üretimine yönelik girişimleri desteklenmiştir. Kore Cumhuriyeti Ordusu (ROK) birlikleri, yerli ekipmanlarla donatılarak operasyonel kapasiteyi artırmaya yönelik kapsamlı eğitimlerden geçirilmiştir. Soğuk Savaş’ın sona ermesiyle birlikte Güney Kore savunma sanayisi, yeni nesil askerî teknolojilere yönelerek niteliksel bir dönüşüm sürecine girmiştir. Bu dönemde Samsung Electronics, SK Hynix, SK Telecom, Kia Heavy Industry, Sapeon Korea, Hanwha, Korea Aerospace Industries ve Hyundai Rotem gibi firmalar, yapay zekâ destekli otonom silahlar, insansız ve robotik askerî platformların geliştirilmesine yönelmiştir. Bahsedilen askerî ekipmanlar, sahada farklı operasyonel görevlerde kullanılarak Güney Kore’nin savunma ve caydırıcılık kapasitesini belirgin ölçüde artırmıştır.

Sonuç olarak, ileri teknolojilerle donatılmış askerî ekipmanların Güney Kore tarafından geliştirilmesi ve uluslararası pazara ihraç edilmesi, diğer devletleri mevcut savunma envanterlerini modernize etmeye yöneltmiştir. Bu bağlamda, bazı ülkeler eski nesil askerî sistemlerini kullanım dışı bırakmaya başlamıştır. Güney Kore savunma şirketlerinin geliştirdiği otonom askerî sistemlerin operasyonel kullanımı, geleneksel doktrinlerin modern teknolojilerle uyumunu hızlandırmıştır. Yeni nesil teknolojilerle desteklenen savunma ekipmanlarının

ihracatı, Güney Kore'nin askerî-teknolojik iş birliği ağlarını genişletmesine ve küresel savunma sanayisindeki payını kademeli olarak artırmasına olanak sağlamaktadır. Güney Kore örneğinde görüldüğü üzere, söz konusu teknolojik gelişmeler konvansiyonel silah sistemlerine dayalı geleneksel askerî doktrinlerin etkinliğini sorgulatmıştır. İnsansız ve algoritma temelli askerî platformların ulusal stratejilere entegrasyonu, modern uluslararası bir güvenlik doktrin oluşum sürecini hızlandırmıştır.

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Giriş

Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde hız kazanan küreselleşme süreci, devletlerin güvenlik ve dış politika anlayışlarında köklü dönüşümleri beraberinde getirmiştir. Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerindeki hızlı gelişim ile dijitalleşmenin toplumsal, ekonomik ve siyasal alanlara nüfuz etmesi, bu dönüşümün en belirgin itici güçlerinden biri olmuştur. Dijital teknolojiler yalnızca günlük yaşam pratiklerini değil, aynı zamanda devletlerin güç algısını, tehdit tanımlarını ve uluslararası etkileşim biçimlerini de yeniden şekillendirmiştir; nitekim siber uzay, günümüzde kara, deniz, hava ve uzay gibi geleneksel alanların yanında uluslararası rekabetin ve iş birliğinin yeni bir boyutu olarak kabul edilmektedir (Libicki, 2009: 12). Siber uzayın kazandığı bu stratejik önem, güvenlik kavramının da yeniden ele alınmasını zorunlu kılmıştır. Bu çerçevede devletler açısından güvenlik artık yalnızca askeri tehditlerle sınırlı bir alan olmaktan çıkmış; kritik altyapıların korunması, bilgi bütünlüğü, veri güvenliği ve dijital sistemlerin sürekliliği gibi unsurları da kapsayan çok boyutlu bir nitelik kazanmıştır. Özellikle enerji, finans, ulaşım ve iletişim gibi hayati sektörlerin dijital sistemlere artan bağımlılığı siber tehditleri ulusal güvenlik meselesi hâline getirirken, siber saldırıların yalnızca teknik bir sorun olarak değil, diplomatik ve politik sonuçlar doğurabilen stratejik araçlar olarak değerlendirilmesine yol açmıştır. Dijitalleşmenin uluslararası ilişkiler üzerindeki dönüştürücü etkisi, diplomasinin de kaçınılmaz biçimde yeniden tanımlanmasına neden olmuştur. Klasik diplomasinin büyük ölçüde devletler arası yüz yüze temaslara ve fiziksel mekâna dayalı yapısının aksine, dijital çağda diplomatik etkileşimler giderek daha karmaşık ve çok katmanlı bir hâl almıştır. Devletlerin barış dönemlerinde dahi sürekli bir etkileşim içinde olmasını zorunlu kılan bu yeni süreç, güvenlik ve dış politika araçlarının dijital alana uyarlanmış biçimi olan 'siber diplomasi' kavramını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Genel anlamıyla devletlerin ve uluslararası aktörlerin siber uzaydaki tehditleri yönetmek, riskleri azaltmak ve ortak normlar oluşturmak amacıyla yürüttükleri faaliyetleri kapsayan siber diplomasi; hem kriz yönetimi hem de uzun vadeli normatif düzenleme süreçlerini içeren geniş bir alan sunmaktadır. Nitekim siber uzayın fiziksel sınırları aşan yapısı, tek taraflı çözümleri yetersiz kılarak devletleri çok taraflı iş birliği mekanizmalarına yönlendirmektedir (Barrinha ve Renard, 2017: 355). Bu iş birliği zorunluluğu ve siber diplomasinin yükselişi, uluslararası ilişkiler literatüründe güç kavramının da yeniden tartışılmasına zemin hazırlamıştır. Geleneksel askeri ve ekonomik unsurların yanı sıra, siber yetkinlikler ve dijital altyapılar devletlerin sistemdeki konumlarını belirleyen belirleyici

faktörler hâline gelmiştir. Ancak siber güç yalnızca teknik kapasiteyle sınırlı kalmayıp, siber uzayın bir diplomatik müzakere alanı olarak ele alınmasını gerekli kılan aktör çeşitliliğini de beraberinde getirmiştir.

Devletler siber alanda halen merkezi konumlarını korusa da siber tehditlerin sınır aşan doğası; Birleşmiş Milletler, NATO ve Avrupa Birliği gibi yapıların siber normların geliştirilmesi ve devletler arası iş birliğinin teşvik edilmesindeki rollerini giderek artırmaktadır (Klimburg, 2012: 14). Bu artan rolün en somut yansıması, siber uzayda devletlerin sorumlu davranışlarına ilişkin normların oluşturulması bakımından bir dönüm noktası kabul edilen Birleşmiş Milletler Hükümet Uzmanları Grubu (GGE) çalışmalarıdır; zira bu süreç siber saldırıların küresel barış ve güvenlik üzerindeki etkilerinin uluslararası düzeyde tescili anlamına gelmektedir (United Nations, 2015). Ancak bu durum, devletlerin siber egemenlik anlayışları ile çok taraflı norm üretimi arasında bir gerilim yaratarak siber diplomasiyi iş birliği ve rekabetin iç içe geçtiği karmaşık bir alana dönüştürmektedir. Devletlerin ulusal çıkarlarını koruma refleksi ile küresel güvenliğin gerektirdiği ortak mekanizma ihtiyacı arasındaki bu ikili yapı, siber diplomasiyi hem ulusal güvenlik stratejilerinin bir uzantısı hem de uluslararası yönetim tartışmalarının merkezi bir unsuru konumuna taşımaktadır.

Bu çalışma, siber diplomasiinin aktörlerini devletler ve çok taraflı kurumlar ekseninde ele alarak, siber uzayın yönetiminde ortaya çıkan güncel dinamikleri analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda öncelikle siber diplomasiinin kavramsal temelleri ortaya konulacak; ardından devletlerin siber diplomasiye yaklaşımları ile çok taraflı kurumların norm üretimi süreçlerindeki rolleri incelenecektir. Yapılacak incelemeler sonucunda, siber diplomasiinin uluslararası ilişkilerde giderek kurumsallaşan, çok katmanlı bir yapı kazandığı ve devletler ile çok taraflı kurumlar arasındaki etkileşimin, siber uzayın geleceğini şekillendiren temel belirleyici olduğu değerlendirilecektir.

2. Siber Diplomasiinin Kavramsal Çerçevesi

Siber diplomasiinin kavramsal olarak ele alınabilmesi, öncelikle siber uzayın uluslararası ilişkiler bağlamındaki konumunun netleştirilmesini gerekli kılmaktadır. Fiziksel coğrafyaya dayalı geleneksel alanlardan farklı olarak insan yapımı altyapılar üzerinden varlık kazanan siber uzay; yalnızca teknik bir iletişim ortamı değil, aynı zamanda siyasal, ekonomik ve güvenlik boyutları bulunan çok katmanlı bir etkileşim alanı olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Uluslararası ilişkiler literatüründe bu alanın giderek daha fazla güvenlik eksenli tartışmaların merkezine

yerleşmesi, diplomasi kavramının da yeniden düşünülmesine yol açmıştır; nitekim klasik diplomasi anlayışı büyük ölçüde fiziksel mekân ve resmi müzakere süreçleri üzerine inşa edilirken, siber uzayın ortaya çıkışı bu yapıyı tamamlayan yeni bir diplomatik alan yaratmıştır. Bu bağlamda siber diplomasi, devletlerin ve uluslararası aktörlerin siber uzaydaki tehdit, fırsat ve belirsizlikler karşısında geliştirdikleri tutumları ifade etmekte olup güvenlik, hukuk ve yönetim kavramlarının kesişiminde şekillenmektedir. Siber saldırıların ulusal güvenlik perspektifiyle ele alınması ile tehditlerin sınır aşan niteliğinin uluslararası hukuk tartışmalarını beraberinde getirmesi, siber diplomasiyi yalnızca kriz anlarında devreye giren bir araç olmaktan çıkararak barış dönemlerinde de sürdürülen sürekli bir faaliyet hâline getirmektedir. Literatürde siber diplomasiyi devletlerin güvenlik politikalarının bir aracı olarak gören yaklaşımlar ile küresel yönetim normlarına odaklanan yaklaşımların eş zamanlı varlığı ise kavramın hem devlet merkezli hem de çok aktörlü hibrit yapısını açıkça ortaya koymaktadır.

Kavramsal açıdan siber diplomasiğin omurgasını oluşturan siber egemenlik tartışmaları; devletlerin ulusal çıkarlarını koruma refleksi ile küresel internetin parçalanma riski arasında bir gerilim yaratırken, siber diplomasi bu iki uç arasındaki dengeyi kurmaya çalışan stratejik bir araç işlevi görmektedir. Bu denge arayışının doğal bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan normatif düzenleme süreçleri, siber uzayda kabul edilebilir devlet davranışlarının tanımlanmasını ve uluslararası hukukun uygulanabilirliğini merkeze almaktadır; nitekim devletlerin barış zamanında kritik altyapılara yönelik saldırılardan kaçınması gibi beklentiler, siber diplomasiğin hukuki ve etik boyutunu güçlendirmektedir (Krutskikh, 2021: 17). Normatif ve hukuki boyutun yanı sıra güç ve kapasite dağılımı da bu kavramsal çerçevenin vazgeçilmez bir parçasıdır. Siber yetkinlikler devletlerin uluslararası konumunu belirleyen temel bir unsur olsa da, bu yetkinliklerin eşit dağılmaması ülkeler arasında yeni bir asimetri yaratmakta (Zinovieva, 2019: 52). Bu durum siber diplomasiğin güvenlik ekseninin ötesine geçerek kalkınma ve kapasite geliştirme perspektifiyle de ele alınmasını zorunlu kılmaktadır. Tüm bu karmaşık dinamikler, siber diplomasiğin çok aktörlü yönetim anlayışıyla olan bağını güçlendirmekte olup; devletler temel aktör niteliğini korusa da çok taraflı kurumlar ve bölgesel örgütler siber uzayın yönetiminde giderek daha belirleyici bir rol üstlenmektedir (Smirnov, 2020: 74). Bu çerçevede siber diplomasi, uluslararası ilişkiler disiplininde güvenlik, hukuk ve teknoloji eksenlerini bir araya getiren, dinamik ve sürekli evrilen bir kavramsal alan sunmaktadır. Kavramın bu çok boyutlu yapısı, siber diplomasiğin aktörler bağlamında ele alınmasını gerekli kılmakta; devletler ve çok taraflı kurumların bu alandaki rollerinin ayrı ayrı analiz edilmesini zorunlu hâle getirmektedir. Bu bağlamda devletler, siber diplomasiğin en baskın ve belirleyici aktörleri

olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Her ne kadar siber uzay, yapısı gereği sınırları belirsizleştirse de, devletler Westphalya düzeninden miras kalan egemenlik reflekslerini bu yeni alana uyarlayarak dijital sınırlarını tahkim etme gayretindedir. Bu çaba, yalnızca askeri veya istihbari önlemlerle sınırlı kalmamış; dışişleri bakanlıklarının yapılanmasında da köklü değişiklikleri beraberinde getirmiştir. Pek çok ülke, siber tehditleri ve fırsatları diplomatik kanallarla yönetebilmek adına siber uzay dijital politika bürosu ve ulusal siber güvenlik stratejilerini dış politika vizyonlarının ayrılmaz bir parçası hâline getirmiştir(Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy, 2025). Dolayısıyla devletlerin siber alandaki varlığı, teknik bir düzenleyici olmanın ötesine geçerek, siber uzayı ulusal çıkarların maksimize edildiği ve jeopolitik rekabetin sürdürüldüğü stratejik bir diplomatik cepheye dönüştürmüştür.

3. Siber Diplomaside Devletler

Dijital çağın hız kazanmasıyla birlikte uluslararası ilişkiler ve diplomasi pratikleri köklü bir dönüşüm sürecine girerken, siber uzayın ekonomik, toplumsal ve askerî alanlardaki artan etkisi devletleri bu yeni alana yönelik stratejik yaklaşımlar geliştirmeye mecbur bırakmıştır. Bu bağlamda siber diplomasi, siber uzaya ilişkin meselelerin yönetilmesi ve uluslararası düzeyde ele alınması amacıyla diplomatik araçların kullanıldığı temel bir mekanizma olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Özellikle Estonya'ya yönelik gerçekleştirilen geniş çaplı siber saldırılar, bu alanın gelişiminde kritik bir dönüm noktası teşkil etmiş; bu tarihten itibaren devletlerin ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri oluşturma ihtiyacı çok daha görünür hâle gelmiştir (Dilek vd, 2023: 333). Her ne kadar siber diplomasi, çok taraflı kurumların, özel sektörün ve sivil toplumun dâhil olduğu çeşitlilik arz eden bir aktör yapısına sahip olsa da, siber uzaya ilişkin temel politika tercihleri ve güvenlik stratejileri büyük ölçüde devletler tarafından şekillendirilmektedir. Nitekim siber yönetim tartışmaları, devletlerin egemenlik ve güvenlik ekseninde geliştirdikleri politikaların belirleyici etkisini açıkça ortaya koymaktadır (Radanliev, 2024: 28–30). Devletlerin bu merkezi rolü, yalnızca siber tehditlere karşı reaktif bir savunma geliştirmekle sınırlı değildir; aksine devletler, siber uzayda kabul edilebilir davranış biçimlerinin tanımlanması, devlet sorumluluğunun belirlenmesi ve normatif söylemlerin uluslararası platformlarda yaygınlaştırılması noktasında 'kural koyucu ve yönlendirici' bir aktör olarak siber diplomasiyi domine etmektedir.

Devletlerin siber diplomasi politikaları, büyük ölçüde ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri aracılığıyla somutlaşmakta olup; bu belgeler devletlerin siber uzayı algılama biçimlerini, önceliklendirdikleri tehditleri ve uluslararası iş birliğine yatkınlıklarını açıkça ortaya koymaktadır. Ancak bu stratejik yaklaşımlar homojen değildir; gelişmiş devletler siber

diplomasiyi stratejik bir güç projeksiyonu olarak kullanırken, geliştirmekte olan ülkeler için bu alan daha çok kapasite geliştirme ve uluslararası destek arayışı ekseninde şekillenmektedir. Uluslararası sistemde yeni bir güç asimetrisi yaratan bu farklılaşmaya rağmen, siber uzayın sınır aşan doğası hiçbir devletin tek taraflı politikalarla kalıcı çözüm üretmesine olanak tanımamaktadır. Bu zorunluluk devletleri ikili anlaşmalar, güven artırıcı önlemler ve bilgi paylaşım mekanizmaları gibi iş birliği araçlarına yöneltmekte; böylece devletlerin siber diplomasideki konumu, kaçınılmaz olarak ulusal egemenlik refleksleri ile uluslararası iş birliği gereklilikleri arasında kurulan hassas bir denge üzerinden tanımlanmaktadır.

3.1. Devletlerin Siber Egemenlik Yaklaşımı

Siber diplomaside devletlerin tutumlarını şekillendiren temel eksenlerden biri olan siber egemenlik anlayışı; siber uzayın sınır aşan ve fiziksel olmayan yapısı nedeniyle geleneksel 'coğrafi mutlak yetki' tanımının yeniden yorumlanmasını zorunlu kılmıştır. Bu zorunluluğa rağmen devletler, dijital altyapıların ulusal güvenlik açısından taşıdığı kritik önem sebebiyle siber uzayı egemenlik alanlarının ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak kodlama eğilimindedir (Caner, 2019: 145). Devletlerin siber uzay üzerindeki denetim, düzenleme ve bağımsız hareket etme yetkisini vurgulayan bu perspektif; ulusal veri akışlarının kontrolünden kritik altyapıların ve seçim güvenliğinin korunmasına kadar geniş bir yelpazeyi egemenliğin dijital uzantısı olarak kabul etmektedir (Şeker ve Aytekin, 2020: 82). Ancak bu kabul uluslararası düzlemde homojen bir karşılık bulmamaktadır; nitekim bazı devletler siber alanı sıkı denetim altındaki kapalı bir yapı olarak kurgularken, diğerleri çok paydaşlı ve serbest bir internet modelini savunmaktadır. Veri akışı, dijital sansür ve devlet sorumluluğu gibi konularda gerilimlere yol açan bu yorum farkı, siber diplomasinin yalnızca güvenlik boyutunu değil, politik ve normatif yönünü de derinden etkilemektedir. Devletlerin kendi egemenlik anlayışlarını uluslararası platformlarda meşrulaştırma çabası ve bunun sonucunda ortaya çıkan diplomatik bloklaşmalar, siber diplomasiyi klasik diplomatik alanlardan ayırıştıran en belirgin dinamiklerden biri hâline gelmiştir (Tetik, 2021: 52). Söz konusu ayrışma, uluslararası literatürde genellikle 'siber özgürlükçüler' ile 'siber egemenlikçiler' arasındaki ideolojik bir fay hattı olarak tezahür etmektedir. Batı dünyasının başını çektiği özgürlükçü kanat, internetin açık ve çok paydaşlı yapısını savunarak devlet müdahalesini sınırlı tutmayı amaçlarken; Rusya ve Çin gibi aktörlerin öncülük ettiği egemenlikçi kanat, 'bilgi güvenliği' kavramı üzerinden devletin siber uzaydaki içerik ve altyapı üzerindeki mutlak kontrolünü talep etmektedir. Ancak bu talep yalnızca siyasi rejim güvenliğiyle sınırlı değildir; aynı zamanda küresel veri akışının kontrolü ve 'dijital özerklik' arayışı da siber egemenlik söylemini besleyen ekonomik bir motivasyon kaynağıdır.

Nitekim devletlerin kendi 'dijital sınırlarını' çizme ve veriyi ülke içinde tutma (data localization) gayretleri, siber diplomasiyi teknik bir müzakere alanı olmaktan çıkarıp, jeopolitik ve jeoekonomik rekabetin iç içe geçtiği çok katmanlı bir mücadele sahasına dönüştürmektedir.

3.2. Ulusal Siber Güvenlik Stratejileri ve Dış Politika

Devletlerin siber diplomasideki yaklaşımları, büyük ölçüde ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri aracılığıyla somutlaşmaktadır. Siber uzayın tanımlanması, tehditlerin önceliklendirilmesi ve uluslararası iş birliği vizyonunun belirlenmesi gibi temel işlevleri üstlenen bu stratejiler; yalnızca teknik önlemleri değil, aynı zamanda diplomatik hedefleri de kapsayan bütüncül politika belgeleri niteliğindedir (Akçadağ, 2015: 118). Strateji belgelerinin dış politika ile kurduğu bu organik bağ, siber diplomasinin kurumsallaşmasında belirleyici bir rol oynamış; nitekim pek çok devletin dışişleri bakanlıkları bünyesinde siber politika birimleri oluşturmasıyla konu, geçici bir gündem maddesi olmaktan çıkıp uzun vadeli planlamaların asli unsuru hâline gelmiştir (Sökmen Alaca, 2021: 14). Öte yandan ulusal stratejiler, devletlerin uluslararası sistemdeki konumlarının da bir aynasıdır. Gelişmiş siber kapasiteye sahip devletler bu belgeleri küresel norm inşasında bir 'güç aracı' olarak kullanırken, gelişmekte olan ülkeler için süreç daha çok kapasite geliştirme ve destek arayışı ekseninde ilerlemektedir; bu durum siber diplomasinin yeni bir güç ve etki alanı yarattığının açık göstergesidir (Köybaşı, 2020: 156). Dolayısıyla ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri, hem devletlerin iç idari yapılanmalarını şekillendiren hem de ikili ve çok taraflı ilişkilerde temel referans noktası teşkil eden çift yönlü bir diplomasi aracı olarak işlev görmektedir.

Ulusal stratejilerin belirlediği bu çerçeve, uygulamada siber iş birliği anlaşmaları, güven artırıcı önlemler ve ortak tatbikatlar gibi somut diplomatik araçlarla hayata geçirilmektedir (Şeker, 2018: 208). Bu yönüyle ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri, siber diplomasinin yalnızca teorik zeminini değil, aynı zamanda pratik boyutunu inşa eden temel yapı taşları niteliğindedir. Devletlerin siber egemenlik refleksleri ile dış politika hedefleri arasındaki ilişkinin en net izlendiği bu metinler ve uygulamalar; siber diplomasiyi klasik kalıpların ötesine taşıyarak, güvenlik ve diplomasi arasındaki sınırların giderek bulanıklaştığı hibrit bir etkileşim sahasına dönüştürmektedir (Özdemir, 2021: 32). Ancak güvenlik ve diplomasi arasındaki bu iç içe geçiş, devlet merkezli çözümlerin sınırlarını da belirginleştirmektedir. Ulusal stratejiler her ne kadar egemenlik sınırlarını çizmeye çalışsa da, siber tehditlerin asimetrik ve sınır aşan karakteri, bu sınırları fiilen anlamsız kılmaktadır. Tek bir devletin, ne kadar güçlü bir stratejiye sahip olursa olsun, küresel bir botnet saldırısını veya sınır ötesi veri ihlali tek başına engellemesi mümkün

değildir. Bu yetersizlik, devletleri 'stratejik yalnızlıktan' kurtulmak adına daha geniş kapsamlı ittifaklara yönelmekte; siber diplomasiyi ikili ilişkilerin ötesine taşıyarak Birleşmiş Milletler ve NATO gibi çok taraflı platformların vazgeçilmez bir gündem maddesi hâline getirmektedir. Bu doğrultuda siber diplomasiinin kurumsal mimarisi, farklı örgütlerin üstlendiği tamamlayıcı roller ekseninde şekillenmektedir. Küresel ölçekte Birleşmiş Milletler, siber uzayda devletlerin sorumlu davranışlarına dair evrensel ilkelerin belirlendiği 'norm koyucu' bir çatı işlevi görürken; bu normatif zeminin güvenliğini sağlama misyonu, siber uzayı operasyonel bir harekât alanı olarak tanıyan NATO'nun kolektif savunma doktriniyle tahkim edilmektedir. Güvenlik ve norm eksenini diplomatik yaptırımlarla destekleyen Avrupa Birliği ise geliştirdiği siber diplomasi araç setleriyle, norm ihlallerine karşı somut siyasi ve ekonomik bedeller ödetmeyi hedefleyen 'düzenleyici' bir güç odağı olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Benzer şekilde, Avrupa Güvenlik ve İşbirliği Teşkilatı (AGİT) gibi bölgesel yapılar da kriz anlarında iletişim kanallarını açık tutarak güven artırıcı önlemlerin uygulanmasında kritik bir rol oynamaktadır. Dolayısıyla, uluslararası örgütlerin bu farklılaşan fonksiyonları birbirinden kopuk süreçler değil; aksine siber diplomasiinin teoriden pratiğe, meşruiyetten müeyyideye uzanan çok katmanlı yönetim yapısını oluşturan ve birbirine eklemlenen stratejik dişliler olarak işlev görmektedir.

4. Çok Taraflı Kurumlar Ve Siber Diplomasi

Siber uzayın sınır aşan ve küresel ölçekte etkileşim yaratan yapısı, siber güvenlik ve siber diplomasi alanında tek taraflı ve yalnızca ulusal düzeyde geliştirilen politikaların yetersiz kalmasına neden olmaktadır. Bu durum, devletleri çok taraflı kurumlar ve uluslararası örgütler aracılığıyla ortak normlar, ilkeler ve iş birliği mekanizmaları geliştirmeye yöneltmiştir. Dolayısıyla çok taraflı kurumlar, siber diplomasiinin kurumsallaşması ve uluslararası düzeyde meşruiyet kazanması açısından temel aktörler arasında yer almaktadır (Caner, 2019: 142). Çok taraflı kurumların siber diplomasi alanındaki rolü, öncelikle norm üretimi ve yönetim boyutunda öne çıkmaktadır. Siber uzayda devlet davranışlarını düzenleyecek bağlayıcı bir uluslararası hukuki çerçevenin henüz tam anlamıyla oluşmamış olması, bu kurumları normatif tartışmaların merkezine yerleştirmektedir. Bu bağlamda Birleşmiş Milletler, siber uzayın uluslararası barış ve güvenlik üzerindeki etkilerini ele alan en kapsayıcı platformlardan biri olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Birleşmiş Milletler bünyesinde yürütülen Hükümet Uzmanları Grubu (GGE) ve Açık Uçlu Çalışma Grubu (OEWG) çalışmaları, devletlerin siber uzaydaki sorumlu davranışlarına ilişkin ortak anlayış geliştirilmesi yönünde önemli katkılar sunmaktadır (Krutskikh, 2021: 18). Birleşmiş Milletler'in yanı sıra bölgesel örgütler de siber diplomasiinin

gelişiminde belirleyici roller üstlenmektedir. NATO'nun siber uzayı operasyonel bir alan olarak tanımlaması, siber güvenliği kolektif savunma anlayışının bir parçası hâline getirmiştir. Bu yaklaşım, siber saldırıların yalnızca teknik tehditler değil, aynı zamanda siyasi ve stratejik sonuçlar doğuran güvenlik sorunları olarak ele alındığını göstermektedir. NATO çerçevesinde geliştirilen iş birliği mekanizmaları ve kapasite artırıcı faaliyetler, siber diplomasinin askerî ve stratejik boyutunu güçlendiren unsurlar arasında yer almaktadır (Şeker, 2018: 211).

Avrupa Birliği ise siber diplomasi alanında daha çok normatif ve düzenleyici güç kimliğiyle öne çıkmaktadır. Avrupa Birliği, siber güvenlik politikalarını dijital egemenlik, veri koruma ve temel haklar çerçevesinde ele alarak, siber uzayın hukuki ve kurumsal altyapısının şekillendirilmesine katkı sunmaktadır. Bu yönüyle Avrupa Birliği, siber diplomasiyi yalnızca güvenlik temelli değil, aynı zamanda değerler ve hukuk eksenli bir alan olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Avrupa Birliği'nin siber diplomasi araç seti, üye devletler arasında ortak tutum geliştirilmesi ve üçüncü ülkelerle ilişkilerde koordinasyon sağlanması açısından önemli bir referans noktası oluşturmaktadır (Zinovieva, 2019: 55). Çok taraflı kurumların siber diplomasi alanındaki bir diğer önemli işlevi, güven artırıcı önlemler ve kapasite geliştirme faaliyetleridir. Gelişmekte olan ülkeler açısından siber kapasite eksikliği, siber diplomaside eşitsizlik yaratan temel unsurlardan biri olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Uluslararası örgütler, teknik destek, eğitim programları ve bilgi paylaşımı yoluyla bu kapasite farklarını azaltmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu durum, siber diplomasinin yalnızca güvenlik ve norm üretimiyle sınırlı kalmayıp, kalkınma ve eşitlik boyutlarını da içeren çok yönlü bir alan olduğunu göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, çok taraflı kurumların siber diplomasideki rolü belirli sınırlamalarla da karşı karşıyadır. Devletlerin siber egemenlik anlayışları arasındaki farklılıklar, bağlayıcı normlar oluşturulmasını zorlaştırmakta; karar alma süreçleri çoğu zaman uzlaşmaya dayalı ve yavaş ilerleyen bir yapıya bürünmektedir. Bu durum, siber diplomasinin etkinliği konusunda eleştirilere yol açmakla birlikte, çok taraflı mekanizmaların tamamen işlevsiz olduğu anlamına gelmemektedir. Aksine, bu platformlar devletler arasında diyalog kanallarının açık tutulması ve ortak anlayış geliştirilmesi açısından vazgeçilmez bir rol oynamaktadır. Bundan dolayı çok taraflı kurumlar, siber diplomasinin devlet merkezli yapısını tamamlayan ve dengeleyen aktörler olarak değerlendirilebilir. Devletlerin ulusal çıkarlarını önceleyen yaklaşımları ile küresel siber istikrar ihtiyacı arasındaki denge, büyük ölçüde bu kurumlar aracılığıyla kurulmaktadır. Dolayısıyla siber diplomasinin geleceği, devletler ile çok taraflı kurumlar arasındaki etkileşimin niteliğine ve bu etkileşimin ne ölçüde kurumsallaşabildiğine bağlı olarak şekillenecektir.

Sonuç

Dijitalleşmenin uluslararası ilişkiler üzerindeki dönüştürücü etkisi, diplomasi'nin kapsamını ve araçlarını da önemli ölçüde yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Siber uzayın ekonomik, toplumsal ve askerî alanlardaki stratejik önemi, devletleri bu yeni alanı yalnızca teknik bir mesele olarak değil, dış politika ve güvenlik politikalarının ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak ele almaya yöneltmiştir. Bu neticede siber diplomasi, klasik diplomasi anlayışını dışlamayan; aksine onu dijital çağın koşullarına uyarlayan tamamlayıcı bir alan olarak uluslararası ilişkiler literatüründe giderek daha görünür hâle gelmiştir.

İncelemeler sonucunda, siber diplomasi'nin aktör yapısının çok katmanlı ve çok aktörlü bir nitelik taşıdığı görülmektedir. Devletler, siber uzayda egemenlik iddiaları, ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri ve diplomatik söylemleri aracılığıyla merkezi konumlarını korumaya devam etmektedir. Siber egemenlik anlayışı, devletlerin siber uzaya yönelik politika tercihlerinin temel belirleyicisi olurken; bu anlayış, siber diplomasi'nin güvenlik, normatif düzenleme ve güç ilişkileri boyutlarını doğrudan etkilemektedir. Ulusal siber güvenlik stratejileri ise bu yaklaşımın pratikte nasıl hayata geçirildiğini gösteren temel araçlar olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Siber uzayın sınır aşan yapısı, devletlerin tek taraflı politikalarla kalıcı ve sürdürülebilir çözümler üretmesini zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu noktada çok taraflı kurumlar, siber diplomasi'nin kurumsallaşması ve uluslararası meşruiyet kazanması açısından kritik bir rol üstlenmektedir. Birleşmiş Milletler, NATO ve Avrupa Birliği gibi yapılar; norm üretimi, güven artırıcı önlemler ve kapasite geliştirme faaliyetleri aracılığıyla siber uzayın daha öngörülebilir ve istikrarlı bir alan hâline gelmesine katkı sunmaktadır. Ancak devletlerin siber egemenlik anlayışları arasındaki farklılıklar, bu kurumların bağlayıcı düzenlemeler üretmesini sınırlandıran temel faktörlerden biri olarak varlığını sürdürmektedir.

Siber diplomasi, devlet merkezli güvenlik anlayışı ile çok taraflı yönetim ihtiyacı arasında kurulan hassas bir denge üzerine inşa edilmektedir. Devletler, ulusal çıkarlarını ve egemenliklerini koruma refleksiyle hareket ederken; çok taraflı kurumlar küresel siber istikrarın sağlanması için ortak normlar ve iş birliği mekanizmaları geliştirmeye çalışmaktadır. Siber diplomasi'nin geleceği, bu iki yaklaşım arasındaki etkileşimin ne ölçüde kurumsallaşabildiğine ve karşılıklı güvenin ne derece tesis edilebildiğine bağlı olarak şekillenecektir.

Sonuç olarak siber diplomasi, uluslararası ilişkiler disiplinde güvenlik, hukuk ve teknoloji eksenlerini bir araya getiren dinamik bir alan sunmaktadır. Bu alanın giderek artan

önemi, devletlerin ve çok taraflı kurumların siber uzaya yönelik politikalarını daha bütüncül, koordineli ve uzun vadeli bir perspektifle ele almalarını zorunlu kılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda siber diplomasinin, gelecekte hem uluslararası güvenliğin sağlanmasında hem de küresel dijital yönetişimin şekillendirilmesinde merkezi bir rol oynamaya devam edeceği değerlendirilmektedir.

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The US-China Competition in the Space Race and the Future

Zeynep Gökçe Bulgen

The world is changing rapidly, and the states that adapt best to this change will be in the strongest position within the system, even controlling or governing others. This rule has remained unchanged since the dawn of humankind. Therefore, while eras and their conditions may change, interstate competition always remains the same. Today, however, the subject of competition is multi-dimensional, multi-layered, and multi-faceted. As international relations experts define it, the New World Order, or in other words, the Third World, is now extending beyond the planet we use. The boundaries of the world are limited, but space still seems limitless. Space, along with technology, is a field that increases the level of advancement in communication, research, meteorology, and security. For this reason, the boundaries of the competition between the two major powers, the United States and China, have naturally now extended to the space sector.

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union, one of the most powerful and technologically advanced countries of that time, launched Sputnik-1, the world's first artificial satellite, into orbit. The "Space Age" has begun for societies, interest in the space industry has increased and begun to develop, and more importantly, the need to have a presence in space has turned into a global competition between states (Yorgancı, 2025). Various definitions are being offered to analyze why the competition between the US and China exists, particularly in the space dimension, and where its boundaries begin and end. Organski's "Power Transition Theory" or Allison's "Thucydides Trap" are, while partially sufficient, to explain the actions of these two major powers. Only time will tell whether these definitions fully describe this competition. Both theories mention about the existence of an existing power and a new power challenging it. However, they examine the China-US rivalry and their ongoing mutual relations in space differently, exhibiting structural and ideological differences. Power Transition Theory, from a more Realist perspective, discusses and analyzes the emergence of a new actor challenging the hegemony of the existing power. Unlike Organski, Allison explains the Thucydides Trap from a Neorealist perspective, starting from a historical context. Allison references the thoughts of Commander Thucydides, who described his observations on the Peloponnesian Wars that occurred in Ancient Greece (Olkan, 2024). According to Thucydides, the rise of Athens frightened Sparta, which was in a position of power at the time, and war became inevitable (Harvard Kennedy School, nd.). So, a rising power triggers fear, and the hegemonic power acts to defend itself, a conflict very likely to result in war. Sixteen cases throughout history that fit

the "Thucydides Trap" perspective were examined, and 12 of them resulted in war (Harvard Kennedy School, nd.). Today, a current example of the Thucydides Trap is the rising power of China, which frightens the United States. Allison examines the dimensions and multifaceted nature of this competition and predicts that sooner or later, this competition will lead to war (Allison, 2017). However, in line with a new world order that proposes a more peaceful and cooperative approach, China rejects this definition and emphasizes a peaceful policy. Unlike China, which seeks to avoid a destructive outcome, the US seems to be fueled by its perception of security threats, leading it to adopt the Thucydides Trap definition.

Historically, the September 11 attacks of 2001 and the subsequent global economic crisis were events that shook the hegemony of the West, and specifically the United States. They created a negative image for the US and raised new questions about its power, as the terrorist attacks questioned its security and the economic crisis questioned its investment capacity. American investments worldwide declined due to the crisis, and trade volume decreased. In other words, the power of the US, which was both the protector and manager of the global order, became uncertain (Tokatlı, 2023). In this time of crisis, where global governance was unclear, China successfully created its own opportunity. It began constructing a new identity with its own rules, principles, and institutions, in opposition to the US-centric order. Learning from history, China experienced an economic and technological leap, and this progress indicated its advancement towards becoming a superpower. The competition, which initially began with economic dynamics, gradually spread to other areas. China's steady rise was worrying for the US because it interpreted this progress as a challenge to its own existence and power, and its perception of a multifaceted threat increased in every field (Tokatlı, 2023). Feeling threatened and experiencing increased security concerns, the US entered a different policy phase. In 2017, the Trump administration shifted its focus from foreign relations to domestic affairs and adopted an "isolationist" stance (Çakır, 2020). For the US, which for nearly the last seventy years had managed a highly interconnected system that was particularly liberal and supportive of international cooperation, Trump's desire to take precautions against the Chinese threat triggered a perception of war. NATO's strength began to be questioned again during this period (Çakır, 2020) because Trump spoke of conditional alliance initiatives or placed greater emphasis on self-interest. Therefore, global actors continued to question the power of the US, which was focusing on its own defense dynamics, and the possibility of a violent conflict began to emerge. These discourses led to a further escalation of the competition between China and the US. Concerns within the system were paving the way for China's rise. China continued to

expand its own ecosystem and collaborations. However, this cannot be explained as a one-sided Chinese success due to the multifaceted and complex nature of the international system, because within a system operating on the principle of interdependence, China and the US need to interact with each other. For example, China needed the US because of its technological capacity and obtains the necessary high-innovation goods from the US. At the same time, the US is dependent on China because of both its growing market and cheap labor (Tokatlı, 2023). In this situation, the relationship cannot be completely severed, it only becomes fragile. The war predicted by Thucydides' Trap may not be possible on land due to this dependence. Unlike on Earth, space competition is still full of uncertainties.

One striking example of US-China competition in the technological field was the Huawei crisis. China, experiencing rapid technological growth over time, became the world's largest mobile phone equipment manufacturer, excelling in 5G technology and artificial intelligence through its Huawei brand, and increasing its global influence. This rise of Huawei attracted the attention of Western technology firms, while causing concern among their executives. The rise of a technology based in China that includes location tracking, communication signals, and similar intelligence information has created a new security threat for the US. Therefore, the US banned the use of Huawei domestically and instructed allied countries not to use it either, because, according to the US, China could use its technology to monitor and disrupt networks (Washington Post, 2021). Despite the government's stance, the success of Chinese-origin applications continued. The use of China's TikTok app increased from 10% to 21% annually in 2022-2023, surpassing domestic Facebook and Instagram usage rates (Washington Post, 2021). Another example is the US halting sales to the Chinese company ZTE. However, these actions demonstrated that in every policy the US implemented based on its security concerns, it supported China's own success because China decided to produce its own technology. It also accelerated its space exploration efforts using the same technology. Both countries updated their action plans in the space race, and their leaders were quite serious about space. This is because space is a highly strategic area in the power competition, encompassing all assets and properties and offering states unlimited freedom of action. During the Barack Obama administration, the space program took a new direction because China's rise was very evident (Atlıg, 2024). In 2007, China conducted the ASAT test to test its own anti-satellite technology, resulting in the destruction of several devices. The ASAT test in space was a Chinese attempt to develop its own space technology and conduct surveillance. Essentially, it was intended to intercept or disrupt anti-satellite weapons and any other dangerous devices in

space (Zissiz, 2007). However, China's test destroyed one of its own devices, a result that has alarmed all actors involved in the space race. The ASAT test demonstrated that all devices in orbit were vulnerable and susceptible to attack. The security problem persisted for the US. In 2010, the US changed its space strategy and called for greater cooperation (Seçkin, 2012). The most important example of cooperation is the International Space Station (ISS). Established through collaboration between the US, Europe, Russia, Japan, and Canada, this station represents a space coalition, serving as a laboratory and observatory in space. Its motto is "A space outpost bringing nations together for the benefit of life on Earth and beyond." (Keenan, 2022). China had submitted a bid to join the ISS because it was developing its space technology and aimed to be part of the coalition there. However, the US blocked China's participation, aiming to keep China out of its space hegemony. But with China excluded from this cooperation, it began working on building its own space station (Şimşek & Atvar, 2021). According to the Law of Outer Space, space is the common domain of all nations and should be used jointly without any claims of sovereignty (Outer Space Treaty, 1967). China has tried to shape its own space policy around this principle. China continued its efforts independently with the aim of joining the system and was already a rising power, as it had become the third country in the world to independently send humans into space. China's achievements and presence in the space race continued. It launched the Tiangong-1 spacecraft into orbit. This was a significant development in space exploration because the technology possessed by the Tiangong-1 spacecraft provided a solution to the problem of docking with other spacecraft in space. Thus, China successfully docked its Shenzhou-8, Shenzhou-9, and Shenzhou-10 spacecraft. These docked vehicles marked the beginning of the goal of establishing a space station and remained active in space for four and a half years. With the crews working on board, it proved that long-duration stays in space were possible (CNSA, 2018). In 2018, China became the first country to land on the far side of the Moon with the Chang'e-4 mission. This achievement was met with interest by major countries pursuing space policies and was supported by many nations. Scientists from NASA, based in the US, also collaborated to study the Chang'e-4 landing (CNSA, 2019). By 2022, China had published a white paper on its space program, "Perspective 2021." This document outlined China's space principles and policies, emphasizing its mission of peace and avoiding war. China also outlined its aspirations for comprehensive cooperation and a five-year global space governance plan, starting in 2022, addressing key issues such as space exploration and space technology (CNSA, 2022). During this process, the US was grappling with internal issues such as election processes, budget planning, and competition between the private and public sectors. Therefore, the US did not

react in isolation, but cooperation was re-emphasized, and a preference for space alliance emerged. However, the inclusion of the private sector and businesspeople in the race and the system transformed it into a highly dynamic competition.

Business leaders like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos are prime examples of this, quietly changing and influencing the rules of the game on the US side and in the space race. In the classic US hegemony, space was accepted under existing conditions, and controllability was desired. Unlike the classic US space policy, Musk argued that space is not static and can be transformed and scaled with the right software. With Musk's ideas and Space Exploration Technologies Corporation (SpaceX) technologies, the US has encountered new equations in the space race. SpaceX's presence is a significant time-saving advantage for the US because if any equipment is lost in space, replacing it won't take months; instead, a new satellite will be in place in days. Therefore, Elon Musk's insights provide an advantage for Trump. Both are businessmen concerned with the commercialization of space exploration and are currently cooperating in the space race against China. Accordingly, the Trump administration reduced government spending on NASA and increased private sector investment, particularly in SpaceX (The Guardian, 2025). With the support of the private sector, the US is once again taking steps and continuing its efforts to counter China's presence in space. China has particularly focused its space exploration efforts on the Moon because of its ongoing search for natural resources. The Helium-3 element, extracted from the Moon, is especially important for nuclear fusion reactors. These nuclear fusions are then used in lunar research (Pirihan, 2023). Furthermore, China successfully completed an "Artificial Moon" project in 2022. An "Artificial Moon" is located in Jiangsu province, China, and this facility is important for future lunar exploration (TRT Haber, 2022). On the US side, new lunar exploration efforts have emerged in response to China's activities. China's Chang'e-7 and the US's Artemis 2, both scheduled to launch to the Moon in 2026, will face off in the space race (The Guardian, 2025). Furthermore, the next step for the US lunar program is to build a nuclear reactor on the Moon. NASA's interim administrator, Sean Duff, announced this year that work has been accelerated. Construction has begun on the reactor, with completion targeted for 2030 (Euronews, 2025). Thanks to this lunar reactor, humans will be able to go to the Moon and space tourism will be supported, a foundation will be laid for Mars missions, and, more importantly, vital infrastructure will be provided for generating energy, enabling communication, or storing energy (Euronews, 2025). With this reactor, the US appears to be able to gain complete control of the Moon. However, China is also currently testing its "Lanyue" lander, which is expected to carry humans to the

Moon before 2030. According to statements, a lunar nuclear reactor, built in cooperation between Russia and China, is planned for 2035 (Euronews, 2025). The US is also vying for the construction of a similar reactor, and work has accelerated. Accordingly, the first reactor on the Moon will give them an advantage in the race.

In conclusion, we are facing a China-US rivalry that, within the framework of the Thucydides Trap, is seen as likely to result in war. China is particularly hesitant about war rhetoric and emphasizes a peaceful approach. But, the space program and mutual power struggle between the US and China may lead to different outcomes as time progresses. A war that does not exist on Earth has the potential to take place in space, because space is an atmosphere filled with high technologies that are still being tested and whose controllability is limited. Initially, the use of space was limited to military purposes. However, in the rapidly evolving world order, space has become a key area. While previously states like the US and Russia held power in this field, the number of actors in space has increased over time. With its extracted minerals, the vast amount of space it provides, and all the secrets open to exploration, space is an area that states aspire to reach. Moreover, not only states but also private companies have joined this mysterious and boundless realm, and the game is growing. The trade rivalry that emerged under the leadership of China and the US has shifted its focus beyond its orbit and continues to grow there. Mutual challenges, competition in military equipment capacity, high-tech infrastructure, and access to natural resources have now moved to the Moon. The idea that "Whoever controls space can control the whole world" seems to be increasing the competition and motivation of states. The nuclear reactors, whose construction has begun and is expected to be completed by both powers, will redefine future space activities and the definition of hegemonic power.

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The Belt and Road Initiative & The Turkic States: Between Strategic Opportunity and Structural Dependency

Can Baykal

1. Introduction: From Grand Vision to Strategic Shortfall

Since its announcement in 2013, China's BRI has been touted as a game-changing initiative that seeks to redefine Eurasian connectivity through large-scale infrastructure investment, energy corridors, and expanded trade networks. Framed as an economic development strategy and a geopolitical instrument, the BRI was purposed to lock in China's long-term growth, reduce its dependence on vulnerable sea lines of communication/chokepoints, and project Beijing's political influence across Asia and beyond (Yıldırımçakar, 2019).

In 2016, almost 64 percent of China's sea trade passed through the South China Sea, emphasizing Beijing's strategic vulnerability to maritime chokepoints and its drive to secure alternative overland corridors (ChinaPower Project, 2017/2021). Central to this vision was the Turkic world whose geography spans the core overland routes linking East Asia to Europe and the Middle East. Over a decade later, however, this claim has become increasingly difficult to sustain as the BRI seems not to have fulfilled its strategic promises and influence China wanted in the Turkic world. Several Central Asian states initially welcomed Chinese financing as a pathway toward diversification and modernization, with a balance for Russian influence. Material outcomes have remained uneven and, in many cases, underwhelming.

A good example we will look at in this case will be Kazakhstan, per Dadabaev (2021), where, despite big promises, material outcomes have remained uneven and, in many cases, underwhelming. Project delays, rising debt exposure, and limited local economic spillovers have generated growing skepticism among political elites and societies alike (Taliga, 2021; Dadabaev, 2021). Rather than consolidating China's influence, these shortcomings have constrained Beijing's room for maneuver and exposed the structural limits of its investment-driven approach. Meanwhile, economic pressures on China internally have mounted. Slowing growth, declining investment efficiency, and deepening energy dependence have narrowed Beijing's strategic options and increased the importance of secure, reliable land-based corridors through Eurasia (UNDP, 2024; Wang et al., 2018).

It is in this context that the Turkic world has graduated from a convenient to an increasingly indispensable component of the BRI. This reversal is further underlined by the erosion, since the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, of Russia's traditional dominance over

Central Asia and the Caucasus. A nuanced examination of Russia's decline is beyond the focus of the present paper, but there is little doubt that the redistribution of influence across Eurasia is real and has hastened China's reliance on alternative regional partners. This paper argues that the underperformance of the BRI created a strategic imbalance, whereby China relies more on the Turkic world than vice versa. For Türkiye, this changing environment has presented a pivotal opportunity. Drawing on its standing in the Middle Corridor and expanding institutional cooperation through the Organization of Turkic States, Türkiye is positioned to do more than simply assume the role of a transit state; it can establish itself as a key driver of Eurasian connectivity. Rather than defer passively to China's ambitions, Ankara is well-placed to frame engagement according to terms set by regional interests and new power dynamics.

2. The BRI in Central Asia: Expectations Versus Outcomes

Central Asia was envisioned as the backbone of the Belt and Road Initiative's overland plan. For Beijing, the region offered more than just a standard transit route: it held the promise of energy security, given the lack of robust non-maritime energy transport options, strategic depth, and a platform to anchor Chinese influence in a historically contested area between Russia, Turkey, and South Asia (Taliga, 2021). Some even speculated that this region could one day serve as a buffer in a plausible future Sino-Slavic conflict, particularly over critical resources like Lake Baikal.

As we move beyond viewing the BRI solely through the lenses of infrastructure and trade, it becomes clear that China's engagement with Eurasia is increasingly shaped by deeper concerns over long-term resource insecurity. The OCP Policy Center identifies the shortages of food, water, and energy as three of the most daunting structural challenges China faces on its path toward mid-century modernization, underscoring that resource access will remain a central constraint to Beijing's strategic autonomy. This concern is particularly relevant in Eurasia, where water-rich regions intersect with major transit corridors and zones of overlapping influence. At the same time, that very analysis describes the current relations between China and Russia as a pragmatic marriage of convenience against the 'big bad imperialist', the USA rather than a stable strategic alliance.

Their cooperation is largely based on short-term political and security alignment, including collaboration in military technology and shared opposition to U.S. strategic priorities. As Paine (2025) notes in her study of the Sino-Soviet split, ties between Beijing and Moscow have repeatedly broken down when their security interests or perceived threats have diverged, most notably during the Vietnam War and the 1969 border clash. While Beijing and Moscow

currently coordinate closely, this alignment is driven more by overlapping interests than genuine trust, leaving the door open to future rivalry as resource pressures mount and competition for influence in Central Asia and neighboring regions intensifies (OCP Policy Center, 2017).

For the governments of Central Asia, Chinese finance also seemed attractive as a means to develop infrastructure, diversify their economies, and, most importantly, serve as a partial counterbalance to the region's long-standing dependence on Russia. During the early years of the BRI, this alignment of interests created a relatively welcoming political climate throughout the region, albeit tempered by cautious skepticism toward Beijing's soft-power ambitions. A clear example in this context is Kazakhstan, as highlighted by Dadabaev (2021). Initially, Chinese investment was welcomed as a means to modernize infrastructure, expand trade corridors, and ease the country's heavy reliance on Moscow. As the symbolic birthplace of the BRI, Kazakhstan gained significant attention from Beijing, attracting investments in energy pipelines, railways, and logistics hubs. Yet, as Dadabaev (2021) points out, the strategic and economic returns from this partnership turned out to be far more limited than originally expected. While connectivity saw improvements in specific sectors, the broader industrial transformation and sustainable value creation promised by the BRI failed to materialize at scale—fueling increasing domestic wariness toward Chinese involvement. Dadabaev (2021) even argues that although communities in Kazakhstan's border regions benefited from the influx of Chinese goods, China ultimately failed to establish a soft-power presence or secure profitable trade deals within the Kazakh market.

Similar patterns can be seen across the broader Central Asian region, particularly in Kazakhstan. Both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan viewed the BRI as a chance to overcome the structural challenges of their landlocked geographies, especially Uzbekistan, which, despite being more economically robust, is doubly landlocked. However, these hopes were tempered by rising debt burdens, delays in project execution, and limited benefits for local economies (Taliga, 2021). In many cases, infrastructure projects ended up reinforcing transit dependency instead of fostering internal development.

The early expectation that Chinese capital would spark broad-based growth has now been replaced by a more cautious and realistic view of its developmental impact. These outcomes indicate that the BRI's shortcomings in Central Asia are not just technical or bureaucratic; they're structural. China's investment model, which leans heavily on state-backed financing and Chinese contractors, has failed to foster lasting economic integration or political goodwill.

This has become especially apparent following the Sri Lanka Port debacle, which stirred global concern (though we'll delve into that later). Instead of strengthening Beijing's influence, the uneven track record of BRI projects has weakened its leverage and deepened its dependence on maintaining unimpeded access through Central Asian transit routes.

3. Kazakhstan: The Flagship Case of Strategic Underperformance

Kazakhstan holds a unique place within the Belt and Road Initiative, both in symbolism and substance. It was in Astana in 2013 that Xi Jinping publicly unveiled his grand vision for the Silk Road Economic Belt, placing Kazakhstan at the conceptual and geographic core of China's overland Eurasian ambitions, a move that sparked widespread speculation and analysis. With its expansive territory, relatively advanced infrastructure, abundant hydrocarbon reserves, and a reputation for political stability, Kazakhstan seemed like the perfect candidate to transform Chinese investment into lasting economic integration and strategic influence. For Beijing, success in Kazakhstan wasn't just preferable, it was critical to validating the entire BRI's continental logic.

From a connectivity standpoint, Chinese engagement has indeed delivered measurable outcomes. Freight rail traffic between China and Europe passing through Kazakhstan grew significantly, major logistics hubs like Khorgos were established, and energy cooperation expanded with new pipelines and related infrastructure. These moves strengthened Kazakhstan's role as a key transit hub within Eurasian trade routes. Yet, when viewed against the broader ambitions of the BRI, these achievements start to look limited. As Dadabaev (2021) points out, gains in connectivity didn't lead to the promised industrial transformation or long-term value creation. Manufacturing connections remained weak, technology transfer was minimal, and Chinese companies tended to operate alongside Kazakhstan's economy rather than becoming truly integrated into it. This outcome points to a deeper structural flaw in China's BRI approach. The bulk of investment in Kazakhstan focused on transit, energy, and construction sectors that primarily serve China's logistical interests, but do little to spark internal growth. Rather than encouraging diversified production or enhancing local value chains, many of these projects merely reinforced Kazakhstan's role as a corridor state. As a result, the BRI failed to foster the kind of long-term economic interdependence that would have increased Beijing's influence and leverage. In practice, Kazakhstan gained selectively, while China fell short of achieving the deep economic and political integration it had hoped for. In other words, it's fair to say the scoreboard reads: 1–0, Kazakhstan.

The political and societal implications of these developments have been just as significant. Over time, China's economic presence in Kazakhstan has become increasingly controversial. Public concerns over land ownership, labor practices, environmental degradation, and demographic shifts have sparked periodic protests and led to growing caution among the political elite. Analyses by the Carnegie Endowment highlight how these internal pressures limited the Kazakh government's willingness to deepen its visible cooperation with China, forcing Astana to tread carefully to avoid political fallout. Most critically, this legitimacy gap has undercut China's efforts to translate economic engagement into soft power or lasting political goodwill. This legitimacy gap was further widened by high-profile controversies beyond Central Asia, most notably the heavily criticized 99-year lease of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port to a Chinese firm. That deal has become a global symbol of the potential risks tied to BRI financing. Critics argue it gave China outsized control over a key strategic asset and fueled broader fears that Chinese infrastructure loans could erode national sovereignty, a narrative that has echoed in both public opinion and policymaking circles across the region. Instead of becoming more reliant on Beijing, Kazakhstan used these dynamics to safeguard its strategic autonomy. Chinese-led projects were increasingly folded into Kazakhstan's own national development plan, Nurlı Zhol, allowing Astana to frame BRI initiatives as aligned with domestic priorities rather than dictated by external forces.

As Kassenova (2017) notes, this act of 'domesticating' the BRI enabled Kazakhstan to reap material benefits while keeping China's ability to shape the agenda in check. As a result, cooperation with Beijing became more conditional, more selective, and entirely reversible. In this way, Kazakhstan reveals the central paradox of the BRI within the Turkic world. Even under ideal political and geographic conditions, China struggled to turn its infrastructure investments into meaningful, lasting strategic influence. The uneven results of BRI projects didn't expand Beijing's power, they actually reduced its leverage, making China increasingly dependent on continued access through Kazakh territory to maintain its overland Eurasian routes.

Rather than becoming a reliant partner, Kazakhstan positioned itself as a gatekeeper. What was supposed to be China's flagship success instead highlighted the structural limits of the entire BRI model.

4. Uzbekistan: Strategic Engagement Without Subordination

Uzbekistan follows a different path within the Belt and Road Initiative, one that highlights, once again, China's limited ability to turn infrastructure investment into lasting strategic influence. Unlike Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan entered the BRI under a phase of deliberate

political recalibration after its 2016 leadership transition. Instead of adopting the BRI as an all-encompassing development plan, Tashkent saw engagement with China as a practical way to ease the burdens of being a doubly landlocked country, while maintaining the flexibility to pursue a variety of external partnerships. From China's standpoint, Uzbekistan appeared to be an ideal partner for advancing core BRI goals.

Its central geographic location, sizable domestic market, and potential to act as a regional hub aligned well with Beijing's larger strategy to export industrial overcapacity and connect its western provinces to international production networks. As Cai (2017) notes, the BRI was at least partly conceived as a response to internal economic pressures in China, such as excess capacity in construction and heavy industry, and the need to stabilize inland regions by opening new outward trade links. In this light, China's engagement with Uzbekistan was as much about addressing domestic concerns as it was about advancing foreign policy ambitions. In reality, however, the outcomes of this engagement were modest. While Chinese-funded projects helped improve transport infrastructure and logistics capacity, their impact on Uzbekistan's domestic industrial development was limited. According to evaluations by the World Bank and firm-level research, BRI investments in the country primarily boosted its role as a transit corridor rather than delivering meaningful benefits to local manufacturing or technology-driven sectors. Local companies participated only sporadically, and integration into higher value-added production chains remained constrained.

Importantly, Uzbekistan made sure these limitations didn't result in dependency. Instead, Tashkent adopted a strategy of selective incorporation, placing Chinese-backed projects within the wider context of its economic reform and diversification agenda. Its engagement with Beijing was carefully balanced with relationships involving Türkiye, South Korea, Gulf states, and multilateral institutions, effectively curbing China's ability to portray itself as an indispensable partner. As Tekir (2025) points out, Uzbekistan deliberately avoided casting the BRI as the cornerstone of its development plans, treating Chinese funding as complementary and not foundational.

This strategy carried significant consequences for China's influence. While Beijing continued to be an important economic partner, it wasn't granted control over the direction of Uzbekistan's reforms. Chinese companies were restricted to clearly defined sectors, and their projects could be renegotiated, delayed, or restructured whenever they conflicted with national priorities. In contrast to structurally weaker states like Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan maintained enough institutional strength to manage debt risks, oversee foreign involvement, and avoid long-term entanglement.

Uzbekistan's experience reinforces a broader trend seen throughout the Turkic world: while China's involvement has grown in scale, it hasn't deepened in influence. The BRI has delivered modest improvements in connectivity but hasn't created the kind of structural interdependence needed for long-term strategic sway. As Cai (2017) explains, this reflects a core contradiction within the BRI, an initiative born out of China's internal vulnerabilities, which faces partner states that are increasingly skilled at gaining benefits without giving up their autonomy. In Uzbekistan's case, the result has been exactly that: strategic engagement without subordination.

5. China's Structural Vulnerabilities and Growing Dependence on Eurasian Corridors

To fully grasp why the BRI has underperformed in the Turkic world, it's essential to consider China's own structural vulnerabilities. Originally pitched as a bold projection of surplus capital and strategic self-assurance, the BRI has increasingly been shaped by deepening demographic, economic, and energy-related constraints at home. According to China's Seventh National Population Census, the country is now firmly in a phase of population aging and labor force shrinkage, with fertility rates remaining well below replacement levels despite repeated policy efforts (Akimov, Gemueva, & Semenova, 2021). This demographic shift imposes long-term limits on economic growth, productivity, and fiscal sustainability, narrowing Beijing's ability to continue funding large-scale overseas infrastructure indefinitely.

Population aging also carries serious macroeconomic consequences. Studies on developing Asian economies show that as societies age, consumption growth slows and domestic demand becomes less dynamic, making countries more dependent on foreign trade and external connectivity to keep their economies moving (Estrada, Park, & Ramayandi, 2011). In China's case, this trend has overlapped with a broader slowdown in growth and mounting pressure on savings and social security systems. These challenges have shrunk the policy space available for major foreign investments (UNDP, 2024). As a result, the BRI has increasingly shifted from a tool of geopolitical expansion to a strategy designed to offset internal economic headwinds. Energy insecurity adds another critical layer to China's structural vulnerabilities, further reinforcing its dependence on secure overland trade routes. Projections suggest that China's reliance on imported energy, especially oil, will continue to grow sharply in the coming decades, exposing the country even more to risks tied to maritime chokepoints and geopolitical instability (Wang, Li, & Li, 2018). Although sea routes still dominate global trade, their strategic fragility has elevated the importance of continental alternatives that avoid these

vulnerable paths. As a result, overland corridors through Central Asia and the Turkic world are no longer just optional; they have become vital to China's supply chain resilience.

Yet the very structure of BRI projects has made it difficult for China to convert its growing dependence into lasting influence. As Taliga (2021) and Dadabaev (2021) note, BRI investments in Central Asia have focused heavily on transit, logistics, and energy infrastructure, geared primarily toward China's own connectivity needs. These investments have done little to drive internal growth within host countries. Instead, they've solidified the role of Turkic states as passageways rather than full-fledged production partners. This has limited Beijing's leverage and made it increasingly dependent on continued, unhindered access, without the benefit of real political control. It's a paradox: China's need for Eurasian corridors has grown, but its ability to shape political realities along those routes has remained weak.

Adding to these structural problems is the increasing scrutiny of how BRI projects are financed. Issues around debt sustainability, lack of transparency, and threats to sovereignty have taken center stage in academic and policy discussions, especially after high-profile cases like the Sri Lanka Hambantota Port lease, which dramatically shifted global perceptions of China's approach to infrastructure diplomacy (Gürel & Kozluca, 2022). These controversies have made countries across the Turkic world more cautious, shrinking Beijing's flexibility and strengthening calls for engagement to be more selective and conditional.

6. Türkiye and the Middle Corridor: From Transit State to Strategic Actor

Türkiye occupies a distinct position within the Belt and Road Initiative, one that sets it apart from Central Asian participants and complicates China's ability to exert asymmetric influence. Unlike landlocked Turkic states, Türkiye is not merely a passageway for overland trade but a pivotal junction linking the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Black Sea basin, and Europe. This geographic advantage is reinforced by relatively strong institutional capacity, a diversified economy, and long-standing experience managing competing external powers. As a result, Türkiye's engagement with the BRI has been selective, pragmatic, and closely aligned with its own strategic priorities rather than subordinated to Beijing's agenda (Yıldırımçakar, 2019).

The Middle Corridor, connecting China to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye, has gained increasing prominence as alternative routes through Russia have become politically and strategically constrained. For China, the viability of this corridor depends critically on Türkiye's cooperation, infrastructure capacity, and

regulatory alignment. However, Chinese investment in Türkiye has remained limited relative to early expectations, particularly when compared to Beijing's commitments in Central Asia or South Asia. Gürel and Kozluca (2022) show that while Chinese firms have participated in sectors such as energy, logistics, telecommunications, and finance, overall investment volumes have fallen short of a transformative impact, and major projects have often proceeded slowly or under revised terms.

This outcome reflects not Turkish reluctance but China's own structural constraints. As China's domestic growth has slowed and financial risk sensitivity has increased, Beijing has become more cautious in committing large-scale capital to politically complex environments where returns are uncertain. Leverage is limited (UNDP, 2024). Türkiye's regulatory environment, competitive domestic firms, and strong bargaining position have further restricted China's ability to replicate the more state-driven investment models deployed elsewhere. Consequently, the Middle Corridor has evolved less as a Chinese-controlled artery and more as a negotiated space shaped by Turkish priorities and regional coordination.

Türkiye has also embedded its engagement with the BRI within broader strategic frameworks, including its own connectivity initiatives and its leadership role within the Organization of Turkic States. Rather than presenting Chinese projects as stand-alone ventures, Turkish policymakers have consistently framed them as complementary to national infrastructure strategies and regional integration goals. This approach has limited China's agenda-setting capacity while preserving Türkiye's autonomy in determining the scope, sequencing, and governance of cooperation (Yıldırımçakar, 2019).

Importantly, China's growing dependence on reliable overland access has strengthened Türkiye's strategic position. As maritime routes remain exposed to geopolitical risk and alternative continental pathways face instability, Beijing's tolerance for disruption along the Middle Corridor has diminished. This has shifted the balance of leverage subtly but decisively. Türkiye is no longer merely a transit state facilitating Eurasian trade flows; it has become a gatekeeper whose cooperation is essential for sustaining China's westward connectivity ambitions. In this context, Türkiye's ability to delay, condition, or redirect cooperation constitutes a form of structural power that contrasts sharply with early BRI assumptions of hierarchical dependence.

Türkiye's experience thus illustrates a broader pattern emerging across the Turkic world but in its most advanced form. Where Central Asian states gained bargaining power through selective engagement, Türkiye has leveraged institutional strength and geopolitical centrality to transform connectivity into strategic agency. Rather than anchoring Chinese influence, the Middle Corridor has increasingly anchored China's reliance on Turkish cooperation, reinforcing the reversal of dependency identified in the preceding sections.

7. Power Vacuum and Strategic Opportunity

The evolving dynamics of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Turkic world are unfolding within a broader transformation of Eurasian power relations. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia's ability to function as the primary political, economic, and security anchor in Central Asia and the South Caucasus has weakened considerably. Military overextension, sanctions-induced economic contraction, and declining capacity to provide financial and security guarantees have reduced Moscow's leverage across its traditional sphere of influence (Taliga, 2021; Ukraine War and Belt and Road, 2023). While this article does not seek to analyze Russia's decline in detail, its systemic consequences form an essential part of the strategic environment in which China and the Turkic states now operate.

Importantly, Russia's relative weakening has not resulted in a straightforward substitution of influence by China. Instead, it has produced a fragmented and competitive landscape in which regional actors have expanded their strategic autonomy. Central Asian governments have responded by intensifying hedging behavior, diversifying external partnerships, and reasserting control over infrastructure governance and foreign investment frameworks (Dadabaev, 2021; Taliga, 2021). Rather than replacing dependence on Moscow with dependence on Beijing, Turkic states have increasingly sought to extract selective economic benefits while avoiding long-term political or financial subordination.

For China, this shifting environment presents both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, reduced Russian dominance has increased the relative importance of non-Russian transit routes, particularly those crossing the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. On the other hand, the erosion of Russia's coordinating role has raised transaction costs, regulatory uncertainty, and political risk for Chinese projects. Beijing can no longer rely on implicit strategic alignment with Moscow to stabilize Eurasian connectivity and must instead negotiate bilaterally with multiple sovereign actors whose interests diverge significantly (Ukraine War

and Belt and Road, 2023; Yıldırımçakar, 2019). This has further limited China's ability to impose standardized investment models or translate economic engagement into political leverage.

These constraints have amplified the strategic relevance of regional coordination mechanisms among Turkic states. The Organization of Turkic States, while still limited in institutional depth, has emerged as a platform for articulating shared interests in connectivity, trade facilitation, and infrastructure governance. By promoting coordination on transit standards, customs procedures, and investment screening, the organization offers a means to reduce asymmetries in negotiations with external powers, including China (Taliga, 2021). Türkiye's leadership role within this framework further enhances its capacity to shape the regional agenda and act as a convening power between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe (Yıldırımçakar, 2019; Gürel & Kozluca, 2022).

The convergence of Russia's declining influence and China's growing dependence on stable overland corridors has therefore created a strategic opening for the Turkic world. This opening does not signal the emergence of a new hegemon, but rather a shift toward a more negotiated and plural order in which transit states possess greater structural leverage. Control over access, sequencing, and regulatory conditions has become a source of bargaining power, enabling Turkic states to shape the terms of engagement more effectively than during earlier phases of Eurasian integration (Dadabaev, 2021; Taliga, 2021).

Viewed in this light, the current power vacuum should not be understood as an absence of authority but as a redistribution of agency. For the Turkic world, and particularly for Türkiye, it represents an opportunity to translate geographic centrality, institutional capacity, and regional coordination into sustained strategic influence. Whether this opportunity is fully realized will depend on the ability of regional actors to maintain coordination, resist overreliance on any single external partner, and convert connectivity into long-term political and economic autonomy (Gürel & Kozluca, 2022; UNDP, 2024).

8. Political Economy of the BRI in the Turkic World: Bargaining Power, Constraint, and Selective Integration

The experience of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Turkic world is best understood not through the lens of geopolitical expansion but through a political-economy framework centered on bargaining power, domestic constraints, and asymmetric interdependence. While early BRI discourse implied a hierarchical structure in which Chinese capital would decisively shape host-state outcomes, empirical evidence from Central Asia and Türkiye suggests a more negotiated and conditional process. Rather than passive recipients of Chinese investment, Turkic states have increasingly exercised agency by filtering, restructuring, and, in some cases, constraining BRI projects in line with domestic political and economic priorities (Taliga, 2021; Dadabaev, 2021).

A key determinant of these outcomes has been the host state's institutional capacity. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrate that states with relatively coherent bureaucratic structures, policy continuity, and alternative economic partners are better positioned to bargain with China. In Kazakhstan, the integration of BRI projects into the Nurly Zhol framework allowed authorities to subsume Chinese initiatives under nationally defined development goals, limiting Beijing's agenda-setting power (Dadabaev, 2021). In Uzbekistan, post-2016 reforms created a selective openness toward Chinese capital, emphasizing diversification, industrial upgrading, and regulatory oversight rather than wholesale alignment with Chinese financing models (Tekir, 2025; South Caucasus and Central Asia BRI Country Case Study, 2023). These cases illustrate that BRI outcomes are not predetermined by China's material capabilities but mediated by domestic governance structures and strategic intent.

Domestic political legitimacy has further constrained the scope of Chinese influence. Public skepticism toward Chinese investment, particularly concerning land ownership, labor practices, environmental impact, and sovereignty, has imposed tangible political costs on Central Asian governments seeking deeper engagement (Carnegie Endowment, 2019; Dadabaev, 2021). These pressures have translated into delayed projects, renegotiated terms, and increased scrutiny of financing arrangements. Importantly, these domestic constraints intensified following high-profile controversies outside the region, most notably the 99-year lease of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which became emblematic in global discourse of the risks associated with opaque infrastructure financing (The National, 2018; Groundviews, 2025).

Regardless of the specific economic merits of the case, its symbolic impact reshaped political calculations across Eurasia by elevating the perceived risks of over-dependence on Chinese capital (Taliga, 2021).

China's own structural constraints have further altered the bargaining environment. Slowing economic growth, capital discipline within state-owned banks, and rising debt exposure among BRI partners have narrowed Beijing's capacity to sustain expansive overseas investment (Cai, 2017; UNDP, 2024). At the same time, demographic decline and population aging have begun to exert long-term pressure on China's labor supply, savings rates, and fiscal sustainability, reducing the surplus resources available for large-scale external projects (Akimov et al., 2021; Estrada et al., 2011). These internal vulnerabilities weaken China's leverage in negotiations, particularly when host states possess credible alternatives or the ability to delay implementation.

Energy and logistics dependencies reinforce this shift. China's growing reliance on imported energy, coupled with its vulnerability to maritime chokepoints, has increased the strategic importance of stable overland corridors through Eurasia (Wang, Li, & Li, 2018; UNDP, 2024). However, this dependence operates asymmetrically: while China requires uninterrupted access to Turkic transit routes, Turkic states face fewer equivalent constraints and can diversify partners across Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. As a result, control over regulatory frameworks, sequencing, and access conditions has become a source of leverage for transit states rather than a mechanism of Chinese dominance (Taliga, 2021; Yıldırımçakar, 2019).

Within this political-economy context, the BRI in the Turkic world has evolved into a model of selective integration rather than structural dependence. Chinese capital remains relevant, but it is increasingly filtered through national development strategies, subject to renegotiation, and constrained by domestic legitimacy concerns. Rather than embedding Chinese firms deeply within local value chains, many projects have reinforced transactional cooperation centered on transit and extraction, limiting the depth of economic interdependence (Beyzatlar & Taş, 2022; Gürel & Kozluca, 2022). This outcome reflects not Chinese strategic failure alone but the interaction between Beijing's constraints and host-state agency.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the political economy of the BRI in the Turkic world is characterized by bargaining rather than subordination. Infrastructure has not

translated automatically into influence, and material investment has not produced durable political alignment. Instead, Turkic states have increasingly shaped the terms of engagement, leveraging China's need for access against their own imperatives of autonomy, diversification, and domestic stability. This negotiated interdependence sets the structural conditions for the strategic opening examined in the following section.

9. Conclusion: The BRI After Illusions

The experience of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Turkic world reveals a fundamental disconnect between China's original strategic ambitions and the political-economic realities that emerged over the past decade. While the BRI succeeded in expanding infrastructure networks and improving physical connectivity across Eurasia, it failed to generate the depth of economic integration and political influence that early narratives implied (Taliga, 2021; Cai, 2017). In the Turkic context, infrastructure did not translate into dominance, nor did investment produce durable dependency. Instead, the initiative exposed the limits of China's external leverage when confronted with domestic constraints, host-state agency, and a rapidly shifting regional environment.

One of the central illusions surrounding the BRI was the assumption that scale alone would yield structural power. China's ability to mobilize state-backed finance, deploy large construction firms, and execute projects rapidly was expected to reshape economic hierarchies across Central Asia and beyond. However, as demonstrated across Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye, the material presence of Chinese capital proved insufficient to override domestic political considerations, regulatory frameworks, and public legitimacy constraints (Dadabaev, 2021; Tekir, 2025; Gürel & Kozluca, 2022). Rather than embedding itself deeply within local economies, China often remained confined to transit, energy, and construction sectors that generated limited spillover effects and weak long-term interdependence (Beyzatlar & Taş, 2022).

At the same time, China's internal structural vulnerabilities increasingly shaped the external trajectory of the BRI. Slowing economic growth, rising debt pressures, demographic aging, and declining labor-force growth have constrained Beijing's capacity to sustain expansive overseas investment strategies (Akimov et al., 2021; Estrada et al., 2011; UNDP, 2024). These pressures coincided with growing energy insecurity and heightened sensitivity to disruptions along maritime trade routes, reinforcing China's reliance on stable overland

corridors through Eurasia (Wang, Li, & Li, 2018; UNDP, 2024). In this context, the BRI shifted from an instrument of outward expansion to a mechanism for mitigating vulnerability.

The result has been a gradual reversal of dependency dynamics. Rather than Turkic states becoming structurally dependent on Chinese capital, China has become increasingly dependent on the cooperation of transit states to sustain its Eurasian connectivity. Control over regulatory environments, project sequencing, and access conditions has empowered host governments to renegotiate terms, delay implementation, or reframe projects within national development strategies (Taliga, 2021; Dadabaev, 2021). High-profile controversies such as the Hambantota Port lease further intensified political caution across Eurasia, elevating the perceived risks of asymmetrical dependence and reinforcing demands for sovereignty and transparency in infrastructure governance (The National, 2018; Groundviews, 2025).

Türkiye occupies a distinctive position within this evolving landscape. Unlike many Central Asian states, Türkiye combines geographic centrality with institutional capacity, diversified economic partnerships, and direct control over the Middle Corridor linking Asia to Europe. Chinese investment in Türkiye has remained limited relative to initial expectations, not due to Turkish resistance alone, but because of China's constrained ability to commit capital under increasingly adverse conditions (Gürel & Kozluca, 2022; Yıldırımçakar, 2019). As China's reliance on non-Russian transit routes grows, Türkiye's leverage has become structural rather than contingent, rooted in its role as a gateway rather than a recipient.

Taken together, the Turkic experience challenges deterministic interpretations of the Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI did not fail outright, but it failed to deliver the strategic transformation once anticipated. Infrastructure expanded, corridors emerged, and trade volumes increased, yet political influence remained bounded and conditional. The initiative's limitations in the Turkic world highlight the importance of domestic institutions, legitimacy, and alternative options in shaping the political economy of connectivity (Taliga, 2021; Cai, 2017).

The implications extend beyond China and the Turkic states. The BRI's evolution underscores the declining effectiveness of large-scale infrastructure as a tool of unilateral influence in a fragmented international system. Power increasingly resides not in the ability to build corridors, but in the capacity to govern access to them. For the Turkic world, and particularly for Türkiye, the challenge moving forward lies not in replacing one external dependency with another, but in institutionalizing leverage through coordination,

diversification, and regulatory control. The post-illusion phase of the BRI thus marks not the consolidation of a new hegemon, but the emergence of a more negotiated and plural Eurasian order.

10. Ending Remarks

This article has argued that the Belt and Road Initiative's trajectory in the Turkic world reveals less about China's ambitions than about the structural limits of translating infrastructure into durable influence. Across Central Asia and Türkiye, BRI projects expanded connectivity but failed to generate the depth of economic integration and political leverage once anticipated. Host-state agency, domestic legitimacy constraints, and alternative partnerships consistently mediated Chinese engagement, producing outcomes that diverged sharply from early projections.

The Turkic experience demonstrates that large-scale connectivity initiatives operate within, not above, political economies shaped by institutions, public consent, and strategic choice. Infrastructure can facilitate movement, but it cannot substitute for trust, legitimacy, or alignment of long-term interests. As China confronts mounting internal pressures and an increasingly fragmented external environment, its dependence on negotiated access rather than imposed hierarchy has become more pronounced.

For the Turkic world, the post-illusion phase of the BRI presents both opportunity and responsibility. Geographic centrality and transit relevance confer leverage, but only if they are matched by coordination, regulatory capacity, and strategic restraint. Türkiye's position at the western terminus of Eurasian land routes underscores this reality. The challenge ahead is not to reject external engagement, but to shape it in ways that preserve autonomy, distribute benefits, and prevent the re-emergence of asymmetric dependence.

In this sense, the future of Eurasian connectivity will not be decided by the scale of capital flows alone, but by the political economies that govern them. The BRI's legacy in the Turkic world thus lies not in a new hierarchy, but in the reassertion of negotiation as the central principle of regional integration.

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Türkiye's Emerging Middle Power Identity: Strategic Autonomy, Activism and Normative Discourse

Safiye Bengisu Karabulut

Throughout history, states have been important in the regional and international arena for various reasons. States, which shape their national and international policies based on their geography, have gained a holistic identity with numerous theories, laws and practices for policy making not only on a global scale but also at the national level. The transformation of the geopolitical position of countries into a risk or advantage status has progressed in direct proportion to the aforementioned search for identity, indicating the existence of certain phenotypes in international politics in line with the characteristic features developed by states. This study will analyze Türkiye's indispensable and central position in the international stage by containing determinations that will be an essence of the change in the foreign policy context of the Türkiye, which has been trying to find a way out of various speculative changes in global and historical terms since its establishment. In the study, while discussing the transformation of Türkiye's ongoing understanding of bridges between East and West into the perception of a central country, hard and soft power data will also be taken into consideration. In light of Türkiye's multifaceted and transformative global identity, its positioning as a middle power will be critically analyzed, while the nature of its diplomatic conduct will be comprehensively evaluated. Within this framework, strategic autonomy, activism, and normative discourse are positioned as the principal analytical dimensions.

Power struggles and recurrent crises in Türkiye's domestic politics have had a direct impact on the country's foreign policy-making process. In this respect, the variables shaping both domestic and foreign policy constitute contested dimensions of Türkiye's inherited identity (Erdağ, 2014). With regard to the historical evolution of Turkish foreign policy since the establishment of the Republic, Balcı categorizes this trajectory into eleven distinct periods: the Atatürk period, the İnönü period, the Menderes period, the Military Tutelage period, the Ecevit and National Front period, the September 12 period, the Özal period, the Coalitions period, the EU-oriented foreign policy period, the AK Party period, and the Davutoğlu period. Through this periodization, Balcı examines the transformation and continuity of Turkish diplomacy over time (Balcı, 2013: p.17; Erdağ, 2014). Focusing specifically on the Atatürk period, Balcı argues that this era was characterized by Westernist principles aimed at consolidating the new Republican order, advancing revolutionary reforms, and positioning the state within what was perceived as a progressive civilizational framework. Accordingly, he

maintains that Turkish foreign policy during this period was predominantly shaped and directed by Atatürk and a narrow elite group (Erdağ, 2014). In this context, the development of the new Türkiye in direct proportion to the West's understanding of freedom and democracy was not confined to transformations in domestic politics or the implementation of revolutionary reforms; rather, it also articulated a foreign policy vision grounded in independent and sovereign ideals. As an illustration of this approach, the uncompromising stance adopted by Atatürk on issues deemed vital to the country's destiny—such as the borders of the National Pact and the Lausanne questions (Erdağ, 2014)—reinforces the view that Turkish foreign policy was compatible with the West while remaining independent of Western interests. This dual orientation, which combined normative alignment with strategic independence, constitutes an early manifestation of middle power behavior. Accordingly, the Atatürk era laid the foundations of strategic autonomy through a secular and Westernist normative discourse, while simultaneously taking the first steps toward middle power activism by asserting diplomatic agency within the constraints of the international system. Within the theoretical literature, middle powers are generally defined as states that lack the material capabilities of great powers yet exercise influence through autonomous foreign policy choices, diplomatic moderation, coalition-building, and a commitment to systemic stability. This historically embedded pattern of autonomy and restraint provides a critical bridge to the period of İsmet İnönü, which is often characterized by the preservation of Turkish foreign policy within a framework of general neutrality. During this period, the understanding of international diplomacy evolved in a more conciliatory and war-avoidant direction, particularly along the contradictory axis of the Second World War. The country's diplomacy, shaped by a policy of balance between the opposing alliances due to its strategic geographical position, reflected a form of determinism and implementation aligned with the monopoly of İnönü and the CHP administration (Erdağ, 2014). İnönü neutrality thus emerged as a prototype of classical middle power autonomy, in which diplomatic restraint and balance-of-power logic were embodied through a normative discourse explicitly centered on “anti-war” principles.

Balcı, who deals with the evolution of the understanding of neutrality into a more Western-based understanding since the second half of the 1940s, argued that this Westernism progressed especially on the axis of the United States of America with the Menderes period, and argued that Türkiye accepted the USA as the main ally against the threat of the Middle East and the Soviet Union (Balcı, 2013; Erdağ, 2014). Americanism, which has also been turned into a justification for the country's economy, is described as a large-scale design project of the

Menderes government, from military competence to the planning of the Turkish family structure. The USA, which was a close ally in the first half of the DP period, was almost an idol at the social level and contained the urge to harmonize Turkish foreign policy with domestic politics. However, over time, the United States' inability to meet Türkiye's expectations—particularly with regard to foreign aid and economic support—together with the emergence of anti-American sentiment at both military and societal levels and the gradual improvement of relations with the Soviet Union, led to the Menderes government being perceived as adopting a contradictory stance in both domestic and foreign policy.

After the Menderes government, which ended definitively with the 1960 coup, Turkish foreign policy also suffered an effective blow to its pro-Western attitude, especially the USA. According to the political understanding of this period, which appealed to a multifaceted and wide scope rather than an unconditional and complete break with the West, democratic approaches and the parallel movement of national interests were important (Erdağ, 2014). In this period, when military rule was primary, a wide and flexible range from the National Unity Committee to coalition governments and Süleyman Demirel, who was the prime minister of the time, played a strategic role in domestic and foreign policy making. This period witnessed significant developments, particularly regarding the Cyprus issue and EEC membership, which served as key indicators of Türkiye's efforts to diversify its geopolitical orientation and foreign policy. These developments reveal a structural approach that neither compromised national identity and interests nor completely distanced Türkiye from European-based Western theories and institutions. During the 1960s, increasing versatility and autonomy in foreign policy, particularly through Cypriot activism, strengthened the normative discourse of "national interest".

Another period discussed by Balcı is the period of the Ecevit and National Front governments, which is about the re-implementation of the multifaceted Turkish foreign policy, which was interrupted especially with the 1971 coup (Balcı, 2013; Erdağ, 2014). With its long-term history of power, the CHP has drawn a different course for Turkish foreign policy, unlike the İnönü administration. In this context, the Ecevit period, which emphasized the necessity of diplomacy based on mutual trust and self-sacrifice, especially with the countries of the region, aimed to respond to Türkiye's national and regional needs by determining policies of rapprochement with the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation and Middle Eastern countries that were distant from Türkiye. Ecevit's activism (Cyprus operation) reinforced autonomy with normative 'trust-based diplomacy'.

With the 1980 coup, which is a continuation of the country's politics where military coups are continuous, Türkiye has been subjected to a domestic and foreign policy system under the coup administration. The conflicts with the PKK terrorist organization, which have become a security issue for Türkiye in both domestic and foreign policy, have attributed primary importance to the country's security concerns. In this respect, politics based on Kenan Evren and the National Security Council (NSC); brought with it an intense and heavy military intervention in national and international politics. In order to ease the burden of the military bureaucracy in domestic politics, the birth of Turgut Özal as a political figure, especially in economic and commercial fields, with the aim of returning and adapting to democratic elections and administrations; could not prevent the dominance of military intervention in the context of security and foreign policy (Erdağ, 2014).

This picture, which started to change between 1987 and 1993, was reinforced with his superior authority over time when Özal started to take an active role in foreign policy and security fields where there was intense military intervention. In this period, when the army began to be disqualified from foreign policy making, the new diplomatic approach was reprogrammed over the Ottoman remnant and constructed within the framework of the historical heritage of the Ottoman past and Islamic identity (Erdağ, 2014). Özal's neo-Ottomanism started activism with the normative 'Islamist model' discourse; Strengthened civil autonomy. Türkiye, which had to choose its allies cautiously and multifaceted due to its geopolitical position in the global system polarized by the Cold War, became a convenient ally of the USA by getting closer to the rising Western powers. Turkish foreign policy, which functioned as a passive means of transmission in line with the national pains and international reservations of the period, started to turn towards the ideals of the center country by laying the foundations of strategic autonomy and proactive activism with the Özal period (Özcan, 2009: 19). The power vacuum in the Caucasus-Central Asia and the power crisis in the Balkans that emerged with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were considered by Özal as an opportunity to seize the centrality of Turkish foreign policy; In this context, a dynamic approach that reinforces the normative discourse with economic interdependence has been born. In his 1990 Parliamentary speech, Özal referred to the Gulf Crisis and said, "We cannot ignore the effects of possible post-crisis changes on our country, as well as the developments in the region during the crisis; we must be in a position to influence these processes and follow a dynamic policy" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.09.1990: 13). Criticizing passive foreign policy, Özal stated that "the era of cowardice and weak attitude is over, and an

active approach will be taken according to the conditions" (Ahmad, 1995: 281) and argued that the Turkish Foreign Ministry should act bravely against the Turkic Republics (Yaraş Laçınok, 2007: 627, cited in Özal); He stated that we can "play important roles" in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia (Yaraş Laçınok, 2007: 622, cited in Özal). Positioning Türkiye as a founding-constructive active actor, Özal drew the first normative map of the middle power identity with the prediction that "the 21st century will be the century of Türkiye and the Turks" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.09.1991: 8). In the light of Rosenau's conceptualizations, this orientation can be read as an evolution arising from the post-Cold War strategic uncertainty. The strategy prioritized by Özal was to deepen economic-commercial relations with the countries of the region; Considering this as a prerequisite for political reconciliation and collective security, Özal said, "Problematic countries create interdependence with economic ties; if there is free trade, the risk of war decreases" (Yaraş Laçınok, 2007: 555, cited in Özal). In this new diplomatic plan, the goal of legitimizing Türkiye's imperial heritage and placing it in a central position in the administration of the aforementioned regions constitutes the first steps of the middle power phenotype that started with the Özal period (Özyılmaz Kiraz, 2021).

During the Coalitions period that lasted between 1993 and 1999, Türkiye was dragged through a very abrasive period in its domestic and foreign policy. While it had problems with Greece and Syria in its foreign policy, it was also struggling with the cycle of insecurity and terror caused by the PKK in its domestic politics (Erdağ, 2014). In this period, which was dominated by an active and high tempo, the Ottomanist principles brought to the field by the Özal period were replaced by a deep-rooted Western-based politics, and the development of modernism and secularism in line with Westernist principles was preserved again. The challenging dynamics of relations, especially with nearby countries, in the dilemma of security and threat; weak coalitions have established a conflicting dilemma between the PKK and the imbalances in domestic politics, the perception of security and regime relations (Erdağ, 2014). Coalitions have transitioned from security reactivity to Western autonomy with the Customs Union; The Israeli alliance reflects pragmatic activism. The normative foundations of the post-Cold War middle power identity have gained continuity in the discourses of Özal's successor Demirel. Demirel, who internalized Özal's vision of strategic autonomy and activism, indirectly expressed the concept of the central country and positioned it in 1995 as "the Türkiye of the new century as a pioneering country that carries its regional riches to Europe, advances globalization, and is pro-peace in development and cooperation" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.10.1995: 31); In 1996, he said, "We are a key and leading country in the new geography after

the Cold War; central location can be understood with a map" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.10.1996: 16-17). This chain of proactive activism is conceptualized in İsmail Cem's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cem, who considers Türkiye's Asian-European identity as a "foreign policy privilege", defined his 21st century goals as "being a central-decisive country in Eurasia" and "full membership to the EU" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 18.04.2000: 199); Türkiye, which has evolved from a "transit bridge to a terminal-destination", has built the bridge of strategic autonomy with the vision of "the main center of Eurasia while maintaining its European identity" (Cem, 2002: 5; Cem, 2009: 82). Defining his historical geography as "the area of societies sharing history-language-belief", Cem considered it a strategy to maximize the political-economic relations within the scope of the Balkans-Caucasus-Central Asia-Middle East-North Africa (TBMM Minutes Journal, 18.04.2000: 199).

Türkiye, which experienced important and shocking ruptures in the context of domestic and foreign policy between 1999 and 2002, experienced a significant change in its security and threat perception, especially with the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and entered into a more flexible and soft regime discourse (Erdağ, 2014). In the light of developments such as the Helsinki Summit and EU candidacy, the rapprochement with the West has increased at a positive rate; despite the terrorism and security discourses against the USA throughout the country after the September 11 attacks, the IMF, which was triggered by the 2001 crisis, made the IMF debt obligatory and made closer relations with Western countries, especially the USA, inevitable, giving rise to soft power activism and normative integration discourse. All these developments constitute a critical transition stage in Türkiye's evolution as a middle power, especially in the context of foreign policy. This period, in which security-oriented and reactive policies are replaced by strategic autonomy, is building a diplomacy phenomenon that tests Türkiye's capacity to be a country that pursues a policy of balance and self-determination, aiming to get rid of full dependence at both regional and global levels. This evolutionary leap paves the way for the AK Party-Davutoğlu summit with the rooting of strategic autonomy, the sprouting of activist diplomacy and the maturation of normative discourse. In this context, all the above-mentioned political periods, developments and changes; spread to a holistic political identity that paves the way for the AK Party administration, which has been in power for 23 years in Türkiye, and is a kind of rehearsal. The autonomy of threats and the structure of crises that give rise to and trigger normative activism; It depicts the understanding that the post-2002 AKP and Davutoğlu administration have transformed Türkiye into a middle power actor crowned with strategic autonomy, proactive activism and justice-oriented normative discourse

in the global arena. Thus, the geopolitical phenotype of the Republic evolved from the East-West bridge to a multipolar centrality and gained a permanent middle power identity. The change in Türkiye's foreign policy as a result of Davutoğlu's conceptual and practical leadership and the activism imagination attributed to the country include the depiction of a new orientation (Özyılmaz Kiraz, 2021). Davutoglu's holistic belief that Türkiye should be a central country, not a bridge or a passage, is one of the main theories in which the evolutionary process of Turkish foreign policy is causalized. The basis of this causality is the uncertainty of the global system, which was divided into the Western and Eastern Bloc as the Western and Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, after the power vacuum and political legitimacy crises it experienced at the end of the war, the democratic illusions on which the aggressive anti-terrorism propaganda and practices of the USA after the September 11 attacks were based; it is a search for an identity that is directly proportional to Türkiye's appetite for autonomy to determine where and how it will stand on the international stage, which has a critical geostrategic importance.

The AK Party, which came to power with the November 3, 2002 elections, refused to ignore Türkiye's cultural and historical heritage by making the neo-Ottomanism policies based on the Ottoman heritage put forward during the Özal period a topic of discussion again. It has used Türkiye's socio-political and geopolitical position as a central and rallying civilization in the regional and international arena (Erdağ, 2014). In this context, the AKP administration, using Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision of identity as the greatest representative of its period, embodied Türkiye's rising middle power identity on the axes of civilization-oriented independence, regional engagement and ethical leadership. While this concretization was made possible by Davutoğlu's 'Strategic Depth' and his proposals on what kind of policies the AKP administration should follow on the aforementioned facts, new agreements and theories were implemented through the political contexts and rhetoric established by Davutoğlu.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, with the AKP administration coming to power, Turkish foreign policy has been experienced with an ever-increasing activism. Türkiye, which has played a role as a mediator and balancer in many regional and global relations from the Arab-Israeli conflict to Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, has made its international power possible not only in the political field but also through data such as free trade and economic agreements. Interactions in regions such as Africa and Latin America, in particular, carry very important traces of the country's global expansion, revealing the change in Türkiye's defense-oriented foreign policy approach (Özyılmaz Kiraz, 2021). This surge in activism can be read as the consolidation of strategic autonomy through multipolar engagement and the embodiment of

normative discourse through ethical mediation. In this context, the new foreign policy envisioned for Türkiye is a reflection of an understanding of where the country wants to see itself. The AKP administration, which states that Türkiye's status as a bridge country is no longer valid and sufficient as a result of its geographical location, is the main implementer of Davutoğlu's diplomatic vision for Türkiye. The aim of the new Turkish foreign policy, which is positioned in the context of the "center country" instead of the bridge country and aims to gain value in international politics in this context; makes Türkiye's new identity recognized in international diplomacy by increasing the regional and global scale with a multifaceted, active and multi-track foreign policy (Davutoğlu, 2004). This vision evolves from the security reactivity of previous eras and brings the middle power identity to the top in the triangle of strategic autonomy (independent engagement), proactive activism (global mediation) and normative discourse (centralized ethical leadership). Between 2002 and 2009, Davutoğlu's rhetoric of "zero problems with neighbors" was shaped by the logic of minimum problems-maximum interests at the regional and global level, with a formulation that would turn economic interdependence, soft power and crises into opportunities (Erdağ, 2014). The AKP administration, which directly restricted the dominance of the army in the bureaucracy rather than reducing it, brought the government to an effective and competent position in the diplomatic and security fields with the institutions it transformed into civilian-oriented structures. The administration, which took an active role despite all military opposition to the developments in Cyprus and Iraq, strengthened its institutionalism in the West. In addition to its rapprochement with regional neighbors such as Syria, Iran and Iraq, it has experienced its autonomy in energy corridors in Latin America and Africa, especially through TİKA, while at the same time displaying an example of international activism with the aid campaigns and educational support it has organized in these regions. The peak of the center country discourse crystallizes in Davutoğlu's AK Party foreign policy architecture (Balcı, 2018: 350). Analyzing the US's search for a security-oriented order after September 11, Davutoğlu criticized the "bridge" metaphor as "not being an independent actor" and established the concept of "the central country that produces Eastern theses in the East and European visions in the West" (Davutoğlu, 2004). The imagination of "power of influence" involved in global crises is embodied by the principles of security for all, political dialogue, economic integration and cultural "historicity" interaction (TBMM Minutes Journal, 21.10.2009: 187; 20.12.2010: 78). This strategy, which aims at regional leadership while strengthening Cold War alliances, crowns multilateral normative activism (Yeşiltaş and Balcı, 2011: 13).

Between 2009 and 2013, Turkish foreign policy underwent a process of recalibration in which the AKP advanced a multi-layered diplomatic agenda informed by Davutoğlu's strategic vision (Erdağ, 2014). Within this framework, Türkiye was no longer conceived merely as a geopolitical bridge between East and West, but rather as an actor capable of generating, shaping, and managing diplomatic initiatives across regional and global domains. The 2009–2013 Davutoğlu era clarified Türkiye's autonomous stance through moves such as strategic rapprochement with the United States and the suspension of relations with Israel following the Mavi Marmara incident. Proactive diplomacy was pursued through initiatives including mediation efforts between Iran and Georgia, the establishment of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils, and the expansion of visa exemption regimes. During this period, political leadership figures such as Abdullah Gül, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Ali Babacan, and Taner Yıldız played prominent roles, while institutions such as SETA and SAM provided intellectual and academic support. While the Arab Spring constituted a critical turning point that intensified tensions with Syria, Iran, and Iraq, Türkiye's reaction to the military coup in Egypt pushed the limits of the “zero problems with neighbors” policy and deepened debates surrounding diplomatic isolation (Erdağ, 2014). This normative reorientation strengthened Türkiye's regional capacity by transforming its foreign policy posture from defensive reactivity to strategic autonomy, particularly through the linkage of neighborly relations to criteria of political legitimacy. On the global political plane, Türkiye thus sought to reduce patterns of full dependency by adopting an autonomous, activist, and normatively driven posture within an increasingly multipolar international order. Yet, this activist and autonomy-oriented foreign policy posture did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, it was embedded in a longer post-Cold War trajectory in which the conceptualization of Türkiye as a “center country” gradually translated into concrete diplomatic practices. In this sense, the Davutoğlu era represented not a rupture but an acceleration and consolidation of earlier strategic orientations.

After the Cold War, the center country orientation turned into concrete foreign policy practices that included cultural-academic cooperation, development of diplomatic relations, solving problems with neighboring countries, foreign aid, economic integration and regional peace-stability contributions, and presented the operational evidence of strategic autonomy (TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.10.1996, p. 16). This proactive agenda embodied the imagination of a soft power-oriented hegemony in Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America while strengthening Western alliances; accelerated the evolution from passive transfer to normative leadership (TBMM Minutes Journal, 20.12.2010, p. 78). The

Great Student Project, which was launched in 1992 during the Turgut Özal period, brought 10,000 students from the Central Asian Turkic republics and the Balkans to Türkiye and built a cultural bridge; In 2012, it evolved into the Türkiye Scholarships program and expanded to Africa and Latin America (Kavak & Bakan, 2001, p. 96). Institutions such as TRKSOY (1993), the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (2008) and Yunus Emre Institute (2009) have institutionalized Turkish education and historiography interaction in more than 50 cultural centers; TRT Türk, on the other hand, has integrated the media of the Turkic world (Yunus Emre Institute, 2020). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, diplomatic recognition was achieved with the new republics in 1991; The number of embassies in Africa was increased to 42 in 2020 and to 17 in Latin America; Maneuverability has been maximized by providing free passage to dozens of countries with visa-free travel agreements (T.R. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020a). This diplomatic expansion is the practical extension of the Asian-European identity, which İsmail Cem describes as a "foreign policy privilege" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 20.12.1997, p. 658).

Foreign aid gained momentum with the institutionalization of development cooperation, which started with the SPO in 1985, with TİKA in 1992. In the 2000s, 21 offices were opened in Africa, spreading to the Middle East and Latin America, making Türkiye the world's leading humanitarian aid donor (TİKA, 2020a, 2020b). On the axis of "zero problems" with neighboring countries, the economic council with Greece (2000), the Adana Agreement with Syria (1998) and the Zurich Protocols with Armenia (2009) were signed with İsmail Cem's principle of "two positive names"; normalization was achieved with football diplomacy (Cem, 2009, p. 71). Economic integration has established interdependence with DEİK (1986), Türk Eximbank (1987), Black Sea Economic Cooperation (1992) and more than 30 free trade agreements; Energy lines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Southern Gas Corridor embodied Demirel's principle of "regional economic cooperation" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Economy, 2020; TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.10.1996, p. 16). Regional peace contributions were crowned with providing bases in the Gulf Crisis (1990), NATO interventions in Bosnia (1992) and Kosovo, Palestinian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli mediations (2008) and 128 personnel contributions to UN missions; He put Davutoğlu's "security for all" paradigm into action (Davutoğlu, 2004; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 13). This synthesis proves the operational continuity of the normative vision of the Özal-Demirel-Cem-Davutoğlu chain: Strategic position has evolved into global influence with normative activism (TBMM Minutes Journal, 18.12.2009, p. 762).

Davutoğlu's doctrine of Strategic Depth has placed the AKP's Islamic conservative nationalism in a systematic ideological framework, positioning the Ottoman legacy as the unchanging essence of Türkiye's "strategic mindset"; this approach crystallized the geocultural and normative depth of the post-Cold War vision of the central country (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 41; Saraçoğlu, 2013, p. 59). This vision, which rejected the bridge metaphor as "not being an independent actor", established the hierarchy of "natural allies" (Bosnia, Albania) and "arch-rivals" (Greece, Russia) on the axis of the Balkans-Caucasus-Middle East-Central Asia, and replaced passive transmission with the imagination of proactive hegemony as the historical heritage "made its weight felt" (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 123; Saraçoğlu, 2013, p. 60). This doctrine, which criticized the "alienation" of the Republican elites, coded the Sunni Islam-oriented "common Ottoman past" as the essence of the nation and considered "placing the sense of social belonging on a historical and socio-cultural basis" as an internal extension of its foreign policy strategy; thus, it integrated normative activism with the struggle for internal hegemony (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 96; Saraçoğlu, 2013, p. 61). The approach, which glorifies Türkiye as the "factor that determines the historical flow" in the hierarchy of civilizations, defined "transforming regional activity into global activity" as a national interest by freeing it from "the passivity of defending borders"; he ideologically synthesized the practice of Özal-Demirel-Cem with the concepts of "rhythmic diplomacy", "soft power" and "order-building" (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 116; Saraçoğlu, 2013, p. 63). The discourse of the central country has transformed İsmail Cem's vision of the "terminal-destination" (Cem, 2002, p. 5) into geopolitical doctrine and activated the dynamism arising from the "incompatibility between geocultural lines and legal borders". After the Arab Spring, it reinforced its claim to regional leadership with the rhetoric of "great Türkiye" (Davutoğlu, 2001: 20-21; Saraçoğlu, 2013, p. 64). While this hierarchical vision of nations placed Türkiye in the position of "heavyweight" (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 123), it recoded Demirel's principles of "good neighborliness-common prosperity" (TBMM Minutes Journal, 01.10.1996, p. 16) with Islamic conservative nationalism. It has turned the zero problem policy into a tool of normative superiority. The continuity of strategic mentality has been universalized with the Russian-Orthodox and German-Germanic examples, legitimizing Türkiye's mission as the "Ottoman remnant"; presented foreign policy actions as an essentialist necessity with the thesis that "history transcends wills limited to certain periods" (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 30). This doctrine crowned the chain of Turkish foreign policy from Özal to Davutoğlu with Islamic conservative nationalism, transforming Rosenau's dialectic of orientation and action into a paradigm of geopolitical hegemony; proved the ideological

continuity of the central country phenotype (Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 13; Saraçoğlu, 2013, p. 57).

Yeşiltaş and Balcı's analysis, which systematizes Turkish foreign policy in the AK Party period as a conceptual map, reveals the discursive richness of the central country doctrine by centering on Davutoğlu's intellectual infrastructure; in this context, the concept of "self-cognition" transforms Türkiye's geopolitical identity into a normative philosophy that transcends the narrow perception of space of the Cold War with civilizational continuity by basing its geopolitical identity on the consciousness of existence (Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 12). Strategic depth positions Türkiye as the center of the world's mainland by synthesizing historical and geographical richness in geo-political, geo-cultural and geo-economic layers. The vision, which rejects the passive transmission of the bridge metaphor, is based on order building with its multilateral maneuverability and ensures the ideological crystallization of the Özal-Cem line (Davutoğlu, 2001, p. 178; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 13). Vision-orientedness, on the other hand, replaces the reactive wait-and-see paradigm with proactive interventionism, necessitating an active pre-crisis role and strategic presence in non-crisis regions. Practices such as African expansion, Latin American deepening and UN Security Council membership embody this transformation (Davutoğlu, 2009c; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 14). It legitimizes Middle East activism by balancing hard power on the axis of soft power, diplomacy, culture and economic dependence; it builds persuasion-oriented hegemony with the triad of historical ties, democratic institutions and market economy, and pushes military discourse into the background (Kalin, 2011; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 14). The security-freedom balance focuses on the promotion of freedom-based democracy against global security after September 11; by integrating with EU harmonization laws at home, the Kurdish problem and the democratization of the Middle East abroad, it carries the freedom-first transformation to a zero-problem policy (Davutoğlu, 2007; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 15). Proactive and rhythmic diplomacy adapts the static structure to dynamic conditions by synthesizing simultaneous harmonious mobility with crisis prevention-mediation. It minimizes the risk of chaos in initiatives such as Arab-Israeli, Syrian-Israeli and in the practice of the Balkans with rhythmic harmony (Davutoğlu, 2009; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 16). Multidimensional-track foreign policy, as a complement to the necessity of the central country, reinforces simultaneous relations in the diversity of actors and subjects with psychological self-confidence; it evolves from negative psychology to positive with zero problems, economic integration and stability generation, and offers a holistic paradigm despite criticisms such as Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions (Davutoğlu, 2004a; Yeşiltaş

& Balcı, 2011, p. 18). Being an order-building actor aims at UN reform and active participation in global organizations by positioning Türkiye as a pioneer in the post-Cold War order gap; It jumps from regional to global with the rhetoric of "order cannot be established without Türkiye" (Davutoğlu, 2010; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 19). This conceptual framework complements Saraçoğlu's analysis of the doctrine of nationalism and documents the discursive hegemony of Islamic conservative nationalism; transforms normative superiority into geopolitical movement with historical heritage and responsibility, and overcomes the criticisms of axis shift with multidimensionality (Saraçoğlu, 2013; Yeşiltaş & Balcı, 2011, p. 21).

This study has demonstrated that Türkiye's foreign policy trajectory reflects a structurally consistent and historically grounded transformation rather than a sequence of episodic or conjunctural shifts. From the sovereignty-oriented diplomacy of the early Republic to the calibrated neutrality of the İnönü era, and from post-Cold War soft power expansion to the activist and normatively framed policies of the 2000s, Türkiye has progressively consolidated a foreign policy identity centered on strategic autonomy, diplomatic activism, and normative engagement. Within this historical continuum, Türkiye's emergence as a middle power should be understood not as a sudden reorientation, but as the institutionalization of a durable foreign policy phenotype in which hard and soft power instruments are employed in a balanced and purposive manner. The gradual abandonment of the "bridge" metaphor in favor of a central country orientation reflects a growing capacity to translate geopolitical constraints into strategic leverage. Accordingly, the analysis suggests that Türkiye possesses the potential to function as an order-shaping actor in an increasingly multipolar international system, extending its influence beyond regional confines through autonomous decision-making, proactive diplomacy, and norm-based legitimacy claims. By transforming geographical determinism into strategic advantage, Türkiye's evolving diplomatic posture highlights its ability to play consequential and stabilizing roles within the competitive and multi-layered global order of the future.

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Between Restraint and Reconstruction: China's Conflict Navigation in Yemen

Dagmar Angelovicova

Introduction

The war in Yemen is among the most protracted and complex conflicts in the contemporary Middle East. Since 2014, it has combined civil war dynamics, regional proxy competition, humanitarian catastrophe, and severe state fragmentation, producing consequences that extend beyond Yemen's borders to regional security and global maritime trade routes (Chang, 2018; Lee, 2015). The strategic importance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, together with extensive humanitarian and infrastructural destruction, has positioned Yemen at the intersection of regional instability and broader international economic and security concerns (Koshaimah & Zou, 2023). Within this context, China has emerged as a distinct external actor. Unlike Western states or regional powers directly involved in military operations, China has remained a non-belligerent participant, consistently emphasizing sovereignty, non-intervention, and political dialogue through multilateral frameworks (Chang, 2020; Chaziza, 2015). Although Yemen has not been central to China's Middle East policy, Chinese interests in maritime security, energy routes, and regional stability—combined with expanding diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia and Iran—have ensured that Yemen remains an indirect but persistent concern in China's regional calculus (Babukair, 2023; Burton, 2023).

China's engagement with the Yemen conflict has been marked by deliberate restraint. Beijing avoided overt mediation and partisan alignment, relying primarily on United Nations-led processes and limiting its actions to diplomatic statements, humanitarian engagement, and the protection of its nationals, most notably during the 2015 evacuation operation (Chang, 2018; UN Security Council, 2021). Existing scholarship converges on the assessment that China's conflict management in Yemen reflects a wider regional pattern of "involvement without impact," in which diplomatic presence does not translate into decisive influence over conflict trajectories (Burton, 2019; Karakır, 2022).

Recent developments have nonetheless renewed debate over China's role beyond the conflict phase. Yemen is central in this context because it represents one of the most pronounced arenas in which Saudi–Iranian rivalry has been expressed through proxy dynamics. China's facilitation of the Saudi–Iranian rapprochement, alongside increasing references to political settlement, reconstruction, and development-oriented peace frameworks, has raised questions about whether wartime restraint is intended to preserve access and legitimacy in a future post-

war Yemen (Babukair, 2023; Yuan & Zhiyuan, 2023). Parallel assessments of Yemen's reconstruction needs underscore the scale of economic recovery required and indicate that any post-war rebuilding will depend heavily on multilateral financing and external coordination (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2021).

This juxtaposition raises a central analytical puzzle: how can China's low-profile, non-interventionist conduct during the Yemen war be reconciled with emerging expectations regarding its possible role in post-war reconstruction? Existing studies tend to treat China's conflict behavior and reconstruction diplomacy as separate domains, leaving limited attention to how wartime positioning shapes post-conflict opportunities and constraints. By examining China's navigation of the Yemen conflict alongside its evolving reconstruction discourse, this article assesses how conflict restraint conditions China's prospective role in a still-unresolved post-war environment.

Analytical Framework: China's Conflict Navigation Logic

China's engagement with armed conflicts in the Middle East is best understood not as mediation in the conventional sense, but as a calibrated strategy of conflict navigation. Rather than seeking to shape outcomes directly, China prioritizes diplomatic positioning, procedural legitimacy, and risk avoidance. This approach reflects a consistent emphasis on state sovereignty and non-intervention, with multilateral institutions—particularly the United Nations—serving as the primary arenas for conflict management (Chang, 2020; Temiz, 2021). In practice, China rarely acts as a direct broker between warring parties. Its involvement is typically confined to issuing diplomatic statements, supporting ceasefire initiatives, and endorsing internationally recognized negotiation frameworks. This posture has been conceptualized as quasi-mediation: diplomatic engagement that avoids coercive leverage, political conditionality, and enforcement mechanisms (Sun & Zoubir, 2018). Unlike traditional mediators, China does not impose settlement terms, deploy peacekeeping forces with robust mandates, or apply sanctions. Instead, it emphasizes facilitation of dialogue and procedural inclusion while avoiding actions that could compromise neutrality or create political entanglement (Balasubramanian, 2020).

In Yemen, this logic has translated into a consistent avoidance of partisan alignment. Beijing has refrained from endorsing any of the principal conflict actors and has framed its position through general calls for political dialogue, humanitarian access, and respect for Yemen's sovereignty (UN Security Council, 2021). This stance reflects strategic calculation as

much as normative preference, as neutrality preserves China's diplomatic relationships with competing regional powers and limits exposure to reputational and security risks (Burton, 2023).

The structural characteristics of contemporary civil wars further constrain China's role. Fragmented authority, the proliferation of armed non-state actors, and external patronage networks create environments in which mediation strategies lacking coercive tools are difficult to deploy effectively (Burton, 2019). The absence of a unified negotiating counterpart and volatile frontline dynamics reduces external actors' capacity to influence outcomes, particularly when they are unwilling to exert political or military pressure. These constraints are especially pronounced in proxy conflicts. In Yemen, local dynamics are embedded within broader Saudi–Iranian rivalry, complicating mediation efforts that do not engage directly with regional power politics (Chang, 2018; Karakır, 2022). China's reluctance to confront or pressure key regional stakeholders further limits its capacity to act as an effective mediator, reinforcing a preference for indirect engagement through multilateral frameworks.

Ongoing violence and the absence of a comprehensive ceasefire impose additional limits. Direct mediation in an active conflict would expose China to political risk without offering commensurate leverage or reasonable prospects of success. Yemen thus constitutes a high-risk environment for overt Chinese mediation, encouraging a strategy centered on diplomatic restraint, UN-centered legitimacy, and long-term positioning rather than immediate conflict resolution (Koshaimah & Zou, 2023).

Taken together, these principles and constraints define China's conflict navigation logic: a strategy that privileges neutrality over influence, procedure over outcomes, and long-term diplomatic access over short-term intervention. This framework provides the analytical foundation for assessing how China's wartime conduct shapes its prospective role in Yemen's eventual post-war phase.

China's Navigation of the Yemen Conflict (2011–Present)

China's approach to the Yemen conflict evolved alongside changing local and regional dynamics while remaining consistent in its underlying strategic logic. Rather than pursuing an active political role, China prioritized caution, neutrality, and diplomatic flexibility, adjusting its engagement as the conflict escalated while avoiding commitments that could entangle it in Yemen's complex war environment.

Before the outbreak of large-scale hostilities in 2014–2015, Yemen occupied a marginal position in China’s Middle East policy. Bilateral relations were limited in scope, characterized by modest trade volumes and the absence of strategic investments compared with China’s engagement with major regional economies (Chaziza, 2015). Although Yemen appeared rhetorically within broader frameworks of South–South cooperation, it did not constitute a focal point of China’s regional economic or diplomatic priorities (Lee, 2015). Politically, China maintained relations with successive Yemeni governments without developing strong alignment with any particular domestic actor, reflecting Yemen’s limited economic relevance and growing internal instability following the Arab uprisings (Chang, 2018). This period established a pattern of low-risk engagement that shaped China’s subsequent response.

The escalation of the conflict in 2015 marked a turning point. China’s most visible action during this phase was the evacuation of its nationals, as well as foreign citizens, from Yemen in April 2015. The operation demonstrated China’s capacity to protect overseas interests while reinforcing its non-belligerent posture, underscoring Beijing’s determination to limit exposure rather than deepen involvement (Reuters, 2015).

Throughout the war, China avoided military involvement and refrained from supporting any of the principal parties to the conflict. Unlike regional powers directly engaged in combat operations, Beijing emphasized political settlement and humanitarian considerations while distancing itself from coercive measures (Chang, 2020; Chaziza, 2015). Official statements framed the conflict as a Yemeni domestic issue requiring dialogue and compromise, consistent with China’s non-intervention doctrine. Diplomatic activity was channelled primarily through multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations Security Council, with China supporting UN-led initiatives and ceasefire proposals rather than pursuing independent mediation (UN Security Council, 2021). This reliance on multilateral processes preserved legitimacy while limiting political risk.

China’s navigation of the conflict was further shaped by its relationships with key regional actors, most notably Saudi Arabia and Iran. Given Yemen’s entanglement in broader regional rivalries, Beijing sought to preserve balanced relations and avoided positions that could jeopardize strategic partnerships (Burton, 2023; Karakir, 2022). China’s facilitation of the Saudi–Iranian rapprochement, while not Yemen-specific, carried indirect implications for de-escalation dynamics affecting the conflict (Babukair, 2023). However, this diplomatic capital was not translated into direct mediation in Yemen, and Beijing continued to emphasize dialogue in principle rather than practice.

This pattern reflects a deliberate strategy of diplomatic balancing. By avoiding direct mediation while rhetorically supporting dialogue, China preserved neutrality and safeguarded regional relationships, albeit at the cost of limited influence over conflict outcomes (Burton, 2019; Koshaimah & Zou, 2023). China's engagement in Yemen, therefore, remained indirect and cautious, reinforcing its position as a peripheral but persistent actor rather than a central conflict manager.

Why Yemen Still Matters to China

China's cautious posture in Yemen should not be read as indifference. Yemen occupies a strategic position within China's broader Middle East and maritime security considerations, even as the risks associated with direct involvement reinforce Beijing's preference for limited engagement. Understanding China's approach, therefore, requires distinguishing between the interests at stake and the constraints shaping how those interests are pursued.

Yemen's relevance to China derives primarily from its location adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Disruptions in this corridor pose risks to global trade and energy shipments, with indirect implications for China's economic security and supply chains (Lee, 2015; Koshaimah & Zou, 2023). Although China does not rely directly on Yemeni energy resources, instability along maritime routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, and Europe carries broader strategic consequences.

Beyond maritime considerations, Yemen figures indirectly in China's regional stability calculus. Prolonged conflict contributes to insecurity across the Arabian Peninsula, increases the risk of regional escalation, and undermines efforts to promote economic connectivity in a region of growing importance to China's diplomacy (Chang, 2018; Burton, 2023). In this sense, Yemen represents less a bilateral priority than a destabilizing node within a strategically sensitive regional environment. At the same time, China's economic engagement with Yemen has remained limited. Trade and investment volumes are modest relative to China's relations with larger regional economies, and references to Yemen within broader Chinese development narratives, including the Belt and Road Initiative, remain largely rhetorical and prospective (Chaziza, 2021; Xie et al., 2024). Yemen's future economic relevance is therefore viewed as conditional, contingent on political stabilization and improvements in security and governance.

Substantial risks offset these interests. Fragmented authority, the presence of multiple armed actors, and persistent insecurity increase the likelihood that deeper involvement would expose Chinese personnel, assets, and diplomatic credibility to significant danger (Burton,

2019; Koshaimah & Zou, 2023). The 2015 evacuation operation reinforced this assessment, underscoring the vulnerability of Chinese nationals in high-intensity conflict environments and validating China's risk-averse approach (Reuters, 2015; Chang, 2018).

Yemen's entanglement in regional rivalries further complicates China's position. Overt involvement risks being interpreted as alignment within the broader Saudi–Iranian competition, potentially undermining China's carefully balanced regional relationships (Karakır, 2022; Burton, 2023). As a result, Beijing has managed exposure by maintaining diplomatic flexibility, limiting commitments, and deferring substantive engagement until conditions become more conducive to external participation. Taken together, China's interests in Yemen are real but circumscribed. Strategic considerations related to maritime security and regional stability explain Beijing's continued diplomatic attention, while conflict-related risks and structural constraints account for its avoidance of deep involvement. This tension between interest and restraint provides the backdrop for assessing China's positioning toward Yemen's eventual post-war phase.

Post-War Reconstruction: Needs, Prospects, and Positioning

Discussion of post-war reconstruction in Yemen must remain cautious. The conflict is unresolved, political authority is fragmented, and large-scale reconstruction has not yet begun. Nevertheless, international assessments of recovery needs and evolving diplomatic discourse permit analysis of how external actors, including China, are positioning themselves for a potential post-conflict phase.

Yemen's reconstruction needs are extensive, reflecting prolonged conflict, infrastructure destruction, and economic collapse. Damage spans critical sectors—including energy, transport, health, water and sanitation, housing, and public administration—with long-term effects on human capital and institutional capacity (World Bank, 2020). These conditions exceed the scope of humanitarian response and require a phased approach distinguishing short-term recovery from long-term reconstruction (UNDP, 2021). International institutions emphasize that effective rebuilding depends on sequencing stabilization, recovery, and reconstruction rather than rapid transitions to large-scale infrastructure projects, as premature reconstruction risks reinforcing fragmentation and inefficiency (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2021).

The architecture governing Yemen's recovery is overwhelmingly multilateral. World Bank-administered mechanisms, including multi-donor trust funds, channel reconstruction

financing through coordinated frameworks aimed at risk mitigation and institutional oversight (World Bank, 2020). United Nations agencies similarly stress multilateral coordination and political conditionality linked to security improvements and governance capacity (UNCT Yemen, 2021). These arrangements define the parameters for external engagement and limit the scope for unilateral reconstruction initiatives in the absence of a political settlement.

Within this context, China's engagement with Yemen's post-war prospects remains broadly discursive rather than operational. Yemen has appeared within broader Chinese narratives of development cooperation and post-conflict recovery, including references to the Belt and Road Initiative. However, these remain general and aspirational rather than indicative of concrete commitments (Chaziza, 2021). China's reconstruction discourse emphasizes economic recovery through trade facilitation, connectivity, and development-oriented growth rather than direct political intervention. Empirical studies suggest that any future Chinese economic involvement would prioritize trade facilitation and export diversification, contingent on stabilization and institutional recovery (Xie et al., 2024). This aligns with China's broader pattern of framing economic engagement as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, political settlement (Ramani, 2021).

Structural conditions further constrain China's prospective role. Persistent violence, contested territorial control, and threats to maritime and land-based infrastructure pose significant risks to external economic actors, particularly those unwilling to deploy security assets or engage in coercive stabilization (Koshaimah & Zou, 2023; World Bank, 2020). Governance fragmentation compounds these risks, as the absence of a unified authority capable of coordinating nationwide reconstruction complicates contractual enforcement, regulatory oversight, and project continuity (UNDP, 2021; UNCT Yemen, 2021). International sanctions and regulatory requirements further restrict permissible engagement and raise transaction costs, reinforcing reliance on multilateral mechanisms and discouraging unilateral initiatives (UN Security Council, 2021; Security Council Report, 2025).

Taken together, these factors indicate that China's prospective role in Yemen's post-war reconstruction is shaped less by ambition than by structural limitation. While Beijing has articulated a development-oriented vision for post-conflict recovery, its engagement remains contingent on political settlement, security stabilization, and multilateral coordination. This positioning reflects continuity with China's wartime restraint and underscores the link between conflict navigation and post-conflict engagement strategies.

From Conflict Navigation to Post-War Positioning

China's engagement in the Yemen conflict reflects a deliberate wartime strategy of restraint that has shaped—and constrained—its post-war positioning. Rather than pursuing influence through mediation or coercive engagement, China prioritized diplomatic neutrality, procedural legitimacy, and risk avoidance. This approach produced a mixed outcome: it preserved access and regional relationships while limiting China's capacity to shape conflict outcomes or post-conflict trajectories.

By avoiding partisan alignment and maintaining balanced relations with key regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, China insulated itself from reputational costs associated with Yemen's humanitarian and political fallout (Burton, 2019; Karakır, 2022). This positioning enabled engagement with multiple stakeholders without being directly associated with military escalation or political exclusion, a consideration that remains salient given Yemen's unresolved conflict and fragmented authority (Chang, 2020; Babukair, 2023). In this sense, neutrality functioned as diplomatic legitimacy rather than leverage. At the same time, the restraint imposed clear limits. Reliance on UN-centered diplomacy and generalized calls for dialogue reduced China's exposure to criticism related to civilian harm or governance failures (Burton, 2023; UN Security Council, 2021). However, by refraining from direct mediation, material inducements, or political pressure, China remained peripheral to the decision-making process regarding the conflict. Its influence over local actors was minimal, and its capacity to shape negotiations or enforce commitments was constrained by both structural conditions and self-imposed limits (Burton, 2019; Karakır, 2022; Koshaimah & Zou, 2023).

This combination of preserved access and limited influence positions China neither as a mediator nor as a bystander. China did not disengage from Yemen, but neither did it assume responsibility for conflict resolution or leadership in reconstruction. Instead, it occupies an intermediate position as a conditional post-war actor whose engagement depends on political settlement, security stabilization, and the availability of multilateral mechanisms capable of mitigating risk (Chaziza, 2021; World Bank, 2020). This continuity between wartime conduct and post-war positioning reflects the internal coherence of China's conflict navigation logic rather than policy inconsistency.

China's experience in Yemen thus illustrates how strategies designed to minimize risk and preserve legitimacy can simultaneously constrain post-conflict influence. Wartime restraint safeguarded access and diplomatic flexibility but limited leverage, resulting in a cautious,

conditional form of engagement. This pattern has broader implications for understanding China's role in protracted conflicts where political settlement remains uncertain, and reconstruction is contingent rather than imminent (UNDP, 2021; Burton, 2023).

Conclusion

This article examines how China has navigated the Yemen conflict and how its wartime conduct shapes its post-war positioning. The analysis demonstrates that China's approach has been defined by deliberate restraint, diplomatic neutrality, and reliance on multilateral processes rather than direct mediation or coercive engagement. Throughout the conflict, China avoided military involvement, refrained from partisan alignment, and confined its role to procedural diplomacy and the protection of its nationals, most notably during the 2015 evacuation operation (Chang, 2018; Reuters, 2015; UN Security Council, 2021). This pattern reflects a broader feature of China's conflict management in the Middle East, characterized by involvement without decisive impact on conflict trajectories (Burton, 2019; Karakır, 2022).

China's wartime restraint produced a dual outcome. It preserved diplomatic access, minimized reputational costs, and enabled Beijing to maintain balanced relations with key regional actors, including Saudi Arabia and Iran (Babukair, 2023; Burton, 2023). At the same time, this restraint constrained China's leverage, limiting its capacity to influence conflict dynamics or shape political outcomes in Yemen. China has thus emerged neither as a mediator nor as a disengaged bystander, but as a conditional actor whose engagement depends on external developments rather than interventionist ambition (Sun & Zoubir, 2018; Koshaimah & Zou, 2023).

These findings carry broader implications for China's Middle East diplomacy. Yemen illustrates the limits of a conflict navigation strategy that prioritizes neutrality and procedural legitimacy in highly fragmented civil wars. While such an approach can preserve long-term relationships and avoid entanglement, it offers limited capacity to shape outcomes in conflicts characterized by proxy competition, fragmented authority, and persistent violence (Burton, 2019; Chang, 2020).

The analysis also contributes to debates on post-conflict reconstruction. International assessments underscore that Yemen's recovery will depend on multilateral frameworks, phased sequencing, and political settlement rather than rapid reconstruction initiatives (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2021). Within this architecture, China's role is likely to remain constrained and conditional, with engagement occurring selectively and in coordination with international

mechanisms, should security and governance conditions improve (Chaziza, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Finally, this study recognizes that Yemen remains an unfinished war. Any assessment of post-war reconstruction must therefore remain provisional and grounded in existing constraints rather than speculative outcomes. Future research could extend this framework through comparative analysis with other conflict-affected cases, such as Syria or Iraq, to assess whether China's conflict navigation logic produces consistent patterns or adapts to differing political, institutional, and security environments. In sum, China's engagement with Yemen demonstrates the continuity between wartime restraint and post-war positioning. By prioritizing neutrality, multilateral legitimacy, and risk avoidance, China has preserved diplomatic flexibility while limiting its capacity for influence. This balance between access and leverage offers a valuable lens for understanding China's role in protracted conflicts where political settlement remains uncertain, and reconstruction is contingent rather than imminent.

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Contemporary Pan-Africanism in a Multipolar World: Sovereigntist Revival and Geopolitical Alignments

Şerif Sav

In the face of altering global power relations, pan-Africanism, the political ideal of African unity and emancipation, is seeing a modern comeback. Today's rebirth takes the form of "sovereigntist Pan-Africanism," a movement focused on recovering African policy autonomy, resources, and security from alleged neo-colonial domination, in contrast to previous versions that stressed continental federation or pan-racial cooperation. A recent surge of military takeovers throughout West and Central Africa serves as a striking example of this trend, where juntas and their supporters use Pan-African rhetoric and anti-imperialist language to portray their takeovers as a "second decolonization" or "second independence" (Barchiesi, 2020). At the same time, African governments now face both new opportunities and challenges as a result of the creation of a multipolar world, which is marked by heightened competition between Western powers and emerging countries like China, Russia, and Türkiye. Through recent events and initiatives, such as the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon; the roles of China, Russia, and Türkiye as alternative partners; the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as a daring sub-regional Pan-African project; and the greater agency African states are exercising to redefine their position in a multipolar global order, this essay examines the rise of sovereigntist Pan-Africanism. This new Pan-Africanist narrative poses difficult issues regarding governance and the future of Africa's interactions with the outside world, even as it feeds real popular dissatisfaction with neo-colonial arrangements.

Pan-Africanism's Evolving Vision: From Anti-Colonial Unity to "Sovereigntist" Revival

Pan-Africanism has consistently been a dynamic and debated ideology, encompassing various perspectives on African liberation. During the mid-20th century, Pan-African thought came together in the fight against colonial rule and the aspiration for political unity (Uzoigwe, 2013). Visionaries such as Kwame Nkrumah imagined a transnational African federation, a "United States of Africa," convinced that only through continental unity could genuine independence and development be secured (Ayittey, 2010). Some, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the sovereignty of newly independent states, concerned that a supranational union could merely substitute European colonial rulers with a dominant central

African power (Ayittey, 2010). The conflict between continental unity and national sovereignty was apparent at the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. The OAU ultimately established the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, postponing the objective of a profound political union. Scholar Abrahamsen notes that Pan-Africanism is not a singular entity; it encompasses “intellectual and political resources” that can facilitate both ambitious multilateralism and assertive sovereigntism, depending on the historical context (Abrahamsen, 2020). Indeed, “Pan-Africanism is neither inherently progressive nor reactionary, and can support multilateralism and sovereigntism in equal measure” (Abrahamsen, 2020). In essence, although Pan-African ideals are frequently linked to liberation and solidarity, they have also been used to uphold the autonomy of states and to oppose external intervention.

By the late 20th century, the emancipatory promise of Pan-Africanism appeared to wane due to the pressures of Cold War patronage, economic crises, and authoritarian governance (Waldman, 2025). In numerous countries, the post-colonial state transformed into a means for the enrichment and repression of elites, despite leaders superficially endorsing the concept of African unity (Ayittey, 2010). The OAU’s policy of non-interference notably permitted despots to operate without accountability under the guise of sovereignty, leading to the organization being viewed with skepticism as a “club of dictators (Abrahamsen & Chimhandamba, 2023).” Abrahamsen observes that the Pan-African norm of solidarity frequently manifested as support for the sovereign power of regimes, contributing little to the enhancement of freedom and prosperity for their populations (2020). The early 1990s ushered in a series of democratic openings across Africa, accompanied by the economic prescriptions of structural adjustment; however, these developments further fragmented any cohesive Pan-African front. The formal reinvigoration of Pan-Africanism occurred with the establishment of the African Union in 2002. The AU moved away from the OAU by implementing a Constitutive Act that harmonizes respect for sovereignty with the goal of creating “an Africa that is a Strong, United, and Influential Global Player” (Williams, 2014). The AU notably allows for collective intervention in instances of severe human rights violations, directly challenging the traditional absolutist sovereignty norm. This indicated a more “liberal Pan-Africanism” in harmony with democratic and humanitarian principles (Abrahamsen et al., 2023).

However, the AU’s Pan-Africanism has faced challenges from realpolitik. Abrahamsen et al. (2023) contend that the revival of great-power rivalry in the 2020s, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, poses a significant threat to two fundamental principles of the

AU's vision: its dedication to democracy and human rights, as well as its goal for Africa to "speak with a united voice" on the global stage (Abrahamsen et al., 2023). In this context, a more assertive, sovereignty-centered form of Pan-Africanism has emerged at the grassroots level, driven by discontent with the unmet expectations of both the post-colonial state and the liberal international order. This concept of "sovereigntist Pan-Africanism" aims to finalize the decolonization journey by liberating Africa from any external control, even if it requires placing state independence above continental governance.

"Second Decolonization": West Africa's Coups as Sovereigntist Pan-African Rebellion

The recent coup belt across Francophone West and Central Africa clearly illustrates the rise of a new sovereigntist Pan-Africanism. From 2020 to 2023, military officers took control in several countries, including Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, frequently toppling governments that had strong ties to France or the West. The putschists have intentionally shaped their actions using the rhetoric of anti-colonial liberation, harnessing widespread frustration over years of perceived neo-colonial dominance (Vinex, 2024). In Mali (2020, 2021) and Burkina Faso (2022), young coup leaders such as Colonel Assimi Goïta and Captain Ibrahim Traoré garnered support by referencing the legacy of anti-imperialist heroes and criticizing France's security shortcomings. In various nations, large crowds have taken to the streets to celebrate the juntas, frequently waving Russian tricolors alongside Pan-African colors, and chanting slogans like "France dégage!" "France, leave!" (NPR, 2023). Following the coup in Niger on July 26, 2023, tens of thousands of individuals gathered in Niamey to protest outside a French military base, setting fire to French flags and raising Russian ones in a call for the cessation of France's presence (Balima, 2023). Comparable events occurred in Burkina Faso and Mali, where enthusiastic demonstrators showcased placards stating "France's army, get out of our country" (VOA, 2023). This surge of public backing, unparalleled in its clear dismissal of France, indicates that numerous Africans perceive the coup leaders not simply as power-hungry military figures but as champions of freedom from external control.

Local and regional actors clearly characterize these upheavals as a "second independence." Gnaka Lagoke, a professor of Africana Studies, notes that in various West African societies, there is an increasing perception that "economic and political life is still being controlled by the French." Lagoke states, "we are now in an age of revolt against the French establishment, and these African countries are seeking 'a second independence'" (VOA, 2023).

The concept of a “second decolonization” became more prominent after the coup in Gabon in August 2023. The removal of President Ali Bongo in Gabon, after a 56-year family rule closely tied to France, was swiftly associated with the wider anti-Françafrique movement. French journalist Thomas Deltombe stated, “The independence of Gabon has never been real...” It seems we could be observing a second independence, a fresh decolonization process” (Deltombe, 2023). The language used, resonating among intellectuals and gaining traction on social media, highlights how these coups are framed as integral to a broader Pan-African liberation movement: dismantling the remnants of colonial-era client states and reclaiming genuine sovereignty.

A prevalent theme among the juntas is their assertion that they are rectifying historical wrongs and providing their countries with a new beginning. For example, Captain Traoré of Burkina Faso, who at 34 became the youngest head of state in the world, has positioned himself as a populist leader, advocating for the people in their struggle against imperialism. Traoré’s passionate speech at the Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023, where he discussed Burkina Faso “facing forms of neo-colonialism and imperialism,” was “very well received” back home (Chikerema et. al, 2025). The resonance of this rhetoric indicates that a considerable portion of the population in nations such as Burkina Faso and Mali perceives the military takeovers as a means of restoration rather than destruction. In their perspective, leaders such as Traoré and Goïta are at last accomplishing what post-colonial civilian elites could not: confronting former colonial powers, removing exploitative foreign troops, and restoring national dignity. In Mali and Burkina Faso, it is notable that supporters of the coups have brought back the legacy of Sankara, the revolutionary leader from the 1980s in Burkina Faso, to frame the present situation as a resurgence of his Pan-Africanist ideals (Unreviled Files, 2025). The coup regime in Niger explicitly accused France of extracting Nigerien uranium while allowing the population to remain in poverty, a complaint that bolstered the junta's rationale for taking power (Chikerema et. al, 2025). All these arguments revolve around a central idea: Africa needs to liberate itself from neo-colonial constraints and forge its own independent journey.

Yet, beneath the victorious Pan-African discourse exists a more intricate truth. The new military regimes, while opposing foreign domination, have simultaneously restricted domestic freedoms and democratic processes. Their assertion of being liberators is at odds with the reality that they seized power through force and have frequently delayed or invalidated elections. In Mali, Goïta’s junta first consented to an 18-month transition but subsequently postponed elections, resulting in sanctions from ECOWAS (Reuters, 2023). In Guinea, Colonel

Doumbouya portrayed his 2021 coup as a means to terminate Alpha Condé's corrupt regime; however, he has also delayed the transition back to civilian governance. Authoritarian tendencies have effectively leveraged the sovereigntist Pan-African wave. The present circumstances can be seen as having expelled the French thief, only to welcome a local one in return. Historically, the invocation of sovereignty in Pan-Africanism served as a double-edged sword, empowering anti-colonial struggles while simultaneously providing protection to despots (Abrahamsen, 2020). A parallel can be observed today. The anti-ECOWAS rhetoric from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger clearly expresses a valid frustration towards the intense external pressure they face. However, it also conveniently characterizes any regional or internal dissent against the juntas as treasonous or instigated by foreign entities. For instance, when ECOWAS warned of military intervention in Niger to reinstate the elected president, the coup regimes in Niamey, Bamako, and Ouagadougou united, condemning ECOWAS as an instrument of imperialism. The three juntas cautioned that any assault on one would be regarded as a "declaration of war" on all (France 24, 2023), and they swiftly established a new defensive alliance. Therefore, although "sovereigntist Pan-Africanism" has invigorated communities and placed colonial powers in a defensive position, it also presents a warning: state sovereignty does not inherently equate to societal freedom. The emancipatory essence of Pan-Africanism can be appropriated to justify undemocratic governance, unless it is paired with a genuine dedication to the rights and well-being of African citizens.

Multipolar Maneuvers: Russia, China, Türkiye and the New Geopolitics of African Sovereignty

The revival of sovereigntist sentiment in Africa has occurred alongside, and has been partially bolstered by, a more multipolar international system. The dynamics of global power are evolving, moving away from a singular Western dominance towards a multifaceted competition that includes the United States and Europe on one side, and rising powers such as Russia and China, with Türkiye occupying a more minor position, on the other. Africa has transitioned from the periphery to the forefront of this geopolitical competition. Abrahamsen et al. (2023) highlight that the continent's rich resources and strategic significance have ignited discussions regarding a "new scramble" for Africa, as global powers compete for access to African minerals, markets, and diplomatic backing with 54 votes in the UN General Assembly. Following the Ukraine war, Africa seems to be becoming the new stage for geopolitical competition among Russia, China, and the West (Mintoiba, 2024). African states are not merely

passive participants; they are proactively maneuvering through this rivalry to promote their own interests. The recent coup regimes illustrate the ways in which African leaders are navigating their relationships with external partners: reducing reliance on Western influence while embracing alternative supporters that provide political backing, military cooperation, or investment without the usual democratic prerequisites. This section examines the roles of Russia, China, and Türkiye in the changing dynamics of Africa, along with how African entities utilize these relationships to seek greater independence.

a. Russia: Anti-Western Patronage and Security Leverage

Russia has become a prominent and occasionally fervent advocate for Africa's emerging sovereigntist narrative. Moscow recognized an opportunity in the Sahel coups to replace Western influence by positioning itself as an ally to the struggling juntas (Vo, 2025). The Russian strategy has involved two main elements: formal diplomatic efforts and informal security support through private military contractors, particularly the Wagner Group. Following Mali's 2021 coup and France's subsequent withdrawal, Bamako's junta shifted its focus directly toward Moscow, bringing in Russian military trainers and equipment, and reportedly utilizing Wagner mercenaries to combat jihadist insurgents (France 24, 2021). Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of Wagner, publicly supported the 2023 coup in Niger, describing it as a triumph over colonizers and comparing it to Niger's "second independence" (Lister, 2023). Statements like these, echoed across Russian media platforms, portray Russia as the defender of African sovereignty in its struggle against Western dominance. President Vladimir Putin has carefully crafted this persona: at the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in 2023, he depicted Russia as a longstanding ally that backed African anti-colonial movements during the Cold War and is now prepared to assist Africa in "completing the process of decolonization (Melly, 2023)." This communication resonates with African audiences who feel disappointed by their Western counterparts. It has been noted that "Putin...has succeeded in positioning himself as the one fighting against the hegemony of the West," which has led many in Francophone Africa to view Russia as a "potential partner" that aligns with their anti-imperialist ideals (Hess, 2022; Tsygankov & Muhwezi, 2025). The presence of Russian flags in Sahelian capitals is not merely coincidental; it indicates a convergence of interests between local nationalist forces and Moscow's broader agenda. On the ground, Russia has primarily provided security assistance to nations dealing with insurgencies. In Mali, the junta expelled French counterterrorism forces (Operation Barkhane) in 2022 and opted to embrace Wagner fighters to

assist in combating Islamist militants in the north (Doxsee et. al, 2022). Despite the controversy surrounding Wagner's harsh methods, this action was presented within the country as Mali taking back its security sovereignty and seeking support from the East without the imposition of human rights discussions. In the Central African Republic, Wagner has effectively supported the government, significantly winning the favor of local populations towards Russia (Naadi, 2025). These deployments have enabled Russia to secure strategic footholds and mining concessions, while also being heavily influenced by public relations efforts: Russian operatives conduct disinformation campaigns that incite anti-French sentiment and elevate Moscow's role.

Importantly, African juntas are not blindly entering a new dependency; instead, many are strategically utilizing Russia to bolster their own standing. Policy analyst Ovigwe Eguegu notes that Mali's leaders are being "opportunistic" in their approach to Russia: "Maliens understand that the Russians and the French are rivals in the region... and want to leverage that rivalry and drag Russia into the mix so as to use its influence to ensure that Goïta has the international clout that he so desperately needs to carry out his agenda" (Kato, 2024). In essence, by welcoming Russian participation, Mali's junta secures a formidable ally to offset Western influence and provide it with legitimacy - a safeguard for the continuity of its regime. In a similar vein, the leaders of Niger's coup, confronted with the possibility of military intervention from ECOWAS, openly sought support from Russia. In late August 2023, a delegation from the Nigerien junta traveled to Moscow, and soon after, Russia issued a warning against any external intervention in Niger. In March 2024, a senior U.S. envoy visited Niamey for negotiations, but the junta sharply criticized the delegation for disregarding Niger's sovereign right to select its partners, justifying its engagement with Russia and other nations (Balima & Felix, 2024). The junta contended that earlier security agreements with Western nations were "profoundly unfair" and detrimental to Niger's national interests, subtly juxtaposing them with possible collaborations with Russia that would honor Niger's autonomy. Niger's new rulers, by making such claims, indicated a shift towards the east, attempting to secure more advantageous terms or at the very least evade punitive sanctions through alignment with Russia.

b. China: Economic Partnerships and the Non-Interference Bargain

Russia's influence in Africa has expanded mainly through security measures and symbolic gestures, while China's involvement is based on economic interests and a commitment to non-interference. In the last twenty years, China has emerged as Africa's largest trading

partner, a significant provider of infrastructure financing, and a diplomatic ally that steadfastly supports state sovereignty (Albert, 2017). The engagement of China holds considerable allure for African leaders advocating for policy independence. Beijing provides loans, investments, and developmental projects without imposing political conditions related to governance or human rights, highlighting a clear difference from Western aid and IMF programs. Analysts Sizo Nkala and Khensani Ntlemo articulate, “China has distinguished itself from Western countries’ interaction with Africa by insisting on unconditional cooperation with African states regardless of their political and economic systems (Nkala & Ntlemo, 2024).” Beijing’s strict non-interference doctrine indicates that it officially avoids criticizing the internal governance of African nations. In practice, China has utilized its UN Security Council veto to protect African regimes from international criticism when it aligns with its interests: for instance, vetoing resolutions regarding Sudan and Zimbabwe in the 2000s when those governments encountered Western sanctions for human rights violations. Such actions have established China’s reputation on the continent as a true alternative partner to the intrusive West (Nkala & Ntlemo, 2024). Many African leaders and citizens perceive that China honors African sovereignty in ways that former colonial powers do not, by investing in Africa without condescension and by supporting Africa’s right to make its own decisions.

African states actively engage in this relationship as well. They have taken initiative to define the parameters of Chinese involvement. In contrast to the oversimplified portrayals of “debt-trap diplomacy,” studies indicate that African governments frequently engage in tough and selective negotiations with China. Zou and Benabdallah (2025) contend that depicting Africa merely as a victim of China's ambitions “taps into orientalist and neo-colonial tropes which disregard the agency and capability of developing countries in managing the risks and opportunities of global partnerships independently” (Zou & Benabdallah, 2025). Africans have often been at the forefront of negotiations with China, strategically leveraging Chinese interest to further their own developmental objectives (Zou & Benabdallah, 2025). An illustrative case is Uganda’s oil sector: the Ugandan government strategically leveraged multiple foreign companies against one another and enforced local content requirements, ultimately securing a partnership with a Chinese firm (CNOOC) under conditions that mandated the construction of a domestic refinery - a demand that Western firms had opposed (Reuters, 2014). This illustrates a wider trend of “strategic hedging,” where African leaders embrace Chinese investment and knowledge while striving to prevent overreliance by maintaining connections with Western donors, multilateral organizations, or other emerging powers. The sovereigntist ethos

emphasizes the importance of diversifying partnerships rather than rejecting all forms of cooperation, ensuring that no single external actor has the power to dictate African policy. Consequently, while nations such as Mali and Niger strengthen their security ties with Russia and enhance their economic relationships with China, they frequently maintain connections with Western entities when it proves beneficial. For example, Mali's government, in spite of its anti-French stance, persists in collaborating with European and Gulf partners on specific development initiatives and has provided assurances to Western mining companies regarding their concessions (Reuters, 2025). This intricate balancing act defines Africa's multipolar engagement.

c. Türkiye as an Emerging Partners: Broadening the Options

In addition to the Russia-China alliance, various non-Western powers have broadened their presence in Africa, providing African nations with more alternatives. Türkiye has actively engaged in an Africa policy over the past 15 years, motivated by a combination of economic goals and strategic interests. In 2005, Türkiye's AK Party government, led by President Erdoğan, proclaimed the year as the "Year of Africa" and subsequently established numerous embassies, trade missions, and cultural centers throughout the continent (Sıradağ, 2023). In 2009, Türkiye had merely 12 diplomatic missions across Africa; by the mid-2020s, it proudly expanded this number to 44, positioning itself as one of the most diplomatically engaged nations on the continent (Sıradağ, 2023). Similarly, the number of African embassies in Ankara rose from 8 in 2008 to 38 by 2023 (Daily Sabah, 2025). This shared institutional dedication illustrates the perception of Ankara and African capitals as significant allies. Türkiye has positioned itself as a fellow former imperial subject and a Muslim-majority nation connecting Europe and Asia, a narrative that finds resonance in various parts of Africa, particularly in the Sahel and Horn regions where there are significant Muslim populations. Turkish officials frequently highlight the concept of "win-win cooperation" and focus on capacity-building, providing a range of services from infrastructure projects by Turkish companies to military training and counterterrorism assistance (Mwongeli, 2025). Türkiye established its largest overseas military base in Somalia and has provided training to Somali special forces to combat Al-Shabaab insurgents (Al Jazeera, 2017). In recent years, it has provided drones and weapons to countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tunisia, establishing itself as an arms supplier with fewer conditions than Western providers (Yaşar, 2022).

African leaders have embraced Türkiye as a component of their hedging strategy. In a time marked by increasing “South-South” cooperation, Türkiye is recognized as a collaborator capable of transferring technology and investing in sectors often neglected by Western assistance. Furthermore, Türkiye's relatively autonomous foreign policy provides African nations with the assurance that their interactions are based on a more equitable foundation. Ankara has skillfully managed its relations, hosting summits with African heads of state and aiming to increase trade volume to over \$40 billion by 2025 (Gorbacheva, 2025). Although Türkiye may not hold the same level of power as China or Russia, its multi-faceted strategy offers African nations an additional option to avoid reliance on a single bloc. Türkiye maintained its engagement “uninterruptedly” despite strained relations with Western allies, demonstrating to African partners that its interest remains steadfast (Sıradağ, 2023). For example, during the later years of Bashir's rule, while Western nations withdrew from Sudan's regime, Türkiye chose to uphold its connections and invested in a Red Sea port project, a strategic move aimed at securing its influence.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES): Sub-Regional Pan-Africanism from Below

The recent surge in anti-neocolonial sentiment has led to a remarkable development: the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a newly formed confederation comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In September 2023, with these three countries under military rule and facing isolation due to ECOWAS sanctions, their leaders entered into a mutual defense pact, thereby establishing a new bloc (Ewokor, 2025). The AES embodies a significant endeavor in fostering Pan-African unity within the sub-regional context. In contrast to earlier regional alliances that typically stemmed from established diplomatic efforts, the AES arose organically, born from a collective revolutionary experience (Gerocs, 2025). Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, united by a shared adversary in France and pro-France institutions, as well as a common struggle against jihadist insurgency and poverty, have endeavored to evolve their trilateral friendship into a more organized alliance that reflects Pan-African ideals.

The Alliance of Sahel States has focused on collective security and resource cooperation as its main priorities. A significant step forward was the establishment of a cohesive military force for the Sahel region. In January 2025, a ceremony at a Bamako airport marked the formal launch of a 5000-strong joint force by Mali's General Goïta and his counterparts, aimed at “intervening together” against terrorist groups and any threats to their regimes (Enome, 2025).

A Burkinabè general, Daouda Traoré, has been appointed to lead this force from a headquarters in Niamey, showcasing the trust and collaboration among the three armies (Okebiorun, 2025). This joint force enhances the mutual defense pact, clearly signaling to the world that any attack or rebellion in one AES country will provoke a unified response from all member nations. The message targets not just jihadists but also ECOWAS and any foreign entity considering intervention. The AES aims to prevent interference by strengthening their union, showcasing a cohesive front that increases the costs for any outside party attempting to target them individually. This strategy seemed to be effective at first: ECOWAS eventually retreated from its plan for military intervention in Niger in late 2023, in part because of the credible threat posed by Mali and Burkina Faso to deploy troops in support of Niger (Raube, 2023). The AES provided its members with both time and security by fostering a sense of solidarity.

The AES leaders have proposed initiatives for enhanced economic collaboration, including the alignment of infrastructure projects like road and rail connections across borders, the establishment of a shared investment bank, and the coordination of natural resource management, particularly uranium in Niger and gold in Mali/Burkina. During the Niamey summit in July 2024, a 25-point communiqué was issued, featuring proposals for an AES development bank and a rotating presidency to represent political unity (Al Jazeera, 2024). Skeptics may regard some of this as lofty posturing, considering the severe economic challenges faced by these nations and their efforts to uphold fundamental services in the midst of conflict. However, it is significant that Pan-African integrationist ideas are re-emerging and being actively pursued beyond the conventional AU framework. It indicates a wish among these revolutionary regimes to create alternative institutions that more effectively align with their vision. The AES can be viewed as a form of “Pan-Africanism from below.” It emerged not from established intergovernmental processes or elite diplomats, but from soldiers who transitioned into statesmen, responding directly to a crisis of sovereignty (Hunter, 2024). This represents a sub-regional realignment based on ideological lines. In distancing themselves from ECOWAS and forming an alliance, the Sahel trio has established a new political divide on the continent, contrasting sovereigntist, coup-led nations with those that are more aligned with Western interests and the existing order. The long-term durability and broader implications of this alignment are yet to be determined. Can the AES countries deliver enough tangible improvements in security or development to justify their model, or will internal governance failures erode their unity? Their decisions and changing environment of geopolitics will show the answer.

Africa's Agency in a Multipolar World Order

The developments highlighted indicate a core truth where African agency is reclaiming its role in global matters. Following a time in the 1990s and 2000s when African policy was limited by unipolar power and economic conditions, African nations today are utilizing multipolar competition to regain control over their own future. Africa is not withdrawing from the global stage; instead, it is increasingly engaging with the world on its own terms. The emergence of “sovereignist Pan-Africanism,” along with fresh geopolitical opportunities, has empowered African leaders, whether they came to power through coups or elections, to undertake actions that would have seemed unimaginable just ten years prior. They are removing former patrons' military bases, similar to what Niger and Mali did to the French, and what the Central African Republic did to certain European missions. Niger's prime minister has described the CFA arrangement as “economic oppression” that must come to an end, as they default on or renegotiate burdensome colonial-era agreements, including France's exclusive mining concessions and the CFA franc currency ties (Ojeh, 2025). African states are increasingly making their presence felt on the global stage: in 2023, the African Union obtained a permanent seat in the G20, a significant diplomatic achievement realized through collaborative efforts from both Western and Eastern allies (Ancharya & Singh, 2023). Similarly, several African nations, including Egypt and Ethiopia, became part of the expanded BRICS grouping in 2024, highlighting Africa's influence in fostering South-South cooperation and contesting Western-dominated institutions.

Sovereignist Pan-Africanism, at its finest, has the potential to address and rectify imbalances in international relations. It serves as a reminder to the world that Africa possesses “ideas of its own and interests of its own,” as famously articulated by Julius Nyerere decades ago (1996). Today, we observe African states forming innovative coalitions: for example, the “G4” alliance of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Djibouti took initiative with a regional solution to the Sudan crisis in 2023, subtly countering the influence of both Western and Arab states in the mediation process. Additionally, African diplomats frequently underscore the importance of justice and equality in multilateral settings, such as utilizing the UN General Assembly platform to address the double standards in global responses to conflicts in Africa compared to Europe, or stressing the necessity of reforming the UN Security Council to ensure African representation (Gowan, 2024). The legacy of Pan-Africanism in internationalism remains significant; it is currently undergoing a recalibration. Abrahamsen (2020) observed that Pan-Africanism

“contains intellectual resources for the defence, reinvigoration, and invention of a more just, equal and rule-bound multilateral world,” although it may also stimulate sovereigntist impulses. The objective is to utilize those resources for forward-thinking purposes.

Simultaneously, the agency of Africans in a multipolar context carries risks that are recognized by the Africans themselves. One potential risk is that in pursuing alternatives to Western influence, African states may inadvertently enter new forms of dependency or become battlegrounds for proxy rivalries. The shadow of Cold War-era rivalry hangs over us, and Africa is determined not to become a pawn in the agendas of others once more. This is why many leaders collaborating with Russia or China frequently assert their “non-aligned” stance, emphasizing that they will not permit bases or conflicts on their territory that do not pertain to African interests (VOA Africa, 2023). Another risk lies within: concentrating on external adversaries may serve as a convenient diversion from pressing domestic governance challenges. Combating “neo-colonialism” can unite people, yet it does not inherently lead to the establishment of schools, job creation, or the eradication of corruption. If the new sovereigntist regimes fail to provide concrete advancements, public backing may diminish, and mere Pan-African rhetoric will not uphold their legitimacy. Furthermore, the democratic decline observed in certain countries prompts an inquiry into whose agency is being articulated. A junta’s perspective on national sovereignty may overlook the contributions and concerns of various groups within its populace, including women’s organizations, opposition parties, and ethnic minorities. True Pan-Africanism, in its original vision, focused equally on the empowerment of African people and the resistance against imperialists. Consequently, a significant challenge ahead is to guarantee that people-focused development and rights are not overshadowed by state-centered demands for sovereignty. The tension is evident within the AU: its Pan-African creed encompasses commitments to democracy and human rights, yet these principles are currently being compromised by certain member states engaging in realpolitik arrangements with non-democratic allies (Abrahamsen et al., 2023). Striking a balance between autonomy and accountability will be essential for the credibility of the new wave of Pan-Africanism.

Conclusion

The modern revival of Pan-Africanism presents a multifaceted and nuanced situation. On one side, “sovereigntist Pan-Africanism” signifies a strong reaffirmation of African agency in a world that is no longer under the control of a single hegemon. By addressing persistent neo-

colonial frameworks, including foreign military installations and economic reliance, and characterizing the recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon as a “second decolonization,” advocates draw on profound wells of anti-imperialist sentiment and widespread dissatisfaction with external exploitation and inadequate governance. Images of French flags being lowered and Russian flags being raised in Sahelian capitals reflect a significant change in perspective, as the engagement with non-Western partners like Russia, China, and Türkiye has expanded Africa’s diplomatic and economic options. In a multipolar order, African governments have the opportunity to negotiate, resist pressure, and forge new alliances such as the AES, asserting that African regions are capable of addressing African challenges when global institutions are inadequate.

Conversely, this resurgence poses significant dangers. Sovereignty-first politics has the potential to empower autocrats who cloak themselves in the Pan-African flag while undermining democratic accountability. Commemorating coups as acts of liberation could lead to the normalization of unconstitutional power grabs, while an excessive dependence on new benefactors might merely recreate existing hierarchies under a new guise. The ongoing wave has revealed cracks within Africa, challenging the concept of “one Africa, one voice” in the face of differing alignments and regimes. Pan-Africanism has consistently evolved through contestation, enduring empire, the Cold War, and globalization, as it represents a dynamic movement rather than a static doctrine. The key issue at hand is not whether Africa possesses greater power, clearly, the answer is yes, but rather how that power will be utilized. Will sovereigntist Pan-Africanism and multipolarity serve as a catalyst for more just, inclusive, and people-centered systems, or will they simply reconfigure the landscape of dependency and domination in new forms? Together with the African people and the geopolitical actors of this rediscovered area, we will explore the answers of this question.

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The United States Influence on UNAMI's Effectiveness in Post-War Iraq

Tugay Deniz Unutmaz

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, after a series of resolutions, issued a final warning to Saddam Hussein, demanding compliance with inspections and promised "serious consequences" for non-compliance (2002). Although later inspections on Iraqi territory did not uncover weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the United States' belief that Saddam's Iraq presented a threat to the United States and the world prompted a need to take a "serious" action. With this, the US-led coalition started their operations in the Iraqi territory on 19 March 2003. This was no ordinary intervention.

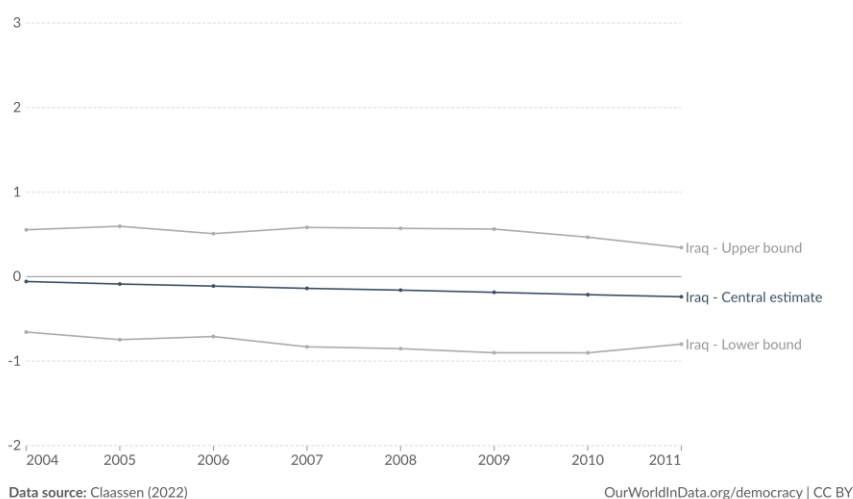
This intervention initiated the peacebuilding process, which began after the fall of Saddam Hussein, with the establishment of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The Mission was founded with the UNSC Resolution 1500, adopted on 14 August 2003, under the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UN). The most important objective of UNAMI was to facilitate Iraq's transition to peace, stability, and democracy. However, questions persist regarding UNAMI's effectiveness in promoting a transition to a more stable environment in post-war Iraq. With this, this paper aims to examine one of the possible answers to this outcome: the influence of external actors, notably the United States. While UNAMI remains active to this day, its founding years mark a pivotal period in its engagement, representing a critical phase in its efforts to assist Iraq. Aligned with the concurrent presence of the US, this paper will examine Iraq's *Citizen Support for Democracy Index*, *Elite Consultation Score*, and *Civil Rights Score* spanning the years 2003-2011. With these data at hand, this paper will analyse the dynamics of peacebuilding in Iraq, considering the local context, and offer valuable insights into the complexities of international interventions affected by external actors in conflict-affected regions and their impact on peacebuilding efforts.

Before withdrawing from Iraq in 2011, the United States played a prominent role in establishing the new government of Iraq. This involvement was underscored by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1500 (2003), which acknowledged the collaboration between the provisional government of Iraq and UNAMI. Notably, UNAMI provided valuable assistance to the Iraqi government in drafting its new constitution in 2005, signalling potential contributions to Iraq's reform efforts. However, while these achievements highlight UNAMI's involvement in Iraq's political transition, they do not conclusively demonstrate the Mission's overall success. On the contrary, it is highly debatable if the Mission was recognised by the Iraqi people.

External dynamics very much shaped the effectiveness of the Mission. Specifically, the United States, which was the occupying force in Iraq, made the process of "peacebuilding" foreign and alien for the Iraqi people (Higashi, 2013; Sarı, 2011). Moreover, backed by the United States, the UNAMI served as a tool for spreading Western norms and values and thus hindered the legitimacy and acceptance of UNAMI's efforts (Berman, 2010). In line with this argumentation, it is plausible to argue that the lack of local ownership over the changes implemented by UNAMI yielded unfavourable outcomes. The analysis of the Citizen Support for Democracy score reveals a downturn in public support for democracy between the years 2004 and 2011 (Our World in Data). The data shows how UNAMI failed to establish an environment in which the Iraqi people were open to the initiatives of democracy and stabilisation. However, this failure, as previously discussed, can be attributed to the United States' presence, as it imposed the new system on the Iraqi people without their involvement in its construction (Brown & Scales, 2012). As a result, the external influence of the United States created an environment where there was a lack of ownership for the new system, including among those who helped construct it, such as UNAMI. Hence, the data indicating that the Iraqi people did not support the changes underscores the failure of UNAMI to effectively rebuild and stabilise Iraq, a responsibility emphasised by Resolution 1770 (2007).

Citizen support for democracy, Iraq, 2004 to 2011

The scores capture the average extent to which citizens support a democratic political system and oppose autocratic alternatives. Higher scores indicate more support, positive scores indicate higher-than-average support across countries and years.

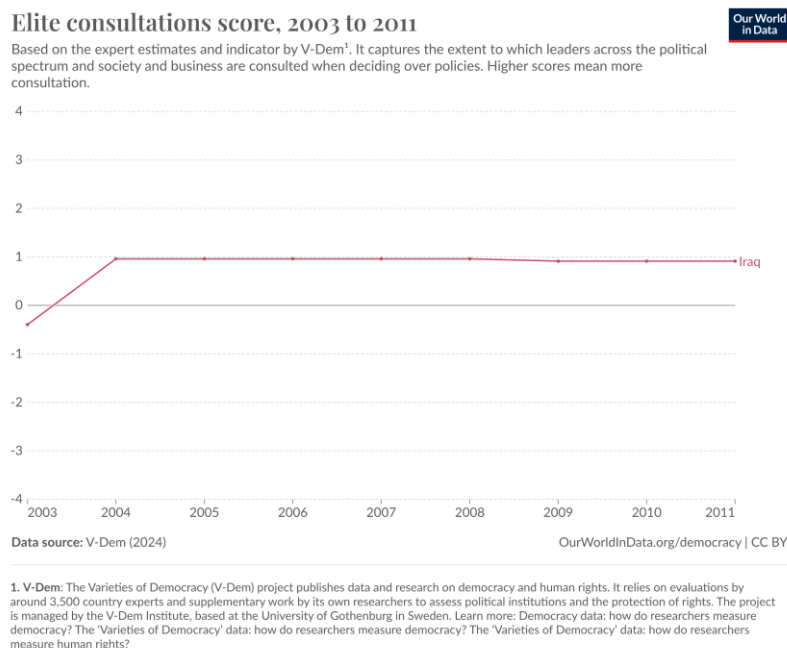


Source: Our World in Data (2004-2011), *Participatory democracy index*.

The lack of local ownership posed a significant challenge for UNAMI, contributing to the rise of insurgent groups. These insurgent groups exploited the situation in Iraq to advance their agendas and further undermine stability in the country. Without genuine ownership by the public and stakeholders, UNAMI's efforts to establish effective governance structures and ensure stability were weakened, further damaging its legitimacy in fulfilling its duty to assist the people of Iraq (Tadjbakhsh, 2010). Therefore, it is evident that UNAMI's effectiveness in fostering consultations with elites was insufficient, leading to security challenges that impeded the Mission's capacity to fulfil its broader obligations within the unstable environment. The graph illustrates minimal changes in elite consulting in Iraq, conceding with the timeline of this analysis (Our World in Data), indicating UNAMI's limited success in encouraging stakeholder consultation in Iraq. Moreover, this situation can also be connected to the presence of the United States in Iraq.

As discussed previously, insurgent groups emerged as a consequence of the United States invasion, because the invasion lacked legitimacy on multiple levels. First of all, the invasion was not authorised by an international body such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), rendering it "illegal" under international law (UN News, 2004). Consequently, its international legitimacy was highly questionable at the time of its occurrence. Another point of note, on a more public level, the people of Iraq did not welcome the presence of US forces in their country. Although the United States acknowledged this sentiment after the fall of Saddam, they failed to integrate the norms and cultures of the Iraqi people into the new system (Tadjbakhsh, 2010). Instead, they encouraged the restructuring of the system based on Western norms (Berman, 2010). This alienation from the beginning hindered UNAMI's effectiveness and essentially rendered the Mission unwanted. As a result, UNAMI struggled to gain the trust and cooperation of local communities, hindering its ability to effectively implement peacebuilding initiatives and promote stability. The perception of UNAMI as a foreign entity serving external interests rather than the needs and interests of the Iraqi people undermined its legitimacy and acceptance on the ground and further encouraged the rise of insurgent groups in the country. Accordingly, based on the available data, the disconnection

between the Iraqi public, elites, and UNAMI may have contributed to a lack of ownership and subsequent security challenges, ultimately hindering the Mission's efforts.



Source: Our World in Data (2003-2011), *Elite Consultation Score*.

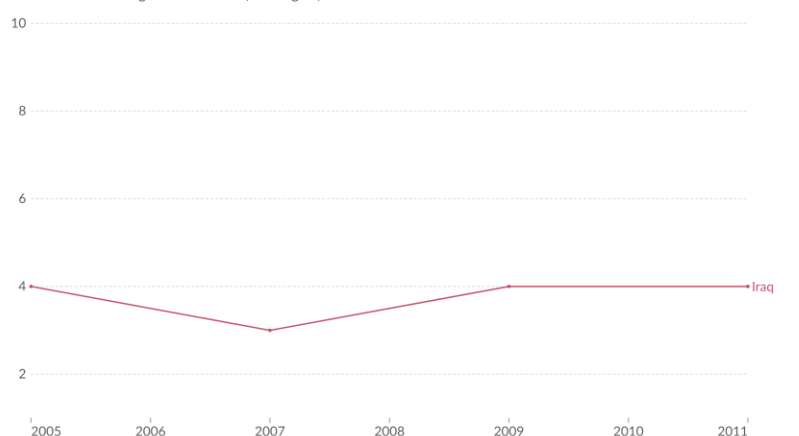
A counter-argument to consider is the role of UNAMI in facilitating the drafting of the 2005 constitution of Iraq. This constitution laid the groundwork for Iraq's transition to democracy and provided a framework for governance and rights protection. UNAMI provided technical expertise and support in navigating complex legal and political issues, guiding Iraqis through the difficulties of constitutional drafting and negotiation (UN). However, while UNAMI may have played an important role in the constitutional process, the ultimate success of the constitution and its implementation rested largely on the shoulders of Iraqi political actors and institutions (Hiltermann, 2009). As previously discussed, this process did not yield favourable results, as evidenced by the data available. Furthermore, it is worth considering that the constitution was primarily developed by the members of the Iraqi Constitution Drafting Committee, which was influenced by the United States at the time (Al-Amin & Wahab, 2022). This point, again, draws a parallel with the lack of ownership as some segments of the Iraqi society has felt marginalised or excluded from decision-making (Ibish, 2005). This counter-argument, unfortunately, does not reflect a trend of success for UNAMI, as indicated by the Civil Rights Score of Iraq, which does not show favorable rates.

The available data indicates that since the implementation of the 2005 constitution, Iraq has not made significant progress in civil rights. The data actually shows no significant

improvement in civil rights in the years between 2005 and 2011 (Our World in Data). Further analysis reveals that despite UNAMI's efforts, the overall landscape of civil rights in Iraq has remained stagnant or even deteriorated in certain years. This stagnation can be attributed to a combination of factors, including ongoing security challenges, lack of local ownership, and political instability. Additionally, systemic issues such as corruption and weak governance structures have contributed to the persistence of human rights abuses and violations in Iraq (Al-Khafaji & Maghaydah, 2017). Despite UNAMI's mandate to promote and protect civil rights (UN), it is apparent that the complex and unstable environment of Iraq has served as a significant obstacle to the success of the Mission. Additionally, the presence of the United States, which cast a negative perception on UNAMI, contributed to the emergence of insurgent groups that destabilised social cohesion. Nevertheless, it can be seen that despite UNAMI's efforts to fulfil its mandate amidst the challenges posed by Iraq's unstable environment, the data reveals that, despite its pivotal role in the drafting of the 2005 constitution, Iraq has not experienced significant improvements in its civil rights landscape.

Civil rights score

Based on the expert estimates and scoring by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2022)¹. It indicates the extent to which civil rights are codified in law, the state prosecutes any violations, and works to prevent discrimination. It ranges from 1 to 10 (most rights).



Data source: Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2022)

OurWorldInData.org/democracy | CC BY

1. Bertelsmann Transformation Index: The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) project publishes data and research on democracy and human rights. It relies on evaluations by nearly 300 country, regional, and general experts, as well as supplementary representative surveys of regular citizens, to assess political institutions and the protection of rights. The project is managed by the Bertelsmann Foundation. Learn more: Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy?

Source: Our World in Data (2005-2011), *Civil Rights Score*.

In conclusion, the role and effectiveness of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in post-war Iraq have been subject to many arguments. While UNAMI has aimed to fulfil its mandate of promoting peace, stability, and democracy in Iraq, numerous challenges have hindered its success. The complex and unstable environment of Iraq, underlined by external influences such as the presence of the United States, has posed

significant obstacles to UNAMI's efforts. Despite playing a pivotal role in facilitating the drafting of the 2005 constitution, Iraq has not experienced significant improvements in its civil rights landscape, highlighting the limitations of UNAMI's impact. Moreover, the lack of genuine local ownership, security challenges, and the alienation of UNAMI from the Iraqi populace have further impeded its effectiveness. The influence of the United States has permeated UNAMI's operations, contributing to the perception of the Mission as foreign and alien to the Iraqi people. This sentiment persists even today, casting a shadow over UNAMI's legitimacy and effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate. As the Mission is set to conclude its actions in Iraq by the end of 2025 (Reuters), it can be expected that more analysis will surely follow in the coming years regarding the successes and failures of UNAMI, following the Mission's conclusion. Thus this timely analysis shows that, while UNAMI played a notable role in Iraq's post-war reconstruction, its legacy is open to question as it is defined by both its contributions and the enduring challenges that have limited its long-term impact on peace and democracy in Iraq.

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The Role of the Afghanistan War in the Dissolution of the Soviet Union by Escalating Nationalist Tensions Within the Union

Buket Er Akyol

1. Introduction

Historical narratives about the collapse of states and regimes always begin with, or at least are associated with, a war. The twentieth century, especially the Cold War era, witnessed the war of two diametrically opposed ideologies: communism, collectivism, Soviet-type economy on the one hand, and individualism, capitalism, and free market economy on the other. Although the collapse of the Soviet Union is often associated with the Cold War waged with the United States, it was not a conventional ‘hot’ war. In terms of its effects, it could even be argued that it sometimes served to consolidate the masses inside rather than leading to the ultimate collapse of the Soviet regime. However, the Afghanistan War, which was a hot war that the Soviet Union fought and returned with defeat, essentially led to distrust towards the Soviet system and disintegration in the Soviet society. For this reason, although the impact of the Afghanistan War on the collapse of the Soviet Union is underestimated, the Afghanistan War radically changed the perspective on both the Soviet ideology and the Red Army, and contributed to the dissolution of the Union by escalating nationalist tensions in Soviet society.

2. The Soviet Union’s Intervention in Afghanistan

2.1. Demographics and Recent History of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in the Central Asia, bordering Pakistan to the southeast, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north, and China to the northeast. Its population of approximately 31 million consists of 42% Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4% Aimak, 3% Turkmen, 2% Baluch and 4% others (World Population Review, 2024). The official languages are Pashto and Persian. The languages spoken are also significantly diverse with 45% Pashto, 33% Persian, 7% Uzbek, 4% English, 3% Turkmen, 2% Urdu, 1% Arabic, 1% Balochi, 1% Nuristani, 1% Pashayi and 2% others (WorldData, 2024). In addition, Afghanistan’s population is 84.7% to 89.7% Sunni Muslim and 10% to 15% Shia Muslim, with small minorities of Christians, Buddhists, Bahais, Sikhs and Hindus (Central Intelligence Agency, 2022).

Afghanistan was ruled by King Zahir Shah of the Afghan Musahiban Barakzai Dynasty for a long and stable period as the Kingdom of Afghanistan. In 1964, King Zahir Shah introduced a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral legislature in which the king appointed

one-third of the members of parliament. Thus began the era of democracy and political parties in Afghanistan. Due to accusations of corruption against the Dynasty and poor economic conditions caused by a severe drought in 1971–72, a non-violent coup abolished the monarchy in 1973 and declared a republic. However, the new regime failed to meet the need for economic and social reform. Thus, the Republic of Afghanistan was overthrown in the Saur Revolution carried out by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan on 27–28 April 1978 and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was established. Following the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, a communist government allied with the Soviet Union, uprisings began against the Government, and the ongoing Afghanistan War broke out. On 24 December 1979, the Soviet Union intervened in the conflict in Afghanistan upon the invitation of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Soviet troops, along with the Afghan alliance, fought against the Afghan Mujahideen, who were supported mostly by the United States, United Kingdom, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the People's Republic of China and the Federal Republic of Germany. Because of the Cold War, especially the United States provided an incredibly large amount of financial and weaponry assistance to the Mujahideen fighting against the Soviet Army (Stoner-Weiss & McFaul, 2009). The intervention ended with the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan on 15 February 1989.

2.2. Soviet Intervention and Aftermath

As for why the Soviet Union intervened Afghanistan, first of all, in accordance with the Brezhnev Doctrine, which called for Soviet intervention to support other socialist and communist movements and to protect socialist governments, the Soviet Union wanted to guarantee the power of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Rasanayagam, 2003; Kalinovsky, 2011). It also aimed to prevent the spread of Western influence and the possibility of Afghanistan forming an alliance with the United States or its allies (Grau & Gress, 2002; Westad, 2005). Moreover, Afghanistan was important for the Soviet Union in many respects. Afghanistan was geopolitically important because it was adjacent to some Soviet republics. It also provided a potential route for the Union to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, which would provide an advantage in its competition with China and the capitalist West (Halliday, 1983; Westad, 2005). Some scholars also argue that the intervention of Afghanistan historically stemmed from the Soviet Union's long-standing ambitions to expand its influence southward, dating back to the Tsarist period (Cordovez & Harrison, 1995).

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the Soviet Union continued to provide financial support to the Afghan government until the collapse of the Union, and

likewise the Afghan Mujahideen continued to receive support from the United States and Pakistan. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan survived until the 1992–1996 Kabul War, when the Mujahideen established the Islamic State of Afghanistan. Afterwards, various factions began to form among the Mujahideen, including such as Hezb-e Islami supported by the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Hezb-e Wahdat supported by Iran, Junbish-i Milli Islami supported by Uzbekistan. The war, which was essentially a civil war but was mostly fueled by foreign intervention, continued until the Taliban took control of Kabul and most of the country in 1996, and the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was established. The loyalists of the Islamic State of Afghanistan reorganized into the Northern Alliance. Between 1996 and 2001, the Northern Alliance remained largely defensive against the Taliban, who controlled almost all over the country. After the assassination of the Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as the Lion of Panjshir, by al-Qaeda on 9 September 2001, al-Qaeda increased its attacks on the United States, culminating in the September 11 attacks. Following the September 11, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan lost almost all international support and diplomatic recognition from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The United States intervened Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, to overthrow the Taliban after it harbored members of al-Qaeda suspected of the September 11 attacks and refused to extradite Osama bin Laden without evidence (Der Spiegel, 2007). Following the overthrow of the Taliban and the eventual establishment of the internationally recognized Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the war between 2001 and 2021 evolved into a protracted Taliban insurgency, with the Afghan government and NATO-led coalition troops on one side, and the reorganized Taliban and, occasionally, other Islamist militant groups such as al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province on the other. By 2021, as a result of bilateral negotiations between the Taliban and the United States, the United States and NATO troops began to withdraw from Afghanistan. Following the announcement of the United States withdrawal, the Taliban took control of most of the country in 10 days and finally captured Kabul on 15 August 2021. Thus, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fell and the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was established. Afghanistan remains unsettled due to the ongoing Islamic State Khorasan Province-Taliban conflict since 2015 and also the resistance of Afghan republicans against the Taliban regime. Republicans, who remained loyal to the fallen Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, have reorganized into the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan in the Panjshir Valley. Despite having international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, the Front has received no external support. Taliban forces captured the Panjshir

Valley in September 2021 and the leaders of the Front fled to Tajikistan. However, fighting continues between the Taliban and the small and scattered insurgents of the Front.

3. How the Afghanistan War Escalates Nationalist Separatism?

3.1. Ethnic and Religious Diversity in the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union officially consisted of 15 republics, based on ethnicity, with a wide variety of nationalities, languages, and religions, spread over a wide geography including the Balkans, the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (Denber, 1992). In this multi-ethnic and multi-religious Union, there were actually 127 officially recognized ethnic groups, including minorities such as the Volga Tatars, Buryats, Yakuts, Chuvash, Bashkirs, the Crimean Tatars, Chechens and Jews (Beissinger, 2002). Similarly, there was a high degree of diversity in the languages spoken and religions.

According to the Soviet 1989 census, following the Russians, the largest ethnic group with 52.47% of the population, the Ukrainians are the second largest ethnic group with 15.9% of the population (Smith, 1990, p. 363). These statistics are followed by Turkic republics such as Uzbeks, Azerbaijanis, Tatars as the third largest ethnic group. Overall, the population of the Soviet Union consisted of 69.8% East Slavs, 17.5% Turks, 1.67% Armenians, 1.6% Balts, 1.5% Finns, 1.52% Tajiks, 1.44% Georgians, 1.21% Moldavians, and 4.1% others (Smith, 1990). In addition to this, Russian is considered the common language throughout the Union, while in the west, Ukrainian and Belarusian from the Slavic language family, Estonian from the Finno-Ugric language family, Moldavian, a Romance language, and Lithuanian and Latvian are spoken (Denber, 1992). In Central Asia, Southern Siberia and the Urals, many Turkic languages are spoken such as Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Azerbaijani, Bashkir, Turkmen, Karakalpak, Tatar, Meskhitian, Chuvash, Yakut and Gagauz (Denber, 1992). In the Caucasus, Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian and Kurdish, and in the region south of Moscow and west of the Urals, Udmurt, Mar, and Mordvin languages are spoken (Denber, 1992).

The Soviet Union was also highly diverse in terms of religions. There were Christianity consisting of Orthodox, Greco-Roman Catholics, Armenian Apostolics, Protestants, Islam in the Central Asian republics and among the Volga Tatars and Bashkirs, Judaism and even Buddhism, Hare Krishna and Bahai (Corley, 1996). There were approximately 62 million Orthodox, approximately 9 million Catholics, approximately 760 thousand Protestants and approximately 25 thousand other Christians (Ramet, 1993, pp. 355-356). In addition, there were approximately 44-50 million Muslims, approximately 1.5 million Jews, and also approximately 590 thousand Buddhists, 100 thousand Hare Krishna and approximately 4 thousand Bahais

(Ramet, 1993, pp. 355-356). Thus, the demographic distribution of religions in the Soviet Union was Christianity with 59.27%, Islam with 38.91%, Judaism with 1.24%, and the rest other religions (Ramet, 1993). Although there were abandonments of beliefs with the atheism brought by the Soviet ideology, after the collapse of the Union there was religious growth almost everywhere, from Christianity to Islam. So much so that, for example, Armenia was the country with the biggest increase, rising from 39% to 81%. (Froese, 2008, p. 152).

3.2. The Effects of Ethnic and Religious Diversity on the Afghanistan War and Its Fueling of Nationalist Separatism

Regarding the defeat in the Afghanistan War that played a significant role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it is argued that first of all, the War exhausted Soviet resources and exposed the weaknesses and corruption in the Soviet economy (Westad, 2005). It is also argued that the long and unsuccessful war in Afghanistan led to the questioning of Soviet leaders, heroized Soviet generals and even the Red Army (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999; Kalinovsky, 2011). Moreover, the argument that the Afghanistan War exacerbated ethnic and nationalist tensions within the Soviet Union and contributed to its disintegration is also highly convincing (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999; Rubin, 2002). In this regard, as for why nationalism was not only a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union but also a force contributing to its disintegration will be evaluated under four headings: First, the changing perception of the Soviets about keeping the Union together and the use of the Red Army for this purpose; second, the disruption of ethnic and religious harmony in the Red Army with the Afghanistan War and the change of commitment to the Union; third, the non-Russians in the Union questioning the legitimacy of the Soviet Union with this War and shifting to a separatist line, and finally, the encouragement of nationalist separatism by exposing and questioning the facts about the Afghanistan War with Glasnost.

3.2.1. Changing Soviet Perception

The Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan for reasons such as increasing its influence in Afghanistan, preventing Afghanistan from aligning with the West, preventing the spread of Islamist influence into Soviet Central Asia, eliminating the threat of instability on the southern border, and supporting other socialist states in accordance with the Brezhnev Doctrine. At the beginning, this War was considered a small-scale intervention by Soviet leaders, but it turned into a ten-year war involving nearly a million Soviet soldiers and in which tens of thousands were killed and wounded (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999). Indeed, the Soviet leaders' underestimation of the Afghan resistance (Rubin, 2002) and their overconfidence in the Union

and the Red Army regarding the Afghanistan War were severely crushed, as Bennigsen says “What are the Afghans for Central Asia? It is a small, wild and poor country. So then, if the Afghans could inflict a military and political defeat, then that makes anything possible.” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 699). The Afghanistan War, which began with the idea that the Soviet Union had to intervene to maintain its credibility and influence in the region (Lyakhovsky, 1995; Kalinovsky, 2011), actually led to the perception, that the Soviets are a complete war machine and the invincible Red Army could be defeated, and even encouraged “non-Russian republics to push for independence with little fear of a military backlash” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 694).

3.2.2. Changing Perspective on the Red Army and Its Unification

The reflection of the ethnic and religious diversity in the Union in the Red Army is more or less similar to the aforementioned demographics. This ethnic and religious diversity did not prevent the Red Army from being in harmony and achieving victories in the beginning. But this time the Red Army, which had brought Nazi Germany to its knees, found itself fighting not against the evil Hitler, the enemy of all, but against the ordinary Afghans, and this time the enemy was not consolidating the masses in the Union but rather pushing them to secede. According to the demographics above, some Soviet Central Asian republics had ethnic and religious kin with Afghans. For example, 38.91% of the population in the Union consists of Muslims and also in the Red Army. Not only do most of them have the same religion as Afghans, but they are also ethnically related. Afghanistan consists of three major ethnic groups, Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, and Tajiks and Uzbeks in the Red Army were forced to fight against their own kin. For this reason, Central Asian soldiers, whose “reliability ... was questioned as being soft on Afghan civilians”, “displayed ambivalence toward fighting Afghans, deserted, and even revolted” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, pp. 700, 698). So much so that “there was resentment and anger over the use of Asian nationalities to suppress their ethnic kin in Afghanistan. The Central Asian troops fired at the Russians and ‘some 450 people from both sides . . . [and] 500 military vehicles were entirely destroyed’” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 700).

The Red Army’s heroic role in defeating the Nazis in the Second World War and its perception of invincibility were “the glue that held together diverse ethnic groups” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 701). However, in addition to the above problem, corruption, looting and atrocities on Afghan civilians also undermined the Red Army’s heroism and moral legitimacy. For example, the crimes committed by the soldiers fighting in Afghanistan were shocking: “We were struck by our own cruelty in Afghanistan. We executed innocent peasants. If one of ours

was killed or wounded we would kill women, children and old people as revenge. We killed everything, even the animals.” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 702). The narratives regarding corruption and looting are also incredible: “[The] widespread corruption and smuggling of army equipment for trade in drugs and goods was permitted. And looting among the Afghan population, killing of non-combatants, punitive attacks on villages, as well as torture of prisoners of war was often permitted and even encouraged by officers.” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 702).

In addition to these problems within the Red Army, the Soviet perception of Red Army soldiers had also changed significantly. Returning soldiers from the Afghanistan War were called *Afgantsy*, and many of them were of non-Russian nationalities (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999). Unwilling to face the failure in Afghanistan, Soviet authorities did not acknowledge the presence of the *Afgantsy* neither. In addition to not receiving support in terms of housing and medical care, *Afgantsy* often could not find jobs. Feeling betrayed, *Afgantsy* became hostile towards Moscow and supported non-Russian separatist movements and even joined their unofficial militias (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999). Furthermore, not only the Soviet army but also the Soviet generals were cherished for their heroic role in defeating the Nazis. However, the failure of the Soviet army in Afghanistan, the high number of Soviet casualties, and the corruption, looting and atrocities on Afghan civilians also changed the perspective on the Soviet generals so that the generals were forced to justify their policies and actions in an unprecedented way (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999).

3.2.3. Changing the Idea of Shared Sovereignty and the Legitimacy Crisis for the Soviet System

Stalin’s definition in 1913 that “A nation is a historically constituted and stable community of people formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup revealed in a common culture.” was a manifestation of the policy implemented, or at least aimed to implement, by the Soviet ideology in the ethnic, linguistic and religious demographics of the Union detailed above (Zickel, 1991). Perhaps that is why one of Shtromas’s predictions that the Soviet Union, which was so diverse, would collapse because of Russian nationalism did not find much favor (Shtromas, 1981; Ellman, 2002). Indeed, Russian nationalism was not really that visible in the Soviets. However, the fact that “once multi-ethnic political elite tipped towards disproportionate Russian representation” and the suppressed “ethnic animosities” towards some minority soldiers in the Red Army make it difficult to deny that there was Russian supremacism (Beissinger, 2009, p. 337; Glantz, 1998,

p. 80). In addition, as mentioned above, the Soviet regime's force ethnic and religious relatives to fight against each other during the Afghanistan War, and Moscow's ignorance of Afgantsy, the majority of whom were non-Russian minorities, further reinforced the perception of Russian supremacism and weakened commitment to the Soviet ideology of shared sovereignty.

In the non-Russian republics, the Afghanistan War were perceived as a Russian war waged by non-Russian soldiers, and as a result, resentment and anger grew in these republics. Moreover, the Russian oppression to Afghanistan evoked memories of their recent oppression. Indeed, the Soviets have always suppressed separatist movements ruthlessly as Andropov says "It took almost the entire Red Army fifteen years to subdue the rebellious khanates in the Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgizstan." (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 698). Thus, the slogan "our boys are dying for an alien cause" became widespread in the Central Asian Soviet republics, seriously eroding the legitimacy of the Soviet system (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 704). In addition to this, the Afghanistan War might have also revived the bitter memories of non-Russian republics, such as the long-term victimization of Ukrainians, due to a series of negligence stemming from the Soviet regime in the Chernobyl disaster on 26 April 1986, or the Soviet regime's brutal suppression of an anti-Soviet and pro-independence demonstration in the Tbilisi tragedy on 9 April 1989 (Beissinger, 2009). As public opposition to the War grew and local Central Asian party cadres began to be influenced, Moscow launched large-scale political purges by appointing ethnic Russians to these positions (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999). As a result, with a boomerang effect, in Alma Ata, the Capital of Kazakhstan, in Tajikistan, in Armenia, in Astrakhan, the city of Russia, in Ukraine, in the Baltics, massive demonstrations were held by saying "under oppression themselves, Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians 'were being forced' to obey the brutal orders of the Russian officers, and shed both their own and Afghan blood" (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 705).

3.2.4. The Glasnost Effect and Its Encouragement of Nationalist Separatism

The Glasnost reforms, initiated by Gorbachev in the mid-1980s and aimed at transparency in government, freedom of expression, and the removal of censorship, were also effective. Regarding the Glasnost effect, it can be said that it has accelerated nationalism, since the media became increasingly liberal and independent in its final phase in late 1989 and early 1990, coinciding with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. In this sense, the Afghanistan War provided fuel for the media, such as the media reporting the stories of wounded Afgantsy, the publication of reports and letters portraying gloom and war fatigue in the Soviet Army and complaining about the children of party elites avoiding military service, and the inclusion of

interviews in which generals blamed politicians (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999). In other words, Glasnost, by constantly exposing the abuses and atrocities in the Afghanistan War, shattered both the perception of the Red Army as a glue between ethnic groups and the Soviet perception, and thus fed nations to seek independence from Russian supremacism (Beissinger, 2009).

3.2.5. Cumulative Results of Effects

By the late 1980s, the issues that effectively mobilized the population in the Soviet Union, such as “democratisation, labour unrest and consumer shortages, and environmental justice”, revolved around nationalism (Beissinger, 2009, p. 336). As for the tidal effect of nationalism, the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe and the collapse of communist regimes tremendously accelerated the nationalist movements within the Soviet Union (Beissinger, 2009). In fact, the reason why the Soviets did not implement the Brezhnev Doctrine, which justifies Soviet intervention to support other socialist movements and protect socialist governments, in the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, and therefore the communist regimes were able to be overthrown, might be a result of the Afghan syndrome in which Soviet politicians were hesitant to engage in similar military interventions. In this regard, the Afghanistan War and its failure paved the way for separatist ideas and radicalized them. When the effects discussed under four headings above are brought together, the main factor that held the Soviet Union, which had such ethnic and religious diversity, together was the invincible, noble, heroic Red Army. However, after the Afghanistan War, the ideas that the Red Army was defeatable, that the Red Army was far from noble due to the stories of corruption, looting and atrocities, and that killing Afghans had nothing to do with heroism were settled. For this reason, anti-militarism and draft resistance became widespread among the non-Russian republics. So much so that, “in Lithuania, many refused the autumn 1989 call-up; in Georgia, the 1989 call-up resulted in mass protests; and in Latvia, groups regularly staged protests outside army bases, carrying posters with slogans such as ‘USSR armed forces are occupation forces’, and ‘Occupiers out of Latvia’” (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 700). In addition, although the Soviet ideology claimed shared sovereignty by stripping away ethnic and religious identities, the fact that both the political elite cadres consisted of mostly Russians and that it was really difficult for soldiers to fight against their ethnic and religious relatives no matter what fueled nationalist separatism. With the Glasnost effect, all these terrible narratives and injustices regarding the Afghanistan War spread in waves. The non-Russian republics realized that Russian supremacism underlies every policy regarding Afghanistan, and thus their demands for independence intensified.

4. Conclusion

Regarding the Soviet intervention, the Afghanistan War was perceived in many aspects as a manifestation of Soviet expansionist ambitions, whether as an export of Soviet ideology or as an advantage in competition with the West. The defeat in the War not only placed an additional financial burden on the already fragile Soviet economy, but also deeply shook many perceptions, from the invincibility of the Red Army to the equal status of minorities as Soviet citizens. In this regard, the Afghanistan War undermined both the Soviet economy, military and social integrity, and escalated the disintegration of the Union. The failure of reforms aimed at reducing the failures and costs of the War and the failure to suppress anti-Soviet sentiment and nationalist demands for independence made collapse inevitable.

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