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Víctor Mario Bados Nieto

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Presentation of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) Journal No. 24

Once again, we bring to readers the latest iteration of the Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies in its 24th issue, framed within a geopolitical situation characterised by intense competition between great powers that is causing our world to move towards greater multipolarity in a turbulent and highly uncertain environment. Rafael Gálvez Bravo analyses the economic links of the threat of terrorism, scrutinising its legal considerations dating back to the 19th century, although he postulates that terrorism could also be recognised in other primitive forms of crime such as ideological assassinations or assassinations motivated by economic interests. As is the case with almost all activities, it requires money for its commissioning, and the means of funding have been changing, as have the ways in which it is executed.

Mario Lozano Alonso studies the rise and fall of an African icon, Abiy Ahmed Ali, who went from Nobel Peace Prize winner to regional security threat. This article seeks to analyse the main events that have occurred in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 until September 2024. During the first few months of his mandate, his public persona enjoyed a meteoric rise, culminating in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, only to then become wildly unpopular in the country, especially among the Oromo and Tigrayan people. The article is a brilliant analysis of his policy successes, condensed in his *Medemer* ideology, and his failures, especially those related to the Tigray war, the Oromo Conflict, the Fano insurgency of Amhara and the recent crisis over Ethiopian access to a Red Sea port.

The volume then shifts to the geopolitical competition between the US and China, where Miguel Ángel Melián Negrín analyses US-China strategic competition from the perspective of realism, a theory that emphasises power, national interest and security in foreign policy. Although there are political and ideological differences, both actors seek to maximise their influence in an international scenario marked by uncertainty. In order to maintain its regional hegemony, the United States has strengthened its

alliances and military presence with the aim of curbing China's rise. At the same time, China is expanding its military, technological and economic capabilities, challenging the existing order and posing a systemic challenge to US hegemony. The Pacific Ocean thus becomes the epicentre of a competition that reflects the tensions between the two nations, where the balance of power is played out in a context of growing rivalry. Understanding these geopolitical, technological and diplomatic dynamics is key to analysing the evolution of competition in this critical region within the international system.

Within the scope of strategic analyses, Antonio Notario Ezquerro examines British grand strategy under Tony Blair's New Labour between 1997 and 2007, focusing on Great Britain's identity as an "axial power" and its role as a bridge between the United States and Europe. Within the ideological framework of constructivism and liberal interventionism, Blair merged values and interests in a highly attractive intellectual mix. It was with this ethical approach, where post-modern security pointed to human rights protection as the ultimate goal, that the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone began. However, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, British support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq reflected a shift towards *realpolitik*. This episode, which has been widely criticised, has parallels with the current era, where historic decisions, such as Brexit and its subsequent development, do not seem to be based on truly strategic considerations.

Rodrigo Pardo de Santayana Jenaro focuses on the present-day conflict of the war in Ukraine to study the importance of numbers in military conflicts between superpowers, demonstrating that these wars still largely adhere to the parameters of the modern era and the massive use of conventional weapons. One inevitably wonders how these observations apply to the case of China's claims to Taiwan; arguably the most dangerous source of tension the world faces. The focus of this research is China's very large population base, which strengthens the nation's position, and which may prove decisive on the geopolitical chessboard. Observations from the War in Ukraine urge caution and highlight the importance of not relying solely on the deterrent effect of US military superiority to maintain the status quo on the Taiwan issue. It also stresses the need for Spain and the European Union to promote policies that strengthen and consolidate their defence industries.

Referring to the same conflict, but from a different angle, Luis V. Pérez Gil and Daniel Saurín Martínez analyse the importance and role of war technology and economics in the Ukrainian conflict from the point of view of analysing the Russian war effort, in a war in which both sides need to mobilise their own resources to sustain a large-scale conflict. Today, after almost three years of attrition, Russia is proving to be a resilient and determined power in the face of the military challenge posed by Ukraine and Western support. At the operational and organisational level, a number of changes have been activated to prepare Russian ground forces for a protracted conflict. Russia has also adapted its resources and industries to overcome the restrictions caused by Western economic sanctions and to advance its war effort. There is a clear correlation between Russian operational adaptations, technology

and war economy. This article analyses the impact of Russia's military and economic changes on the battlefield.

Subsequently, Daniel Terrón Santos, in his article on artificial intelligence and biometric systems for military use, redefines artificial intelligence from the perspective of ethics and law and addresses the use of biometric systems as a world of opportunities within the security sector, but which at the same time clashes with inalienable rights and guarantees. This confrontation must be resolved on the basis of ethics and law, without in any case setting an absolute limit to the use of a decisive tool with basic and essential military applications.

Within the field of migration strategy formulation, Gabriella Thomázy applies content analysis in a comparative study that examines and compares strategy documents from four South American countries (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru), in addition to two European countries (Portugal and Spain) as benchmarks. She uses a qualitative content analysis methodology and examines current trends and challenges. The results point to the countries' readiness for a migration crisis, highlighting similarities and differences in their documents.

Within the framework of energy and natural resources, Ana Valle Padilla addresses the geopolitics of Russian gas pipelines in Europe in a study that moves between energy realism and liberalism. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 intensified the conflict that began in 2014, raising concerns regarding Europe's energy security due to its dependence on Russian natural gas. Three of the four pipelines supplying Russian gas to Europe were of particular concern: Nord Stream (1 and 2), Yamal-Europe and the Ukrainian Transmission System, piping gas to Germany, Poland and Ukraine, respectively. This article analyses Russia's relations with these countries from the perspectives of realism and liberalism, examining how both theories interpret energy geopolitics. While Poland and Ukraine treat Russian gas from the perspective of offensive realism and view their dependence as a strategic vulnerability, Germany has traditionally adopted the stance of institutional liberalism and perceives gas as a commercial good that promotes stability.

Jesús Gutiérrez Villalta and Daniel Casal Oubiña devote their attention to the highly important field of intelligence to study how Spanish democracy controls its intelligence community by means of three analytical dimensions: the Government's political management of the set of institutions that make up the public administration, including the intelligence services; the supervision exercised by the Spanish Parliament or *Cortes Generales*; and, finally, the jurisdictional control exercised by the bodies that make up the judiciary. The article analyses aspects of the configuration, design and performance of this type of control instruments and reveals how they have evolved in parallel with the development of Spanish political institutions.

Finally, Bernardo González-Lázaro Sueiras' latest article analyses Chinese-Russian strategic synergies in North Africa, applying the analysis model of the Carlisle Scholars Program. The article examines the potential synergies between Russian and Chinese strategies in North Africa by applying the strategic analysis model of the U.S. Army

War College's Carlisle Scholars Program. This research analyses how coordinated efforts between the two powers within the diplomatic, informational, military and economic spheres could significantly amplify their regional influence and undermine Western interests. The study employs a systematic methodology that assesses the ends, ways and means of each actor, identifying specific areas of strategic convergence. The findings suggest that this cooperation, although not formalised in an explicit alliance, generates synergistic effects that amplify the influence of both powers and effectively challenge Western interests in the region, especially in the control of critical infrastructure, military power projection and anti-Western narratives. The analysis suggests that the war in Ukraine has accelerated this coordination, as demonstrated by the divergent responses of North African countries to the conflict. The article concludes by proposing specific recommendations for adapting Western strategies to this emerging strategic environment, emphasising the need for a comprehensive approach that recognises the unique characteristics of each North African country.

Finally, the reviews of the books by Annie Jacobsen (*Nuclear war: a scenario*), José Ignacio Domínguez García de Paredes (*Winston Churchill and his time*) and Chongrui Nie (*A distant mountain*) are presented.

I wish you a pleasant and fruitful reading.

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***Economic links of the terrorist
phenomenon. Historical background and
current situation***

Abstract

The first legal considerations on terrorism date back to the 19th century, although they could be recognised in other early forms of crime such as ideological or economically motivated murders. Like almost every activity, it needs money to be carried out, and the way it is financed has been changing, as has the way it acts.

Keywords

Terrorism, Terrorist financing, Organised crime, Low-cost terrorism, Theory of rational actions.

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I Introduction

Terrorism is a criminal phenomenon that has been active, albeit with different arguments and excuses, since the mid-19th century. Not that it did not exist prior to the doctrinal differences between socialists and anarchists, for political violence has been a common element in all ages.

Many means have been employed by different governments across the political spectrum to try to put an end to this scourge, ranging from the application of strictly national policies to international consensus and coordination, from legality to the illegal dirty war or State terrorism, which provides the terrorists with the excuse that they are facing a criminal State.

Terrorism, despite being a common phenomenon in almost every country in the world, whose pernicious effects make citizens firsthand victims of its outrages, and whose existence has expanded, as it has been said, for more than a century, is such a complex phenomenon that not even an international consensus has been reached when it comes to defining it.

Spain has suffered from all types of terrorism that could exist in theory: anarchist, nationalist/independence, far-left, far-right, jihadist, etc...

Despite the obvious criminal effects of terrorism on the lives and property of citizens and its conditioning of State security policies, terrorism also has an economic component that may go unnoticed, but which has a decisive influence on many of its facets, because, as the neoclassical school of economics pointed out, it permeates almost all areas of our lives. In this respect, it should be pointed out that economic variables are related to many aspects of terrorism: from its motivation, its development and maintenance, its consequences (expenditure incurred by the State in its persecution and repression. Human and material resources that are provided by the General State Budget, which could be allocated to other needs but which this criminal activity makes necessary to divert), its dismantling, and even the justification for its punishment. Here is a review of these variables:

2 Economic causes of terrorism

There should be no real cause to justify terrorist actions in as much as terrorists use the civilian population as hostages to impose their claims through terror¹. Terrorism is such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that it has been studied from an economic, psychological, sociological, political, international relations, cultural or religious point of view. The political scientist Alex P. Schmid (1983), who in the

¹ In this regard, it is worth quoting US President Ronald Reagan, who in his traditional weekly radio address to the nation in 1986 stated, not without some irony, that “freedom fighters do not need to terrorise a population into submission”.

1980s published an essay in which he offered more than a hundred definitions of the concept of terrorism, distinguishes between structural, motivational and facilitating causes, although these are not the only ones². For the purposes of this paper, only the socio-economic variant will be presented.

In situations of economic crisis, the reduction of social services and job insecurity leads to an increase in social discontent and a lack of credibility of the institutions. Those most disadvantaged in this situation of deprivation may feel excluded from society, believing that they do not have equal opportunities to access employment, education or housing. Recruiters will deepen the discourse of inequality in order to alienate the individual from society and make them see society as the source of all their problems.

Ideologies shape people's thinking, and terrorism has tended to be rooted in ideologies that have had an undoubted economic component. Next comes a brief overview that coincides with the terrorist waves theorised by David Rapoport:

2.1 *Anarchist terrorism*

If the first terrorist movement is taken as a reference, *strictu sensu*, it is anarchist terrorism³, which based its ideology in the mid-19th century on the European revolutionary fervour of 1848 and the postulates of Proudhon to find a solution to the problems of the working class which, as a consequence of price and wage fluctuations, caused a rapid impoverishment of the population. In these proletarian revolutions, theoreticians such as Marx, Engels, Blanqui, Heinzen, etc., appeared, who were in favour of violent revolution to change society. In 1870, the First International showed the differences between socialists and anarchists, represented by Marx and Bakunin, which resolved with the separation of the two ideologies, where the latter defended the existence of an agrarian society in which all men would be equal, there would be no money, the State or any form of coercive politics, and to reach this form of society the mass of the working class had to be encouraged to act forcefully by committing attacks. In his speeches and slogans, terrorism was described as “a duty of all national anarchist committees to explore all means for the annihilation of all rulers, nobility, clergy, capitalists and other exploiters” (Oterino Durán, 2008: 6).

In Spain, anarchism was very popular, especially in Andalusia and Catalonia. The indiscriminate attacks on political figures, the bourgeoisie and Roman Catholics had their most economic component in the creation in 1910 of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), which maintained a permanent agitation in the form of workers'

2 For example, the American writer and Harvard Kennedy School professor Jessica Stern (2003) identifies five causes of terrorism as alienation, humiliation, demography, history and territory.

3 The concept of terrorism actions such as those carried out in the Roman razzias, the Hebrew zealots, the Ismaili hashshashins, Indian thugs, the virtuous terrorism of the French revolutionaries, etc is left out because they do not have the characteristics of terrorism, although some of them do, which is why this type of action could be called *avant la lettre* terrorism.

demonstrations in the factories. The climate of revolt and attacks against the industrialists generated a reaction of self-defence on the part of the entrepreneurs, who hired their own gunmen to confront the anarchist gunmen, which caused the death of more than three hundred people in the streets of Barcelona and Bilbao.

2.2 Nationalist and anti-colonialist terrorism

The economic component of nationalist and fundamentally anti-colonialist terrorism is to be found in the imperialist conception. Imperialism, as the next step after colonialism, came about in the 19th century as a form of capitalism where industrialised countries looked outside their borders for a captive market in which to place their surplus production and, at the same time, to obtain raw materials with which to supply the growing needs for production.

Nationalist-imperialist sentiment was countered by a nationalist, anti-imperialist movement, which in some cases became terrorist. This terrorism gained momentum after the end of World War I and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which recognised the principle of self-determination of peoples. During its early years, this terrorism coincided on its tactics and argumentation with Marxist and anarchist postulates⁴, which made it possible to justify and blame the industrial and economic backwardness of their country on the colonising empire.

2.3 Far-left or revolutionary terrorism

Far-left terrorism took place during the Cold War as a kind of contest in which the superpowers settled their political differences in third countries. The origin of far-left terrorism can be traced back to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR held in 1956, after Stalin's death, where two different currents emerged: Marxist-Leninists and Marxist-Maoists⁵. The latter favoured direct confrontation and terrorist actions and, although they did not know it, were at least partially financed by the Soviet secret services.

The manifestation of far-left terrorism was represented in Europe by the social movements of 1968 as a counter to US authoritarianism represented by the Vietnam

⁴ Imperialism represents the figure of the capitalist as the oppressor of weaker peoples, giving rise to the Marxist theory of imperialism developed, among others, by Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Gramsci in the early 20th century.

⁵ The theoretical foundation, including the violent one, of the far-left could be found almost a century earlier, in the *Communist Manifesto* written by Marx and Engels in 1848. The text concluded with the following sentence:

“Communists consider it unworthy to conceal their ideas and purposes. They openly proclaim that their goals can only be achieved by violently overthrowing the entire existing social order. The ruling classes may tremble before a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose with it but their chains. Instead, they have a whole world to gain. Proletarians of all countries, unite!”

War, and the sympathies aroused by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) against Israel. In this respect, the best known terrorist organisations would be the Red Army Faction in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy. In South America, the seizure of power by Fidel Castro's guerrillas led to a series of peasant revolts which became known under the common name of the "Foquista Movement" and spread to several countries such as Peru (Sendero Luminoso), Uruguay (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional), Argentina (Montoneros), etc. The same was true of Asia: Philippines (New People's Army), India (Communist Party of India [Maoist]), etc.

In Spain, far-left terrorism, rather than as a response to Leninist or Maoist theories, was based on opposition to Franco's regime. The different organisations included the Directorio Revolucionario Ibérico de Liberación (DRIL), Defensa Interior (DI), the Frente Revolucionario Antifascista y Patriota (FRAP), the Organización Marxista-Leninista de España (OMLE), etc. ETA brought together elements of nationalist and far-left terrorism.

2.4 Jihadist terrorism

Jihadist religious terrorism originated in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Jihadist terrorism pursues a model that transcends the merely political to focus on a theocratic model where the religious element is all-encompassing.

However, we cannot abstract from the reality that the Islamic world seemed to be disconnected from modernity and did not go through an industrial or social revolution, resulting in many Muslim countries being amongst the poorest and most unstable in the world. A clear example of this situation is the Sahel territory, which has become the so-called southern border of Europe and the advanced southern border of Spain. The emergence of failed States such as Libya and the lack of control of some parts of their territory, as in the case of Mali, has made them a transit point for all kinds of mafias and especially jihadist organisations, as they are located in one of the most insecure areas of the world. The Sahel, due to its political weakness and porous borders, has become an area where all illicit trafficking (drugs, people, arms, terrorists, etc.) converges. The extreme poverty of the area offers little or no future for the young people of these countries who, in order to survive, join terrorist cells that roam the ever-widening territories of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, while the security forces of the States retreat to the urban centres, leaving vast tracts of land unprotected, at the mercy of groups of radicals, bandits and traffickers who impose their law, robbing, extorting and kidnapping with little opposition from the forces of law and order. In other cases, these young people are forced to migrate to Europe to find work (often through a human trafficking mafia) or to join an organised crime network or to become radicalised and join a terrorist group.

3 The economic psychology of terrorism

From a psychological point of view, terrorism, in addition to being radical, must be considered as a deliberate criminal offence, i.e. intentional and, as such, has an intellectual and volitional element that criminological and economic rational choice theory has tried to explain.

Basically, rational choice theory suggests that criminals, in this case terrorists, make their decisions on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. In this way, criminals would carefully assess the likelihood of being caught, the possible penalties and the potential rewards before deciding to commit a criminal offence. Consequently, this theory rejects the idea that criminals act impulsively or as an exclusive product of their upbringing and environment.

This theory was first conceived by Max Weber in the late 19th century and refined by Anthony Downs in the 1950s. In 1968 it was the Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker who gave it the formulation of action as a weighing of costs and benefits, in which, if the latter outweigh the former, the probability of perpetuating a crime will prevail. Cornish and Clarke reformulated this theory in the 1980s to apply it to criminal activity and, also in the 1980s, political scientist Martha Crenshaw applied it to terrorists to demystify them and reduce terrorism to a political strategy.

4 Sustaining terrorism: terrorist financing

4.1 *Historical developments in terrorist financing*

Almost all terrorist activity requires funding, both as far as the means to carry out the attack and for the subsistence of its members are concerned. In this sense, terrorism has evolved throughout history, as has the way it is financed.

Generally, terrorism does not require large financial resources to be carried out. However, a terrorist organisation that has a support and maintenance infrastructure, consolidated over a certain period of time, will require liquidity and will need personnel who know how to raise and channel this money, so that, like any complex organisation, it will need to have members specialised in each field.

Nineteenth-century anarchist terrorism had little financial means and its economic contributions came from highly motivated members who placed little value on material possessions and had no intention of accumulating them for their own benefit. Contributions from sympathisers were practically non-existent, as the anarchists were considered enemies of the bourgeoisie, who had the money at their disposal at that time⁶. An exception to the above lack of funding was the inheritance of one million

⁶ In this respect, perhaps anarchism's most expressive statement of intent is that made by the Frenchman Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in his controversial book *What is property?* (1840), in which he produced the answer: "Property is theft".

francs donated in 1901 by Ernestina Meunier, a former student of Spanish, to Francisco Ferrer i Guàrdia, an anarchist ideologue, who would be condemned to death and shot in October 1909 as the instigator of the events of the Tragic Week in Barcelona that very July. He had also been suspected of taking part in the attempted assassination attempt on Spain's King Alfonso XIII in 1905 by Mateo Morral, who had been a pupil at the *Escuela Moderna* (Modern School) of which Ferrer i Guàrdia was a founder.

In turn, the nationalist terrorism that followed the First World War was financed by contributions from sympathisers' (the main source, for example, of funding for the IRA) and from some foreign governments that saw in this nationalism the seed with which to undermine the strength of a rival country. In the second case, the IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation), founded in 1893, played a prominent role. During the first third of the 20th century, it fought against the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the Macedonian region, which received up to 44 million pounds between 1929 and 1933 from the Italians and Hungarians (Laqueur, 2003: 135).

After the Second World War, in the midst of the Cold War, terrorism was sponsored by States, usually former colonial powers, which supported insurgent groups so that they would opt for an ideology they could sympathise with, while, at the same time, it was a form of covert warfare to weaken the opposing axis countries on several fronts. Unlike the United States, which was generous with money, the Soviet Union never directly funded Marxist groups, but supplied them with training, arms and ammunition free of charge (Napoleoni, 2005).

In the 1970s, the unpopularity of such outlays among their own citizens forced governments to rethink such official aid. At the same time, armed groups sought economic independence that would guarantee them a continuous flow of funding without external ideological subordination. In the case of the South American and Asian guerrillas, funding was provided through extortion of businesses and citizens in order to cover the needs of the self-proclaimed defenders of the land.

The 1990s brought a new shift in the way terrorist financing took place. This decade, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War and the opening of borders, was characterised by globalisation and the deregulation of economic and financial markets. The globalisation of markets also led to the globalisation of terrorism and the interdependence of terrorism and organised crime and terrorist money with the traditional economies (Napoleoni, 2005). Osama bin Laden arranged for Al Qaeda to operate through decentralised cells that followed instructions from the core. Terrorist groups established state-of-the-art financial engineering in order to maintain and develop their activities. This engineering was designed by qualified personnel, who were paid very high emoluments for the creation, improvement and consolidation of shadow companies (Sánchez Medero, 2008: 53), whilst Al Qaeda's biggest expense remained the radicalisation and training of terrorists (Napoleoni, 2015).

With the death of Bin Laden in 2011, Al Qaeda lost strength to the Islamic State (ISIS), which used a horizontal organisational model that left its members or

sympathisers free to attack how, where and when they wanted, as well as to finance themselves by whatever means they saw fit. These guidelines have led to the fact that terrorism today is a “low-cost” form of terrorism (a term especially used in the media) carried out by home-grown terrorists, with no police or criminal record, with no apparent links to terrorism, who are self-trained and who, for their attacks, can use any everyday object such as a vehicle, a knife or a stick. The ability to carry out a terrorist attack is no longer necessarily costly in terms of financing, for example the attacks on the Bataclan hall in Paris in November 2015 or the attack on the Ramblas in Barcelona in August 2017, in which the actions of so-called “lone wolves” using a firearm or a motor vehicle can wreak havoc on Western society, which sees its way of life disrupted by an invisible enemy living in its neighbourhoods. This new type of terrorism is part of the most extreme asymmetric warfare.

4.2 *Forms of terrorist financing*

Terrorism needs money to finance itself, and logically, as a criminal activity, it cannot do so by legal methods. The success of any criminal organisation lies in its ability to evade police and judicial control. Terrorist organisations have been able to evolve and adapt to the measures that States have taken to uncover their sources of funding. We have seen how terrorists have financed themselves through donations from their sympathisers, on other occasions they have committed robberies or extorted money from their fellow citizens, and on other occasions it was the State itself that was able to finance certain organisations that could favour governmental interests; on the other hand, jihadists do not need much funding to set up their cells, active or dormant, or to carry out terrorist operations (Aristegui, 2006: 267).

To a large extent, the success in terrorist financing is due to the diversity of masking techniques used and the difficulty of tracing these funds. To this end, and as proof of the plurality of means they can use, there are two methods that are centuries removed from their creation. On the one hand, there is *hawala* —a centuries-old tradition— and *blockchain* cryptocurrency transfers⁷ which, after only a few years of operation, is one of the current challenges for economic crime investigators due to the difficulty of tracing them. Thus, over the course of 2022, the most significant change in the field of terrorist financing is the increased use of virtual assets. The use of these assets to raise and move funds has increased both within groups and regionally (i.e. between Daesh’s core and its affiliates in Africa and Asia, and between Al Qaeda and its affiliates) (Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 2023: 43).

Collaboration between organised criminal and terrorist organisations is of a practical nature, leading to the development of transactions or agreements for the

⁷ For the purposes of curiosity, it is worth noting that the concept of cryptocurrencies dates back to the 1970s and was born of a group of US libertarian computer scientists who, two decades later, would promote the *cyberpunk movement*, drafting in 1992 *The Crypto-Anarchist Manifesto*, whose doctrine would be adopted by the *Anonymous* group.

exchange of goods and/or services. This category would include the purchase and sale of weapons, explosives, documentation or any other resource sought by terrorists that can be offered by criminal elements. In addition to supplying illicit goods, clients or partners from the criminal world may provide terrorists with access to safe havens or routes for their clandestine transit from one country to another or provide them with services related to the transfer and laundering of illegal funds or the bribery of public officials (Corte Ibáñez, 2015: 9).

Conversely, terrorists can also sell their services to criminals. In some arms, drugs or even human trafficking operations, terrorists play the role of seller, either because they are transforming themselves into mere criminal actors or because they use these kinds of goods to exchange them for some other resource useful for the carrying out of terrorism (Corte Ibáñez, 2015: 10).

Terrorism and organised crime have different objectives, but a similar procedure when it comes to financing and concealing this financing through money laundering techniques; in fact, they have the dubious honour of sharing the regulation that pursues it: the *Act 10/2010, of 28th April, on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing*.

The means used by jihadist terrorists in their attacks tend to be commonly used instruments, such as knives, motor vehicles and any object that is likely to cause terror if the cause of *jihad* is wielded. They are very low or no-cost objects beyond the control of intelligence and security services. Because of this low cost, terrorist financing does not require large amounts of funds to carry out attacks. Terrorist training is becoming cheaper everyday thanks to new technologies; and the ways of life of individuals willing to give their lives for their ideology does not require great luxuries, unlike organised crime, which pursues personal gain.

The major expenditure in funding is often directed at maintaining a certain power structure, concealment of its leadership and the possibility of creating training and travel camps for foreign fighters who have moved into the conflict territory.

The following are the most common forms of financing for jihadist terrorism. This article focuses primarily on jihadism because it is the most modern form of terrorism and therefore offers the greatest novelties in this area, although many of these operations can be extrapolated to other terrorist typologies.

4.2.1 Public donations

External donations are those coming from governmental institutions —mostly from Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf countries (Arístegui, 2006: 271)— that finance the construction of mosques, schools, cultural centres, etc. Some of the money directed to this philanthropic activity may be diverted to illicit terrorist training, indoctrination and logistical activities.

In addition to charities, there are other legitimate activities that can be used for this type of funding. For example:

“The Al Qaeda network created agricultural industries whose profits were used to finance their terrorist activities, but they not only established agricultural businesses, but also invested in many other sectors, such as: oyster and prawn farms in Kenya; timber tracts in Turkey for logging and sale; construction companies, etc.” (Shelly, 2005: 2).

One of the most recent cases is that brought by “a hundred victims of 11/7 in Israel” against UNRWA in Manhattan Federal Court, accusing the UN agency of having diverted a billion dollars to Hamas to facilitate the purchase of weapons and the construction of tunnels (Buesa Blanco, 2024).

In this regard, such actions are described by Buesa (2024) as “pseudo-State sponsorship”, since governments that fund NGOs acting as a front for terrorist organisations allege they are unaware of this fact relying on bureaucratic reasons whilst being exempt from the duty of due diligence that binds private actors.

Religion, and not only Islamic religion, is often a vehicle associated in its charitable work with the financing of terrorism. Thus, the Roman Catholic organisation of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines was accused in 2022 by the Philippine government of financing the New People’s Army (NPA). The same can be said of Nicaragua, where the Ortega regime expelled the Roman Catholic community of the Sisters of Charity from the country on charges of financing terrorism and supplying arms to government opponents.

4.2.2 *Private donations*

One of the five obligatory precepts of Islam is that believers must give alms—or *zakat*— to their community, estimated at a contribution of 2.5% of their income. Certain religious leaders have led their followers— members of the immediate community— to believe that donations must be given exclusively to the radical organisations they control. On the other hand, some people know to whom they are giving their money but hope that their donations will help to defeat apostates and infidels (Aristegui, 2006: 268). There is another type of donation, this one of a voluntary nature, called *infaq*, which is made in view of pleasing God and which, if it gets into the wrong hands, can be used for terrorist financing.

The way to make these donations can range from the simplest of physically giving a certain amount of money to the most complex in which “neobanks” that accept cryptocurrency deposits and transform them into fiat money can intervene to mobilise funds, avoiding banking institutions (Cornejo García, 2024).

4.2.3 Business activities

Legally established enterprises that use their profits for terrorist financing. They can also use their accounting structure to launder illicit activities, which they then use for terrorist activities. It is the *modus operandi* of organised crime.

ETA considered that Basque enterprises had to collaborate with the armed gang. This was expressed in one of its internal bulletins (*Zutabe*) in 2003: “The cooperatives have to participate in the construction of Euskal Herria, working on their projects from the national point of view, using the potential they have for the benefit and freedom of Euskal Herria” (*ABC*, 2003) Under this reasoning, ETA attempted to extort twelve million euros from the Mondragon Corporation between 2002 and 2004, which the cooperative refused to pay (*El Mundo*, 2012).

Enterprises that, in addition to contributing financially to terrorist financing, do so by lending their financial logistics are known as *shadow companies* that will be directly involved in money laundering operations to give an appearance of legality to funds that have a perverse origin or destination, such as committing attacks.

4.2.4 Remittances from abroad

This is a form of private contribution that comes from the money that nationals living abroad, also known as *diaspora communities*. This system of financing was widely used by the IRA, Hezbollah, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and others. Such is the magnitude of the money that can be moved for terrorist financing that, in February 2004, the G7 Finance Ministers included concern about this phenomenon on the Summit’s Agenda.

4.2.5 Use of the stock market

One of the greatest perversions of terrorist financing is how terrorist groups have used their attacks to speculate and make money on the stock markets using shadow companies. This is the case of the 9/11 attacks, where Al Qaeda, in the days prior to the attacks, had taken bearish positions in the stock market in order to obtain high profits with which to finance itself afterwards. To this end, Bin Laden’s people made speculative moves in insurance agencies (*Munich, Axa* and *Swiss Re*) and airlines (*American Airlines* and *United Airlines*).

The hypothesis that terrorists used the financial system in the knowledge of the chaos their attacks would cause was raised again after the 7th July 2005 terrorist attacks in London. Regarding the latter, journalist Nacho Cardero (2005: 6-11) said:

“In the London bombings, coinciding with strong movements in the gold market —the safe haven market par excellence when there are

warnings— the same issue was raised again. Was the notorious terrorist —Bin Laden— behind the massive gold purchases?. He concluded that the profits from the financial manoeuvres in the days leading up to 9/11 amounted to several hundred million dollars, in what constituted ‘the most significant insider trading crime ever committed’” (Cardero, 2005).

4.2.6 Drug trafficking

To some extent, cocaine, marijuana or other synthetic drugs traded globally have been found to be direct and indirect contributors to the financing of terrorism, as has been the case with the FARC, Al Qaeda, IRA and ETA organisations, among others (Villamarín Pulido, 2005: 142).

Although drugs, and indeed their sale, should be prohibited for any Muslim believer, for jihadist terrorists their use is acceptable as drugs contribute to accelerating the decadence of the infidel, as they see them. Islamists and jihadists are essentially finalists; i.e. they think that the end justifies the means, so if immoral and sinful acts have to be committed to achieve them, there is no problem of incompatibility of such acts with morality (Aristegui, 2006: 273).

Drugs are cheap to produce, and the cultivation of marijuana, opium and cocaine is not difficult to obtain, so their production yields huge profits for all those who deal in them. At the same time, drug trafficking provides terrorists with contacts to obtain virtually every other logistical need such as weapons, explosives, vehicles, computer systems, crackers, etc. (Sánchez Medero, 2008: 59).

The UNODC estimated that in 2016, non-State armed groups earned around USD 150 million from Afghanistan’s illicit opium trade in the form of illegal taxes on opium poppy cultivation and opiate trafficking. While the UN Security Council Committee estimated in 2011 that the Taliban’s global income was around USD 400 million and that 50% of that figure was probably derived from the drug trafficking economy (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017: 23).

4.2.7 Bank and cultural property robbery

During the 1970s, terrorist organisations used to carry out bank robberies to finance themselves, as in the documented cases of the Italian Red Brigades, ETA, GRAPO and one of the most paradigmatic cases in the history of terrorism, that of the Symbionese Liberation Army⁸.

⁸ The group became internationally known because one of its members, Patricia Hearst, was the granddaughter of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. She was believed to have been kidnapped by the organisation, although images captured by cameras at a branch of the Hibernia bank in Los Angeles showed her to be one of the perpetrators of the branch robbery.

One way in which the IS finances itself is by looting businesses, banks, houses, selling antiquities on the black market, defrauding insurance companies or charging fees to aid workers in areas under its control.

The turbulent situation in the Middle East and the struggle between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State for control of the region has meant that, since 2011, their violence has also been used in the theft of coins, statues, manuscripts and ancient inscriptions: around a hundred objects looted in Yemen have been sold at auction houses in Europe and the United States for an estimated value of one million dollars. In Raqqa, one of the first Syrian towns to fall to Daesh in 2014, the city's museum was stripped of hundreds of important artefacts. The following year, in Idlib, the city's museum was stripped of some 10,000 artefacts (Renold, 2020).

In both Iraq and Syria, the terrorist organisation, aware of the market value of these objects, proceeded to a methodical and massive looting of museums and archaeological sites in the areas under its control, also introducing a tax on the value of the looted objects. In a November 2015 report on the protection of heritage in situations of armed conflict, Jean-Luc Martinez, President and Director of the Louvre Museum (France), notes that "blood antiquities" have accounted for "15-20% of Daesh's sources of income", becoming, along with the trafficking of oil resources, one of the most important means of financing terrorism (Renold, 2020).

In this regard, the Spanish National Police Corps conducted an investigation into the financing of terrorism through the purchase of archaeological artefacts from northern Libya, looted from territories controlled by armed groups (Operation Harmakhis) (Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 2020: 31).

Such has been the theft of works of art used for terrorist financing that the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2347⁹, which for the first time makes the protection of cultural heritage a security imperative and condemns the deliberate destruction of cultural property as a war crime. In the same vein, that same year, the European Union through the Council of Europe adopted the *Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property*¹⁰ with the following purposes:

- "a. Prevent and combat the destruction of, damage to, and trafficking of cultural property by providing for the criminalisation of certain acts;
- b. strengthen crime prevention and the criminal justice response to all criminal offences relating to cultural property;
- c. promote national and international co-operation in combating criminal offences relating to cultural property; and thereby protect cultural property."

Sometimes the collection of money for terrorist purposes can be diverted for private use, as was the case with Jules Bonnot's anarchist gang, who used 90% of the loot from

⁹ S/RES/2347 (2017), 24th March.

¹⁰ STCE No. 221, 19th May 2017.

their robberies for personal use, and only the remaining amount was dedicated to the cause (Laqueur, 2003: 154).

4.2.8 Arms smuggling

Illicitly trafficked with and acquired small arms and light weapons, together with their parts and components and ammunition, play a crucial role as accomplices to armed violence and as a source of funding and threat multipliers for terrorist groups acting alone or in groups on a national, regional and global scale¹¹. The General Assembly and the Security Council, through the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy¹² and relevant resolutions, have consistently stressed the need to curb the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and their supply to terrorists.

Thanks to the existing arms surplus and the lack of scruples shown by some countries when it comes to selling their products, terrorists have penetrated the arms trade market with force (Sánchez Medero, 2008: 60).

4.2.9 Smuggling of gold and precious stones

There may be cases where individuals associated with terrorist groups have transacted in the diamond and gemstone market, as in the case of the attack on a US Embassy in Africa, which was financed by the diamond market and smuggling of protected species and food (Giménez-Salinas Framis, 2007: 6).

The exploitation of resources in local mines and the imposition of taxes or fees allow the generation of revenues that are easily laundered in other countries (Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 2024: 53).

4.2.10 Human trafficking

Jihadism favours the passage of Muslim migrants in the belief that they can become potential recruits for extremism, but they traffic with migrants of all backgrounds to make money and finance their terrorist networks (Arístegui, 2006: 240).

The theorists of radical Islamism have embarked on a race to consolidate what they call the “silent conquest”, which consists of taking advantage of their birth rate, which is much higher than that of the societies in which they settle (Arístegui, 2006: 240).

¹¹ See: <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/es/cct/terrorism-arms-crime-nexus> [Accessed: 07/07/2024].

¹² Resolution A/RES/60/288 of 20th September 2006.

For the Islamic State, people smuggling is one of the most profitable businesses, as the same trucks used to transport Syrians through Turkey returned full of smuggled goods that were not available on the Syrian market, such as flour for bread or electric batteries. The purchase is made with cash that the refugees have paid to the traffickers (Napoleoni, 2005).

4.2.11 *Kidnapping and extortion*

In many cases terrorist organisations find a way of financing in attacking businesspeople and their organisations and may resort to extortion, kidnapping and exemplary murder so that other businesspeople who refuse to pay their “revolutionary tax” will take note of their dire future if they persist in their refusal.

ETA resorted to coercing Basque businesspeople to finance its campaign of terror, and the number of those directly affected by its extortion can be counted in the hundreds. Thus, the first businessperson kidnapped by ETA was Lorenzo Zabala Suinaga, who was captured on 22 January 1972 under the pretext of resolving the labour conflict in the company *Preincontrol*, of which Zabala was the CEO. Zabala managed to get out of his kidnapping alive after three days of imprisonment once the company gave in to ETA’s demands. Other businesspeople were not so lucky: they were kidnapped by ETA and other far-left terrorist organisations, which demanded large sums of money for their release, and, in some cases, murdered.

In the field of Islamic terrorism, after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the kidnapping business expanded enormously. To finance themselves, criminal gangs and jihadist groups kidnapped well-off Syrians, sometimes for a few hours, only to release them in exchange for juicy ransoms. As wealthier Syrians left for Turkey and Lebanon, kidnappers shifted their attention to Westerners, often reselling them to stronger armed groups such as the Islamic State or Al Nursa, Al Qaeda’s branch in Syria. However, for the Caliphate, unlike other jihadist groups, kidnappings are not a major source of income. On the other hand, the execution of a hostage represents a net loss, because it does not even recover the money paid to buy him and keep him in prison (Napoleoni, 2015).

Jihadist extortion consists of demanding that Muslims contribute to the compulsory payment of *zakat*, in the amount and to the organisation that the extortionist indicates. Should the extorted person refuse, they are exposed to insults and accusations of hypocrisy, treason or even apostasy (Arístegui, 2006: 278).

4.2.12 *Energy resources as a source of financing*

The Islamic State, since its birth in 2011, sought to settle in the Middle East and Africa. In addition to the impact of their attacks in Europe, its main activity has been in Muslim countries, many of which have oil. In this way, once ISIS forces control a

territory they seize its resources, as happened in 2014 with the seizure of the oil city of Kirkuk in Iraq, where the country's second largest crude oil reserve was located (Blanco Moro, 2015). Although ISIS allocates most of its crude oil production to domestic consumption, it also benefits from the illegal network it inherited from the insurgency and Al Qaeda (Martín, 2016), being considered one of the nine largest producers in the whole of OPEC, taking into account the data published by the Organisation for the month of September, surpassing the combined production of Qatar, Ecuador and Libya (Blanco Moro, 2015). The financial model is the classic shell-State model, similar to the management of the PLO in Lebanon, the FARC enclave or the drug traffickers, dependent on drug smuggling. The sources of revenue are diverse and therefore more solid (Napoleoni, 2014).

As the *Financial Times* explained in October 2014, the oil sales operation run by the Islamic State is not unlike that of a large State-owned company. Part of the oil goes to the organisation's own needs, while the other part is for self-financing. The newspaper explains that terrorists hire experts in the sector, engineers, skilled workers, etc., offering competitive salaries commensurate with the experience of each worker. Middlemen park their trucks in long queues waiting to fill their tanks and buy crude oil and then sell it to refineries or middlemen at market price (Napoleoni, 2014).

In this same context, piracy has positioned itself as the criminal activity par excellence in the Gulf of Guinea, along with the extraction of oil from the coastline to be sold on the illegal market (Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 2024: 53).

4.2.13 State funding

Last but not least, the financiers of terrorism can include States, in this case dealing with the State terrorism that characterised much of the Cold War, in which the two world superpowers fought for leadership by financing armed groups in other countries that would hinder the triumph of the rival ideology, in what the United States called *national security doctrine*, but which is nonetheless a type of State terrorism.

4.2.14 Self-funding and crowdfunding

Lone actors and small jihadist cells in Spain continue to finance themselves through common crime, although *crowdfunding*, in cash or through social networks, also continues to be used. Through these campaigns, donations are being identified through QR codes that sometimes lead to virtual asset wallets (Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 2024: 54).

5 Economic consequences of terrorism: generating economic and financial instability

5.1 Terrorism's relation to economic and financial instability

Terrorism is based on a model of resource depredation to sustain the war effort, usually on a small scale, so that not too many resources are needed to sustain it (Buesa Blanco, 2016: 28).

However, such extortion also has its limits, as terrorist organisations should avoid damaging the assets of the segment of the population in whose name they act and from which they derive both their political support and their militants (Reinares, 1998).

Terrorism, beyond its physical ravages (evidenced by the death and injury of its victims and the material destruction caused by its attacks), produces psychological effects that will condition the behaviour of its potential victims, i.e. society as a whole. In this respect, Professor Buesa *et al.* (2008) distinguish between:

- Direct costs: value of destroyed assets or property losses, value of human lives lost, cleaning-up and response costs, rescue and recovery, injury costs, business impacts, etc.
- Indirect costs: psychological treatment of victims and their families, treatment of the physical aftereffects of the attack, prevention costs (police), sanction costs (judicial and penitentiary policies), economic costs due to reactions derived from the terror induced in the attacks or threats (restriction of investments, loss of profits in affected businesses, etc.).

The economy permeates almost all areas of our lives, so that situations of economic prosperity or instability have a direct influence on the security and well-being of citizens. Thus, economic and financial instability may have a reciprocal relationship with terrorism in the sense that it may be the root cause of the emergence of terrorism, but it may also be a consequence of its actions. In this regard, and as far as Islamic terrorism is concerned, it was Osama bin Laden himself who stated that “attacks on targets that have an impact on the economy are bound to be repeated, because finance is the main artery of nations that exercise imperialism with impunity and impudence” (Merlos García, 2009: 49).

Poverty and inequality are drivers of economic instability and the emergence of extremism, including terrorism. Terrorism breeds poverty and poverty is a potential generator of terrorism. It is no coincidence that the areas of the world where terrorism (mainly of an Islamic and far-left nature) is most present are those with the highest levels of poverty. The existence of failed or failing States that are extremely poor and do not have a reasonable welfare state is a breeding ground for their people to fend for themselves as best they can, and it is in this troubled environment that terrorist

organisations recruit militants for their cause. This is the case of Boko Haram and the Islamic State, which has its pool of terrorists in the Sahel.

The anarchist movement never really posed a threat to established financial interests or to the stability of Western governments (Carr, 2002: 151). However, the emergence of non-State or State-sponsored actors to destabilise the economy is a possibility that has become a reality, as when in March 1989 the US Embassy in Chile received an anonymous phone call warning that a shipment of grapes from the US destined for Philadelphia had been poisoned with cyanide. The US Customs Service (FDA) inspected the suspect shipment and found two grape berries sprayed with cyanide (albeit in a non-lethal amount). The triggered alert led to a temporary ban on all Chilean fruit. Canada and Japan also banned its import and consumption. In this way, Chile was losing millions of dollars in trade, even though no more infected pieces were found. The Chilean government accused the Communist Party and the American CIA of sabotaging Chilean exports. The incident was resolved two weeks later when international markets reopened their borders to Chilean products.

There is a well-known truism on the stock exchanges that “money is fearful” and one of the first consequences of a terrorist attack is that the stock market tends to fall. The attacks of 11th September 2001 were followed by a sharp fall in airline and insurance share prices, a crisis of investor confidence and a rise in commodity markets.

But it is not only the stock market, where billions of dollars and euros are traded, that is affected by the terrorist attacks. The most immediate effect on the economy of a country victim of terrorism is the fear generated in its citizens who, in a situation of uncertainty, prefer to save their money in order to have it at their disposal in the event of an eventuality that puts their way of life at risk. Thus, the sale and purchase of houses, cars, etc. tends to decrease in a crisis situation.

Moreover, terrorism directly affects a country's tourism, an essential source of income for some countries. The so-called ‘Arab Spring’ that began in December 2010 in the Maghreb countries resulted in a series of attacks attributed to the Islamic State, many of them targeting tourism interests, undoubtedly affecting one of the economic sources of countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. A situation analogous to that experienced in Spain during the so-called “years of lead” with the ETA attacks and, with a lesser intensity of violence, the Catalan independence challenge during the second decade of this century, generated a climate of mistrust for many companies that opted to change their headquarters¹³, or for tourists who changed their preferences and no longer had Barcelona as a reference point for their holidays (Vargas, 2019) with the consequent drop in income for Catalan businesses.

The various terrorist attacks on Spanish territory have not only directly affected people, but also the country's own economy; terrorist threats, although local, reached

¹³ It is estimated that in a few days more than 30 billion euros of bank deposits fled Catalonia and thousands of Catalan companies changed their registered office in search of legal certainty and to stay within the Eurozone (López, 2022).

the ears of foreigners who were wary of making investments that could put their lives and money at risk. This is the case of the failed Spanish bid to host *EuroDisney* in 1985, which presented the Valencian Community as an alternative to Paris. Spain's tourist potential was not enough to compete with the French bid, as Spain was suffering from a campaign of ETA attacks against tourism along the Mediterranean coast, including the one committed by Henri Parot on 16th August 1985 against Clément Perret, a French citizen and alleged member of the GAL, who was shot 13 times and killed on the spot.

It would not be the only international investment boycotted by the presence of ETA terrorism, as a few years later, in 2005, during the presentation of Madrid's candidacy to host the 2012 Olympic Games, Prince Albert of Monaco, as a member of the IOC, asked about security guarantees after the explosion of an ETA device on 25th June 2005, next to the *La Peineta* Olympic stadium in Madrid (Segurola, 2005). Although the Prince of Monaco was reproached by saying that terrorism was an international problem that no country was unaffected by, the shadow of suspicion over Spain's ability to guarantee the security of an international event marked the bid for those games.

6. Conclusions

This article has tried to explain the terrorist phenomenon from a general economic point of view and its specific forms of financing.

If the neoclassical maxim of economics are heeded, “we are a *homo economicus*”, the terrorist phenomenon has been accustomed to submitting to this aphorism because, regardless of its ideology, it has tried to justify its existence through the different political currents, many of them based on the economic foundations that have appeared since the 19th century.

If attention is paid to the evolution of terrorism, economics is one of its constants, both from its conception as a movement of State contestation (social inequality, colonialism, socio- and geopolitics, etc.), the cost/benefit analysis for terrorists of the consequences of their actions for themselves (criminal punishment and/or death in the case of suicide) and for their environment (change in the model of society, human and material resources used in their persecution, etc.), as well as the way of carrying out their attacks, which will necessarily involve financing them.

The forms of terrorist financing are as varied as the inventiveness of their perpetrators and share to a large extent the ways and fashions of organised crime and money laundering with which it shares legislation to combat them, such as *Act 10/2010, of 28th April, on the prevention of money laundering and the financing of terrorism* and its annexed regulations. Its operations will be ever-changing and constantly evolving, adapting to and anticipating the criminal policy of prevention and law enforcement implemented by the States and their legal operators, all of which are included in

the Spanish National Security Strategies due to the many links discovered between criminal and terrorist organisations.

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Rise and fall of an African icon. Abiy Ahmed Ali: from Nobel Peace Prize winner to regional security threat?

Abstract

This article seeks to analyse the main events that have occurred in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 until September 2024. During the first months of his mandate, his public persona enjoyed a meteoric rise, culminating in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, only to become wildly unpopular in the country, especially among the Oromo and Tigrayan people. Here the successes of his policy will be discussed, condensed in his *Medemer* ideology, as well as its failures, especially those related to the Tigray war, the Oromo Conflict, the Amhara insurgency in Fano and the recent crisis over Ethiopian access to a Red Sea port.

Keywords:

Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, Oromia, Tigray, Conflicts.

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I Introduction

Ethiopia is a country of extreme contrasts, not only because of its geography and cultural diversity, but also because of its recent political history. With a population of over 110 million inhabitants and an economy that, until 2016, grew at rates close to 10% annually, the country was set to become one of the so-called *African lions*, the continent's emerging powers. However, this economic progress coexisted with the ethno-federal political system, marked by inter-ethnic tensions and an unequal distribution of wealth that kept many in poverty.

In this context of growing unrest, Abiy Ahmed Ali's coming to power in 2018 represented a historic change. As Prime Minister and leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Abiy Ahmed promised to democratise the country, reconcile it with Eritrea after decades of hostility and transform the economy through a series of structural reforms. His rise generated a wave of hope both inside and outside Ethiopia, culminating in him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

However, this initial optimism soon gave way to disillusionment. Abiy's political model, based on the *Medemer* ("synergy" in Amharic) ideology, sought to centralise power and overcome the ethno-federal system in place since 1995. This strategy led to tensions with groups that had traditionally enjoyed relative autonomy, especially in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara, triggering violent armed conflicts such as the Tigray war (2020-2022) and the Oromo and Amhara insurgencies. Moreover, economic reforms, designed to attract foreign investment and modernise key sectors, failed to address structural problems such as inflation and foreign currency shortages, generating discontent among the population with the rising cost of living.

Internationally, Abiy Ahmed tried to position Ethiopia as a key player in the Horn of Africa, but his ambition to secure a Red Sea port strained relations with Somalia and Egypt, further damaging his reputation. This article takes an in-depth look at Ethiopia's political, economic and social evolution from 2018 to 2024, assessing Abiy Ahmed's achievements and failures in a critical period of Ethiopian history. By analysing key events from the recently generated literature, it aims to provide an overview of the challenges this leader and his country are facing.

2 The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

2.1 *The legacy of Meles Zenawi (1995-2012)*

The Ethiopia born after the bloody civil war (1974-1991), which ended with the fall of the Derg's bloody communist regime, enacted a constitution in 1994 that made it a federal republic. Democratic only in name, as it soon became clear that the war-winning coalition of parties, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic

Front (EPRDF), would not relinquish power. In fact, accusations of fraud, coupled with arrests and harassment of opposition leaders, have been the norm in all electoral processes held in the country (Aimé González, 2022).

The regime of Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister from 1995 until his death in 2012, was notable for its lack of democracy and the strong economic growth of the country, which thus ceased to be among the ten poorest in the world. Another feature of his rule was the establishment of the ethno-federal system, in which the old provinces inherited from the empire by the *kililoch* (plural of *kilil*, regional state) were abolished. Each of the country's majority ethnic groups was circumscribed within its own *kilil*, with the exception of the southwest, where the Southern Peoples, Nations and Nationalities was formed, a mixed bag of some 45 different ethnicities. Although the ethno-federal system sought to end inter-ethnic tensions, they continued to be present in border areas. However, it was successful in putting an end once and for all to the strong centralism (amharisation) that, coming from the former Ethiopian Empire, was practised by the Derg (Nahum, 1997; Kidane Mengisteab, 1997; Berhanu Abegaz, 2020).

2.2 *The origin of the Oromo protests*

Traditionally marginalised by the powers that be, the Oromo account for more than 33% of the country's population, making them the largest ethnic group. Its regional state, Oromia, is also the largest and most populous in the country. During the Meles Zenawi era (1995-2012), the situation of the Oromo did not improve despite the fact that many of the exported products (coffee, pulses, gold, flowers) are produced in Oromia. In fact, the main beneficiaries were Tigrayan members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), some of whom allegedly enriched themselves through corrupt practices (Tadesse and Young, 2003). Although Tigray is still a relatively poor *kilil*, today Mekelle is one of the cities with the best infrastructure in the country, and the second railway line being built there will link it to Addis Ababa via Awash, although it is currently halted due to the past Tigray war and the country's economic crisis. The developmentalist nature of the Federal Government led it to promote major public works projects such as the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam or the renovation of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, aimed at alleviating Ethiopia's lack of infrastructure (Plaut, 2012; Záhorský, 2014).

The side effects of the economic growth projects included numerous abuses against the Ethiopian peasantry, who were poor and lacked the capital to invest in their fields. Meles Zenawi's last years favoured the forced expropriation of private land to hand it over to international investors. The aim was to encourage the export of agricultural products for profit, to secure access to the international food market to avoid famine, and to obtain financial capital for the incipient industrialisation (Lavers, 2012).

Discontent among the population was growing, hidden by good macroeconomic figures. Plans to expand the capital, Addis Ababa, at the expense of the *kilil* of Oromia, which completely surrounds it, were the trigger for protests that erupted

in Ethiopia from 2014 onwards, but they became especially violent from August 2016 onwards. Most of the people affected by the plan were small Oromo farmers whose land was being expropriated for \$0.6 per square metre, usually to build new residential buildings. The impoverished and landless peasants began a wave of protests that resulted in the deaths of 140 people and succeeded in stopping the expansion of the capital (Wayessa, 2020).

These events triggered a true Oromo awakening, especially among their young people, who were burdened by high unemployment and bleak economic prospects. For the first time in their history, many Oromo of rural origin had gained access to higher education, and it was they who took the lead in the protests. These *qeerroo* (“youngster” in Oromo), united by common ideals of social and economic justice, soon began to take to the streets of Oromia’s villages until they reached the capital Addis Ababa itself, which they consider an Oromo city and call Finfinne (Abebe, 2020).

The *qeerroo* managed to keep the protests on the streets from August 2016 until 2018, forcing the Government of Hailemariam Desalegn, Meles Zenawi’s successor, to declare a state of emergency on as many as two occasions. The Government cracked down hard on these protests, while in the *kilil* of Amhara, there were riots in Gondar and other cities demanding investment in the region (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019: 7).

3 The rise of Abiy Ahmed (2018) and *Abiymania*

Hailemariam Desalegn, Prime Minister from 2012 to 2018, was a technocrat lacking the guerrilla past and charisma of his predecessor. He was chosen to maintain the delicate inter-ethnic balance within the EPRDF: being from the traditionally marginalised south and Pentecostals —Ethiopia’s fastest growing religion— the other three Vice Presidents were from the ANDM (Amhara), the TPLF (Tigray) and the OPDO (Oromia) (Aalen, 2014). The pressure on the Prime Minister became unbearable in early 2018, and he eventually resigned in February in what was an unexpected move. It was clear that the country needed new leadership that could respond to the demands of the growing street protests. Abiy Ahmed’s rise is a result of political manoeuvring by the Oromo sector within the party. The preferred candidate to take over the reins was the President of the *kilil* of Oromia, Lemma Megersa; he could not be elected, however, as he was not an elected member of parliament (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019: 8-9). Therefore, a person was chosen who represented the aspirations of the Oromo wing: young, Oromo, son of a Muslim father and an Orthodox Christian mother, Pentecostal and educated in the USA. Abiy Ahmed, a young man who had grown up within the EPRDF, was chosen for the difficult task of leading the country out of a crisis that almost ended in civil war (Lozano Alonso, 2022: 174). His religious beliefs are an important aspect of his personality, as he is a Pentecostal. The various evangelical churches (*P’ent’ay* in Amharic) are the fastest growing in the country, especially in the south, and this is also reflected in national politics, where there have already been two Pentecostal Prime Ministers (Haustein and Feyissa, 2022).

Be that as it may, Ahmed's election came as a surprise to many in the EPRDF, from whose hardliners —the Tigray— he soon began to disassociate himself (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019). Thus, Ahmed's reforms were particularly ambitious internally, most notably the early dismissal of the two most important figures of the TPLF, considered custodians of Meles Zenawi's legacy: Samora Yunis, the Chief of Staff, and Getachew Assefa, Head of the Intelligence Services (Maasho, 2018).

Abiy Ahmed's new policy awakened the population's enthusiasm, elevating him to heights of popularity —*Abiymania*— never before seen in an Ethiopian leader after Haile Selassie (Geshaye, 2018). In addition to removing the TPLF from power, he continued Hailemariam Desalegn's measures to release political prisoners and journalists, while encouraging exiles to return to the country (Ylönen, 2018: 2). In April 2018, after four years of staging protests in the streets of Oromia, the *qeerroo* enthusiastically supported the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, believing that “the Oromo's turn had come” (Østebø, 2020). The streets were filled with portraits of the new Prime Minister, who symbolised the Ethiopians' hopes for change.

On the economic front, he proposed a series of reforms, including the privatisation of some public services, the entry of foreign companies into the telecommunications market (Safaricom) and the creation of industrial parks in the main cities. However, the serious problem of lack of foreign investment and foreign exchange has not been corrected, as the Ethiopian banking system remains poorly connected to the rest of the world (Ylönen, 2019). In 2024, both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank demanded that the value of the birr be set by the market and not by the Government; in order to grant Ethiopia the 10.7 billion dollars it requested to alleviate the effects of the economic crisis it has been suffering since 2020. Liberalisation caused the value of the birr to plummet, resulting in higher prices for basic necessities, which worsened the situation of the country's impoverished sectors (Kalkidan Yibeltal, 2024).

Compared to his predecessors, Abiy Ahmed has stood out for his commitment to ecology. In 2019, he approved an ambitious plan to reforest the country, which is suffering from severe tree degradation, with the aim of planting twenty billion trees, of which four billion were to be planted by October of that same year (Lambert and Deyganto, 2023). This environmental plan includes providing Addis Ababa with green spaces. The Ethiopian capital has traditionally lacked a sufficient amount of green space or large parks. One of the most prominent was the creation of the Unity Park on the grounds of the imperial palace, opening to the public an area that was hitherto forbidden to the people, which had been also used as a prison and torture centre (Bearak, 2019).

On the infrastructure front, the Abiy Ahmed Administration continued work on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Abbay or Blue Nile, a project conceived during the Meles Zenawi era (1995-2012). With 74km³ of dammed water, it is the second largest on the African continent, behind only Lake Nasser (132km³), although its hydroelectric production capacity of 5.15 gigawatts makes it the largest in Africa. Filling of the reservoir began in 2020 and was completed in September 2023 (Endeshaw,

2023). Its construction has caused a diplomatic crisis in the region, as Sudan and Egypt, countries dependent on the waters of the Nile, have perceived it as a threat to their water security, since 85% of the Nile's water comes from the Ethiopian massif, with the Blue Nile or Abbay providing 60% of the total (Abteu and Dessu, 2019).

An especially important aspect of Abiy Ahmed's first year was his rapid resolution of Ethiopia's conflict with Eritrea since 1998. Between 1998 and 2000, the two countries had fought a bloody war for the control of several border regions that ended in a pyrrhic Ethiopian victory. The UN arbitration to redraw the borders between the two countries was in favour of Eritrea, but Ethiopia did not accept it because of differences in the western zone (Abbink, 2003: 408). This continued to generate friction in the following years, with border closures and frequent skirmishes, as well as regional rivalry that led both nations to support insurgent groups opposed to their rival's interests, including third countries. Eritrean support for the Afar guerrillas of the *Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy* in Djibouti and for various organisations opposed to the Addis Ababa action in Somalia (Abbink, 2003: 413-415) are worth highlighting in this regard.

On the 5th of June 2018, the EPRDF announced that it had accepted in full the border demarcation established in 2002 by the UN Commission. This was a complete and unexpected reversal of the country's hardline policy towards Eritrea (Woldemariam, 2019). It would be the beginning of an alliance between Abiy Ahmed and Isayas Afwerki against their common enemy, the TPLF, with military cooperation playing a key role in the 2020 Tigray conflict (Afriyie, Ayangbah and Effah, 2023: 145).

Between the 8th and 9th of July 2018, an agreement normalising relations between the two countries by ending the border conflict was signed at the Asmara Summit. Thus, a gradual opening of borders and the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations were agreed. The resolution of this conflict was the main reason for awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the Ethiopian Prime Minister in October 2019. However, the Tigrayan TPLF, disappointed by the new alliance with Eritrea, left the ruling coalition of parties, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Yihun, 2020).

4 The decline of Abiy Ahmed's popularity

Abiy Ahmed has departed from the precepts inherited from Meles Zenawi by abandoning the concept of ethno-federalism of previous governments for a new ideology. His *Medemer* ("synergy" in Amharic) is based on three main pillars: centralisation of power in the Prime Minister, economic growth through liberalisation of the economy and regional integration. The pan-Ethiopian approach is a key aspect of the *Medemer*, as power is vested in the State vis-à-vis the *kililoch* (Ali, 2019).

Abiy Ahmed's promising first months soon gave way to disappointment. Reforms could not be implemented at the speed that the expectant Ethiopian people had hoped for. Disappointed that they had simply exchanged one dictator for another, the *qeerroo*

revived protests. The disproportionate response by the army and police showed the intransigence of the State and confirmed that reforms would not be implemented quickly, calling into question the country's democratisation process (York, 2020; Aimé González, 2022).

4.1 *The revival of the Oromo protests*

In September 2018, the return of several leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front, one of the main Oromo opposition parties, ended in clashes with police in Burayu, in addition to attacks on people of other ethnicities that resulted in at least 25 dead people (Østebø, 2020). In the south, conflicts over control of land between Oromo and Gedeos resulted in one million displaced people (Ineke Mules, 2018).

Growing tension was also felt in the armed forces. On the 22nd of June 2019, in the Amhara capital of Bahir Dar, an Amhara nationalist plot killed General Se'are Mekonnen, Chief of Army Staff and one of the few TPLF Tigrayans that Abiy Ahmed had confirmed in his post. The Government subsequently accused the Amhara nationalists who orchestrated the coup of being backed by foreign powers (*AfricaNews*, 2019a).

In December 2019, Abiy Ahmed took the opportunity to launch the Prosperity Party, which was joined by all ethnic-based parties in the EPRDF except the Tigrayan TPLF (*AfricaNews*, 2019c; Lozano Alonso, 2020: 177). This meant dismantling the old power structure and replacing it with a new one that ran in the 2020 elections, which were postponed the following year due to the coronavirus crisis.

That the TPLF was excluded from the new party that succeeded the EPRDF was a further indication of Abiy Ahmed's hostility towards the former Tigrayan leaders. This political formation continued its estrangement from the Prime Minister, especially after the peace treaty with Eritrea and after some of its members were accused of corrupt practices during the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019; Abdulkadr and Neszmelyi, 2021). All of this, coupled with the growing disaffection of Tigrayans in the TPLF with Abiy Ahmed's new Ethiopia, led to growing discontent in the region, increasing the risk that the party would opt to pursue Tigrayan independence rather than seek to increase its influence in Addis Ababa (Assefa, 2020).

Despite promises of democratisation, the Prosperity Party won 410 of the 483 seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives, Ethiopia's lower house, in the 2021 elections. The promised transition to democracy is still blocked today by Abiy Ahmed's excessive cult of personality and his refusal to negotiate with the opposition (Aimé González, 2022).

Within the context of the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, new protests erupted in Oromia following the murder of Oromo singer Haacaaluu Hundeesaa on the 29th of June 2020. Suspicions that the Government might

have been behind the crime led numerous Oromo to take to the streets and protest against what they thought was a political assassination, as the singer was a highly respected figure in the Oromo protest song genre, the *geerarsa* (*Al Jazeera*, 2020).

Abiy Ahmed denied any link between the Government and the crime, but discontent grew among the protesters, who were also influenced by rumours and fake news that sought to only inflame an already explosive situation. During the first week of July, the protests put the Nobel Peace Prize winner against the ropes, and he did not hesitate to use old methods that were thought to have been banished: 166 people died as a result of the crackdown and 2,300 were arrested, including leading Oromo opposition political figures such as Jawar Mohammed of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and numerous important journalists. The Government's ploy to cut the internet was also used again (*Deutsche Welle*, 2020).

The protests coincided with the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The Government used this to fuel its claim that the riots were being financed by foreign powers, without pointing to any specific one, but indicating an unlikely Egyptian or Sudanese involvement, the two actors most interested in stopping the work. However, the Prime Minister asserted that the protests would not delay the filling of the reservoir (*France 24*, 2020).

Inter-ethnic violence became frequent in contact zones of Oromos with Gedeos and Somalis. During the protests in the summer of 2020, *qeerroo*, in some cases no more than children armed with machetes, looted and destroyed homes and businesses belonging to non-Oromos, especially Amhara, in some of Oromia's main towns, such as Shashemene (Getachew, 2020).

While his popularity and democratising promises had earned him great respect inside and outside Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed and his reforms have been tested in an endurance test that they have failed: the moment the situation got out of hand, the Prime Minister and his cabinet did not hesitate to resort to the old authoritarian methods. Dressed in military uniform, he appeared on television to claim that the singer's murder was part of a plot to destabilise the country, forcing the Government to intervene to prevent the outbreak of civil war (Getachew, 2020; *Al Jazeera*, 2020).

But the critical voices against Abiy Ahmed do not come exclusively from the streets of Oromia. His political mentor and then Defence Minister, Lemma Megersa, began to distance himself from Ahmed after the creation of the Prosperity Party, although their differences became irreconcilable during the protests in the summer of 2020. In August of that year, Lemma Megersa was removed from all his posts, proof of his fall from grace in the eyes of the Prime Minister. On the 13th of August it was confirmed that he was under house arrest (*Addis Standard*, 2020). A few days later, further violent clashes between protesters and police in Chiro and Aweday resulted in nine dead people and dozens of people shot and wounded (*Al Jazeera*, 2020b).

4.2 *The Sidama and the settlement of the kilil of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples*

Another pending issue on the Government's agenda was the creation of a separate state-region (*kilil*) for the Sidama, a historical claim of this ethnic group, which, with its more than 4,000,000 people, is the sixth largest in the country and the largest of the more than 45 groups that made up the vast ethnic cauldron that was the *kilil* of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. The issue was particularly heated in the capital of the *kilil*, Hawassa, which the Sidama claimed as the capital of their own future state-region.

The Government in Addis Ababa, however, refused to apply their constitutional right to constitute a new *kilil* to the Sidama, as they feared that if it was granted, other peoples might demand the same (Abebe, 2019). In May 2019, the Government of the Sidama Zone joined the citizens' protest movement and announced that if the referendum did not take place on the 19th of July, it would declare the *kilil* unilaterally (Yokamo, 2019).

As the date approached, tensions rose in Sidama. July saw more than 27 people killed in clashes between police and protesters (*BBC News*, 2019). Finally, in October, Abiy Ahmed announced that the referendum would be held the following month (*AfricaNews*, 2019b). In the referendum held on 20 November, the results showed an overwhelming majority (98.5%) in favour of autonomy (*Deutsche Welle*, 2019). Abiy Ahmed did not hesitate to declare that the result showed Ethiopia's commitment to democracy. The new *kilil* was formed on the 18th of June 2020 (Borkena, 2020), pending the appointment of a new capital for the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region to replace Hawassa.

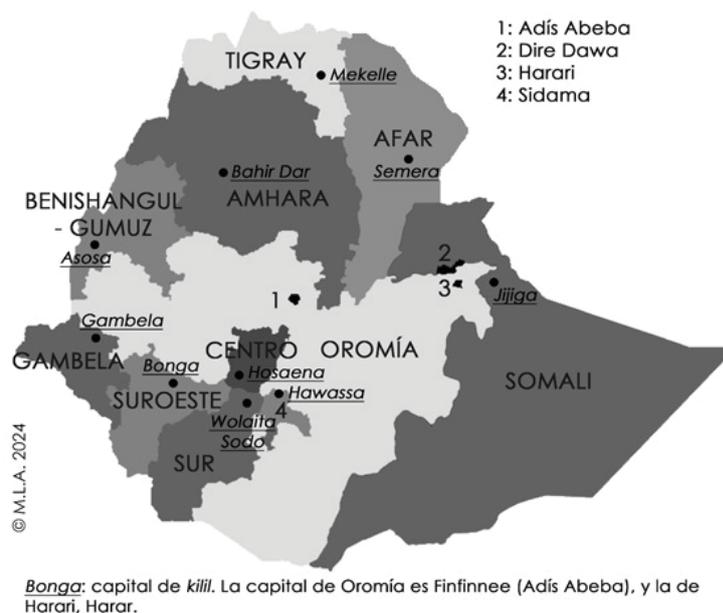


Figure 1. Map of the new Ethiopian kililoch. Author's own based on Lozano Alonso, 2022: 168.

Subsequently, two new referenda further divided the former *kilil* of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (see Figure 1). The first, held on the 23rd of November 2021, resulted in a new majority of voters (98%) in favour of unbundling the western territories, forming the *kilil* of Southwest Ethiopia (*Addis Standard*, 2021). The second referendum was held on the 6th of February 2023, after which it was agreed to separate the majority of the Wolayita, Gedeo, Konso, Gamo and Gofa ethnic areas into the new *kilil* of South Ethiopia (*Addis Standard*, 2023a). Finally, the *kilil* of Central Ethiopia was constituted with the northern areas, inhabited mainly by the Gurage and Hadiya, establishing its capital in Hosaena (*Ethiopian News Agency*, 2023).

5 Internal conflicts: the Tigray war and the OLA and Fano insurgencies

5.1 The Tigray war (2020-2022)

The most intense internal conflict that Abiy Ahmed faced came from Tigray (see Figure 2). Removed from power, the TPLF's relations with Addis Ababa continued to deteriorate by leaps and bounds. The Prime Minister's decision to postpone parliamentary elections from 2020 to 2021 was not accepted by the Tigrayan party, which accused him of trying to perpetuate himself in power. Thus, the *kilil* of Tigray decided to hold the regional parliamentary elections in open defiance of the central Government, which overruled them. The elections were finally held on the 9th of September, with the party led by Debretsion Gebremichael winning with 98.2% of

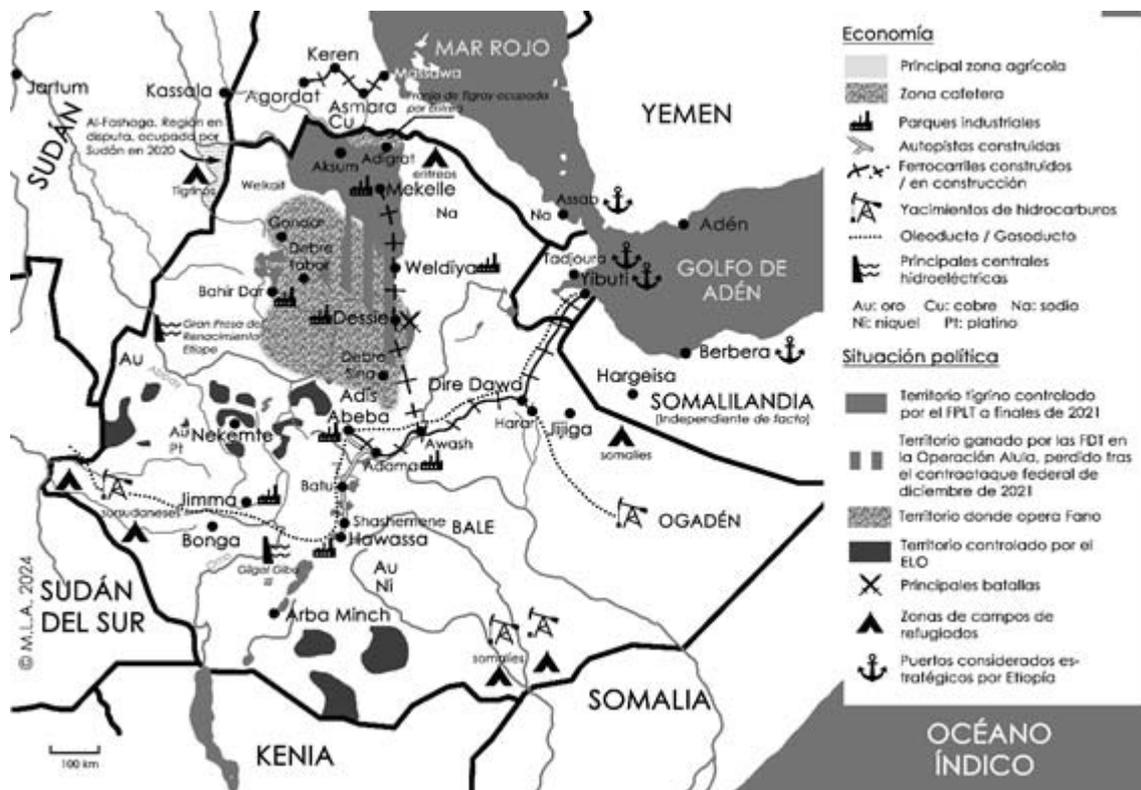


Figure 2. Ethiopia's political situation in 2024. Author's own based on Lozano Alonso, 2022: 179.

the vote, resulting in the TPLF (*Al Jazeera*, 2020c) taking control of the 152 MPs up for election.

After the elections, tensions between the two governments escalated to openly warmongering positions. On the 4th of November 2020, TPLF troops attacked one of the federal army bases in the region. The Prime Minister took it as a declaration of war, announcing a military campaign against the rogue region-state. The Ethiopian army's northern command, headquartered in Mekelle, soon defected in favour of the rebels (*BBC News*, 2020).

The Federal Government decreed a six-month state of emergency in Tigray, despite the fact that almost the entire territory was in the hands of the TPLF. However, the State agency *FANA* reported military advances in the west on the 5th of November. TPLF sources also reported that fighter jets had bombed several points near the Tigrayan capital on the same day, while internet access and bank accounts were cut off throughout the *kilil* (*Al Jazeera*, 2020d).

Soon the first crimes against civilians began to be uncovered. Between the 9th and 10th of December, the village of Mai Kadra, located a short distance from the Sudanese border, was the scene of the massacre of 500-600 Amhara civilians by a local youth militia called the Samri. The bodies of those killed showed signs of having been attacked with knives or machetes in a clear episode of ethnic cleansing (Paravicini, 2020a).

From the outset of the conflict, an important question was what Eritrea's role in the conflict would be, given that much of its southern border is shared with the rebelling *kilil*. While a policy of neutrality could not be ruled out, it was always clear that, in the event of intervention, it would most likely be in favour of the Government in Addis Ababa, given the open hostility that had always been professed by the TPLF against Asmara. These doubts were erased on the 14th of November, just ten days after the start of the war, when the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) attacked the Eritrean capital of Asmara with missiles in retaliation for invading Tigray (Paravicini, 2020b).

With the explosion of violence, the first refugee groups appeared. Early in the conflict, some 60,000 Ethiopians fled to Sudan, while the number of internally displaced persons reached 2,000,000. The four existing Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray (May Aini, Adi Harush, Shimelba and Hitsats) were attacked by the Eritrean army, which looted and destroyed Shimelba and Hitsats and executed several hundred political refugees (Pellet, 2021).

The federal army's military operations were successful, focusing on capturing the main population centres. In order to secure the border with Sudan, federal troops seized the airport at Humera, 50 kilometres southwest of the town of the same name. Attacking from the west, troops loyal to Addis Ababa managed to capture Shire, Adwa and Aksum in November. Meanwhile, progress along Highway 2, from Amhara towards Mekelle, was much slower given the proximity of the *kilil's* capital. (Lozano Alonso, 2022: 180; Plaut and Vaughan, 2023). Meanwhile, Eritrean troops occupied

the border strip and the town of Aksum, where they massacred more than 200 people protesting against their presence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

On the 23rd of November, Abiy Ahmed issued an ultimatum to TPFL leaders giving them 72 hours to surrender before proceeding to take Mekelle, which was surrounded by federal army troops (*Reuters*, 2020a). On the 28th of November, the assault on Mekelle began, which was preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment. In the afternoon of the same day, Abiy Ahmed claimed that federal troops had completely captured the city, ending the conflict (*Reuters*, 2020b).

Predictably, the TPFL engaged in guerrilla warfare, given its knowledge of the rural areas of Tigray, which are endowed with a rugged terrain that facilitates guerrilla action. The Tigray war (2020-2022) focused the Federal Government's attention on the northern region, postponing its response to the country's other crises. Military spending drained the scarce economic resources available to the Government in the context of the economic crisis caused by the Covid pandemic and subsequent inflation. Although Addis Ababa initially managed to control the main Tigrayan cities, the Tigray Defence Force (TDF), the military arm of the TPLF, launched *Operation Alula* in June 2021, a rapid counter-offensive aimed at advancing on the federal capital. To this end, they relied on the alliance of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which went from being the TPLF's enemy to its closest ally, along with other guerrillas such as the Gumuz. However, the offensive was halted at Debre Sina, forcing Tigrayan troops to retreat to their region, largely thanks to drones sold by the UAE to Ethiopia and support from Amhara militias in Fano (Plaut and Vaughan, 2023). Finally, the armistice between Tigray and the Federal Government was agreed on the 3rd of November 2022, two years into the conflict. The total blockade of the *kilil* caused a severe famine that affected the majority of the population. Exhausted, the TPLF had to sign an armistice with the Federal Government in Pretoria on the 3rd of November 2022, which was brokered by the African Union, whose intervention was key as mediator. Although its ally was defeated, the OLA continued to organise sporadic attacks against the federal army (Lozano Alonso, 2022a: 181). The Amhara militias in Fano played a key role in the defeat of the TPLF and its armed wing, cooperating closely with government troops in order to secure the cession of the western Tigray region of Welkait to Amhara, which was ultimately not granted (John, 2021). Unlike the TDF, the TPLF has not been disbanded, although Debretsion Gebremichael, former leader of the *kilil*, has been replaced by Getachew Reda, acting President of Tigray (*Addis Standard*, 2023b).

The impact of the conflict on civilians in the region has been enormous. The Federal Government cut off humanitarian aid organisations' access to Tigray, which eventually led to a famine that affected 400,000 people as early as 2021 but eventually affected the region's nearly 6 million inhabitants. The total death toll of the conflict is estimated at 600,000 (Nyssen, 2024: 341), according to an estimate by former Nigerian President Obasanjo, who assisted in the African Union mediation mission. This makes it one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century, largely due to famine. To this must be added the cutting off of electricity supplies, the blocking of bank accounts, the impossibility of acquiring medical supplies and the destruction of health and education infrastructures

(Weldemichel, 2022). A worrying aspect has been the brutal episodes of sexual violence suffered by almost half of the women in the region, without any government assistance to date (Fisseha *et al.*, 2023; Gebremichael *et al.*, 2023).

5.2 *Benishangul-Gumuz and OLA insurgencies in Oromia*

In the *kilil* of Benishangul-Gumuz in the west, the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM) and the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) began their guerrilla warfare actions in June 2019. Their attacks were mainly directed against the Amhara and Oromo settlers who had settled in the region since the time of the Derg, whom they accused of appropriating the land and driving the native inhabitants off it. This degenerated into ethnic cleansing massacres in Metekel and elsewhere in the *kilil*, while fighting against federal army and OLA troops. An initial agreement for the cessation of hostilities between the two guerrilla organisations and the *kilil Government* was signed at the end of 2022 (Addis Standard, 2022). The final peace agreement was signed in June 2024 (Addis Standard, 2024a).

Peace in Tigray and Benishangul-Gumuz did not mean the final pacification of the country. In Oromia, OLA guerrillas are still active in many regions of the *kilil*, most notably in Wellega. The OLA has not managed to occupy any major urban centres, but its presence is relatively strong in rural areas. Although negotiations to reach a peace agreement between the Federal Government and OLA began in April 2023, they failed as both sides accused each other of intransigence (AP News, 2023). Today, the conflict is still active.

5.3 *Fano's rebellion*

Amhara, one of the country's most important *kililoch* (as it boasts the second largest population), soon became a new hotbed of tension. Among the reforms aimed at reinforcing the weight of the Federal Government was the abolition of regional militias, including those such as the Fano of Amhara, which had fought against the TDF in Tigray. This group, heir to the warrior tradition of the Amharas¹, presents itself as a defender of this ethnicity in the face of growing inter-ethnic violence (Chanie, 2024). But while the TDF or OLA has a cohesive structure with a clear leader, Fano is not a single body, but a group of militant factions operating autonomously and with an unclear hierarchy. The three main factions are the *Amhara Fano Unity in Gondar* (AFUiG), *Fano for Existence, Justice, and Democracy. Movement* (FEJDM) and the *Amhara Fano Unity Council* (AFUC), plus another six factions (see Table I) strongly supported by the Amhara diaspora, and in some cases hostile to each other. They operate mainly in Shewa, Gojjam, Gondar and Wollo (Necho and Debebe, 2024).

¹ Fano may be translated as "wandering warrior" or "leaderless warrior".

Name	Leader	Region
AFUiG	Mesafint Tesfu and Sefer Melesse	Gondar
FEJDM	Wubante Abate	Gondar
AFUC ²	Sefer Melesse	Shewa
Amhara Popular Front	Eskinder Nega	Gojjam
Bete Amhara Fano	Unknown	Wollo
Amhara People's Force	Zemene Kassie	Gojjam
East Amhara Fano	Mihret Wedajo	Wollo
Amhara Unit in Shewa	Unknown	Shewa, South Wollo
Amhara Fano Free People's Movement	Asseged Mekonnen	North Shewa

Table I. Fano's main factions, leaders and region of operation. *Source:* Necho and Debebe, 2024.

In April 2023, the Federal Government decreed the abolition of the regional militias. The Fano refused, starting the insurgency in the *kilil* of Amhara. Despite some important initial successes, such as the capture of Bahir Dar or Lalibela in August 2023, the Government in Addis Ababa has taken control of the main towns in Amhara, pushing the Fano into rural areas where they are still engaged in a low-intensity conflict (Necho and Debebe, 2024; Masoliver, 2024).

5.4 *The Berbera port crisis and new changes in foreign policy*

In late 2023, the Ethiopian Head of Government argued that Ethiopia needed to control a Red Sea port, which was key to its own survival. The matter would have gone no further had it not been for the rhetoric employed, stating that “Ethiopia’s natural border was the Red Sea” or that, if the port could not be obtained by peaceful means, it would be done by force. The logical consequence was a diplomatic crisis with its neighbours, since the only viable options for obtaining such a port were, excluding Djibouti, Eritrea or Somalia (Waal, 2023).

The question of access to the sea has been one of the main aspirations of the Ethiopian State since the reign of Menelik II (1889-1913) (Lozano Alonso, 2024). The colonial powers occupied the entire coastline of the region, most notably the establishment of the Eritrean colony, which deprived Ethiopia of access to the port of Massawa, and that of Somaliland, with the port of Zeyla. During the Middle Ages, both were the main trading hubs in the area. The French-controlled port of Djibouti eclipsed that of Zeyla, especially since the 1917 inauguration of the railway linking it to Addis Ababa, transforming it into the country’s main commercial entry and exit point (Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.*, 2011: 29-30). After World War II, Eritrea was ceded by the UN to Ethiopia, allowing it to control the ports of Massawa and Assab, where Haile Selassie’s imperial Government built a refinery. Ethiopia again lost access to the

² Disbanded in April 2023 by the Federal Government.

sea with Eritrean independence in 1993, although it was agreed that Ethiopians could access the port of Assab without restrictions (Henze, 2000: 333). Assab remained the main entry and exit point to and from Ethiopia, accounting for up to 75% of transit goods until the border war with the Eritreans (1998-2000) diverted this trade traffic to Djibouti (Takele and Tolcha, 2021: 2).

The need for secure access to maritime trade routes was one of the objectives of Meles Zenawi's Government. The port of Djibouti, the entry point for 90% of the country's imports, was considered a priority, which led to the construction of a new railway line between Djibouti and Addis Ababa, parallel to the old one, completed in 1917 and in poor condition. China, which at the time was engaged in the construction of a military base in Djibouti as part of its *Belt and Road Initiative*, assisted in this endeavour. Interested in strengthening its ties with Ethiopia, China granted both countries a \$4 billion loan, commissioning its construction to two Chinese state-owned companies, the *China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation* (CCECC) and the *China Railway Group* (CREC). It was inaugurated by Hailemariam Desalegn on the 1st of January 1998 (Cabestan, 2021). However, China has significantly reduced investment in the country, although it continues to maintain its interest in the Horn of Africa, albeit now by encouraging Gulf countries' cooperation in the region (Liu, 2023).

Already in 2024, with three recent or ongoing conflicts —against Tigray, the OLA and the Fano— and in dire need of an IMF loan, Abiy Ahmed's military threats are hardly credible (Waal, 2023). This is where we must explain the growing influence of Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which seek to invest in the Horn of Africa region in order to diversify their economies in a framework of energy transition, while funding Islamic schools and mosques, ensuring food security and selling arms. This was especially relevant during the Tigray war, where the UAE provided drones to the Government in Addis Ababa (Meester and Lanfranchi, 2024).

The Saudi presence, which dates back to the time of Haile Selassie (1930-1974), focused on funding Wahhabi mosques in Ethiopian territory (Erich, 2006), although in recent years the country that has gained the most influence is the UAE. Within this context, in 2015, Emirati foreign policy succeeded in getting Eritrea to cede the deep-water port of Assab and the use of a 3,500 m airstrip to the Arab country (*Al Attas*, 2018: 4). In the case of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed has strengthened ties with the UAE, which has allowed him, among other things, to diversify the number of countries interested in investing in the country —apart from China and the US—, to obtain foreign currency and to buy modern weaponry, such as the Emirati drones used in the Tigray war. The inflow of foreign exchange propped up the Ethiopian economy during the conflict, and its diplomatic backing managed to prevent the regime's isolation at a time when the US and the EU were concerned about human rights abuses in Tigray. Emirati support has also been key to mediating Ethiopia's accession to the BRICS group of countries, alongside Egypt, the United Arab Emirates itself and Iran, and in reaching peace with neighbouring Eritrea (Meester and Lanfranchi, 2024).

However, the Emiratis do not appear to be cooperating directly with Abiy Ahmed in his efforts to secure a route to the sea, although an Emirati company, DP World, manages the port of Berbera. A Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of Ethiopia and Somaliland was signed on the 1st of January 2024, the full content of which has not yet been disclosed. Some aspects revealed by the Somaliland Foreign Minister include the ceding of 20km of coastline near Berbera for the construction of an Ethiopian naval base, in exchange for Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign state. However, none of this has been confirmed by the Ethiopian Government, and even many aspects of the memorandum, such as which stretch of coastline would be ceded, remain unclear (Yibeltal, 2024).

The memorandum has led to a formal protest by the Somali Government, which continues to claim to be the sole authority authorised to negotiate, even though Somaliland has been operating as a de facto independent country for decades (*AfricaNews*, 2024). A few months later, Somalia and Egypt announced a military alliance that would involve the deployment of 5,000 Egyptian troops on Somali territory to help fight the Islamist insurgency in a new African Union mission, to which further 5,000 would be added separately by Egypt. The latter has taken a stand against Ethiopia since the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which it sees as threatening its water security by regulating the waters of the Abbay (Blue Nile), the main tributary of the Nile. The agreement would help supplant the 10,000 or so Addis Ababa troops operating in Somalia, who would be expelled from there in the event that the agreement to cede the port of Berbera (Wafula, 2024) is formalised. Far from achieving its goal of controlling Berbera, on which there are no new developments, the confrontation with Somalia has served to further drive it apart from Ethiopia and to strengthen the former's ties with Egypt, Ethiopia's traditional rival. To ease the tension and also to prevent the important flow of Ethiopian money from being diverted to other ports, Djibouti has offered to cede the port of Tadjoura to Ethiopia (*Addis Standard*, 2024b). In sum, the new corridor between Ethiopia and Berbera, while it could have been a source of prosperity, now risks becoming a new focus of regional conflict (Stepputat and Norman, 2024).

6 Conclusions

Abiy Ahmed Ali's Administration has faced serious problems internally, in many cases inherited from previous cabinets. His rise to power in 2018 aroused enormous expectations, both due to his Oromo origins and his reformist discourse, which promised democratisation, peace and economic prosperity. However, the challenges inherent to governing a country as complex and fragmented as Ethiopia quickly called into question his ability to deliver on these promises.

His major achievements include the signing of a peace treaty with Eritrea, which marked a turning point in regional politics in the Horn of Africa, and the completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which can transform Ethiopia into a

power exporter on the continent. Furthermore, its entry into the BRICS represents a significant milestone in Ethiopia's foreign policy, placing the country on a new global economic axis. Abiy Ahmed has also pushed for innovative measures such as his reforestation plan, which seeks to address the country's environmental challenges.

However, these successes are overshadowed by the many internal conflicts that have undermined his leadership. The Tigray war (2020-2022) not only resulted in a devastating humanitarian crisis but also highlighted the Government's inability to reconcile inter-ethnic tensions. This has culminated in the death of 600,000 people, the highest death toll in a military conflict so far this century, as well as provoked a famine that affected the entire population of Tigray. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) insurgency in Oromia and Fano militias in Amhara remain sources of instability, which must be seen as a reaction by local elements to the recentralisation implied by the prime minister's *Medemer* policy.

Abiy Ahmed's foreign policy has also suffered setbacks. His handling of the Berbera port crisis, in the context of growing competition for access to the Red Sea, has generated diplomatic tensions with Somalia and Egypt, complicating regional relations. Although he has received support from the United Arab Emirates, this support has not been enough to compensate for the loss of traditional allies and the perception of authoritarianism that is beginning to consolidate on the international scene.

Ultimately, Abiy Ahmed's legacy will be determined by his ability to overcome these challenges. While his Administration has made significant progress, his centralist leadership and conflict management style have exacerbated internal divisions and economic difficulties. Ethiopia faces an uncertain future, in which peace and stability will depend on inclusive reforms that address the demands of different ethnic communities and regions. Without these transformations, the country risks perpetuating a cycle of conflict and inequality, moving away from the promises of change that defined the beginning of his mandate.

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Realism, the United States and China: comparison and strategic projection in the Pacific Ocean

Abstract

The strategic competition between the US and China in the Pacific is approached from the perspective of *realism*, a theory that emphasises power, national interest and security in foreign policy. Although there are political and ideological differences, both actors seek to maximise their influence in an international scenario marked by uncertainty. In order to maintain its regional hegemony, the United States has strengthened its alliances and military presence with the aim of curbing China's rise.

At the same time, China is expanding its military, technological and economic capabilities, challenging the existing order and posing a systemic challenge to US hegemony. The Pacific Ocean thus becomes the epicentre of a competition that reflects the tensions between the two nations, where the balance of power is played out in a context of growing rivalry. Understanding these geopolitical, technological and diplomatic dynamics is key to analysing the evolution of competition in this critical region within the international system.

Keywords:

Balance of power, Strategic competition, Geopolitics, Security, Rivalry.

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I Introduction: *Realism* and the Pacific Ocean, the keys to understanding the international system

In recent decades, the Pacific Ocean has become the main axis of geopolitical competition between the United States and China, two powers whose strategic interests clash in a region that is key to the future of the international order. While the United States seeks to maintain its hegemonic position, consolidated since World War II, China has emerged as a rising power, determined to reshape the balance of power in its favour. This rivalry, which encompasses military, economic, technological, commercial and diplomatic dimensions, is deployed across the spectrum of States, permeating different social strata of this power game between powers. This redefines not only bilateral relations between the two nations but reshapes the international system as a whole.

In this sense, understanding the motivations of these actors is essential if people are to discern the next scenarios of hegemonic competition that will be played out over the course of this century. The pivotal idea of this analysis is therefore introduced here; *realism* as the most appropriate theoretical branch of international relations to understand this strategic confrontation. As a theoretical tool, *realism* allows the analysis of how states develop their actions in the international environment with the fundamental premise of protecting their strategic interests, where survival and security become the main pillars of foreign action and permeate the rest of the elements around them.

This theory thus makes it possible to analyse the foreign policy structures of States from a lens that integrates elements of the balance of power and calculated strategic interests, which are influenced by elements that may be empirically tested, such as the decision-making process or geographical and economic factors, which end up defining the fundamental features of a country's foreign policy.

Based on the premise that the international system is inherently anarchic and that States act primarily in their national interests, *realism* offers a truthful lens through which to analyse the logic driving the competition between the US and China. Thus, from this perspective, both countries may be examined as actors seeking to apply reason in their operational logic where, guided by the imperative of maximising their power³ and guaranteeing their security, they are engaged in a struggle for pre-eminence in a region that is key to their respective global projections, regardless of their origins as a country, society or power.

Within the context of the Pacific, the United States and China are confronting each other not only over immediate territorial or economic interests but also over the

³ This logic is understood as *classical realism*, articulated by thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, Edward Carr or R. Niebuhr, which underlines that the quest for power is a constant in international politics and exposes the limitations of morality in the face of more influential variables such as the balance of power or national interests, which are positioned as crucial factors for international stability according to this view. The latter, in his work *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (1953), adopts a similar approach to analysing the conditions inherent to international society.

ability to define the rules of the geopolitical game, directly affecting the stability of the international order. As China's power grows, the US perceives a direct threat to its hegemony not just in the region, thereby reinforcing a competitive dynamic similar to that described by *realism*: an inevitable cycle of confrontation and mistrust between great powers (Allison, 2017).

	America	China
Self-perception	'Number one'	'Center of the universe'
Core value	Freedom	Order
View of government	Necessary evil	Necessary good
Form of government	Democratic Republic	Responsive authoritarianism
Exemplar	Missionary	Inimitable
Foreigners	Inclusive	Exclusive
Time horizon	Now	Eternity
Change	Invention	Restoration and evolution
Foreign policy	International order	Harmonious hierarchy

Source: Allison, 2017, p.141.

Table I. Differences between China's and the United States' view of their standing in the world. Source: G. Allison (2017)

From this perspective, the US-China clash in the Pacific is not an anomaly but a natural consequence of the reconfiguration of global power, scenarios that may even be detected in various historical periods. As an example, in his work *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*, Allison refers to a total of 16 scenarios, 12 of which involved direct conflict through war. By analysing historical rivalries, this statistic highlights the trend in which emerging and established powers frequently end up in conflict. This reinforces the relevance of his analysis for a greater comprehension of the current dynamics between China and the United States, and the potential escalation towards confrontation.

Moreover, competition in this region is not limited to only the military sphere. Both the US and China have used a variety of diplomatic and economic approaches to expand their influence in the Pacific in an attempt to secure trade routes, establish strategic alliances and project their power more broadly. These dynamics demonstrate that the Pacific region is a space of vital strategic importance in which the power projections of both actors are defined and reaffirmed.

Thus, *realism* offers a robust theoretical basis for understanding why US-China competition in the Pacific Ocean is so deep and persistent. In addition to its evolution within a context of high competition and increasing complexity. Therefore, in an environment where powers seek to ensure their survival and maximise their influence, confrontation between the two nations seems highly likely and is destined to play a decisive role in shaping the future world order.

2 *Realism in International Relations: the Case of China and the United States*

Realism is one of the fundamental theoretical pillars of the academic field of international relations, and its roots go back to thinkers who predate the formal creation of the discipline, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. In *The Prince* (1532), Machiavelli introduces the concept of power as an essential tool for the maintenance of the State and political stability. According to this author, power must be exercised pragmatically in order to ensure the survival and security of the State, even if this requires acting without moral scruples (Machiavelli, 1998). Undoubtedly, this realist view of power laid the groundwork for the later development of the theory of *realism* in international relations and was referred to on many occasions across the globe by all sorts of political and even religious figures.

For his part, Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (2017) offers an equally influential perspective by describing nature as a state where all are at war with each other, in which life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 2017). This pessimistic view of human nature underlines the need for a strong sovereign power to impose order and security on society. Along these lines, Hobbes argues that, in the absence of a central authority, human beings are prone to conflict due to the search for security and power. In this way, his work provides the basis for a view of the international system as an anarchic environment where States, much like individuals in nature, seek to safeguard their own security and power, characteristics that leading realist authors of the 20th and 21st centuries continue to maintain are essential today.

In the 20th century, *realism* gained ground through the contributions of major authors within this theoretical branch, such as Hans Morgenthau. In his influential work *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau described a realist theory that has been essential to interpreting power dynamics within the international system, and his postulates are key to understanding US-China relations today.

Firstly, Morgenthau argued that international politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature. In this regard, understanding these laws is essential for political analysis, as the actions of States respond to predictable patterns. Secondly, the concept of power is fundamental: political leaders think and act according to interests defined in terms of power, introducing a rational approach to international politics that sets aside ideological or personal motives. Moreover, this interest in power is a universal category, constant across time and space, although its form may vary according to historical and geopolitical circumstances⁴.

Moreover, Morgenthau argues that, while morality is relevant in political life, within the international arena, the actions of States should be judged by their effectiveness

⁴ An example of this is Russia's historical strategic focus on its borders, an issue whose policy has been a key concern from the time of Tsar Alexander II until today.

in pursuing national interests, rather than by abstract moral criteria. This distinction between individual morality and State morality is central to realist theory, which sees States acting according to a pragmatic rather than idealistic logic. At the same time, he also stressed the importance of prudence, considered the highest virtue in international politics, as States should base their decisions on a realistic calculation of the circumstances, rather than on moral or utopian aspirations.

Finally, Morgenthau understood the political sphere as autonomous, with its own logic, distinct from other fields such as economics or ethics. Thus, according to *realism*, international policy as a whole must be understood within its own framework, centred on power, security and national interests. The above postulates together constitute Morgenthau's (1990) so-called *Six Principles of Realism*.

However, the development of realist theory is not limited to Morgenthau's work. Waltz (1979), one of the most influential theorists of neorealism, in his *Theory of International Politics*, introduced a structural version of *realism* that placed renewed emphasis on the importance of the international system as a decisive element of State behaviour. Waltz argued that in an anarchic international system, where there is no central authority to regulate the actions of States, the latter must seek their own security and survival through the balance of power.

In this way, the distribution of power within the international system becomes the decisive factor in the dynamics of cooperation or conflict between States. Waltz also introduced the idea that States do not necessarily seek to maximise their absolute power, but rather to ensure their security in an environment of constant competition.

In connection with that, the theoretical advances of this branch that gives form to structural realism or neorealism may be added to *classical realism*. Developed by Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, this stream of realism emphasises the structure of the international system as the driving force behind State actions. In a system where power is constantly being redistributed, China's rise is seen as a challenge to the regional balance of power, which explains US containment and rebalancing policies designed to preserve its influence and prevent the consolidation of a direct competitor.

On the other hand, offensive neorealism, a more contemporary approach that responds to the characteristics of an interrelated international system, developed by John Mearsheimer, adds a more aggressive dimension to the analysis of State behaviour. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer (2001) argues that States, especially great powers, seek not only to guarantee their security, but to maximise their relative power to the point of hegemony in the international system. According to Mearsheimer, great powers do not trust other powers to respect the balance of power and therefore adopt an offensive strategy to prevent the emergence of rivals capable of challenging their hegemonic position.

This view is especially relevant to understanding the competition between the US and China, as both countries appear to be pursuing strategies aimed at securing their position in the Pacific, a key region for their respective geostrategic interests. It is

also possible to observe how *realism* has influenced, to a large extent, China's recent foreign policy. Since the 1970s with Mao Zedong's strategic rapprochement with the United States, it is worth noting how China has been evolving towards a pragmatic and realistic approach in the development of its foreign policy.

This historical turn, which exemplifies the first step towards the application of a realist approach, allowed China to counterbalance the influence of the Soviet Union—its main geopolitical rival at the time—and to improve its position within the international system (Kissinger, 1994). Nevertheless, *realism* continued to gain influence in Chinese politics under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who promoted a strategy of economic and military modernisation with a highly pragmatic approach, clearly separating national interests from the national idea of the Chinese Communist Party. As China has grown in power and influence, its leaders have pursued a cautious strategy, seeking to avoid direct confrontation while gradually expanding their influence in Asia and the world. This created a dynamic in Chinese foreign policy structures that has endured through generations of Chinese leaders to this day.

Among the Chinese authors who have adopted and adapted realist principles to their national context, Yan Xuetong⁵ argues that China must find a balance between acquiring power and consolidating its legitimacy in the international community. In his *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, Yan (2019) argues that great powers must not only develop their military and economic capabilities, but also win the acceptance and respect of other international actors. And while Yan acknowledges the importance of hard power, he also stresses that ethical behaviour and positive image-building are essential to maintaining a leadership position within the international system; vital elements for understanding China's deployment of soft power actions (Yan, 2011).

Another influential Chinese author is Wang Jisi⁶, who has focused on analysing China's foreign policy from a realist perspective. Wang (2011) stresses that although China has sought to integrate into the international system, it remains driven by its own power and security interests. He argues that China, like other great powers, acts pragmatically by pursuing its national interests within a context of competition with other powers, especially the United States.

Based on this analysis, China's military behaviour may be understood through realistic principles. The modernisation of its military, especially focused on expanding its naval and technological capabilities, is in the interest of protecting its national interests, especially in the South China Sea. This strategically vital region has been subject of territorial disputes and represents a key point of competition between the United States and China, with certain points of historical tension such as Taiwan, South Korea and the South China Sea. China's accumulation of military power is seen by many analysts as a direct manifestation of the principles of *realism*, where power is

⁵ Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University.

⁶ Dean of the School of International Studies, Peking University and President of the China Institute for International Strategy.

the primary tool for ensuring survival and status in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2005).

Within this context, *realism* provides a robust theoretical framework for analysing US-China power dynamics. Through its different streams, *realism* allows the understanding of how powers behave according to their national interests and their quest for security and hegemony. As described by this theory, the international system remains a competitive environment where great powers such as the United States and China seek to maximise their influence and prevent their rivals from gaining an advantage.

From the US perspective, *realism* has influenced its foreign policy towards China. As will be discussed below, the containment strategy which started during the Cold War has been adapted to modern times, with policies aimed at maintaining US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region and preventing China from expanding its influence in an uncontrolled manner. Therefore, this competition between the two powers does not only involve military competition, but also economic and diplomatic aspects, where both actors seek to expand their network of allies and consolidate their presence in key international bodies.

To recapitulate, it should be stressed that this branch of the study of international relations remains one of the most useful theoretical currents for understanding contemporary international relations. Its emphasis on power, security and national interests provides a clear lens for analysing the US-China rivalry in the Pacific Ocean. It may thus be observed how both countries, driven by their own interests of power and survival, are engaged in a struggle for supremacy in one of the world's most strategically important regions. Thus, *realism* not only offers us the tools to understand this confrontation, but also to foresee its possible developments and its implications for the international system as a whole.

3 US and China: rising powers and relative decline

The US-China relationship has been marked by a cycle of cooperation and competition that has almost inevitably evolved towards a strategic rivalry (Kissinger, 2011). This dynamic is part of a broader context of change in the international system, where the hegemony of the United States, consolidated after the Second World War, has been increasingly challenged by the rise of China and a numerous open fronts in an international system with increasingly influential actors such as terrorist groups or transnational corporations. Thus, in order to understand this confrontation, it is essential to begin by analysing the position of both countries from the hegemonic powers theory point of view. The work of George Modelski is especially relevant in this regard, as he explains how great powers rise, peak, decline and are finally replaced (Modelski, 1987).

3.1 *United States: hegemony and relative decline in the 21st century*

Since the end of World War II, the United States has enjoyed a leading position in the international system (Kissinger, 2011). Its military capacity, economic dominance and cultural influence gave it the status of a hegemonic power, which allowed it to shape the rules of the global system and guarantee an order favourable to its interests (Brzezinski, 1997). However, as Modelski (1987) points out in his theory of hegemonic cycles, this leadership is not permanent. According to this author, hegemonic powers experience four phases: rise, hegemony, decline and, finally, collapse, when they are replaced by a new emerging power. Within this context, it is possible to envisage the US entering a phase of relative decline, facing increasing competition from China, which threatens its hegemonic status and its role as a global beacon of Western security and values.

US hegemony, which was consolidated in the second half of the twentieth century, has experienced multiple challenges in the twenty-first century. Modelski (1987) argues that the decline of a hegemonic power often manifests itself in the loss of control over global economic and geopolitical dynamics. In the case of the United States, the 2008 financial crisis marked a turning point that revealed structural weaknesses in its economy and weakened its ability to lead the global financial system with the same authority as in previous decades (Modelski, 1987). Moreover, increasing domestic political polarisation and the erosion of its international image—especially after the war in Iraq and the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2022—have undoubtedly eroded its legitimacy as a world leader in the eyes of its key allies. It should be noted, however, that the United States is not withdrawing from key US foreign policy areas and its international military presence remains vital, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

Another key indicator of the relative decline of the United States may be found in the shift in the distribution of economic power at the global level. While the United States remains the world's largest economy, China has rapidly closed the gap, becoming the second largest and the engine of global growth in terms of output and trade⁷. This phenomenon, as Modelski (1987) argues, is typical of the decline phase of a hegemony, when other powers emerge as serious competitors capable of challenging the leadership of the dominant power while simultaneously reducing the hegemonic power's capacity for influence.

However, this decline does not imply a total loss of influence. The United States continues to maintain an unrivalled military capability, boosting major advances in military industry, with a global presence, and leading key institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Friedberg, 2018). Moreover, it continues to be a central power in international relations thanks to its strategic alliances

⁷ To understand the magnitude of this historic event, it is worth pointing out that China has maintained an average annual GDP growth between 2000 and 2023 of 8.29%, making it the second largest economy in the world since it overtook Japan in this global ranking in 2010.

and its network of defence agreements, which means that US strategy has two options according to Modelski's model: delaying this hegemonic shift or resuming the path of hegemony.

Additionally, China's rise and the reconfiguration of the global order present a direct challenge to its dominant global position, especially in the Pacific region, where a key part of its containment strategy is at stake. In this new phase of rivalry, the competition between the two powers has extended to the field of technology, an increasingly decisive area for global hegemony. Mastery over advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, 5G and cybersecurity, has also become a key part of strategic competition, with profound implications for 21st-century economic, military and social control.

3.2 China: the rise and reconfiguration of global power

China's rise over the past four decades has been unprecedented in recent history (Allison, 2017). Since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the 1980s, China has established itself as a major economic power and, more recently, has begun to expand its political and military power. In terms of Modelski's (1987) theory of cycles, China is in a phase of ascendancy, challenging the established US order and seeking to redefine the rules of the international system in its own interests.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	
Construction	Africa	-9%	-7%	9%	-26%	3%	-46%	-16%	8%	47%
	Central Asia	-89%	-62%	1,409%	-70%	48%	-54%	764%	-93%	368%
	East Asia	-18%	24%	-25%	5%	7%	26%	-45%	41%	-63%
	Europe	-33%	-23%	267%	-59%	79%	-37%	160%	-74%	-15%
	Latin America & Caribbean	-39%	-25%	172%	-25%	-52%	-20%	60%	423%	-95%
	Middle East	19%	60%	-22%	55%	-19%	-59%	36%	14%	35%
	Pacific	5%	18%	272%	-60%	-17%	-56%	-100%		-43%
	South Asia	294%	-58%	-36%	45%	-3%	-64%	-7%	-25%	171%
Investment	Southeast Asia	101%	28%	-18%	1%	39%	-25%	-40%	16%	8%
	Africa	-48%	12%	-49%	170%	-7%	-64%	234%	-39%	114%
	Central Asia	-74%	-76%	211%	-36%	342%	-100%		-68%	53%
	East Asia	83%	-66%	90%	20%	95%	-68%	-43%	129%	94%
	Europe	-17%	-7%	7%	-33%	56%	-80%	35%	-100%	
	Latin America & Caribbean	-92%	227%	-38%	749%	-41%	-25%	-51%	4%	108%
	Middle East	0%	769%	32%	-8%	24%	-92%	322%	341%	-43%
	Pacific	-55%	-64%	117%	-56%	253%	-100%			
South Asia	309%	-32%	-26%	102%	-62%	103%	-93%	197%	-42%	
Southeast Asia	170%	-33%	61%	-20%	-53%	52%	-69%	143%	27%	

Figure 1. Overall scope of the Belt and Road Initiative by region and project type. *Source:* Green Finance & Development Centre, FISF Fudan

China has based its rise on a combination of economic growth, infrastructure investment and military modernisation. Without doubt, it has experienced unparalleled growth since it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2000. An excellent example of

this is the Belt and Road Initiative⁸, through which China has extended its economic influence around the world, securing access to strategic resources and key markets. China's economic expansion, accompanied by its increasing military projection, especially in the Pacific and South China Sea, is evidence of the momentum of a rising power (Shambaugh, 2020). This process reflects its strategy to consolidate itself as a key regional force, taking advantage of its natural environment as a space for growth and strategic assertion.

In tandem with this geopolitical evolution, China's economic growth has transformed not only its position on the international stage but also global power dynamics. As its economy has grown, China has sought to consolidate its influence in international bodies such as the United Nations and has begun to form strategic alliances that counterbalance those of the United States, particularly in Asia and Africa.

This strategy responds to a pattern of behaviour whereby emerging powers tend to seek spheres of influence that allow them to challenge hegemonic power without directly confronting it on all fronts (Modelski, 1987). It has thus developed a series of political and economic tools that allow it to penetrate different international contexts thanks to a progressive —and sometimes aggressive— development of its soft power. This has led, for example, to the development of international organisations parallel to the traditional Western economic and financial organisations, such as the Asian Development Bank.

This is closely related to another of the most notable focal points of Chinese foreign policy in recent years, its relations with the so-called Global South. In this sense, China has strategically increased its influence in the Global South, redefining the global power landscape and positioning itself as a central figure in the development of new structures of international cooperation. This approach is manifested in its participation in forums such as BRICS, formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and has expanded with the BRICS+ proposal, which includes other emerging countries.

The importance of BRICS in China's foreign policy is not only limited to their economic weight, but also to their ability to form a cohesive bloc that can act as a counterweight to traditionally Western influences in the global financial and political arena. This effort is part of a broader strategy to strengthen South-South relations by promoting economic cooperation and mutual development among developing countries, which in turn broadens China's sphere of influence and reinforces its position as a leader among emerging economies.

Thus, within the context of these efforts, China not only continues its quest to expand its access to vital resources and markets, but also to cement its status as a

⁸ Launched in 2013, it is a vast infrastructure and economic development project spanning more than 140 countries across Asia, Africa and Europe.

global actor capable of challenging Western hegemony (Economy, 2018). As a result, the implementation of these strategies has enabled China to position itself as an indispensable leader for many developing countries, which perceive China as an alternative development model and a strategic partner in their quest for greater autonomy on the international stage.

However, this effort to boost its global leadership is not only manifested in the economic and political sphere but also extends to the military sphere. In this area, albeit with a strong internal rather than external approach, China has focused its efforts on modernising its military, especially its navy, in order to project its power in the Pacific and the South Sea. In this regard, the *China Defence White Paper* of 2019⁹ describes how the South China Sea is an area of special interest for China and places special emphasis on an active defence policy, not discarding the use of force if necessary (Jinping, 2022). An example of this has been the development of a significant military presence by building bases on artificial islands, increasing the number of patrol vessels, or the increasingly recurrent claims of sovereignty over the territorial waters of neighbouring countries.

As will be discussed below, these actions are seen by many as an attempt to assert control over a key region for world trade, and as a direct challenge to the US military presence in the region. In this stage of its rise, China is seeking to consolidate its position as the leading regional power, a goal that is in line with the behaviour of the emerging powers, which historically aspire to regain what they consider to be their own, a hegemonic position in the international order.

In this sense, from China's perspective, the country has considered itself to be a hegemonic power since time immemorial, yet in its strategic documents—for example, in its *Defence Book of 2019*—, it makes numerous references to staunch opposition to US hegemonism. Throughout its history, China has exerted significant influence over the international system, particularly in Asia, where its power was manifested through cultural and tributary relations rather than territorial expansion or military aggression towards other countries in the region (Allison, 2017).

This view, deeply rooted in its culture and history, sees China as an ancient and advanced civilisation, which played a central role in the regional balance of power, promoting order and stability without resorting to conquest or violent rule. However, this perception of benevolent hegemony was drastically altered by 19th-century events such as the Opium Wars and the humiliation inflicted by Western powers, which reduced China to a weak and fragmented State (Song, 2009).

Today, China's rise must be understood in light of this historical context. For China's leaders, regaining its position as a global power is not a matter of aggressive expansion, but of restoring the country's natural hegemonic role before its "century of

⁹ Available online at: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html

humiliation”¹⁰. From the perspective of *realism*, this process implies an accumulation of economic, military and diplomatic power to ensure China’s survival and national interests in a competitive international system, elements that are perceived in relation to its comparison with the main actors in the region.

REGIONAL COMPARISON OF THE PRC'S 2022 OFFICIAL DEFENSE BUDGET	
	2022 \$ Billion
PRC (official defense budget)	\$229
India	\$74.4
Japan	\$51.9
Russia (national defense budget)	\$90.9
South Korea	\$42.5
Taiwan	\$16.8

Table II. Regional comparison with China’s official defence budget (2022). *Source:* United States Department of Defense

However, *realism* also underlines that this rise is taking place in an anarchic environment, forcing China to act with pragmatism and caution, expanding its influence without provoking open conflict with the United States. Thus, understanding China’s projection in the 21st century through this realist lens allows for a better understanding of its strategies, which seek to reassert its status as a great power without replicating the aggressive models of Western imperialism.

Additionally, Chinese *realism*, developed by authors such as Y. Xuetong and W. Jisi, has guided many of the country’s strategic decisions. Xuetong underscores the importance of moral power as a complement to economic and military power, arguing that, to consolidate itself as a global power, China must gain international legitimacy and project an image of justice (Yan, 2019). For example, the premise of non-intervention in the affairs of other countries—a fundamental pillar of China’s historical foreign policy—may be understood in this light, which the Asian country employs to build economic and trade ties with numerous countries while positioning itself as a neutral actor.

The preservation of a pragmatic foreign policy, focused on defending China’s national interests and strengthening its influence in key areas of the international system, is also clearly observable (Wang, 2011). Both approaches converge in China’s foreign and domestic policy, thus reflecting a realistic vision of its rise, the ultimate goal being to displace the United States as the leading global power.

¹⁰ The “Century of Humiliation” (1839-1949) refers to the period in which China suffered invasions and loss of sovereignty at the hands of foreign powers. It began with the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and included defeats such as those suffered in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Japanese occupation during World War II (1937-1945).

3.3 *The Pacific as a strategic arena for China-US rivalry*

As one of the most geopolitically strategic arenas of this century, the Pacific Ocean has acquired crucial relevance in the geopolitical competition between the United States and China. This region, vital for international trade and strategic military projection, has become the main arena for the struggle for supremacy between the two powers. Controlling the Pacific means having access to strategic trade routes and being able to militarise one of the world's most dynamic areas (Mackinder, 1904). For both countries, maintaining or expanding their influence in this region is key to securing their position in the global system.

Historically, the US-China relationship has been marked by events that have deepened their rivalry in the Pacific. During the Cold War, the Korean War was one of the first direct confrontations between the two countries, which reinforced the perception of China as a communist enemy and boosted the US strategy of containment in the region (Kissinger, 1994). However, after the diplomatic opening in the 1970s, with Richard Nixon's historic trip to Beijing, relations between the two countries improved significantly, allowing China to gradually integrate into the US-led international system (Kissinger, 2011).

In recent decades, however, competition has re-emerged with greater intensity. China has strengthened its military presence in the South China Sea, which it claims almost entirely, in defiance of the principles of free navigation upheld by the US and its allies. For the United States this region is essential, not only because of its



Figure 2. Number of bilateral exercises conducted by Asia-Pacific countries with China and the United States (2003-2022). *Source:* International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

strategic value but also because it symbolises its ability to project power in the Pacific, a key aspect of its global hegemony. Washington's response has been to strengthen its alliances with countries in the region, such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, and to increase its military presence in the Pacific.

Returning to Modelski (1987), this scenario of strategic competition in the Pacific fits perfectly with the model proposed by the author, who suggests that, as an emerging power challenges the dominance of the hegemonic power, pockets of conflict emerge in key regions of the international system. The Pacific is therefore one of those arenas where the struggle for supremacy manifests itself most clearly, with both powers seeking to secure their influence and prevent the other from gaining a decisive advantage.

To sum up, the US-China relationship is profoundly shaped by the dynamics of rise and decline that form Modelski's cycles of hegemony and are largely based on realist decision-making. While the US faces a relative decline, China has managed to rise rapidly and reshape global power. Therefore, the Pacific, as the strategic arena of this rivalry, will continue to be the epicentre of the competition between the two powers, where the future of the international order will be defined to a large extent.

4 Strategic comparison from a historical point of view: United States vs. China in the Pacific arena

Once the Pacific is understood as the epicentre of geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, where two powers compete for influence in a region vital for global trade, energy resources and international security, it is worth highlighting the strategic visions of each actor. From economic and trade strategies to military alliances and soft power diplomacy, both Washington and Beijing have deployed a variety of instruments to consolidate their influence in the region, in a confrontation that extends far beyond the military to encompass multiple dimensions of international power.

Firstly, the United States has maintained a pre-eminent position within the international economic system, especially in the Pacific. Throughout recent history, Washington has promoted trade agreements that seek to integrate the region's economies under a liberal model of open trade and economic cooperation. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) —although aborted in 2017— was one of the largest US attempts to counter China's growing influence, bringing together 12 countries representing 40% of global GDP¹¹. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), launched in 2022, represents a renewed US effort to establish an economic network to counterbalance China's economic expansion by proposing trade based on more equitable and sustainable rules.

¹¹ Australia, Canada, Mexico and New Zealand are some examples of important economies that were part of this economic-trade agreement which, after the withdrawal of the United States in 2017, renegotiated and signed a new agreement in 2018 called the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPP).

In turn, China has consolidated its economic leadership in the region through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), signed in 2020, which includes 15 countries and represents the largest trade agreement in the world. The RCEP not only expands China's economic influence in the Asia-Pacific but also strengthens its ability to establish new trade rules and norms that favour its interests, directly challenging US efforts to maintain its hegemony in the region.

The *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) may also be added as its main economic tool. Thus, since its inception in 2013, the BRI has channelled over \$1 trillion in strategic infrastructure investments in Asia, Africa and Europe, as well as in the Pacific. This ambitious project connects more than 140 countries through infrastructure networks, ports and railways that seek to achieve and consolidate commercial and diplomatic alliances with key international players. However, the geopolitical implications of the BRI are clear: by providing long-term loans, China has gained economic and political influence in countries of high strategic value, such as Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands. Despite its economic benefits, the BRI has been criticised for generating economic dependency and unsustainable debts, leading to additional geopolitical tensions.

4.1 Alliances and partnerships

Strategically, the US security architecture in the Pacific has been propped up by a network of military alliances that has consolidated its presence in the region over the decades until today, adapting existing resources to the current security context. An example of this is NATO, which has traditionally focused on the North Atlantic

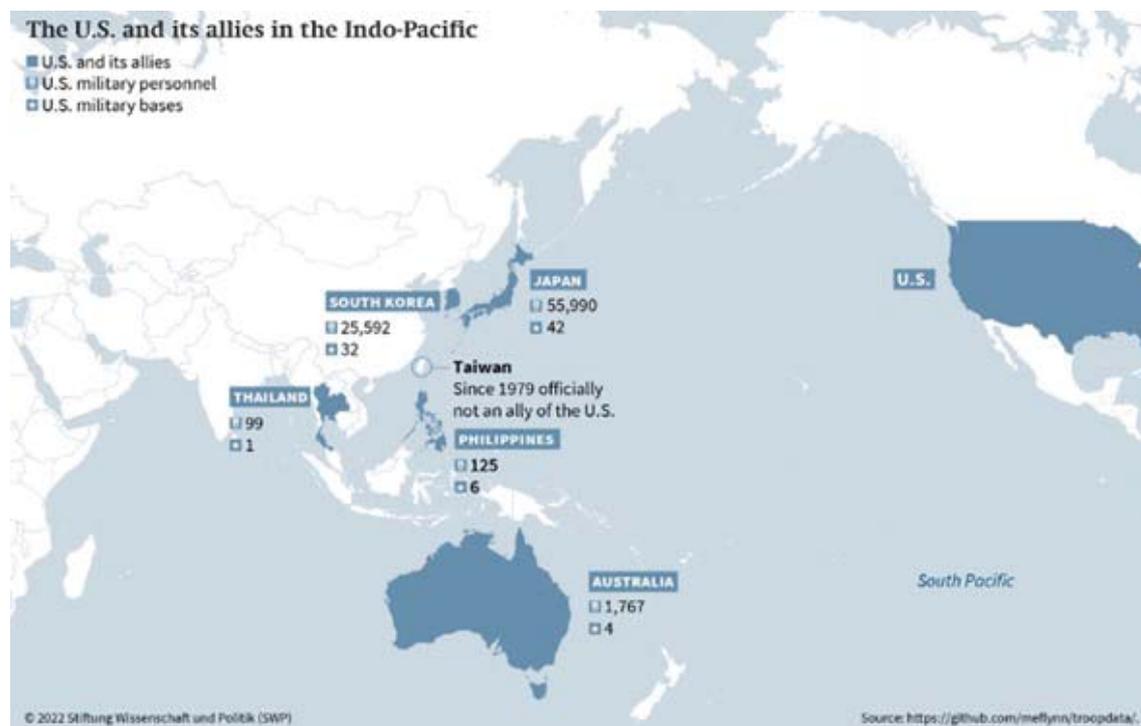


Figure 3. Major US allies in the Indo-Pacific. Source: German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik)

and Eastern Europe, but which, following the expansion of US security interests, has led to the participation of Asian countries in joint exercises and cooperation on cyber-security and defence issues.

In this sense, the key regional alliances of the United States, the organisation's leader, are articulated through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Japan, India and Australia, and the AUKUS, signed in 2021. The latter marks a crucial step in intensifying military competition with China by offering nuclear technology to Australia, strengthening defensive capabilities in the South Pacific and countering China's growing militarisation in the South China Sea.

The US-India rapprochement deserves a special mention. As one of the region's major rising powers, and one of China's biggest competitors, India positions itself as a key player in strategic and technological cooperation in defence. The boosting of this alliance, which is marked by both countries' participation in initiatives such as the "U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership"¹² and the "2+2" Ministerial Dialogue with the goal of achieving significant development in the global balance of power vis-à-vis China, not only strengthens each nation's military posture, but also shapes a cohesive response to China's growing influence and military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. This bilateral reinforcement translates into increased cooperation in critical

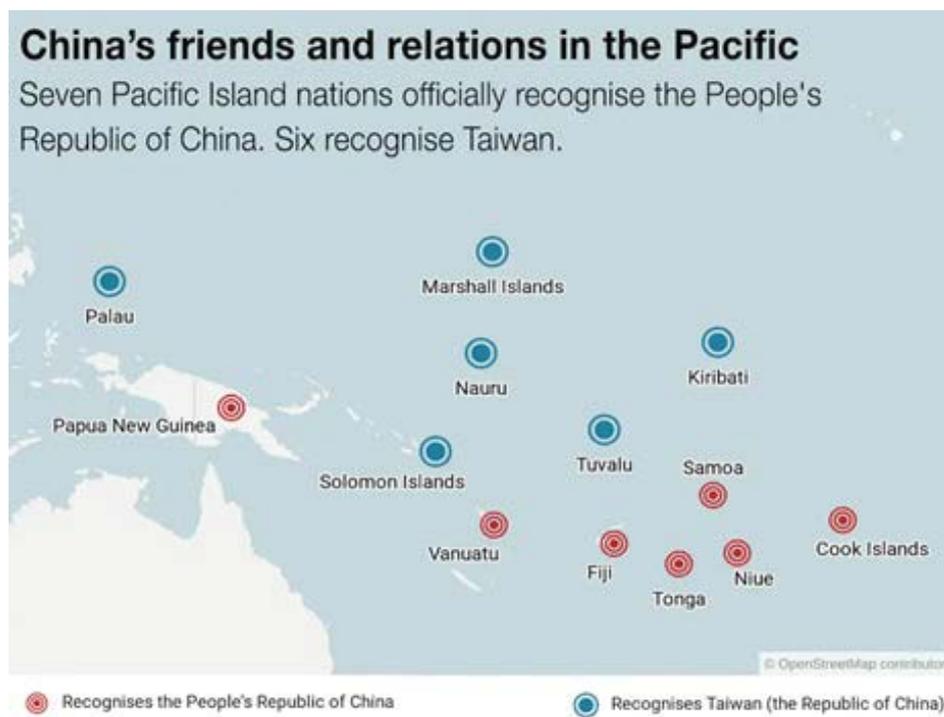


Figure 4. China's relations with its Pacific partners. Source: The Conversation

¹² Negotiated in 2023, this agreement involves the creation and coordination of a space for cooperation in military and defence matters between the two powers in order to generate synergies that will enable the development of joint capabilities in these areas and their mutual exchange. For further information, visit the following URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3433245/us-india-rapidly-expand-their-military-cooperation/>

areas such as military technology and defence, where both countries seek to advance interoperability and force projection capabilities.

In turn, China has relied on ASEAN as a key platform to promote its vision of regional cooperation, although ASEAN's influence has been limited by internal differences among its members. China has also pushed for free trade agreements such as the aforementioned RCEP. These alliances allow China to strengthen its economic ties while avoiding direct military confrontation in a strategy that seeks to minimise friction while consolidating its economic presence.

The United States has deployed a major diplomatic effort to maintain its leadership in the Pacific, using an approach that combines the promotion of democracy, human rights and free trade. Organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)¹³ have become key platforms where Washington seeks to project its vision of an international order based on clear rules. The United States has not only sought to forge diplomatic alliances through these groups, but also to counter China's growing influence by emphasising democratic values and multilateral cooperation.

In this regard, China has significantly increased its economic diplomacy, especially through the BRI, which has provided essential infrastructure investments in key Pacific countries. Beyond economics, China has used its soft power through academic cooperation programmes, scholarships and the expansion of the Confucius Institutes¹⁴, promoting an image of China as a peaceful and culturally influential power. Moreover, in the diplomatic sphere, China has sought to present itself as a defender of multilateralism, contrasting with the more unilateral policy of the United States under the Trump Administration, taking advantage of both existing international forums (ranging from the United Nations to the International Monetary Fund) or promoting its own, of which the BRICS and the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation are noteworthy examples.

4.2 United States and China: strategy and expansion

The United States has maintained a continuous military presence in the Pacific since World War II, traditionally establishing itself as the guarantor of regional security, where this idea can be transposed to the current day through the case of Taiwan. With military bases in Japan, South Korea, Guam and Hawaii, the US has secured vital trade routes and deployed a naval fleet capable of projecting power across the Pacific. RIMPAC, a multinational military exercise conducted every two years, is a clear demonstration of US military capability in the region.

¹³ Founded in 1989, the APEC is an intergovernmental organisation that promotes free and sustainable trade, economic cooperation and inclusive growth among 21 economies in the Asia-Pacific region. It was a major step in realising the growing interest that this part of the world was already starting to generate in terms of trade and economics.

¹⁴ Ever since they were established by China in 2004, there are now more than 460 Confucius Institutes in around 160 countries.

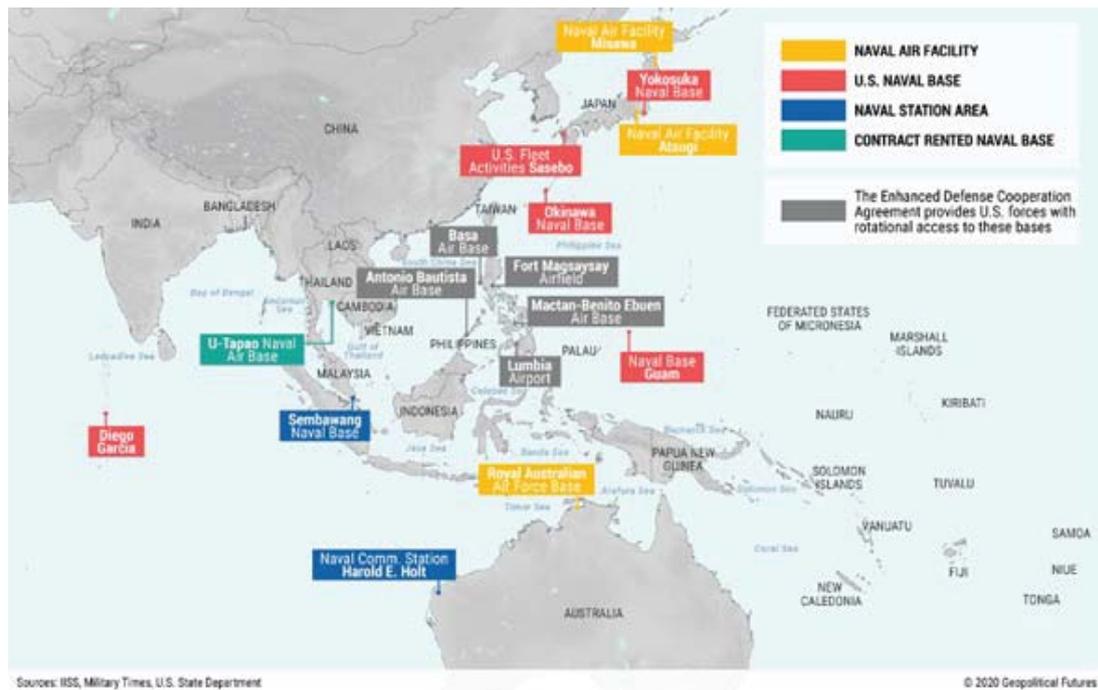


Figure 5. US facilities and bases in the Indo-Pacific. Source: Geopolitical Futures

These exercises do not only showcase US naval power, but also reinforce military cooperation with its allies, consolidating its position as a security leader in the Pacific. For example, the recent renewal of the US-Japan alliance in 2024 has taken this strategic partnership to its highest level in security and defence. This agreement significantly boosts military interoperability between the two countries, enabling the joint deployment of advanced capabilities such as missile defence systems and state-of-the-art technologies.

Japan, which has increased its military spending in recent years —reaching a historic figure of around 49 billion euros by 2024¹⁵— in response to the growing threat from China and North Korea, thus becomes an indispensable US partner in the latter's containment strategy in the Indo-Pacific. The alliance not only ensures the maintenance of a robust military presence in the Western Pacific but also sends a clear message of deterrence to China by displaying a coalition willing to defend the balance of power in the region.

This strengthening of the alliance also underlines Japan's role as a key player in regional security and as a counterweight to China's military build-up. This is in addition to the signing of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in 2023. This marks a historic milestone in bilateral relations, underlining the growing importance of Southeast Asia in the global competition between Washington and Beijing (Melián, 2023). This agreement places the US alongside countries such as China and Russia at the highest level of engagement with Vietnam, reinforcing the axis of containment against Chinese expansion.

¹⁵ To understand the importance of this figure, France allocated around 51 billion euros in defence spending in 2022.

Thus, within a context of growing tension in the South China Sea, where territorial disputes are frequent, this strategic alliance has the potential to reshape the balance of power in the region, positioning Vietnam as a key player in the US strategy to counter Beijing's influence. At the same time, deepening security and defence cooperation, especially in naval capabilities, suggests a mutual interest in strengthening resistance to China's unilateral actions in Pacific waters.

This renewed engagement not only reflects a new phase of US containment policy but also highlights Vietnam's ability to balance its relations with global powers without compromising its strategic autonomy, as it is still highly dependent in trade and economic terms on China, but without neglecting the security aspect of the decision to move closer to the US.

And finally, within the economic sphere, US influence has manifested itself through trade agreements that have integrated the region into the Western-dominated global trading system. Through free trade agreements with Japan, South Korea and other Pacific nations, the United States has maintained its economic clout, although in recent years it has had to adapt to the growing presence of China.

From China's perspective, its expansion in the Pacific in recent years has been remarkable, especially in terms of building strategic infrastructure. China has invested heavily in key ports and logistics bases, such as the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka and in the Pacific islands, raising concerns about the militarisation of these infrastructures. These ports do not only facilitate trade and transit of goods, but also serve as strategic points to strengthen China's power projection in the region.

China's Pacific strategy has been seen by many as a combination of economic expansion and military consolidation. Military reforms since Xi Jinping's rise to power have been a clear demonstration of this Chinese military and strategic ambition. Divided in two phases¹⁶, the military reforms were essentially aimed at transforming the quality of the army and adapting it to the new scenarios of competition. At the same time, Xi Jinping reinforces his role as commander-in-chief and revives Mao's idea that the Party must command the gun and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.

To this end, some of the notable achievements of these reforms include reducing the army's manpower by more than 300,000 troops, the creation of the Rocket Force (PLARF), which is estimated to reach up to 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, as well as the founding of the Strategic Support Force (SSF), tasked with managing the Chinese military's technological warfare capabilities, and the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF). At the same time, Xi Jinping continues to strengthen his and the Communist Party's influence over the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by subordinating military commanders to the Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military authority under his leadership.

¹⁶ 2011-2017 and 2017 thereafter.

Thus, this renewed strategic vision and centralisation of military power may be seen in Xi Jinping’s reduction of China’s military regions from seven regions in 1980 to five (Sierra and Marrades, 2023). These military regions cover different areas of strategic action that essentially locate four of the five theatre commands in the Pacific—the South Sea; the East China Sea; Japan and Taiwan; the Korean peninsula; and Russia’s maritime zones of influence— highlighting both the importance of the reforms and their focus on the Pacific.

The construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, equipped with airstrips and defensive weaponry, reinforces this perception. And while China defends these actions as part of its territorial sovereignty, their impact on regional security has been significant, prompting a firm response from the United States and its allies by boosting defence capabilities and conducting joint military exercises in the region.

Of all Chinese theatre commands, the South China Sea ranks as a hotspot of territorial dispute due to overlapping sovereignty claims between China and several Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. China claims almost the entire sea under its so-called “nine-dash line”, a demarcation that has been rejected by the international community¹⁷. These are not only energy-rich waters, with vast reserves of oil and gas, but also one of the busiest trade routes in the world, with more than \$3 trillion in trade passing through this region annually.

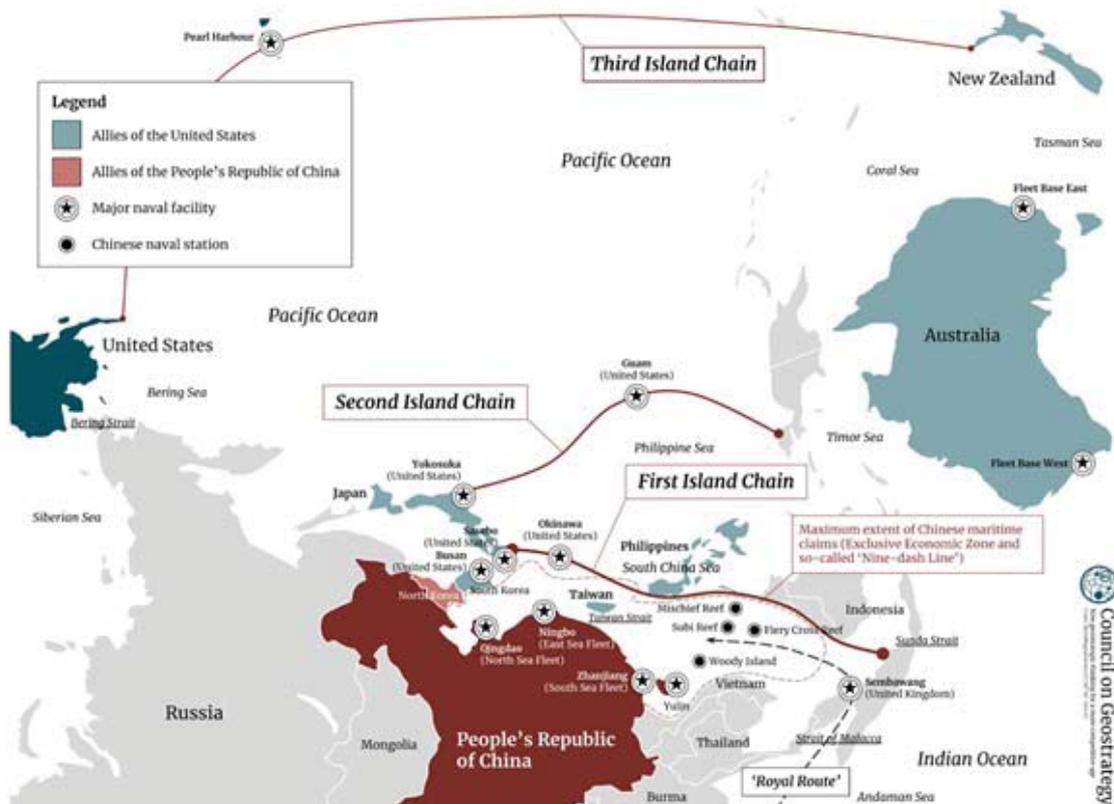


Figure 6. China's island chain strategy. Source: Council on Geostrategy

¹⁷ In 2016, a tribunal of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (not recognised by China) ruled against China's maritime claim, stating that its "historical" claims have no legal basis..

Control of strategic enclaves such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands has intensified tensions, with China building military bases on artificial islands and claiming exclusive sovereignty rights. Layered occupation, in which China surrounds islands with layers of military and civilian presence, has been a key component in its attempt to consolidate its control over these waters. Also known as the *First, Second, and Third Island Chains*—including Taiwan and the Philippines in the first chain to Hawaii and Australia in the last—, this strategy fundamentally reflects China's strategic concepts for projecting its power in the Pacific (Gunter, 2020). Despite attempts at international mediation and unfavourable rulings against China, Beijing has continued to expand its presence in defiance of the established international maritime order.

Competition in the Pacific Ocean is thus the result of a confluence of economic, diplomatic and military factors, reflecting the growing tension between an emerging power, China, and a hegemonic power in relative decline, the United States. This confrontation extends beyond a simple regional dispute to represent conflicting views of the global order, in which both powers seek to promote their respective models. As the balance of power continues to evolve, the Pacific will also continue to be a crucial scenario of competition. An amalgam of economic, military and diplomatic strategies will not only influence the future of the international order in the 21st century here but may act as a catalyst for changes in global power structures in this dynamic arena.

5 Strategic projection and possible scenarios in the Pacific

As a critical arena for hegemonic competition, the Pacific has witnessed a growing strategic deployment between the United States and China, whose power projections have a direct impact on regional and global stability. This section will analyse the strategic and military perspectives of both actors, as well as the possible scenarios that may emerge from this rivalry, highlighting the role of alliances, technology and geopolitical factors that will define the future of the region.

5.1. Indo-Pacific Influence: US perspective

Based on this analysis, it may be claimed that the US has developed a complex Indo-Pacific strategy based on deterrence, alliance-building and a constant military presence. This approach responds primarily to China's growing influence as a regional power and seeks to maintain a balance of power favourable to US interests that it has sought to maintain since World War II.

In this line, the first decisive step towards this new strategy was crystallised through the so-called *Pivot to Asia*, initially launched under the Barack Obama Administration on the basis of a 2011 article for Foreign Affairs by the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. By becoming an integral part of this new geopolitical approach, it was an essential recognition for US foreign policy, confirming its growing importance in global

geopolitics (Clinton, 2011). This strategic repositioning reaffirmed US commitment to the region, strengthening relations with key allies such as Japan and Australia, while increasing military and diplomatic presence to contain China's influence. This strategy has been continued and adjusted under subsequent administrations.

Under Donald Trump, the 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly identified China as a systemic threat, marking a shift towards a more aggressive stance towards Beijing's economic and military expansion. The trade wars, which imposed tariffs on Chinese goods, not only had an economic impact but also symbolised the growing tension between the two powers. The competition was no longer just military, but extended to trade and technology, areas where China has made remarkable progress. Tensions over the control of 5G, the battle against TikTok under the threat to US national security, or the restrictions on companies such as Huawei and the growing rivalry in the development of artificial intelligence reflect this dimension of the conflict.

Additionally, on the geopolitical front, the defence of Taiwan remains a key pillar of US policy. In order to deter any possible Chinese aggression, Washington has increased arms sales to Taiwan and stepped up naval deployments in the region. Increasing militarisation of the Taiwan Strait and Beijing's pressure on the island have made the issue a critical sticking point in China-US relations. Taiwan's defence is viewed by Washington not only as a commitment to an ally's security, but also as an act of resistance to Chinese efforts to reshape the regional order and ensure balance under the geopolitical double standards applied in the defence of the island.

Following Donald Trump's tenure, the 2022 National Security Strategy introduces a more sophisticated focus on the Indo-Pacific, with strategic competition with China as a central priority. Unlike previous policies, this new strategy focuses on *integrated deterrence*, a concept that combines not only military power but also diplomatic and technological capabilities to counter China's growing influence. The modernisation of China's military and its militarisation of the South China Sea has led the US to redouble its efforts in key areas such as the control of sea lanes and the reinforcement of its military presence at strategic points in the Western Pacific, underlining the importance of this front in the rivalry between the two powers.

Through integrated deterrence, Washington is committed to preventing any attempts by China to redraw the balance of power in the region, ensuring that its military presence and immediate response capabilities keep Beijing under pressure. As a result, for the US, controlling the Pacific is not just a matter of military power, but a key aspect of its overall strategy to contain China and maintain stability in one of the world's most dynamic and strategic regions. The new US strategy thus places particular emphasis on naval competition in the Pacific, where China's growing military capability is seen as seeking to overwhelm traditional defences within the region, involving a combination of conventional forces and cyber, space and intelligence capabilities to secure its strategic advantage over China.

5.2 The “One China” policy and its implications for the region

The arrival of Xi Jinping has undoubtedly been a turning point in Chinese history. He has brought about a renewal of China’s strategic direction in multiple areas, where his intended vision of the country in this new phase stands out. This vision may be understood through three essential slogans: The “Great Chinese Dream”, “Common Prosperity” and “One China”. This analysis focuses on the third slogan.

The “One China” policy is the centrepiece of China’s geopolitical strategy and largely defines its maritime and military projection in the Pacific, positioning itself as a central element in China’s power strategy in the region. This principle, which regards Taiwan as an inseparable part of China, has led to an increasing militarisation of the Taiwan Strait and its surroundings. Chinese military incursions in the vicinity of the island have increased in frequency, reflecting Beijing’s commitment to reunification, even by force if necessary.

In this context, it is crucial to recognise that China’s maritime strategy is confirming the theories of Alfred Mahan (1980), who argued that maritime dominance is essential to global power. By developing a modern naval fleet and militarising artificial islands in the South China Sea, China is effectively putting Mahan’s vision into practice, underlining the strategic importance of maritime control in asserting its global



Figure 7. Comparison of China’s military exercises in Taiwan (1995-2022). Source: Xinhua News

ascendancy. These islands, which are equipped with advanced defence systems, reflect China's desire to consolidate its control over strategic sea lanes while strengthening its power projection capabilities. Control of the South China Sea is essential to secure the trade and energy routes that are vital to China's economy, as well as ensuring a "defensive belt" around its coastline.

Within this context, the militarisation of Taiwan's surroundings is of critical importance. Beijing has made it clear that it will not tolerate any form of independence on the island, and the growing military presence in the region suggests that China is prepared to use force if it perceives an imminent threat to its territorial integrity. This situation has significantly increased tensions with the United States, which remains committed to the defence of Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act (1979) and arms sales agreements, which ensure the island's defensive capability against possible Chinese aggression.

The future projection of US-China competition in the Pacific will be marked by technological and military development, with a particular focus on naval capabilities.

	CHINA		TAIWAN
	Total	Eastern and Southern Theater Command Navies	Total
Aircraft Carriers	2	1	0
Amphibious Assault Ships	3	3	0
Cruisers	8	4	0
Destroyers	42	30	4
Frigates	47	30	22
Corvettes	50	40	0
Medium Landing Ships/ Tank Landing Ships / Amphibious Transport Dock	57	50	50
Attack Submarines	47	31	4
Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarines	6	2	0
Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarines	6	6	0
Coastal Patrol (Missile)	60	60	43
Coast Guard Ships	142	N / A	168

Table III. Comparison of naval forces of China and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait. *Source:* United States Department of Defense

The sea has become the key battleground in this rivalry, and both countries have focused their efforts on modernising their fleets. China, for example, has developed an impressive naval capability with the addition of modern aircraft carriers, such as the *Fujian*, to its growing fleet of destroyers and nuclear submarines.

Table III. Comparison of naval forces of China and Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait. *Source:* United States Department of Defense

Such weaponry will allow China to project its power beyond its immediate borders, strengthening its presence in the western and central Pacific. Additionally, China is investing in cutting-edge technology, including hypersonic missiles and missile defence systems, which will give it a qualitative advantage in the event of conflict. On the other hand, the United States remains the world's leading naval power, with

11 aircraft carriers deployed globally and a network of bases in the Pacific that allows it to project its power in every corner of the region.

However, China's growing military capability is closing the gap, and there will likely be greater parity in terms of naval capabilities in the coming years. This situation could undoubtedly generate an atmosphere of heightened military competition, especially over strategic sea lanes and disputed areas in the South China Sea.

5.3 *A scenario of controlled escalation: unstable equilibrium*

From a realist perspective, a scenario of direct confrontation between the US and China in the Pacific is indeed likely. Both countries have conflicting strategic interests, and the nature of *realism* suggests that when two great powers compete for hegemony, conflict is highly inevitable. Thus, control of Taiwan and territorial disputes in the South China Sea stand out as the most likely points of military confrontation.

China has increased the frequency of its military exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan, while the US has responded with naval deployments in the region and defence agreements with neighbouring countries. This pattern of action and reaction has created a dynamic of escalation that, in a worst-case scenario, could lead to military confrontation.

Thus, the possibility of a limited conflict between the two powers, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, is becoming increasingly plausible as tensions rise. China's increasing militarisation of the region is seen by the US as a direct threat to its hegemony in the Pacific, and therefore this situation, combined with growing nationalism and the aggressive foreign policy of both powers, could cause a small spark to ignite a wider conflict.

An alternative, and possibly more plausible, long-term scenario is that of a controlled escalation in which both powers manage to maintain a fragile balance of power in the region. Such a scenario implies the creation of geopolitical blocs and the consolidation of spheres of influence, where both the US and China deploy their respective tools of power without direct confrontation.

The Pacific region may be divided into two areas of influence: one dominated by China, encompassing much of Southeast Asia and the trade routes through the South China Sea, and the other led by the United States, centred on its alliances with Japan, Australia and other countries in the Pacific. Within this context, both powers could avoid all-out war by creating red lines and tacit agreements, as happened during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union.

However, this balance would be inherently unstable. Competition for global leadership, combined with the tensions inherent to the disputed areas, would mean that any provocation could trigger escalation. In such a volatile environment, the

ability of both countries to manage their bilateral relations will be crucial to avoid catastrophic conflict.

In this sense, the US-China rivalry in the Pacific has implications far beyond the region. This confrontation is shaping up as a civilisational clash between two models of society and governance. While the United States defends a liberal and democratic system based on economic freedom and individualism, China promotes an authoritarian and collectivist model that prioritises economic development and social stability over individual rights.

This confrontation affects not only the powers involved but also other international actors who are forced to align themselves with one model or the other. The outcome of this competition may therefore play a crucial role in defining the global balance of power and the future of the international order. While the prevailing model will significantly influence the control of the Pacific, it could also shape, to a certain extent, the civilisation and value system that will prevail in the 21st century. It is important to consider, however, that other international factors and actors will also play a role in this complex process, adding additional layers of dynamism and uncertainty to the evolution of these global geopolitical events, most notably the rise of the Global South or the evolution of the war in Ukraine.

6 Realism, strategy and power: conclusions on US-China competition in the Pacific

The analysis of US-China competition in the Pacific reveals a dynamic deeply rooted in realist IR theory, where the pursuit of power and national security are the main drivers of strategic decisions by both actors. Although both powers operate from opposing ideological visions, their foreign policy converges in a dynamic structured by the anarchy of the international system and the logic of State survival, reaffirming *realism* as the central operational framework.

For this reason, the US-China rivalry may only be fully understood through the lens of the balance of power that shapes their interactions. The United States, as a consolidated hegemonic power, and China, as an emerging force in the international system, act according to the fundamental principles of *realism*. These dynamics reinforce the inevitability of confrontation as long as power and influence remain in play. Within this context, the foreign policy of both powers develops under a strategic rationale of structural competition, where mutual deterrence and the struggle for global leadership emerge as determining factors in the configuration of the contemporary international order.

Despite the avoidance of open military conflict, rising tensions and militarisation in the Pacific raise the risk of incidents or miscalculations with destabilising consequences. As a result, this interaction between the US and China perpetuates a cycle of actions and reactions that reinforce the perception of mutual threat. This rivalry is thus

manifested not only in conventional terms but also in areas such as hybrid warfare and technological conflicts, illustrating how hegemonic powers adjust their strategies to maximise their advantage in an environment marked by structural distrust.

On the other hand, this unstable equilibrium is not limited to the military realm, but encompasses a broader geopolitical rivalry that integrates economic, technological and diplomatic dimensions, highlighting the complexity of US-China competition. In this context, the confrontation is not only about the control of territories or resources but also about the ability of both powers to influence and redefine the rules of the international system in the 21st century. This is evident in their attempts to impose opposing visions of a global order: while the US promotes a model based on liberal and democratic values, China prioritises stability, hierarchy and State-control. This dichotomy adds a significant ideological dimension to the strategic competition, intensifying the struggle to consolidate spheres of influence that will shape the future of the global equilibrium.

The future of US-China relations will therefore be marked by the constant tension between cooperation and conflict. Although both powers recognise the high costs of open confrontation, structural differences in their worldviews and competition for regional and global supremacy make direct conflict, in some of its many manifestations, a highly plausible scenario. However, the most plausible scenario is one of controlled competition, characterised by a fragile equilibrium where strategic alliances, deterrence and diplomacy structure a sustained rivalry. In this regard, the constant pressure will not only reflect the struggle for global supremacy but will also have sufficient capacity to redefine the rules of the international order, marking an era of prolonged strategic uncertainty.

To sum up, the analysis of the US-China competition in the Pacific shows how the region has become a geopolitical laboratory where differing visions of power, influence and global legitimacy confront each other. Beyond the military balance of power, this rivalry extends to critical areas such as technology and international economic norms, in which both powers seek to shape the international system in their favour. Thus, the Pacific is not only the epicentre of a clash between powers, but also the stage where the rules that could define the global order in the coming decades are being shaped.

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New Labour's grand strategy in the UK (1997-2007): constructivism or realism?

Abstract

This article examines British grand strategy under Tony Blair's New Labour, focusing on Britain's identity as an "pivotal power" and its role as a bridge between the United States and Europe. Within the ideological framework of constructivism and liberal interventionism, Blair merged values and interests in a highly attractive intellectual mix. It was with this ethical approach, where post-modern security pointed to human rights protection as the ultimate goal, that the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone began. However, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, British support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq reflected a shift towards realpolitik. This episode, which has been widely criticised, has parallels with the current era, where historic decisions, such as Brexit and its subsequent development, do not seem to be based on truly strategic considerations.

Keywords

Grand strategy, New Labour, Constructivism, Liberal interventionism, Brexit.

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“I grew up as part of a post-war generation. I voted for Britain to remain in the EEC in 1975. I fought to persuade my Party to become a party of Europe, believing that to be in my country’s interest. I support the European ideal of cooperation between nation-states for the mutual benefit of all. I have no doubt that the future of my country lies in being at the heart of Europe” (Blair, 1995: 2)¹.

I Introduction

International relations theories provide conceptual frameworks for understanding and analysing how State-actors behave on the world stage. According to Alexander Wendt (1995), considered one of the key figures of this discipline and author of the book *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), constructivism is aimed at studying social change through ideas. This approach is in opposition to a materialist view, which holds that material forces *per se* determine international life.

In the case of Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the question of whether he was a constructivist or a realist raises an intriguing debate. Labour brought a new language to the domain of British politics in the late 1990s. However, the facts denote features of *realpolitik*. There are signs that Blair was committed to restoring the UK to glory (Powell, 2011: 262-263). In order to capture the key features of New Labour during the period 1997-2007, this article analyses four parameters.

The first is the hallmarks of the British grand strategy. It especially delves into Britain’s status as a “pivotal power”. It also explores the strategic dimension of the UK’s special relationship with the United States, an issue that has shaped British strategy since the Second World War and which prevailed over other substantive considerations in the decision to become involved in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Secondly, this article dissects the new British Government’s European policies. The arrival of the Labour Party in Downing Street, after eighteen years of the two consecutive Governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and John Major (1990-1997), heralded a major shift in British policy towards the European Union (EU) under the banner of New Labour. Moreover, a key issue in this analysis, which may be associated with classic principles of British grand strategy, is the vision of Britain as a bridge between the United States and Europe (Hill, 2010).

Thirdly, this article analyses the ideological framework. Tony Blair faced major challenges that had remained unresolved in the second half of the 20th century when he took office as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1997. To address them, Blair developed a grand strategy with the ethical dimension at the forefront of external

¹ Tony Blair’s speech to the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung in Bonn on 30 May 1995 is available in full at the following link: <https://dorie.ec.europa.eu/en/web/dorie/details/-/card/235579>

action. This approach has been associated with the doctrine of the international community, presented in 1999. Some have compared it to the policies of William Ewart Gladstone, a Liberal Party member and British statesman who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom four times in the second half of the 19th century. Gladstone played a pivotal role in British politics in the Victorian era (Bogdanor, 2007: 103). However, unlike earlier times, Tony Blair's speech was distinguished by its moral orientation (Dyson, 2009). Blair used the term "devil" in his public speeches to refer to threats such as international terrorism (Seldon, 2001), or to people such as Milošević or Saddam Hussein (Dyson, 2009). This moral vision was projected into external action based on a personal understanding of the UK's rightful place as a great country (Daddow and Gaskarth, 2011). Other issues were its actual materialisation and the deviation of the application of ideas to the real world (Wallace, 2005).

Fourthly, the next parameter under analysis, which is directly linked to this intellectual approach, is the so-called "wars of choice". Tony Blair's tenure as leader of the United Kingdom was witness to crucial international events. This was the case of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 ("9/11" hereafter). For Europeans, 9/11 was an awakening from the Kantian and postmodern vision that accompanied the golden decade of the 1990s. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" interpretation that the fall of the Berlin Wall would bring an end to international confrontation seemed outdated (Garton Ash, 2003b). More specifically, the decision to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 drove a wedge between the UK and other European countries such as France and Germany. It also led to a marked deterioration in Tony Blair's international image (Hill, 2005: 384-409).

In conclusion, it may be argued that New Labour's grand strategy pursued an approach that may be termed selective constructivism, where external interventionism in defence of ethical values intersects with the protection of national interests. While Blair's efforts initially appeared to be successful, the Iraq crisis called into question the fundamental thrust of Britain's grand strategy, which was the UK's ability to act as a strategic bridge between the United States and old Europe (Dunne, 2004). The prevalence of "shoulder-to-shoulder policies" with the United States, over and above other substantive issues, led to one of the biggest strategic blunders in recent UK history.

2 Identifying features of New Labour's grand strategy

2.1 Britain as a pivotal power

Britain's imperial past has historically influenced its identity. They have always refused to accept themselves as a second-tier power. British exceptionalism means that Britain does not see itself as just another country (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 274).

Following the Second World War, Britain's loss of international influence vis-à-vis the United States meant that it lost its status as a major player. Dean Acheson's famous 1962 West Point speech, in which the then US Secretary of State noted that Britain had lost an empire and had not yet found its role in the world, had a resonant effect in the corridors of Whitehall (McCourt, 2014).

This aspiration never completely disappeared, continuing to be an important factor in the articulation of British grand strategy (Morris, 2011). Forty years after this speech, on the 10th of January 2002, *The Economist* published an article entitled "The dashing Mr Blair: Britain has lost an empire but has at last found Tony Blair", which appeared to imply that, thanks to the Prime Minister, the country was once again playing a prominent role in international affairs. However, this ironic epigraph actually concealed a critical underlying message: the Prime Minister's rhetoric overestimated Britain's role in world affairs (*The Economist*, 2002).

New Labour extended the term "pivotal power" to modulate the message of Britain as a global great power (McCourt, 2011). Its significance may be associated with its position as a transatlantic bridge, capitalising on its special relationship with the United States while maintaining close ties with Europe. For Blair (2010), being a pivotal power also meant exercising moral leadership in the face of global challenges, such as the protection of human rights and the rule-based international order. The UK also exercised active multilateralism, presenting itself as a force for good.

Today, the expression "pivotal power" from the 1990s may be reinterpreted as the "Global Britain" vision, following the UK's exit from the EU (Brexit). The two terms emerged in different contexts. While Blair used EU membership as a vector of international influence, the "Global Britain" concept implies a redefinition of Britain's grand strategy outside the EU in key areas such as international trade.

However, the underlying objective is both the UK's ambition to be a world-class country, despite its real limitations. Lord Hurd's famous quote from 1993, noting that Britain has always fought beyond its means, illustrates this perfectly (Edgerton, 1998; Porter, 2016).

2.2 *Special "relationship" with the United States*

The UK-US relationship retained its strategic dimension under New Labour, based on shared democratic values and a liberal tradition. These issues were seen as genuine national interests (Danchev, 2007: 191). However, the UK has always displayed a certain intellectual arrogance towards the United States. From the British perspective, contacts between these two countries have been likened to the relationship between classical Greece and the late Roman Empire, where a sophisticated Greek civilisation (a role played by London) refines the intentions of the barbarians, in Washington (Dumbrell, 2009: 273).

From the US perspective, the 1990s alliance with Britain was not as important as it was before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when airbases on British soil were a vital part of the forward defence against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the Kosovo War generated some tensions. In addition, Tony Blair's patronage of the Saint-Malo Declaration and his support for the development of the European integration agenda cooled relations between the two countries (Dumbrell, 2009: 274).

But 9/11 changed this dynamic. The relationship took on renewed momentum with the UK's active participation alongside the US in its grand strategy against terror: "no other state has the day-to-day engagement in planning and preparation for operations that the UK has with the United States" (McCausland, 2006: 191).

The Bush Administration did not put much pressure on Blair to join the Iraqi coalition in 2003. The President offered Blair the possibility of withdrawing Britain's participation, after realising the difficulty of gaining social support in Britain for the war (Naughtie, 2004: 144). Added to this offer are statements by the Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who indicated that British participation was not essential to US military planning, when it appeared that Blair would not be able to obtain authorisation from the British Parliament to commit British troops (Naughtie, 2004: 145).

Despite Bush's offer that Britain should stay out of the invasion (Bromund, 2009: 267; Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007), the prevailing approach in the Prime Minister's decision was to stand by the US at all costs (Coates and Krieger, 2004; Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 187). The UK's commitment to the US materialised with the dispatch of a sizeable ground contingent at the very start of the invasion of Iraq. This initiative may be interpreted as a move to influence US grand strategy and encourage progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Dunne, 2004). However, the passage of time has demonstrated how this view was distorted (William D., 2024a: 148). Thus, the third way can be said to have evolved from a Europeanist position towards a sclerotic view of continental Europe vis-à-vis the United States as the land of promise (Wallace, 2005: 61). Britain was too absorbed in its role as clever Greece advising and influencing powerful Rome to realise that it was in fact being used by the United States to impose its strategy unilaterally (Porter, 2010).

3 Renewed Europeanism

Blair tried to dissociate Eurosceptic dynamics as a hallmark of "Britishness" (Riddell, 2006; Seldon and Snowdon, 2007: 572). New Labour's grand strategy pursued a European agenda of renewal, where the UK was called upon to lead a transformative process of organisation for a post-modern world.

Tony Blair addressed the public in a cosmopolitan and global way, as if in his view, there were no borders. This form of looking at the world may be compared to Ernest Bevin's original vision, when he pointed out that the goal of his foreign policy was for anyone to be able to board a train from London's Victoria Station and travel to any

place without being asked to show their papers. Blair thus sought to reposition British opinion towards major issues that would shape Europe's future: enlargement of the Union, its economic management and institutional reform. The reality was, however, quite different (Young, 1998: 514).

Initially, New Labour was clearly pro-European. Its ideas were boosted by rhetoric presenting Britain as a pivotal power and a bridging nation between the US and the EU (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 154-157). Tony Blair was considered pro-European, at least at the beginning of his term as Prime Minister. In his 1995 speech at Chatham House, entitled "The Future of Europe", Blair pointed out that to doubt Europe was to deny Britain's historic role as a major global player².

His election in 1997 pointed to a different relationship with Europe than that of his predecessors, Margaret Thatcher and John Major (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 154). For continental European nations, accustomed to British delegations that did not guarantee progress on agreements reached, the arrival of New Labour meant dealing with a British Government that aspired to lead the Union in a style that verged on condescension. Specifically, in his initial visits to European countries in the early days of his term in office, Blair's message promoted the liberal economic model of the third way as opposed to the social policies of Jacques Delors. This wide-angle vision, commonly referred to in Blair's language as *le grand tableau*, was founded on an economy based on knowledge, skills and creativity (Pollack, 2000).

The United Kingdom was one of the most proactive countries in the Lisbon Agenda, the name given to the programme adopted by EU Member States at the European Council of 23-24 March 2000. Its aim was to make the Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by 2010 (European Council, 2010)³.

With regard to economic policies, Blair appeared to herald a decidedly pro-European decade for the first time in British history. While the rhetoric was openly inclusive, the new Labour Government was ambivalent about a project as sensitive as the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Applebaum, 1997: 57). Launched in 1988 by Jacques Delors, then President of the European Commission, 1999 witnessed one of its milestones, the entry into force of the single currency (Wall, 2008b), a historic initiative that Britain did not join: "As to Britain and the Euro, we will make our decision not on political grounds but on the basis of our national economic interests" (Blair, 1999a).

² Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-06-08-EU1995.pdf>

³ The Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council of March 2010 are available at the following link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21032/consejo-europeo-de-lisboa-conclusiones-de-la-presidencia.pdf>

The decision to reject the euro had already been taken internally by Blair's Labour Government at the end of 1997⁴. Tony Blair's argument was to wait and watch whether the Common Market would move forward. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, applied five economic tests (Grant *et al.*, 1997)⁵, the results of which were the subject of his statement dated 27th of October 1997 in the House of Commons, in which Gordon Brown (1997: 585-586) concluded that more time was needed to introduce the single currency in Britain:

“The Treasury's assessment is that, in vital areas, the economy is not yet ready for entry and that much remains to be done. The previous policy of keeping options open without making active preparations has left parts of the economy unprepared. Our overall assessment is that Britain needs both a period of preparation and a settled period of sustainable convergence, both of which require stability.”

Britain was also a promoter of progress in EU foreign and security policy in practical terms (Wall, 2008c), illustrating a desire to demonstrate closer ties with the EU (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 155). The traditional British position in this field was entrusted to NATO. This was the preference of successive governments, understood as the established position over many years (Moravcsik, 1998: 5-6), regardless of which political party was in power (Dover, 2005: 508).

Within this area, the shift in British strategy towards greater European integration opened up new avenues of understanding in security and defence matters, which would be reflected in the Saint Malo agreements in 1998 (Kramer, 2003: 81). There are three reasons behind this initiative for enhanced cooperation between the UK and France, signed by the two countries on 6 December 1998 in the French city.

The first was to improve Europe's military capabilities to intervene in humanitarian crises and reduce its marked dependence on the United States (Dover, 2005: 513), in view of the Union's inability to act in serious situations in Europe such as Kosovo in 1998 (Brookshire and Hennessy, 2003; Hennessy, 1998; Seldon, 2001).

The second was to favour a proactive and constructive attitude towards the Union's military role, without the traditional view of NATO as a competing actor in European security, a shift that may be interpreted as a tactical move that did

4 Fiscal independence was a major factor in this decision. The UK joined the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1990, with an exchange rate against the Deutsche Mark of 2.95%. On 16 September 2022, its value reached the minimum permitted level of 2.82%. On that day, known as Black Wednesday, the British Government was forced to raise interest rates to 15% and inject £16 billion from reserves to keep the British currency in the markets, resulting in an economic depression and an unsustainable deficit. As a consequence, the UK was expelled from the European exchange rate mechanism, with consequent loss of credibility.

5 The five economic tests meant to assess the feasibility of adopting the euro were:

«(1.) Are business cycles and economic structures compatible so that we and others can live comfortably with euro interest rates on a permanent basis?; (2.) if problems emerge, is there sufficient flexibility to deal with them?; (3.-) would joining the EMU create better conditions for firms making long-term decisions to invest in Britain?; (4.) what impact would entry into the EMU have on the competitive position of the UK's financial services industry, especially in the City's wholesale markets?; and (5.) will joining the EMU promote higher growth, stability and a lasting increase in jobs?»

not alter the traditional British strategy of favouring the transatlantic relation (Dover, 2005,: 508).

Thus, the third, more instrumental, motive was that of leading EU security and defence policy as a means of gaining influence among its Member States and in the US. This would thus mitigate the negative effects of maintaining a distance in other areas, such as economic policies (James and Oppermann, 2009: 287-288).

The UK also used its role as a pivotal power to favour EU expansion (Seldon, 2007). This was of a strategic nature, as the entry of several Eastern European countries provided greater security against a Russian Federation that was already revealing itself as a country with geopolitical aspirations and assertive messages to reclaim its past (Wall, 2008a,: 29-30). In May 2004, ten new countries acquired the status of EU Member States⁶. This increase came just two months after NATO's eastward expansion. Both processes, viewed together, represented a decisive change in the configuration of the political map and security, with the aim of stabilising Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Solana, 2023: 58).

3.1 Strategic bridge

The concept of pivotal power is very closely related to the key issue of British grand strategy, which is to act as a strategic bridge between the United States and Europe.

New Labour adopted this constructivist approach from the onset. Thus, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook called for a reversal of the classic British grand strategy followed by previous Conservative governments. It was a matter of abandoning the “splendid isolation” –an expression traditionally attributed to Lord Salisbury in association with the strategic advantage conferred on Britain by its insular nature (Howard, 1962)– to exercise a renewed leadership role in Europe (Gale, 2021).

The expression of strategic bridging was not new. For Winston Churchill, Britain was at the intersection of the three circles representing the Commonwealth, the Anglosphere and Europe. Harold Macmillan also used this expression to express Britain's position as intermediary between the United States and Europe (Ashton, 2005). And in the 1970s, James Callaghan, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1976 to 1979, and leader of the Labour Party from 1976 to 1980, stated that Britain was a bridge-building country (*The Economist*, 2002). More recently, Blair revived this idea in May 1997, on the occasion of Bill Clinton's first official visit to Britain: “And a Britain that is leading in Europe is a Britain capable of ever closer relations also with the United States of America” (Blair, 1997). In subsequent speeches by Blair, such as his remarks on 15 December 1998 at the 150th anniversary of the Associated Press news

6 Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

agency, devoted to British foreign policy, this idea of strategic bridging emerges on a repeated basis:

“Britain does not have to choose between being strong with the US, or strong with Europe; it means having the confidence to see that Britain can be both. Indeed, that Britain must be both; that we are stronger with the US because of our strength in Europe; that we are stronger in Europe because of our strength with the US” (Blair, 1998).

Another example of the connection between the US and Europe, and the UK's key role as a connecting actor between the two, may be found in the 1999 Chicago speech, which is also known as the Doctrine of the International Community:

“For Britain, the biggest decision we face in the next couple of decades is our relationship with Europe. For far too long British ambivalence to Europe has made us irrelevant in Europe, and consequently of less importance to the United States. We have finally done away with the false proposition that we must choose between two diverging paths - the Transatlantic relationship or Europe. For the first time in the last three decades we have a government that is both pro-Europe and pro-American. I firmly believe that it is in Britain's interest, but it is also in the interests of the US and of Europe” (Blair, 1999a).

Following the terrible terrorist attack in 2001 that changed the world, the relationship between Europe and the United States was very different. It seemed that Europeans and Americans no longer lived on separate continents, but on separate planets: Europeans on Venus and Americans on Mars (Kagan, 2002).

From the perspective that 9/11 had reshaped international relations, this new paradigm presented Blair with an opportunity to demonstrate Britain's capacity for international influence. Within this context, Blair's remarks demonstrate how the Prime Minister made numerous calls for European countries to show solidarity with the United States, and how he consolidated his privileged position as a strategic bridging actor between the United States and Europe (Sanders and Houghton, 2017): “we have buried the myth that Britain has to choose between being strong in Europe or strong with the United States” (Blair, 2001a).

These same underlying messages were repeated in a speech to the European Research Institute on 23 November 2001, where Tony Blair, using strong pro-European rhetoric, uttered phrases such as “we must be whole-hearted, not half-hearted, partners in Europe” (Blair, 2001b). During this public intervention, Tony Blair also used rhetorical references that acknowledged the vital role of the United States and the importance of the UK as a bridging actor with Europe: “Indeed the UK has a powerful role to play as a bridge between USA and Europe” (Blair, 2001b).

However, in January 2003, the Prime Minister's tone changed. In his speech to British ambassadors, Blair conveyed this goal as an aspiration in the context of a souring of international relations between European countries and the United States: “We can

indeed help to be a bridge between the US and Europe and such understanding is always needed. Europe should partner the US, not be its rival.” (Blair, 2003).

Tony Blair’s speech on 18 March 2003, on the occasion of the House of Commons debate prior to the parliamentary vote on participation in the invasion of Iraq, is prescient, but in a wholly contradictory sense to what the Prime Minister sought to convey:

“Because the outcome of this issue will now determine more than the fate of the Iraqi regime and more than the future of the Iraqi people, for so long brutalised by Saddam It will determine the way Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century; the development of the UN; the relationship between Europe and the US; the relations within the EU and the way the US engages with the rest of the world. It is of utmost importance. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation” (UK Parliament, 2003).

While Blair’s ambition was to set himself as a leader on the international stage, the reality was very different, and what he actually achieved was to widen the gap between the two sides of the Atlantic. The 2003 Iraq War was arguably a profound contradiction to the ethical foreign policy that governed the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone (Bulley, 2010). In particular, blind loyalty to the United States at all costs led to the breakdown of one of the axioms of British grand strategy: to act as a strategic bridge between the new and the old continent (Garton Ash, 2003a).

Recently, Tony Blair himself has openly criticised the breach created by Brexit. However, with the privilege of hindsight, it is possible to draw three connections between New Labour and the rise of Euroscepticism in Britain which eventually led to Brexit. Firstly, ambiguity in European policies in the 1990s –especially, issues such as abandoning the referendum on the European Constitution and refusal to adopt the euro– did not help European ideals to gain ground in British society (Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017). Secondly, the promotion of EU expansion into Eastern European countries intensified fears over immigration. This is a key element of Eurosceptic discourse (Hawkins, 2021). Finally, New Labour’s economic globalisation policies deepened regional inequalities that fuelled a sense of abandonment in areas that subsequently voted overwhelmingly for Brexit (Dorey, 2021: 195).

4 The doctrine of the international community

In 1997, New Labour put forward a grand strategy built on ideas guided by a moral framework for action as its hallmark. British foreign policy would be built on a strong ethical approach, which, in the words of the British foreign secretary, “[...] will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy” (Cook, 1997). This opening strategy made use of soft power, such as the global influence of the English language with institutions such as the *BBC* and the British Council (Cook, 1997), or using the

Foreign Office website (www.fco.co.uk) to disseminate the ideas of the new British strategy (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998: 853).

Two years later, Tony Blair would deliver a speech in Chicago, which is commonly referred to as “the doctrine of the international community”. Broadly speaking, this vision influenced the diplomatic, economic and military policies of Britain's Labour Governments for over a decade. As a matter of fact, it can be seen how Blair referenced international institutions in this speech, directly mentioning the G7, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Security Council, NATO, and the Kyoto protocol, and the need to adapt this architecture to the reality of the international panorama: “We need to focus in a serious and sustained way on the principles of the doctrine of international community and on the institutions that deliver them” (Blair, 1999a). For these reasons, the doctrine of the international community may be viewed as a grand strategy with transformative ambitions, intended to renew Britain's national purpose, abandoning the idea of splendid isolation and reorienting its position in the world as an international actor (Kramer, 2003: 72 and 75).

Liberal interventionism was one of the most characteristic features of New Labour's strategy. Blair's speech in Chicago on the 24th of April 1999 may also be examined in connection to his appeal regarding the grave situation in Kosovo. The atrocity of the events was reflected in the Foreign Minister's speech dated 14th of April 1999: “The mass graves that have been uncovered by our photographs by aerial reconnaissance are the graves not of the casualties of fighting or of war, they are the graves of the victims of war crimes” (Cook, 1999).

A crucial moment was Blair's speech in the British Parliament on the 23rd of March 1999⁷, where he discussed in detail the ethical reasons behind the intervention. In this speech, the Prime Minister argued that inaction in the face of human rights violations in Kosovo would be tantamount to giving *carte blanche* and would defy the fundamental values of the international community:

“If Kosovo was left to the mercy of Serbian repression, there is not merely a risk, but the probability of re-igniting unrest in Albania, of a destabilised Macedonia, of almost certain knock-on effects in Bosnia, and of further tension between Greece and Turkey. Strategic interests for the whole of Europe are at stake. We cannot contemplate, on the doorstep of the EU, a disintegration into chaos and disorder” (Blair, 1999b).

Eventually, *Allied Force*, a NATO operation which ran from the 23rd of March to the 10th of June without a UN Security Council resolution to back it up, was a military success (Bartlett, 2000). The air operations, which lasted seventy-eight days, succeeded in getting Milošević's troops to withdraw from Kosovo. This air campaign was not the only reason behind this success. In addition to the possibility of a ground operation, which had not been entirely ruled out in operational planning, the Russian leader,

7 Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/v0990323/debtext/90323-06.htm>

Boris Yeltsin, also ceased to support Milošević. This withdrawal of support may have been as decisive, if not more so, than the military action (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 157-158).

Once again, Blair used soft power to mobilise the international community in the face of human rights violations. The ethical dimension was a fundamental pillar of New Labour's strategy and its position on Kosovo (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 306). Tony Blair's moral rhetoric promoted international military action in the face of the atrocities committed by the Milošević regime. Blair delivered a series of speeches outlining the ethical principles that guided the decision to intervene. The strong connection between moral values and Britain's national interests formed the basis of the central message within the doctrine of the international community (Gilmore, 2014).

The words uttered by the British Prime Minister in his Chicago speech conveyed his personal conviction (Seldon, 2005: 394) and the ethical justification for intervention in defence of humanitarian principles, linking military action to the moral responsibility to protect civilians in Kosovo:

“This is a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values. We cannot let the evil of ethnic cleansing stand. We must not rest until it is reversed. We have learned twice before in this century that appeasement does not work. If we let an evil dictator range unchallenged, we will have to spill infinitely more blood and treasure to stop him later” (Blair, 1999a).

Those in favour of these ideas, as well as those critical of this values-based interventionist policy, agreed on one central point. It was widely agreed that the Chicago speech was revolutionary, as it broke with the Westphalian stream of international relations, where the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations was considered sacrosanct (James, 2024b).

This intellectual framework may be placed behind other operations abroad, such as in Sierra Leone in 2000. As in Kosovo, the use of force in Sierra Leone was underpinned by a British strategic culture based on liberal interventionism (Daddow and Schnapper, 2013). Here, intervention was motivated by an ideological belief in Britain's responsibility as an international actor to intervene in human rights violations wherever possible (Bogdanor, 2005: 448).

This operation is considered a precursor to the “responsibility to protect” principle. This principle, adopted by the United Nations, is based on the idea that States have an obligation to ensure the security of their citizens in the face of atrocities, and that the international community has an obligation to intervene if the State is unable to ensure said safety (Gallagher, 2013)⁸. Moreover, the operation in Sierra Leone fostered a positive attitude towards interventionism in distant lands on humanitarian grounds within the British Government (Williams, 2001; Dorman, 2018).

⁸ The United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 16 October 2005 is available at the following URL: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf

5 The wars of choice

The so-called “wars of choice”, referring to the military operations engaged in response to the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan (2001) and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, were along the same interventionist lines, both of them part of the grand strategy against global terrorism.

On 12 September 2001, barely twenty-four hours after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for the first time in history, NATO activated Article V of the Atlantic Alliance Treaty, which states that an attack against any member of the Alliance will be considered an attack against the Alliance as a whole. The announcement by NATO Secretary General, the British Lord George Robinson, emphasised solidarity with the United States and thus the determination to act against the global threat of international terrorism (Johnstone, 2003).

Within the United Nations, on 28 September 2001, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1373 (2001), which was the main benchmark for international cooperation in the fight against terrorism⁹.

Furthermore, on 7 October 2001, the US Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte announced the invocation of Article 51 of the UN Charter. Consequently, in application of the right of self-defence, military action would begin immediately against Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (Katselli and Shah, 2003).

Given the speed of US action in the aftermath of 9/11, most notably the early identification of Osama bin Laden as the spiritual leader of Al Qaeda and the organiser of the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, Britain could not sit idly by (Taylor, 2011).

5.1 War in Afghanistan (2001)

The first step of this new phase was Britain's involvement in the 2001 Afghan war. For Britain, Afghanistan was not a new area of operations. The term “Great Game” had been used in 19th century imperialism to describe the struggle between two great powers, Britain and Russia, for control of Central Asia (Rubin and Rashid, 2008: 30). By 2001, however, Britain was no longer a great power, but a satellite country of the United States, adopting the ideas of US national security strategies as its own (Porter, 2010).

The British Government published credible evidence that Al Qaeda was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and that the Taliban had provided safe haven for Bin Laden. Air

⁹ The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) is available at the following URL: https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res_1373_spanish.pdf

strike operations against Al Qaeda over Kabul and Kandahar as part of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, which began on the same day, were supported by the Royal Navy (with Tomahawk missiles launched from nuclear submarines) and the Royal Air Force. Additionally a battle group of 1,700 British commandos joined the *Enduring Freedom* forces.

In 2001, the traditional annual speech at London's Guildhall, known as the Lord Mayor's Banquet, was held on the 12th of November, with the operation already underway. At this event, Blair referred to the complicated humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, an issue that made the country a hub for illegal trafficking, as well as a sanctuary for criminal and terrorist organisations. Blair's narrative used the need for stability to justify the operation in Afghanistan (Cawkwell, 2016: 2). Thus, the war on terrorism was explained in the form of a political action aimed at eliminating the conditions under which "such acts of evil can flourish and be tolerated" (Blair, 2001a).

Subsequently, Tony Blair's personal action at the Bonn conference on 5 December 2001 was key to securing international agreement to form an international force that would operate in Afghanistan. A fortnight later, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1386 (2001)¹⁰ which led to the creation of the ISAF (*International Security Assistance Force*) to assist the interim authority in Afghanistan. Britain led the first ISAF contingent in Kabul, which relieved the US provincial reconstruction team for the transition from combat to stabilisation operations (Suhrke, 2011).

Twenty years on, the balance sheet is not positive. In 2021, the US withdrew from Afghanistan, a unilateral decision that was "driven not by grand strategy but by politics" (Blair, 2021). It is striking that the national security strategy "Global Britain in a Competitive Age", published in March 2021, explicitly alluded on two occasions to supporting the Afghan Government to stabilise the country. However, barely a month later, on the 13th of April 2021, Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by the 11th of September 2021. This decision was taken without consulting its main ally, the UK, the second largest international contributor to the mission, with 20 years of uninterrupted presence, more than 100,000 troops deployed during that time and 457 killed in action. This argument brings into question the so-called "UK-US special relationship" as a major component of a British global grand strategy worthy of such status (Clarke, 2023).

5.2 *Invasion of Iraq (2003)*

Tony Blair believed that toppling Saddam Hussein was the right path for Britain to follow as a logical outcome of the international community doctrine outlined in his 1999 Chicago speech. Thus, the invasion of Iraq was conceived of as a liberal war, justified on humanitarian grounds and for the protection of human rights (Freedman,

¹⁰ Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/454998>

2005: 88). Moreover, the British Prime Minister believed that regime change would cause a benign domino effect that would facilitate democratisation dynamics in Middle Eastern countries (Porter, 2018: 57).

Tony Blair's main justification for British intervention in the invasion of Iraq was threefold: the imminent threat posed by the possession of weapons of mass destruction, or a clear intention to manufacture them; connections with international terrorist groups, primarily Al Qaeda; and the continuing human rights violations under Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime (Freedman, 2005; Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 211)¹¹.

Eventually, following two rounds of voting in the British Parliament, the decision to join the war was officially adopted (William D., 2024a: 172)¹². For Coates and Krieger (2004), this decision, attributable to Parliament as a whole, challenges the British *establishment* itself, despite Blair's very direct involvement and personal leadership style. Robin Cook himself, who resigned as Foreign Secretary on the 17th of March 2003, on the eve of the vote in the House of Commons, argued that he could not support this military intervention (Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 206).

The official enquiry into Britain's involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, led by Sir John Chilcot, revealed that there had been no real need for pre-emptive action that would justify the invasion of Iraq. The declassification of the official report on 6 July 2016 caused public shock because of the forcefulness of the condemnation, despite widespread public belief that the war had been a grave mistake (McTague, 2016). The "Chilcot Report", as it is commonly known, concluded unequivocally that the UK Government had exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his access to weapons of mass destruction as a reason to support the United States and justify the invasion¹³.

Based on the information published in this official report, William D. James (2024) identifies two key moments in the British decision to become involved in the invasion of Iraq. Both are at the level of a grand strategy.

The first is the meeting held on the 23rd of July 2002, at the request of Defence Minister Geff Hoon. This meeting may well be likened to a modern-day National Security Council, an element that did not exist at the time. The meeting was

¹¹ The original transcript of the full speech may be found at the following URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/2870581.stm

¹² Voting was held on the 26th of February and the 18th of March. In the latter round, the vote in favour of invading Iraq prevailed over the dissenting votes of Liberal Democrats and left-liberal MPs. Specifically, the British Parliament approved the use of all necessary means to overthrow Saddam Hussein with 412 votes in favour and 149 against in the House of Commons.

¹³ The Chilcot Report was commissioned in 2009 by Gordon Brown as Prime Minister. It covers the period from 2001 to 2009. Its conclusions were reached by reliable and impartial analysis of the evidence offered by detailed scrutiny of secret, but subsequently declassified official documentation in the UK's national archives. The twelve volumes resulting from this investigation may be consulted at the following URL: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20171123122743/http://www.iraquinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>

attended by the key decision-makers on the intervention in Iraq. In addition to Prime Minister Tony Blair, it was attended by the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Defence Secretary Geff Hoon, the Chief of Defence Staff, intelligence officials, and key staff from 10 Downing Street (James, 2024a: 161). Among them the only dissenting voice was that of Jack Straw. He questioned the utility of invading Iraq due to its links to weapons of mass destruction, when other scenarios, such as Iran, Libya, or North Korea, presented a higher level of threat (Chilcot *et al.*, 2016). However, for the Prime Minister, not participating in the Iraq operation would have been tantamount to breaking the special relationship between the UK and the US. Alastair Campbell, his communications director, recorded this moment in his personal memoirs: “when Jack [Straw] commented on the possibility of not supporting the United States, TB [Tony Blair’s acronym] said it would mean the biggest change in foreign policy in the last fifty years” (Campbell and Hagerty, 2013: 279).

The second key moment was on the 28th of July 2002, when Blair wrote to George W. Bush: “I will be with you, come what may” (Chilcot *et al.*, 2016), signalling unconditional British support for the US invasion of Iraq.

By September 2002, Tony Blair was resigned to the inevitability of war in Iraq. Unilateralism prevailed over multilateralism. Eventually, under the guise of the threat to international security posed by the combination of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime, Tony Blair was trapped by the logic of his earlier decisions. The British Government was behaving like a puppet operated by the United States (Wheatcroft, 2007: 7).

The “shoulder-to-shoulder policies” that had been in place since Bill Clinton’s time; Blair’s adherence to the ‘axis of evil’ rhetoric employed by George W. Bush in April 2002; the photograph at the Bush-owned Texas ranch; and his participation in coordinating the “no-fly-zone” on Iraq drove the country into a corner from which it could not emerge without the Prime Minister losing face with its main partner, the United States (Coates and Krieger, 2009). For Blair, the risk of being sidelined by the United States was worse than the risk of public disapproval in Britain (Hlatky, 2013), an argument also used by Robin Cook himself (Hoge, 2003).

Thus, in contrast to the possible argument that the US pressured Britain to join the military intervention, the facts demonstrate that the Iraq invasion was a war of choice.

Wars of choice required considerable defence spending in order to fund military missions abroad. In 2001, the UK volunteered to lead NATO’s ISAF. In January 2022 there were 1,800 British troops on the streets of Kabul (Farrell, 2017: 94). However, in 2008, the UK’s military budget was the lowest it had been since 1930, at only 2.3% of the GDP, in a situation where it would have been almost impossible to undertake a military operation similar in scale to the 1982 Falklands War (Gardiner, 2008). Approximately one third of the total contingent in Iraq was British, responsible for security in several southern Iraqi provinces. It was a grand strategy decision whose effects are still palpable today (James, 2024a: 146). But morale, recruitment levels and operational capabilities of the Armed Forces further exacerbated the effects of this

underfunding. In other words, the means were not sufficient to achieve the ends of their strategy (Bromund, 2009: 271). Moreover, according to the “Chilcot Report”, the troops sent to Iraq had not been properly trained and equipped (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 184-187).

This personal style of governing the nation, which according to Michael Clarke (2007: 174-175) bordered on democratic autocracy, has been described as “sofa politics”. The dysfunctional nature of the cabinet largely contributed to decisions that have been highly criticised, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Lord Butler’s statement that the decision-making process was flawed is at least thought-provoking. Thus, the former Secretary to the Prime Minister’s Office for ten years (under Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair) publicly declared that Margaret Thatcher had a capacity to listen and made proper institutional use of the cabinet. John Major faced internal divisions, indiscipline and leaks, which led him to rely less and less on his cabinet for advice regarding key decisions. And under Tony Blair, the cabinet was virtually non-existent. There are documents on crucial issues, such as the Iraq intelligence reports, which were not distributed to cabinet ministers. No meetings of the Defence Policy and Foreign Affairs Committee were held. Alternatively, the working method was via verbal reports (Norton-Taylor, 2007).

6 Conclusion

Determining whether Tony Blair was primarily a constructivist or a realist in international relations is not a black and white question; after analysing the many aspects of his tenure, a scale consisting of numerous intermediate greys may be found. Its pragmatic approach may have combined elements of both theories, adjusting them to changing geopolitical circumstances. Ultimately, the complexity of political decisions and the interplay between multiple factors make it challenging to place Blair within a specific category, but detailed analysis reveals a rich interplay between ideas and interests in his grand strategy.

The evolving study of the four parameters analysed in this article provides us with an evolutionary framework that may be classified as a kind of selective constructivism. It begins with the prevalence of the ethical dimension —with slogans such as the idea of “a force for good” which justified the theory of liberal interventionism (Daddow, 2009: 183)— towards later positions that fit better within *realpolitik*. In other words, British grand strategy was guided by the primacy of national interests, but without discounting the importance of international ideas and standards.

Despite an exciting start, with a clearly pro-European discourse and achievements in areas such as economic management and the Northern Ireland peace accords, Blair’s legacy is ultimately portrayed as mixed and unfinished. Blair’s attempts to leave a lasting mark on British politics were overshadowed by the Iraq war and other controversies (Riddell, 2006).

9/11 was a clear turning point in British grand strategy, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq as the clearest example. The idealism that underpinned the liberal interventionist approach (from a moral-ethical perspective, Tony Blair considered it an obligation to eliminate Saddam Hussein) ran up against a lack of strategy (the difficulty of shifting from inspiration from the muses to representation on the boards), without a clear vision of what to do, and leaving open the question of how the Iraq invasion would effectively contribute to the grand strategy of the war on global terrorism (Smith, 2007: 392).

Thus, in view of the lack of coherence between theory and praxis, and a political-strategic planning that was overtaken by events, it is appropriate to say that British grand strategy during the New Labour years was contradictory. The clearest example of this is the decision to participate in the Iraq war in 2003. There is general consensus, confirmed by the official enquiry led by Sir John Chilcot, that this decision may be described as a strategic blunder. For Hew Strachan (2013: 218), the “wars of choice”, as the interventions in Iraq (2001) and Afghanistan (2003) are called, were conducted without a clear long-term strategy, partly because the political objectives were unclear, modified, or so broadly defined as to be impossible to achieve. Christopher Elliot (2015) argued that the British Government did not take a comprehensive approach to the problem, both at the highest level of politico-strategic decision-making and at the top military command, where there was strong rivalry between the three armies over budgetary issues in a context of cutting military spending.

Britain’s stance of unwavering support for the United States (shoulder-to-shoulder), which guided Britain’s grand strategy in the global war on terror (Dyson, 2009), has been widely criticised for its lack of coherence (Gaskarth, 2015) and inherent confusion in strategic thinking, issues that have led to the failure to marry political objectives with military action (Edmunds, 2014).

As a final conclusion, within the framework of multidisciplinary and open-minded thinking, as demonstrated by Tony Blair’s words in the first stage of his mandate, the ultimate goal of the process according to post-modern security was the freedom of the individual, where values and interests merged in a very attractive intellectual mix. In this world of ideas, the question was not just about British interests, but about self-perception and identity. In short, it was about reconciling the Britain that it was and the Britain it sought to be (Cooper, 2003). However, the future did not seem to be determined by grand plans, treaties or strategies, but by the decisions of the moment.

This seems to be reproduced today, where issues such as Brexit are openly criticised by a growing section of the population. Likewise, the asymmetry of the special relationship between the US and the UK may still be detected in events such as the US administration’s unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

To this must be added the unpopularity of making commitments beyond those required to protect national interests, positions perceived by society as policy failures (Walt, 2006; Beeson, 2007). Blair himself publicly acknowledged that the Iraq intervention had been a disaster (Branigan, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Webster, 2006). Eventually, the disillusionment of British society contributed to Tony Blair’s

resignation in 2007, due to the strong divergence of policies based on the protection of international values and human rights and his inability to rebuild the political base on which he had twice been democratically elected (Bromund, 2009: 260).

The Blair Witch Project is the title of a well-known found-footage film depicting the search for a young girl who has disappeared in a forest, and when it seems that they are about to find her, she mysteriously disappears. The same was true of New Labour's grand strategy. After an exciting start, with a very clear message about revitalising the UK's role in the world as a bridge connecting the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean, his grand strategy eventually faded out.

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*The return of big numbers to the
battlefield: the quantitative implications
of the War in Ukraine for the Taiwan
ambitions of the People's Republic of
China*

Abstract

The War in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of numbers in military conflicts between superpowers, demonstrating that these wars still largely adhere to the parameters of the modern era and the massive use of conventional weapons. One cannot help but wonder how these observations apply to the case of China's claims to Taiwan; arguably the most dangerous source of tension facing the world. China has a very large population base, which is the focus of this research, thus strengthening its position, and which may prove decisive on the geopolitical chessboard. Observations from the War in Ukraine urge caution and highlight the importance of not relying solely on the deterrence of US military superiority to maintain the *status quo* on the Taiwan issue. It also stresses the need for Spain and the European Union to promote policies that strengthen and consolidate their defence industries.

Keywords

Defence, Military, Conflict, China, Geopolitics.

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I Introduction

1.1 Background and relevance of the research

The war in Ukraine has made it clear that large-scale military confrontation is not as unlikely as previously thought and has quickly generated speculation about a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan (Qin *et al.*, 2022).

In a publication by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), it was stated that:

“What was once unthinkable—direct conflict between the United States and China—has now become a commonplace discussion in the national security community. [...] Taiwan is widely regarded as the most dangerous potential flashpoint for conflict between the United States and China” (Cancian *et al.*, 2023).

The Taiwan issue is complex, sensitive and entails serious risks. On one hand, this is a highly important claim by China, due to various factors such as the presence of the semiconductor industry on the island or to prevent mainland China from being geographically isolated from its outlet to the Pacific Ocean. Above all, however, this is a matter of Chinese national pride, and that makes it a particularly sensitive issue. In 2022, Xi Jinping, in his speech to the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress, reiterated the fundamentals of China’s official policy on the Taiwan issue, which is that the island is part of China and its reunification will be sought by peaceful means, but does not renounce the use of force if necessary, “consolidated commitment to the one-China principle” (Xi, 2022).

On the other hand, US commitment to Taiwan’s autonomy is strong, even arguably stronger than that to Ukraine, and direct intervention in its defence would be likely (Cancian *et al.*, 2023). Along these lines, President Joe Biden told reporters that he was prepared to use force in the defence of Taiwan (Kanno-Youngs and Baker, 2022). The growing tension with China was also evident at the NATO summit in Washington in July 2024, where, in its most confrontational statement against China, it was accused of being “a decisive enabler of Russia’s war against Ukraine” and of continuing to “pose systemic challenges to Euro-Atlantic security” (NATO, 2024).

While the United States leads the way in defending Taiwan’s autonomy, Japan is another potentially relevant actor in this scenario. National security and alliance reforms over the last decade have elevated its strategic role in the area (Liff, 2022: 125-160); the alliance with the United States is fundamental to US military strategy in the event of a crisis situation on the island (Smith, 2022: 69-97).

Due to rising tensions and the precedent of the war in Ukraine, this issue deserves to be explored in depth, in order to gain a clearer view and avoiding misrepresentations.

This research does not take a stance on the likelihood of conflict over Taiwan but acknowledges its possibility.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine is teaching important lessons about the nature of modern warfare between powers. In contrast to the Iraq War, where fighting between the bulk of the forces resulted in a rapid US victory, largely driven by the technological superiority of its resources, in Ukraine, troop advances are much more sporadic and offensives are carried out at a very high cost in human lives and destroyed material. As a Foreign Affairs publication put it, “This war is quite familiar. It features foot soldiers trudging through muddy trenches in scenes that look more like World War I than Star Wars” (Biddle, 2023: 153-164).

The strategic observation of the war in Ukraine has shed renewed light on the importance of the massive use of conventional weaponry; the ability to innovate and adapt to new uses of warfare; and the demographic factor. It is therefore of interest to analyse these factors at the macro level, for the specific case of China and the confrontation over Taiwan.

This approach is of especial interest because, given China’s large population base and considerable resources, as well as military budget, R&D spending, armed forces personnel, or innovative activities of all kinds, the balance of power may be more inclined towards China than before, and this could have very significant consequences. While it is acknowledged that the two scenarios, Ukraine and Taiwan, are very different and that every war is different from the previous one, and will be different from the next one, the lessons of Ukraine are significant because they may provide clues as to where future conflicts may evolve and influence the perception of military force at the strategic level.

1.2 Hypothesis and research objectives

The following research question was defined as the starting point and guide for this study:

What is the impact of the military strategic lessons of the war in Ukraine on the issue of Taiwan?

The hypothesis put forward in order to answer the research question and which this study will seek to confirm or refute is as follows:

The Ukrainian War demonstrates that in conflicts between powers, the quantity and volume of conventional arms production, together with the capacity to innovate in defence technologies and the demographic factor, are central elements. This phenomenon is crucial to the Taiwan issue, as China’s vast production, research and population capacity can shift the perception of forces in its favour.

To this end, the research proposes the following steps:

- First, it analyses the current literature on the war in Ukraine and explores the main arguments leading to the conclusion that macro-numbers are once again a decisive factor in military conflicts.
- The specific case of China will then be examined to determine the extent to which its mass production capacity, innovation in defence technologies and demographics may have an impact on the Taiwan issue.

1.3 Methodology and limitations

Initially, a literature review of lessons learned or the implications of the war in Ukraine was carried out, using keywords related to the research question and only assessing publications following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For this purpose, online academic search engines were used such as the single academic search engine of the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) and specific bibliographic databases accessible from the UAM library, and political science and humanities databases such as Dialnet, Scopus or Web of Science.

Due to the focus of this research, only analyses at a strategic or political level, i.e. macro or statistical levels, and not conclusions on specific operations or tactical combat without wider implications, were accepted. Having identified the main strategic lessons of the war in Ukraine, each of these lessons was explored in greater detail.

This was followed by a literature review and a specific search for data on China with regard to the fields identified above. This is where the research encountered the greatest difficulties, as data on the Chinese military is limited. To remedy these shortcomings as much as possible, searches were repeated, some of the most comprehensive open databases were explored, such as those of the World Bank, the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI) or the *World Intellectual Property Organization* (WIPO), and the search was extended to indirect indices that provided information that could be complementary to the focus of the research. Out of these databases, only SIPRI has a section for Taiwan, and therefore, in some cases, the *Ministry of Science and Technology Statistics Database* of the Taiwanese Government was used. The data found were analysed and presented in an orderly and coherent manner.

The graphs included in this article have been generated by the authors, using the data sources indicated in each case. Additionally, in order to facilitate the reading of the text, quotations have been translated by the author in the Spanish version of this document.

1.4 Structure

Section I constitutes the introduction. It sets out the background and relevance of the research, then states the hypothesis and the intermediate steps to be taken to test

its validity or falsity, followed by a discussion of the methodology and its limitations, and finally the structure of the article.

Section 2 deals with the lessons of the war in Ukraine. First, the general concept of the return of numbers as a key element of warfare is discussed, followed by a more in-depth treatment of each of the three main factors identified: the mass production of conventional weapons, the capacity for defence technological innovation, and demographics.

Section 3 presents information and data on China for each of the three factors identified in Section 2. This section is the most extensive as it is the focus of this research.

Section 4 presents the conclusions of the research.

2 Lessons from Ukraine

2.1 *The return of the mass*

Just three months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a publication in the journal *Global Politics and Strategy* concluded that the Russian army's initial manoeuvre had failed mainly as a result of the following:

“Russia’s military leadership had overdosed on ideas of next-generation warfare, whereby subversion and psychological operations in combination with long-range precision strikes would weaken the enemy so that little conventional force would be needed” (Dalsjö *et al.*, 2022: 13)

Along these lines, a publication by *Foreign Affairs*, entitled *Back in the Trenches: Why New Technology Hasn't Revolutionized Warfare in Ukraine*, highlights how some experts, faced with the advent of artificial intelligence, drones, hypersonic weapons and other advances in military techniques, declared that the Ukrainian War would be “a pivotal moment in military history” or even a new “military revolution”, and nonetheless, the course of the war had demonstrated that this was not the case (Biddle, 2023: 153-164).

After the development of various stages of the war in Ukraine, there appears to be one point of agreement in the current literature, namely that the inclusion of the latest technological advances into warfare has not brought about the hoped-for revolution. According to some experts, what is happening is more of an evolution of the modern system that emerged at the end of World War I, modern warfare against an organised enemy will continue to involve a massive consumption of munitions (Bolton, 2023: 1-14; Biddle, 2023: 153-164). Technology has greatly influenced and modified the uses of warfare, but it has not become the sole criterion for victory or defeat, nor is it facilitating a rapid resolution, contrary to what some had hoped, returning instead to consumption and numbers that were thought to have been left behind in the past.

In other words, as stated in a publication of the *Defense & Security Analysis*, “the Ukraine War has reminded the world of the military importance of mass” (Marsh, 2023: 331).

This premise is justified in several ways. One way is to look at statistics on deaths and the use of military equipment in this war. The above-mentioned *Foreign Affairs* article concludes that the high numbers of destroyed assets such as tanks and aircraft are similar to those suffered at different stages of World War II, and the appalling fact that 80-90% of casualties in Ukraine are caused by artillery is in keeping with the fact that since 1914, artillery has been the deadliest weapon in warfare (Biddle, 2023: 153-164).

It is true that the use of precision weapons, in combination with technological advances that enable the seamless transmission of information, has significantly increased the effectiveness of artillery, representing a remarkable evolution in the art of warfare. In fact, the same study demonstrates how the artillery effectiveness ratio in Ukraine has risen to 8 per 100 rounds, compared to 3 per 100 rounds in World War II. Therefore, technological advances in this field, such as surveillance drones, target acquisition systems, automation and information communication, have been very relevant. However, it also highlights how most of the munitions fired by both sides are relatively outdated (Biddle, 2023: 153-164).

Therefore, some of the most relevant technological advances integrated into this war, compared to World War II, such as precision systems and techniques that accompany artillery and which have led to significant innovation, even at the strategic level, are also conditioned by the use of large amounts of conventional ammunition.

Other analyses of the war have come to similar conclusions. For example, it is argued that during the first stage of the fighting, media attention focused on the anti-tank weapons supplied to the Ukrainians by the United States and its allies, such as the Javelin System. In the hands of Ukrainian special units, these technologically advanced weapons achieved considerable successes and forced a change in the usage and movement tactics of some Russian units. However, Javelin-based actions accounted for a small proportion of the fighting that took place. Conversely, during the first stage of the war, Ukrainian artillery, tanks and regular units played a much more important role in the battles around Kiev, Kharkov and other cities (Marsh, 2023: 329-352).

It is also discussed how, at the start of the second stage, Russia had a roughly 12:1 advantage in artillery guns and was firing around 20,000 shells per day, while Ukraine could only fire around 6,000. This superiority is directly related to Russia being able at that time to advance with its forces, after completely destroying the Ukrainian defensive positions (Marsh, 2023: 329-352).

By contrast, the next phase of the war, in which Ukraine managed to fight back and achieve very significant gains on several fronts, is attributed to the shortage of supplies for the Russian forces, which were spread too thin. This was particularly the case in the Kherson region, where the Ukrainians were able to hinder the logistical crossing over the Dnieper River by Russian forces using precision-guided artillery

such as the recently donated US HIMARS rockets. In parallel to the supply shortages on the Russian side, the United States had also transferred of more than half a million artillery shells to the Ukrainian side. The superior use of artillery ammunition by the Ukrainian side was the main cause of attrition of the Russian forces in this phase (Marsh, 2023: 329-352).

The increased battlefield surveillance provided by new technologies makes it more difficult to conceal force concentrations and other preparatory offensive activities from the enemy, which hinders the launching of surprise attacks on unprepared defences and therefore favours defensive manoeuvres and slows the pace of war. It is when a war drags on or stalls that numbers become very relevant.

Unfortunately, this war is not only consuming weapons and ammunition; the human casualties are tragically heavy. The conflict is leading to a large number of deaths and injuries on both sides of the conflict as well as among the civilian population, especially in Ukraine, and has also resulted in a large number of refugees and displaced persons.

A Ukrainian publication emphasised Russia's superiority at the time of the invasion, not only because Russia had more military hardware, but also because it had almost four times more soldiers in its armed forces (Kyzym *et al.*, 2022: 47-57). In fact, according to one US military expert, if the first lesson of the Ukrainian War is the high cost of arms, the second lesson is the critical value of troop training, without which weapons and technology are ineffective (Bolton, 2023: 1-14).

Other US sources claimed in August 2023 that troop losses due to death or disabling injuries in the conflict could be as high as 500,000 between the two sides. Russian losses were estimated to be around 300,000 and Ukrainian losses just under 200,000, however, the greater number of Russian troops, reservists, paramilitary forces and population meant that "troop deaths could have a greater impact for Ukraine" (Cooper *et al.*, 2023).

These high losses, added to the tens of thousands of civilians wounded or killed and the nearly 8 million Ukrainians who have fled the country since the outbreak of hostilities, highlight the demographic dimension as a crucial strategic factor in the war (Pardo de Santayana, 2023).

2.2 Numerical and industrial considerations

The analysis of the literature review on lessons learned from the Ukraine War at the strategic military level identifies three main factors. The mass factor in the use of conventional weaponry, the factor of the evolution of warfare as a result of technological innovations, and the demographic factor. Of course, more relevant factors worthy of attention may be found in the war in Ukraine, especially at the operational or tactical, organisational or doctrinal levels, however, this research limits the scope of its focus for more a more in-depth rather than general approach, as well as to comply with

the size limitations of this article. This research focuses on macro-type factors at the strategic level. This limitation must therefore be taken into account in the conclusions reached by this research.

2.2.1. Factor I: mass production of conventional armaments

The defence industry, and especially its production capacity, has traditionally been a major factor in warfare. In the case of the Ukrainian War, in which “conventional artillery has fired millions of unguided shells, so many as to strain the production capacity of the industrial bases in Russia and the West” (Biddle, 2023: 153-164), is proving critical.

A study by the *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, which analyses the numbers of military transfers to Ukraine from the US and their replenishment ratio, concludes that most inventories will take years to replenish, and has identified a serious problem in artillery ammunition (Cancian, 2023).

The problem with this type of ammunition may be easily understood if it is noted that the Ukrainian armed forces consumed an average of almost 5,000 155 mm shells daily in 2022, while US production of this type of material amounted to just over 3,000 shells per month (Cancian, 2023). The production figures are expected to increase, but in any case, it is estimated that the war has already consumed six years' worth of production of this ammunition (Biddle, 2023: 153-164).

These data explain why, only one and a half months after the invasion, assessments were already being made such as: “The current level of support to Ukraine is not sustainable for the long term [...] the rate of munitions expenditure in modern warfare far exceeds the current pace of production” (Schaus, 2022).

At the outset of the war, the United States and the European states lacked adequate arms reserves and industrial capacity to sustain a high-intensity war. This is because from the mid-1990s until the war of Ukraine itself, it had been assumed that warfare between the great powers was a thing of the past and that future military operations would focus on terrorism, counter-insurgency or confrontation with militarily weak rogue states, such as Iraq in 1991 (Barnett, 2005).

As a consequence, defence industries adopted efficient production methods, such as those first developed in the commercial vehicle industry, which reduced costs per unit produced, but have also limited the scope for rapid scale-up of production in the event of a crisis (Marsh, 2023: 329-352). Thus, after the first year of the Ukraine War, due to the Russian invasion, it was already clearly identified that the US and its European allies were facing serious production problems (Chávez *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to the fact that defence industries, at least in the West, were not prepared to make drastic increases in production, modern weapons systems have not made it easy either. In general, “because modern weapons require high-tech manufacturing, they take

more time than previous equipment; producing them at scale is difficult, and stockpiles are critical as are the capabilities required to deploy them” (Bolton, 2023: 1-14).

High-tech weapons require complex production chains, for example, the manufacture of the Javelin system involves 16 US states, and the HIMARS system and its GMLRS rockets are manufactured in plants in 141 different locations (Chávez *et al.*, 2023). Each of these plants is a potential bottleneck to increasing production.

The high amount of weaponry required by the Ukrainian authorities has also shown the discrepancies between the European States themselves, and between them and the United States, resulting in at least 154 different weapon systems supplied by European countries and 27 different ones by the US (Bran, 2023: 169-177). The large number of different weapons systems donated to Ukraine creates inefficiencies in its armed forces due to the difficulties of using them and the complexity of the logistics required.

The consumption of arms and ammunition is so high in the war in Ukraine that members of the US administration and Congress were concerned that flows of military materiel to Ukraine might limit supplies to Taiwan (Lubold *et al.*, 2022).

2.2.2 Factor 2: defence technology and innovation capability

The war in Ukraine has also highlighted the importance of mastering new technologies in the military domain and having the ability to innovate in order to adjust to situations.

The increased effectiveness of artillery is most notable due to improvements in artillery accuracy and its use combined with new target acquisition technologies from drones, satellite imagery or signal analysis tools (Bolton, 2023: 1-14). This compendium of innovations has become an indispensable set of technologies and techniques for both sides.

Hypersonic missiles are another example of a new technology with an impact on the war which, for the moment, are only being used by the Russian side. These missiles have hit high-value targets in various parts of Ukrainian territory on many occasions, causing severe damage. With regard to these missiles, official Ukrainian sources have stated that they do not have the capability to shoot them down (Hall and Olearchyk, 2023). However, there are also reports that some have been shot down using the US Patriot air defence systems.

The Chinese military, which possesses such systems but has never tested them in a real conflict scenario, is said to be evaluating their use in Ukraine and analysing the vulnerability of the Patriot system, which currently defends some of Taiwan’s most critical targets, such as radars and command posts (Goldstein and Waechter, 2024).

However, as noted above, the more technologically advanced the weaponry, the more costly and complex its production chain, making it difficult to produce in large numbers. These conditions and the large number of weapons used in the war make it

clear, as Ukrainian sources state, that the development of weapons systems and military equipment must be governed by the principle of “cost-effectiveness” (Krakhmalyov *et al.*, 2023: 117-135).

Technological innovation in armaments and its focus on the cost-effectiveness principle has already had a major impact on the war in Ukraine. In armed conflicts of this scale, it is normal to have multiple cycles of technological races of measures and countermeasures. For example, the sophisticated drones employed in the early days of the war were countered primarily with anti-aircraft missiles, which encouraged the deployment of simpler, cheaper and more numerous drones, which in turn have been countered by simpler and cheaper anti-aircraft artillery or even hand-held jammers (Biddle, 2023: 153-164).

The Ukrainian naval drones have been another example that highlights the importance of the adaptability enabled by technological innovation. Despite having an almost non-existent naval force, Ukraine has used these drones to outmanoeuvre one of the world’s largest naval powers. These drones, costing an estimated \$200,000 per unit, have damaged or destroyed around two dozen Russian warships, up to a third of the Black Sea fleet, including large landing ships and missile carriers worth billions of dollars. These attacks have forced the rest of the Russian navy to withdraw from the Ukrainian coast (Shuster, 2024)

Mastering certain technologies, as well as the ability to innovate and adjust to situations, is proving to be a critical factor in this war. This has been evident despite the fact that the most advanced and destabilising technology is estimated not to have been transferred and employed in the war in Ukraine due to the fact that, as highlighted by some scholars, the nature of the war has been conditioned by fears of escalation (Marsh, 2023: 329-352).

2.2.3 Factor 3: demographics

The demographic factor as a strategic element in warfare is related to the number of trained troops and the size of the population. It can determine the potential for replenishing casualties in the army’s ranks, as well as estimate the nation’s capacity to withstand these losses.

Demographics have always been linked to national security. Some experts sum it up by stating that, in essence, the importance of the link between demographics and war lies in the relative ability of a given political unit’s population to contribute to its defence or to threaten other political units. For this reason, population increases and decreases have always been identified as vital security issues (Palczewska, 2016: 208-226).

The exact number of combatant troop casualties in the war in Ukraine is uncertain, precisely because it is confidential and sensitive information. This explains why there is such disparity between estimates, which for example put Ukrainian casualties in

August 2023 at around 70,000, and the actual data reported by official sources, which stated that in February 2024 they totalled 31,000 (Armstrong, 2024).

Moreover, as discussed above, it is also clear from the war in Ukraine that personnel readiness is essential for an effective use of assets, especially in the case of more complex weaponry (Bolton, 2023: 1-14). Therefore, the number of troops but also the number of reservists, in that they have served in the army before or have participated in some form of compulsory military service, is especially relevant.

3 China's numbers

The three factors that have been identified, from a strategic and macro point of view, as critical to the war in Ukraine, become especially relevant within the context of Chinese aspirations regarding Taiwan and the risk of armed conflict.

However, due to the limitations of this research, mainly because of the lack of transparency of information in this area, the analysis of these factors applied to the case of China has been carried out with the available tools, which sometimes consist of estimates or indirect measures of the factors to be elucidated.

3.1 *Mass production of conventional armaments*

As stated in a RAND study, “perhaps the single greatest advantage of the Chinese DIB is its sheer scale” (Weinbaum *et al.*, 2022: 24).

It is well known that China, for several decades, has been dubbed the “world’s factory”, producing about a quarter of global manufacturing and becoming the global leader in 2009. Parallel to this boom, there has also been a considerable development of China’s defence industrial base, meaning that not only have production numbers grown, but some of its technology sectors are deemed comparable in quality to those of other top-tier international producers, especially those dubbed as “pockets of excellence” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2022).

The growth of China’s DIB has advanced in parallel with the development of its defence state-owned enterprises (Qi *et al.*, 2022: 88276-88294), where eight large companies share the lion’s share of the market, which will be discussed in more detail below. Over the past ten years, the revenues and assets of most of these large SOEs have grown by more than 150%, a slower pace than that of the Chinese economy as a whole, but fast enough that they now rank among the world’s largest defence companies. One of the most significant injections of resources into these companies has been China’s defence procurement budget (Weinbaum *et al.*, 2022).

This section will therefore look at data on China's defence budget, with especial focus on military spending, followed by data on China's main state-owned defence companies.

With regard to China's defence spending, it is estimated that the official figures for China's defence budget do not include a wide range of military-related activities, including items such as military technology research and development and even some major arms purchases (Darling, 2019; Funairole *et al.*, 2021). For this reason, and in order to obtain more complete figures on China's defence spending, which enable comparisons with that of other powers, estimates by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) have been used. The SIPRI method attempts to cover, with its limitations, all direct or indirect expenditures that support the functioning of the military (Tian and Su, 2021).

SIPRI's estimate of China's military expenditure is 1.36 times higher than that officially published by the Chinese authorities.

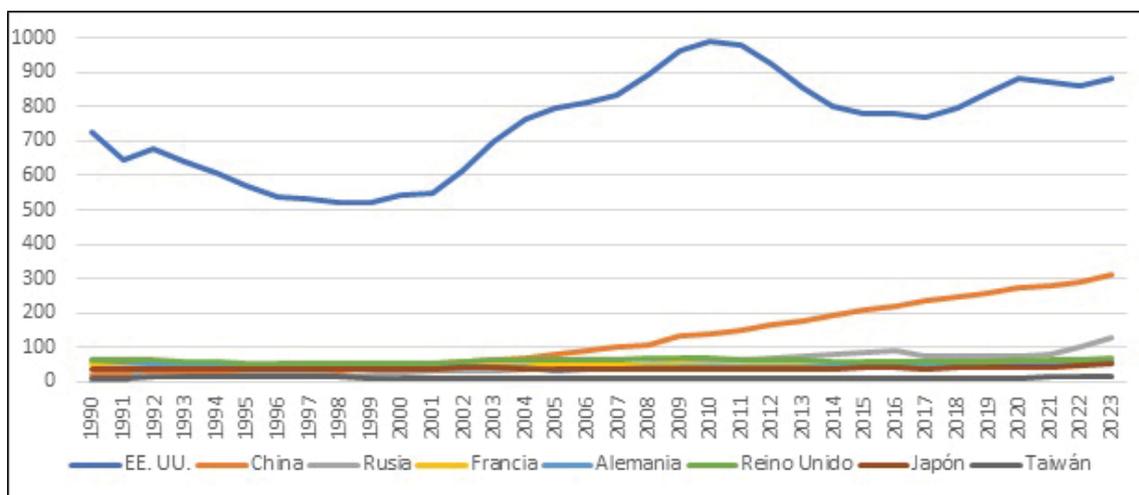


Figure 1. Military expenditure by country (1990-2023) Note: expressed in billions of dollars and based on the 2020 value of the dollar. Source: www.sipri.org

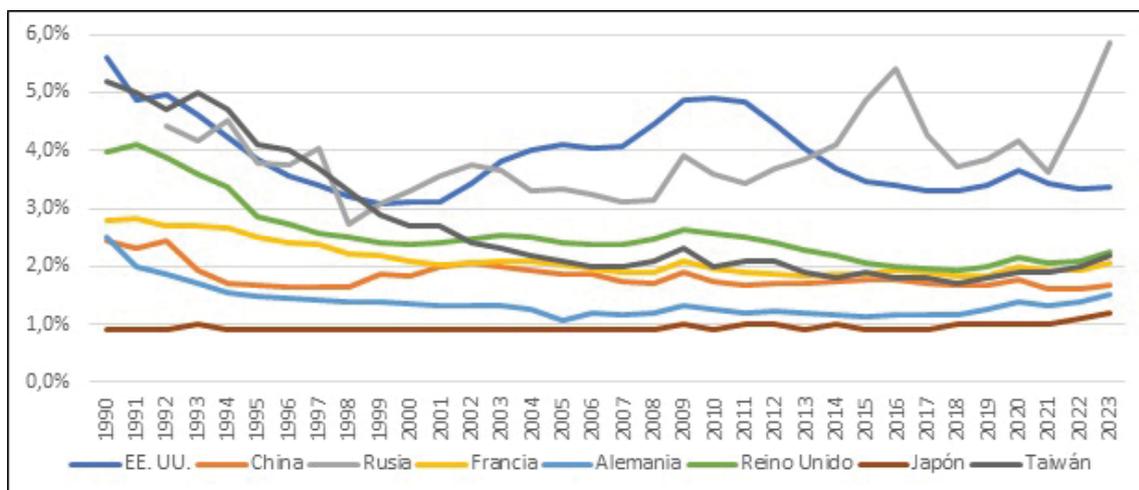


Figure 2. Military expenditure as a percentage of each country's GDP (1990-2023). Source: www.sipri.org

Given that these data would not be useful in isolation, but require comparison for their assessment, the figures above display the six countries with the most robust defence industries, according to SIPRI data. They also include Japan, as the world's third largest economy and a growing regional military power, and Taiwan, for the scope of this research.

Looking at both figures simultaneously demonstrates how China has achieved this striking increase in defence spending without increasing the share of defence spending in its budget, keeping it under 2%, well below most defence powers, especially in comparison to the US or Russia. The China's increased defence spending is directly related to the increase in its GDP in recent decades. Moreover, by devoting a medium-low proportion of its budget to defence compared to the other major powers, it may be concluded that China has more room to increase military spending than the other major powers.

The official figures of the Chinese yearly defence budget do not provide insight into how the budget is divided into different items, except for a sample included in the 2019 China Defence White Paper, which shows how the budget has been divided in previous years into three main categories: personnel costs, training and maintenance costs, and equipment costs (Table I).

Year	Personnel costs		Training and maintenance costs		Equipment costs	
	Yuan	%	Yuan	%	Yuan	%
2010	185931	34.9	170047	31.9	177359	33.2
2011	206506	34.3	189943	31.5	206342	34.2
2012	195572	29.2	232994	34.8	240626	36.0
2013	200231	27.0	269971	36.4	270860	36.6
2014	237234	28.6	267982	32.3	323738	39.1
2015	281863	31.0	261538	28.8	365383	40.2
2016	306001	31.3	266994	27.4	403589	41.3
2017	321052	30.8	293350	28.1	428835	41.1

Table I. Official breakdown of China's defence spending (2010-2017) *Note:* in billions of RMB yuan. *Source:* Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2019). *China's National Defence in the New Era*

On the other hand, the 2010 China Defence White Paper lists the elements that, broadly speaking, make up the three main categories of China's defence spending (Table II).

Category	Items
Staff	Salaries, allowances, housing, insurance, food, bedding and clothing for officers, NCOs, soldiers and contracted civilians
Training and maintenance	Troop training, institutional education, construction and maintenance of infrastructure and facilities, and expenditures on consumables
Equipment	R&D, testing, procurement, maintenance, transport and storage of armaments and equipment

Table II. The three main categories of China's official defence budget. *Source:* Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2011). *China's National Defense in 2010*

Therefore, broadly speaking, of these three items, the equipment category represents expenditure on armaments and R&D. Table I shows, in addition to the annual increase in defence spending for all items, that the equipment category is the only one to increase its share of the defence budget, at the expense of the other categories. From 2010 to 2017, the share of equipment spending in China's defence budget grew by almost 8%. This growth is highly significant and, although only 8 consecutive years of data have been published, they are sufficient to show the evolution of the Chinese Armed Forces towards armaments and R&D.

As with GDP, an alternative way to compare defence spending in different countries is through the purchasing power parity (PPP) method. Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed in May 2018 that, under the lens of the PPP, and by suppressing personnel costs, China might be spending more on defence than the United States.

After these words by General Milley, the magazine *Breaking Defense* published an article that sought to depict with graphs what the General had stated (Freedberg, 2018). This resulted in the information displayed in the first four columns of Figure 3.

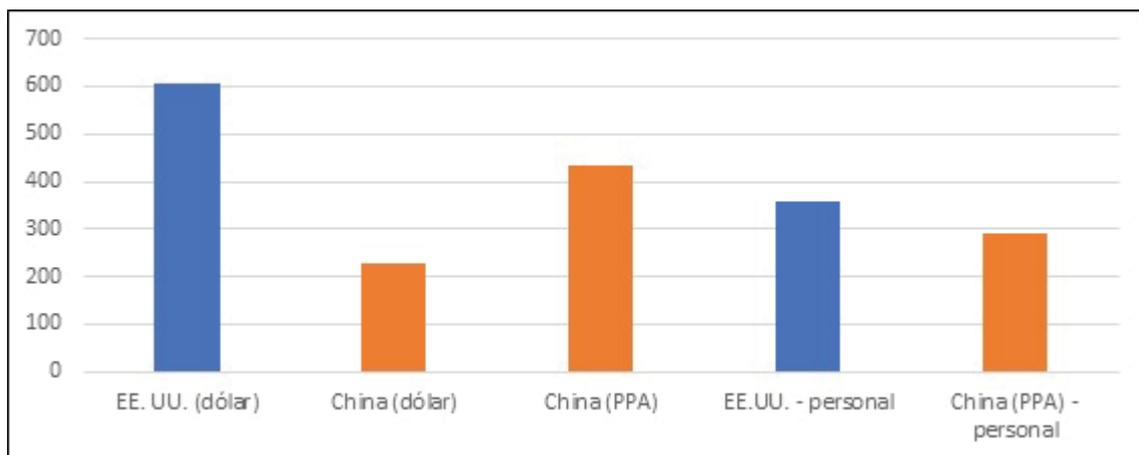


Figure 3. Defense spending in 2017 by China and the United States. Note: expressed in billions of dollars.
Source: www.breakingdefense.com and China's 2019 Defense White Paper

Figure 3 displays, in the first two columns, US and Chinese defence spending in dollars; then, in the third column, a calculation of China's defence spending using the PPP methodology, and finally the US budget with 42% of its total removed as being earmarked for personnel. Additionally, with the knowledge that according to the China Defense White Paper, China spent almost one third of its defence budget on personnel in 2017, a fifth column has been added by the authors, in which the value of China's PPP-adjusted budget is reduced by 33% of its value, which is the approximate proportion of its expenditure on personnel. The ratio of China's defence budget to that of the US using the PPP method is 71%, while the ratio for both is 81% in 2017, according to these estimates.

However, the application of the PPP method according to the common goods and services cost conversion ratio is inaccurate in the case of the defence budget. While the difference in personnel costs between the US and China is high, the difference in the

cost of high-tech goods or internationally traded components such as semiconductors or aircraft turbines is not. Taking into account different PPP ratios according to personnel, training and equipment sectors, the University of Texas estimated that China's total defence budget for 2024 would be around \$471 billion. (Fravel *et al.*, 2024: 40-54), which would represent 54% of the U.S. budget, compared to 35% when comparing by the international currency exchange rate, rather than the PPP method.

In any case, what may be confirmed is that China's budget is larger than it appears, that it has increased dramatically in recent decades, and that it is increasingly focused on equipment and R&D, but it is still far from that of the US. However, it should also be noted that China spent about half as much on defence as the United States, according to proportion of GDP, and therefore, if China were to match the United States' defence share of GDP, the two budgets would be very similar.

With regard to the companies that make up China's DIB, since 2001, the magazine *Defense News* has been publishing a list of the top 100 global defence companies. However, Chinese companies did not appear in this list since they did not publicly declare their revenues or provide this information to the organisation. 2019 was the first year in which Chinese companies entered the list as a result of internal estimates made on the top eight Chinese state-owned defence companies.

Figure 4 shows the top 15 defence companies in the world in 2022¹, including six of Chinese origin.

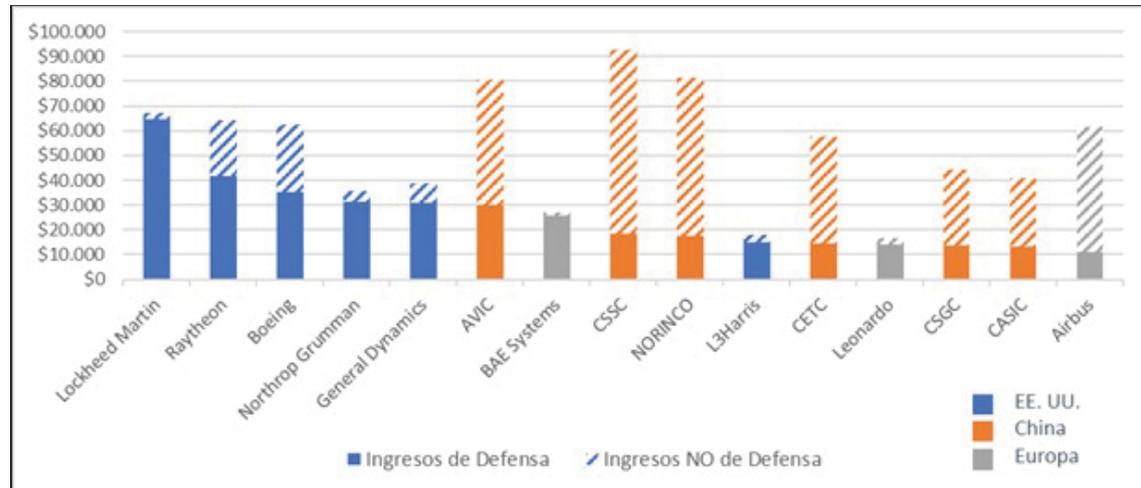


Figure 4. Top 15 defence companies of 2022 by revenue Note: expressed in millions of dollars. Average dollar value for each company's fiscal year. Source: Defense News Top 100

When observing Figure 4, it is noticeable that major US defence companies dominate the first half of the table and Chinese companies dominate the second half. It is also noteworthy that Chinese companies have the highest proportion of revenues from the civilian sector, compared to the military. This was a development of Chinese state-owned defence companies as a result of the Defence Industry Conversion policy

¹ The 2023 list is not used as only the expenses of four Chinese companies were estimated in said year.

of the 1980s, an industrial policy of dubious efficiency in terms of benefiting the military, but which succeeded in getting these companies involved in civilian products as a means of obtaining higher revenues (Bitzinger, 2021: 5-24). The large-scale involvement of these companies in civil sector products is now a unique feature.

For this reason it is interesting to look at the same data from another perspective, that of the total revenues of each company (Figure 5).

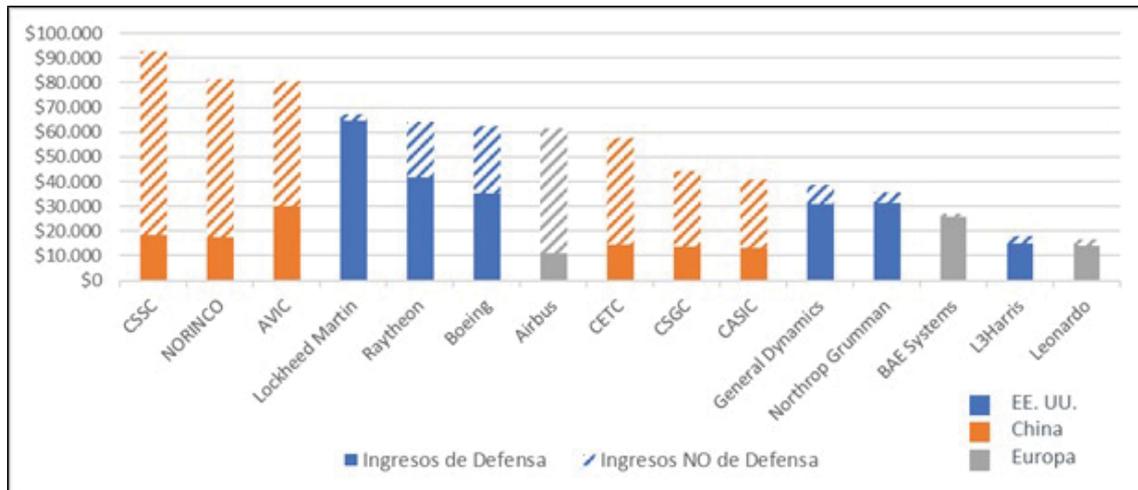


Figure 5. The top 15 companies in 2022 by defence sector revenues, ranked by total revenue. Note: expressed in millions of dollars. Source: Defense News Top 100

From this perspective, Chinese companies do not seem to be as dominated by US companies, since Chinese companies have a higher aggregate volume of revenue. For example, Boeing has 16% more defence revenues than AVIC, however AVIC has 29% more total revenue, which begs the question whether Boeing is a bigger defence company in the aerospace sector than AVIC.

Some of the main advantages of this feature for China's defence industry are: greater diversification and economic stability, as it is not subject only to defence contracts that may be more cyclical or subject to political changes; a greater tendency towards civil-military technology transfers; benefits of economies of scale; and greater potential for reconversion and adaptation, for example, by shifting factories from civilian or dual production to military armaments.

On the other hand, the fact that the Chinese defence industry is dominated by state-owned companies is often cited as one of its main weaknesses, due to the fact that these types of companies tend to be associated with greater bureaucracy, fewer incentives for innovation, greater corruption, and increased difficulty in establishing relations and cooperation with international institutions for technology transfers.

It would be of interest to conduct an in-depth analysis of the production of missiles, aircraft, as well as other ground systems and munitions, by China's major state-owned defence companies; however, one of the most prominent areas of Chinese military production is naval production, led by the *China State Shipbuilding Corporation* (CSSC). CSSC is the only primarily naval-focused company that ranks among the

top 15 defence companies in the world, and it is precisely the company with the highest total revenues (Figure 5).

China's naval industry has experienced highly significant growth in recent decades, both in numbers and technology. In the late 1980s, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy consisted of a smaller force with defence capabilities limited to coastal and territorial waters. However, in 2024, the PLA Navy ranks as the second largest in the world by displacement tonnage², second only to the United States, and the largest in the world in number of active vessels, with over 370 ships and submarines, compared to 290 in the United States.

This may be explained by the fact that the Chinese fleet does not have as many large ships as the US aircraft carriers, but also by the fact that it is a much more modern and lighter navy than the US, given that around 70% of the Chinese fleet was launched after 2010. Of the US navy, only 25% of the ships meet this condition. It is also worth noting that the US Office of Naval Intelligence estimated the production capacity of Chinese shipyards at around 23 million tons, more than 200 times that of US shipyards, with less than 100,000 tons (Trevithick, 2023).

CSSC, which by 2021 was the world's largest shipping company and by 2024 is expected to account for 41% of global shipbuilding, also has a very interesting feature in that all vessels produced by CSSC are built to military specifications, in accordance with the Chinese Government's doctrine (Brussels, 2024). This indicates that China would have a very high capacity for the military conversion of its naval production.

One should not jump to conclusions, as it is widely accepted that the technological level of the US naval industry, and other defence sectors, is significantly superior to that of China. However, in terms of mass production, China's numbers contrast with the fall in US military naval production capacity since World War II (Bolton, 2023: 1-14)

3.2 Defence technology and innovation capability

It is increasingly common to come across expert analyses or military and technological reports that claim that China is no longer an emerging power in science and technology but is competing with the United States for global primacy (Weinbaum *et al.*, 2022).

An article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, which concludes that the United States' lead in terms of knowledge and technological power is diminishing, proposes that "firms play an essential role in technological innovation, but the innovation supply chain actually starts earlier, in campus laboratories and classrooms" (Zegart, 2024).

² The displacement of a vessel refers to its weight.

There is a lot of literature on the factors involved in defence technological innovation systems, but common elements may be found, highlighting certain macro and measurable elements, which are the focus of this research, such as investment in R&D, the number of published patents, articles, citations, ongoing projects or the availability of human talent (Cheung, 2018; Soare and Pothier, 2021).

Due to the limited information available for these factors that are specific to the Chinese military, data on Chinese R&D expenditure, publications in scientific journals, availability of research talent and patents have been used, supplemented with information from the military where possible.

China's macro data show that the considerable growth of its economy in recent decades has been accompanied by its great boom in R&D, as may be seen in the following figures.

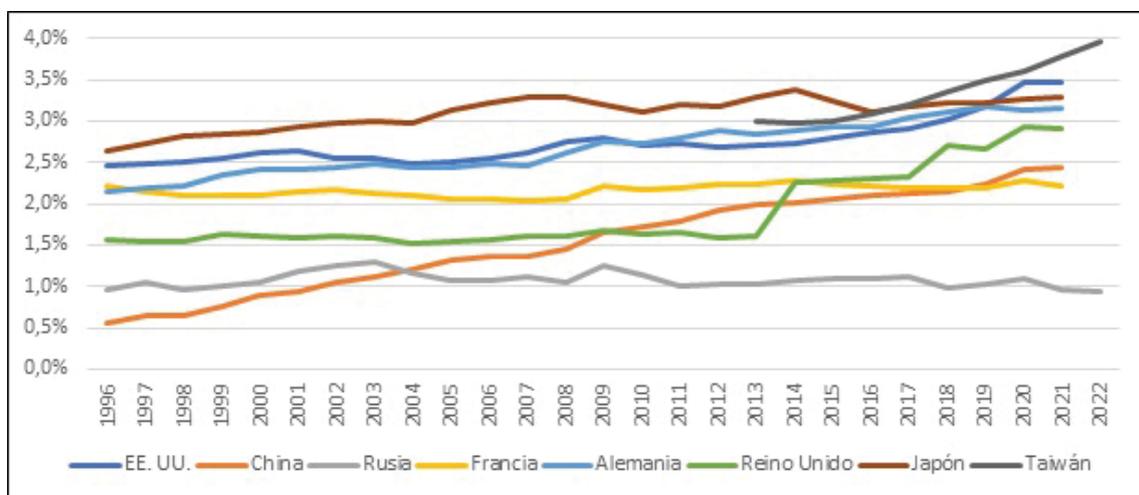


Figure 6. R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP for each country (1996-2022). Note: no data are available for years earlier or later than those shown. Source: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/> (except Taiwan: Ministry of Science and Technology Statistics Database)³

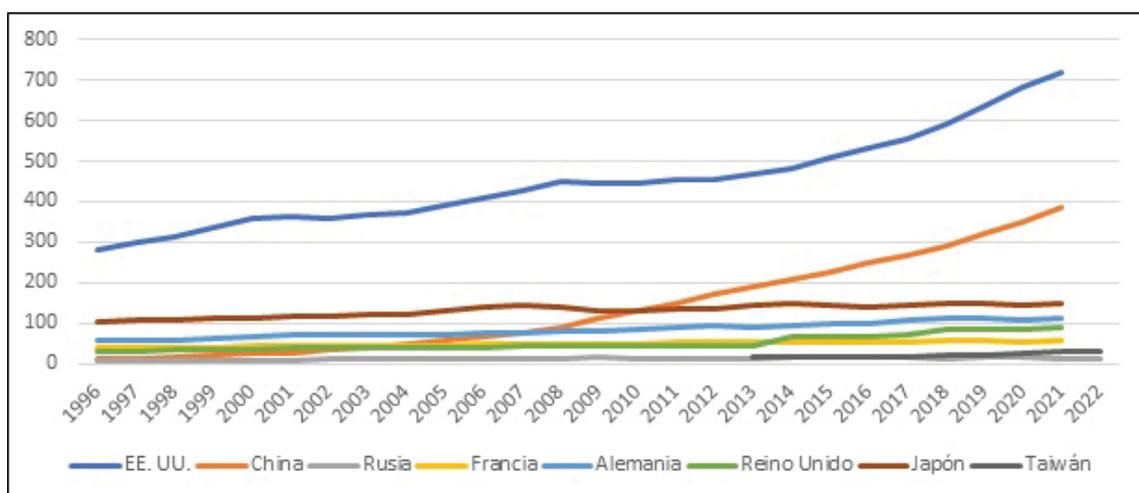


Figure 7. Actual R&D expenditure (1996-2022). Note: expressed in billions of dollars and at constant 2015 dollar values. Source: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/> (except Taiwan)

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3 This is the case for all subsequent graphs with data on Taiwan.

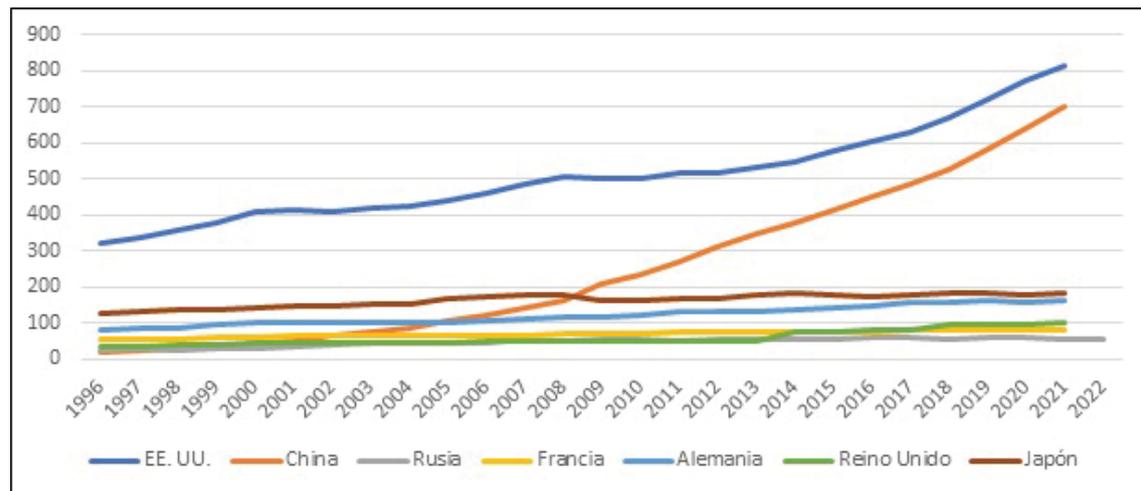


Figure 8. PPP-adjusted R&D expenditure (1996-2022). Note: expressed in billions of dollars and equalised to the dollar per PPP at constant 2017 dollar values. Source: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/>

Figure 6 shows that China has increased the percentage of GDP earmarked for R&D by nearly a factor of five between 1996 and 2021, moving up from a very low position to an intermediate level, somewhat below that of some of the more advanced countries. However, although China does not stand out in terms of the proportion of GDP spent on R&D, its strong economic growth has allowed it to pull away from other powers in terms of actual R&D expenditure (Figure 7) and move closer to the dominant position of the United States.

On a supplementary basis, Figure 8 shows a PPP comparison calculation, according to which China exceeded the combined R&D expenditure of the entire European Union in 2014 and is catching up with the United States, which also appears to accelerate its own spending in recent years in the face of China's intercepting trend. However, it should be noted that as China's economy continues to grow and its wages and costs become closer to those of the major powers, the PPP method of calculation will be less effective in maximising the estimates of investment by the Chinese authorities.

From these observations, it is clear that China's total volume of R&D investment is already comparable to that of the United States, even though it is still far behind in terms of the proportion of GDP earmarked for this area.

In a publication of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), Gonzalo León Serrano (2020: 23-76) explains that "the goal of the R&D effort is, obviously, to have the capacity to master the development of emerging technologies" and adds that if this effort is accompanied by boosting the industrial sector and a sufficient availability of human resources with the appropriate training, "it will allow the short term control of the global market via the development of highly advanced products and services based on these emerging technologies".

Thus, in terms of R&D spending, the combination of China's increasing budget and the growth of its economy has had the effect of transforming China from a laggard in the early 1990s to a leader today, on track to dominate future emerging technologies. To complete the analysis of the R&D budget, as indicated by León Serrano, the availability of human resources must be studied.

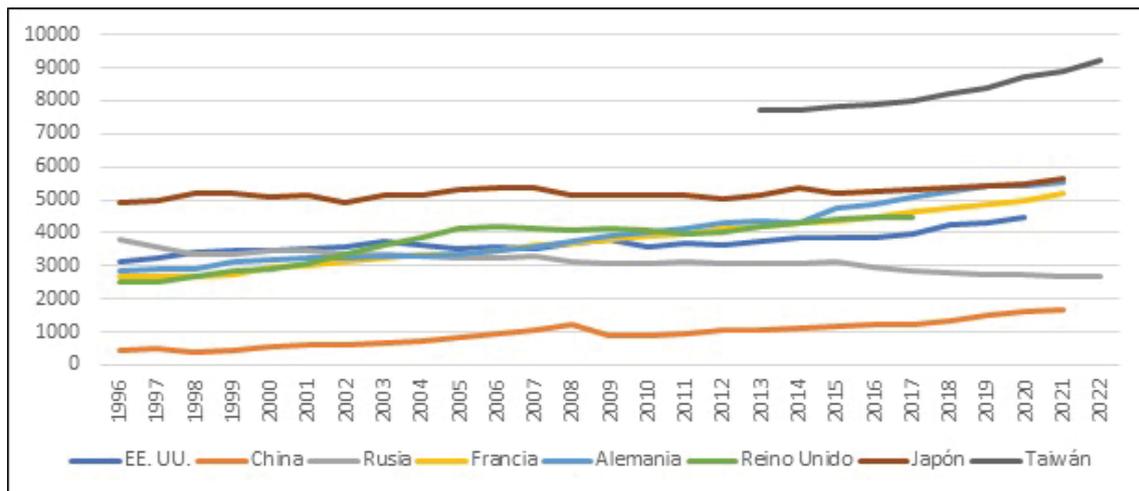


Figure 9. Number of researchers per million inhabitants (1996-2022). Note: no data are available for years earlier or later than those shown. Source: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/> (except Taiwan)

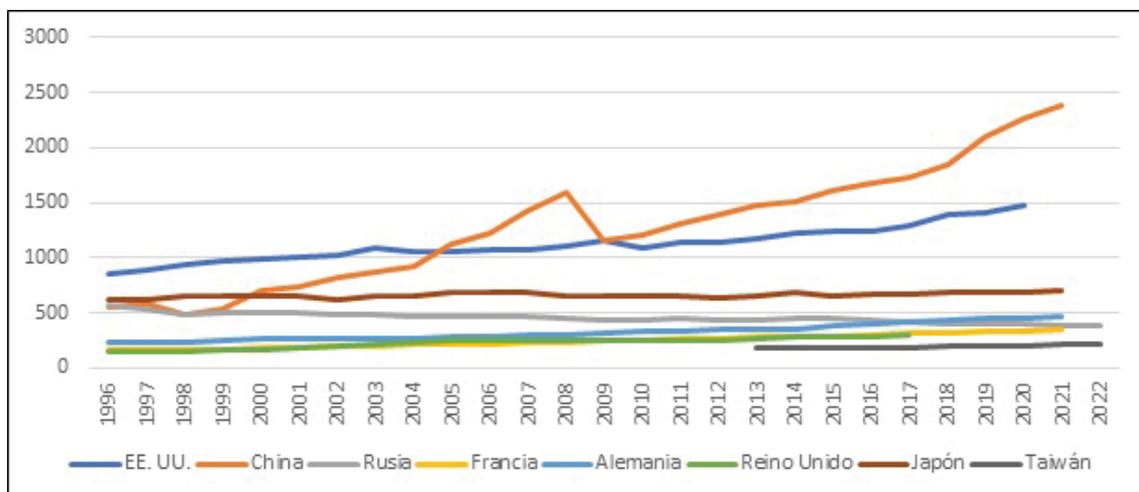


Figure 10. Number of total researchers (1996-2022). Note: expressed in thousands. Source: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/> (except Taiwan)

In terms of the availability of research personnel per million inhabitants, Figure 9 shows that China is still far behind the major powers, despite a remarkable growth in this regard since 2000. This is partly a reflection of the social inequalities that exist in China, which hinder its human resource potential. However, it is worth examining how its huge demographic base compensates for this limitation and even pushes China to the first position in the world, ahead of the United States, in terms of total number of researchers, as may be seen in Figure 10.

For Chinese researchers Zhang Jihai and Li Bing, as expressed in a study on China's "Collaborative Innovation System in National Defence Science and Technology" for the *Beijing Institute of Technology*, China's human resource in terms of researchers is a weak point of the system. However, it is also a great opportunity, should it succeed, as Zhang and Li state, in "unleashing" its full potential.

Indeed, if China were to have half the number of researchers per million inhabitants as the United States, China would more than double the number of researchers. This is indeed a sign of China's potential and the fact that it is not being tapped.

Additionally, publications and patents are one of the main factors examined in order to comprehend a country's success in terms of its R&D.

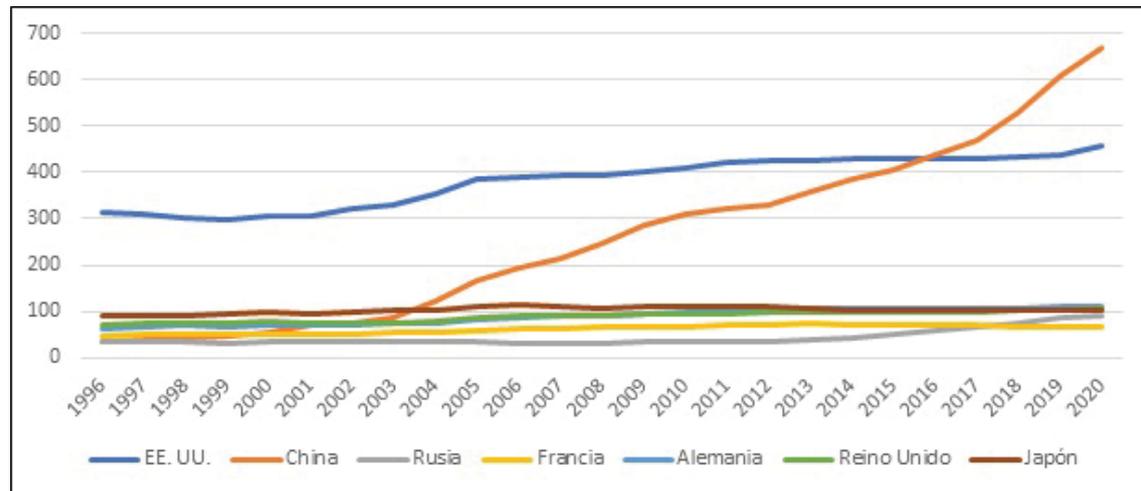


Figure 11. Number of articles in scientific and technical publications (1996-2020). Note: expressed in thousands. No data are available for years earlier or later than those shown. Source: <https://datos.bancomundial.org/>

Figure 11 shows the dramatic increase in the number of articles in scientific and technical publications originating from China in recent decades, making China the leader in this regard.

However, the number of publications does not necessarily mean an equivalent quality of said publications. One of the main means of measuring the quality of publications is by examining how often they are cited, and more specifically, by looking at how many of a country's articles are in the top 1% or 10% of the most cited articles in the world. According to data from Japan's Ministry of Science and Technology (Matsuzoe, 2022), within the period from 2018 to 2020, China was leading in the number of articles ranked in the top 1% and top 10% most cited articles in the world, as can be seen in Figure 12.

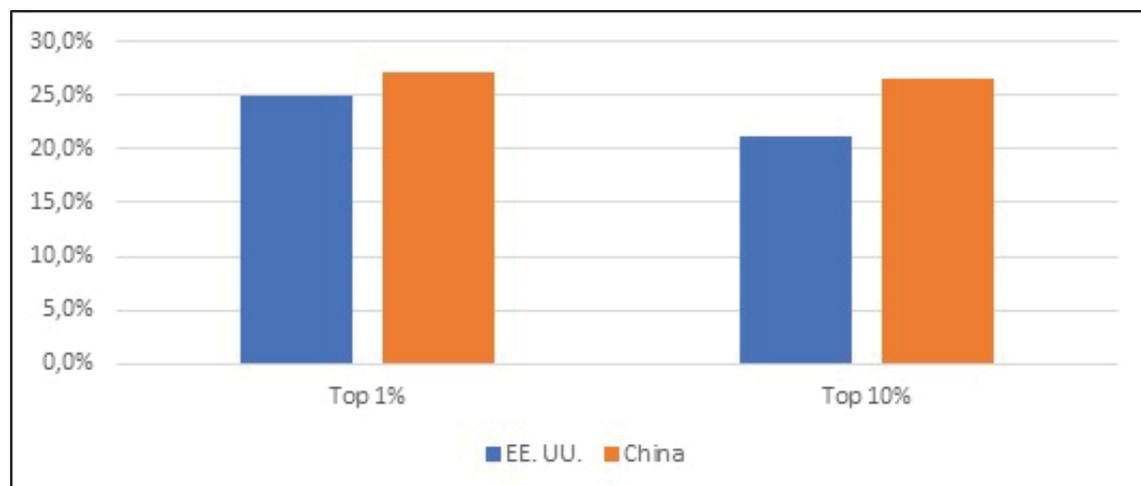


Figure 12. Proportion of articles from the United States and China making up 1% and 10% of the world's most cited articles in the period 2018-2020. Source: Matsuzoe, 2022

The large number of Chinese publications in scientific journals, and the predominance of high-quality publication indices, is a very significant demonstration of the results of the country's strong R&D focus.

As far as patents are concerned, the case of China is especially unique. The WIPO data on patent applications and grants for Chinese applicants are extraordinary, with China surpassing the United States in patents granted in 2015 and had three times as many patent applications as the US in 2022.

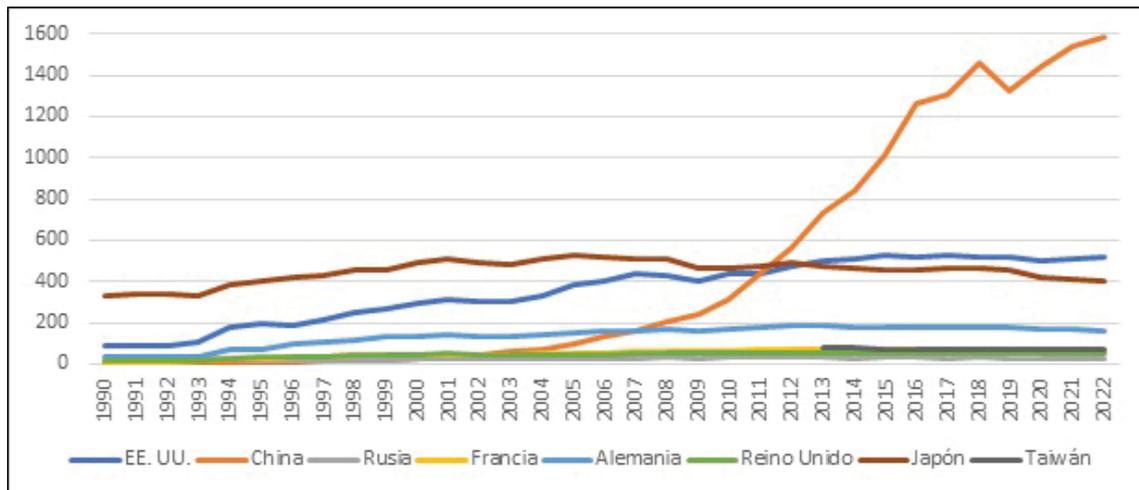


Figure 13. Total patent applications by country of origin of applicants (1990-2022). Note: expressed in thousands. The totals include residents and non-residents of the selected country of origin. Source: <https://www.wipo.int/> (except Taiwan)

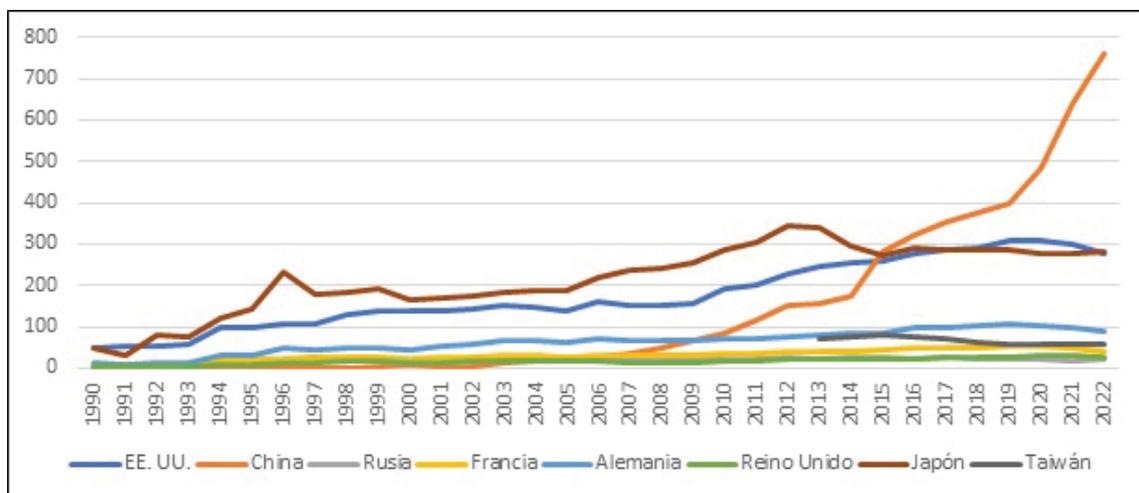


Figure 14. Total patent grants by country of origin of the applicant (1990-2022). Note: expressed in thousands. Source: <https://www.wipo.int/> (except Taiwan)

This is truly astonishing data, as China now accounts for more than 45% of all patent applications worldwide.

However, these data are not always read optimistically. For example, according to a study by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), these data do not reflect the reality of innovation in China as they claim that rather than being driven by research, the large increase in China's patent applications are mostly driven

by other motives, such as seeking government subsidies, job promotion, building reputation for individuals or universities and institutions, or obtaining certification as domestic high-tech companies (He, 2021).

CIGI insists that quality is the weak point of China's patents and for this they point to certain indicators such as the degree of commercialisation of patents, their internationalisation, or the grant ratio. For example, they point out that China's patent grant rate for 2020 is 33% while that of the US is 61%. Moreover, according to 2019 WIPO data, only 6.3% of Chinese applications were also filed abroad, while 45.3% of US applications were filed abroad.

Due to these arguments, it is worth looking at the evolution of the patent grant rate.

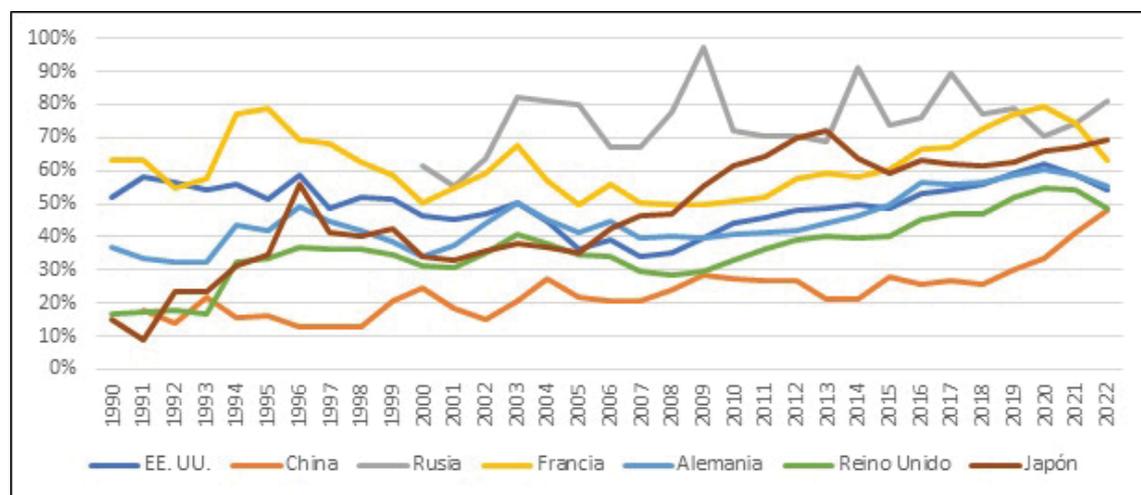


Figure 15. Patent grant rate by country of origin of applicants (1990-2022). Source: <https://www.wipo.int/>

The data displayed in Figure 15 negates, albeit only partly, CIGI's argument since, just two years later, in 2022, the US and Chinese patent grant rates have evolved to 54% and 48% respectively. China's rate has evidently improved considerably in recent years to position itself at levels very similar to those of the UK, Germany and the US.

China does not devote more of its State budget to R&D than its competitors, but its high economic growth is enough to put China at the forefront of the world in this area. This is also the case for the number of researchers in China. While China has almost three times fewer researchers per million inhabitants than its competitors, China's large population means that it still has more researchers than any other country.

These factors have led to much of the increased research activity, reflected in the fact that China is now leading in the number of scientific publications, the proportion of top-cited papers and the number of patent applications and grants.

While it is true that some indicators reveal shortcomings in the quality of certain aspects of R&D in China, despite these weaknesses, there can be no doubt about the extraordinary leap China has made in recent decades and the enormous potential it has to position itself at the forefront of the R&D world.

Nor should any hasty conclusions be drawn from these data. It is not that China has more advanced weapons systems than the United States, which is not generally the case, but that China has developed a strong research base that equips it with future innovation capabilities. This innovation base is also driven by China's large economic and population numbers.

3.3 Demographics

According to World Bank data, China has the second largest population in the world with 1.419 billion inhabitants in July 2024, second only to India as of 2023 and, for the time being, by a few million. However, the agency's projections predict that China's population will start to shrink from 2023 onwards.

The PLA is the largest armed force in the world with 2.3 million active soldiers and some 510,000 reservists. China has compulsory military service, with a general duration of 2 years, but not all Chinese youth are required to participate; instead, volunteers and a small and variable number of randomly selected young men and women participate. Women are also involved, but to a lesser extent and for medical or similar tasks. Every year in China some 13 million boys come of age.

Taiwan has a population of about 24 million, only 1.7% of China's population, and approximately 180,000 males come of age each year. Its army consists of 300,000 active troops but the island has another 2.5 million reservists.

Taiwan's reservist system is robust and has been developed with the eventuality of conflict with China in mind. Military service in Taiwan requires all men over the age of 18 to undergo basic military training, which was extended from 4 months to 1 year in 2024, due to growing fears for their safety. The so-called "porcupine defence" is based precisely on the rapid mobilisation of a large number of these reservists, who are also maintained at a high level of readiness through regular exercises.

However, Taiwan's internal politics are complex and shaped by the island's two main national identities. The efforts by a majority of its population to establish a new nation-State is met with resistance from a significant minority, who favour unification with their homeland of origin (Lin, 2001: 60-83).

There are also negative aspects to China's demographics. Although China has a lower proportion of older adults than the United States, China's population is aging at an exceptionally rapid rate (Tu, Zeng and Liu, 2022: 1159-1163) It is estimated that by 2050, the proportion of Chinese citizens above retirement age will be 39% of the population, and China does not have the infrastructure nor is it ready to bear this economic burden (Weinbaum *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the challenges that China will have to face with regard to its population, from a strategic point of view, China's enormous population, its large army and its potential to expand it further with young individuals has consistently meant that

different simulations of war in Taiwan that have been published, such as that of MIT (Hanlon, 2000: 51-86), or that of the CSIS (Cancian *et al.*, 2023), never consider the lack of troops as a Chinese vulnerability, but they do so in the case of Taiwan. In these simulations, the decisive criterion is usually China's ability, with the effects of its missile, aviation and naval forces, to establish and sustain a ground force landing in Taiwan. Therefore, the focus has been on the quantity and quality of their weapons systems, since their demographic superiority is not in doubt.

4 Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has reminded the world that wars between great powers are a real possibility. Moreover, it has shown that military technological advances alone are not sufficient to bring about a rapid resolution of the war, but that these advances need to be combined with large numbers of conventional weapons and troops.

The world is watching with unease as tensions rise over the issue of Taiwan, the primary and most dangerous potential cause of war between China and the United States. It is inevitable to observe, with the new perspective provided by the war in Ukraine, the situation in the scenario of Taiwan. Although these scenarios display very different characteristics, the latest lessons from the war provide interesting insights into its evolving nature and may influence current perceptions of the forces.

China is a superpower with an immense population base that is of critical strategic importance in the event of a major war, such as a confrontation with a Taiwan backed by allies, primarily the United States.

China does not need to spend a large proportion of its GDP on defence to be considered a match for the US. Its growing economic base means that, despite generally allocating a smaller proportion of its GDP to defence compared to other major powers, its military receives more resources than any other nation except the US. Furthermore, when comparing the defence budgets of China and the United States using the PPP method, it is clear that the PLA's resources regarding equipment and readiness are not that much lower.

China's state-owned defence enterprises, which constitute virtually the country's entire DIB, show great manufacturing potential. Although they are less active in the military sector than their US counterparts, the sheer volume of their civilian production makes Chinese companies larger producers than their US counterparts in the aggregate. Moreover, as has been observed in the case of the Chinese naval company CSSC, these companies, being under strict government control, are already geared towards military conversion, which may be a decisive ability.

In recent decades, China has also made giant strides in building the foundations of a robust national defence technology and innovation system. It has not needed to become more advanced than other powers, nor to spend more resources on R&D relative to its GDP, nor to train more researchers per million inhabitants to achieve

some of the top innovation rankings. It has been enough for China to accompany its economic growth with a development of some basic R&D rankings, sometimes to positions slightly lower than those of the other powers, as in the case of R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP, to achieve surprising results such as the figures for articles published in research journals or patents.

In addition to these factors, the large PLA, the formidable potential for troop replenishment, and China's huge population, suggest that combat casualties could be borne at a lower cost than in other powers.

In his book, *On War*, the Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz argued that war tends to expand in new and complex ways that are beyond the ability of military or political leaders to foresee, and that leaders must therefore proceed with caution in any military campaign, for failure to do so leads to disaster.

A conflict scenario over Taiwan could have immeasurably destructive consequences and is a scenario of uncertain resolution. If previously the established military, industrial and technological superiority of the US had appeared to discourage any kind of military escalation, the current return to the massive use of means and troops offers a perspective in which China's position gains strength, according to the hypothesis put forward in this study.

Despite the stark strategic, operational and tactical differences between the scenario of the war in Ukraine and the confrontation over Taiwan, it is the shift in the balance of power in China's favour that may prove decisive. This development recommends acting with great caution, avoiding warmongering rhetoric and not relying on the deterrence of US military superiority as the guarantor of the *status quo*.

On the other hand, Spain, especially within the framework of the European Union, must prioritise incentives for the defence industry, joining forces with its allies and promoting the continuous development of its technological and innovation capabilities. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, the European Union has redoubled efforts to jointly boost the defence industry and military technology development, as demonstrated by the March 2023 reinforcement of the European Defence Fund (EDF) (European Commission, 2024a) or in the First European Defence Industrial Strategy of March 2024 (European Commission, 2024b), among other initiatives. These instruments and others working in this direction will be essential to ensure that its armed forces do not present vulnerabilities and maintain pace with the evolution of the art of war, in order to remain effective.

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Technology and the economics of war in the Ukrainian conflict: analysis of the Russian war effort

Abstract

Within the context of the war in Ukraine, both sides must mobilise their countries' resources to sustain a full-scale conflict. Today, after almost three years of attrition, Russia is proving to be a resilient and determined power in the face of the military challenge posed by Ukraine and Western support. At the operational and organisational level, a number of changes were activated to prepare Russian ground forces for a protracted conflict. Russia has also adapted its resources and industries to overcome the restrictions caused by Western economic sanctions and to advance its war effort. There is a clear correlation between Russian operational adaptations, technology and war economy. This article analyses the impact of Russia's military and economic changes on the battlefield.

Keywords

Armoured warfare, Mobilisation, War economy, War in Ukraine, Russia.

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I Introduction

The war in Ukraine has brought to the forefront issues that appeared outdated in post-Cold War conflict analysis, such as the outbreak of large-scale conventional warfare between major countries (in terms of size and international influence), the massive deployment of airborne forces and mechanised units to achieve an initial decisive strategic success, the large-scale mobilisation of reserves (hundreds of thousands of troops), the massive use of artillery in all its forms from tube to rocket to short-range ballistic missiles, and the indiscriminate use of thermobaric and cluster bombs.

Furthermore, new ways of waging war have been incorporated with the massive use of guided artillery munitions, unmanned vehicles in their different versions and modes (air, naval and ground), high-speed satellite communications, and the massive use of electronic warfare to counter them. Finally, within the strategic sphere, the war in Ukraine has revived the relevance of nuclear weapons as a pressure mechanism to achieve political ends by major nuclear powers (Cimbala and Korb, 202; D'Agostino and Diaz-Maurin, 2024; Pardo de Santayana, 2023; Trenin, 2023).

As a result, a sizeable amount of extremely important information and data has been generated and new tactics, techniques and procedures have been identified which must be analysed and studied beyond the war propaganda of both sides to assess their impact on the conflict and obtain assessments that may be systematised and applied as lessons learned in doctrine and planning for future conflicts. From the perspective of conflict theory, they are variables that must be studied in order to establish the causes that determine their use, their impact on other conflicts, and whether any of them represent a technological or doctrinal revolution that could change the way war is waged. In some historical moments, these advances have even been capable of changing the very nature of warfare, as was the case, for example, with the use of the atomic bomb in 1945 (Freedman, 1983).

This essay will analyse one such aspect identified in the war in Ukraine, namely the use of Russian armoured and mechanised forces, which in light of more immediate analyses of the conflict, it is believed that conclusions that may affect the long-term view of the role of armoured and mechanised forces in future conflicts have been drawn too hastily. This text will examine the development of Soviet operational level of war and deep battle, the changes implemented in Russia following the Russo-Georgian war from 2010 onwards, the challenges to manoeuvres posed by new multi-domain warfare scenarios as seen on the Russian-Ukrainian front, as well as Russia's mobilisation capability to provide the means and resources necessary to sustain the war effort in the long term. Identifying these variables is essential in order to estimate their future capabilities, both operationally and strategically. It is thus hypothesised that combat forms, economics and technology are interconnected in a complex multi-domain scenario in which all variations affect the evolution of the conflict to a greater or lesser extent.

2 Historical foundations of Russian doctrine

The elementary basis of Russian strategy and tactics is to be found in the works of Soviet theoreticians such as Vladimir Triandafillov, Alexander Svechin, Georgy Isserson and Mikhail Tukhachevsky in the 1920s and 1930s. In its strategic aspect, the operational level of war represented a new current of military thought aimed at transforming the foundations of nineteenth-century military strategy, using new technological means within the military sphere, including the battle tank. In parallel, at the tactical level, the concept of the deep battle (*Gluboki boi* in Russian) emerged, consisting of a coordinated staggered assault composed of aviation, armoured vehicles and infantry. An understanding of both concepts is indispensable to understanding the contemporary development of Russian military doctrine.

In the early 1920s, Svechin established the principles of operational level of war, which included the need for a robust economy, the importance of attrition and destruction of the enemy, and the lesser importance of decisive battles, among others. Svechin, like Triandafillov, saw the operational level of war as a succession of interlinked operations, the success of which affected the overall strategy (Kipp, 1994: 15). In contrast to the traditional broad, linear front line layout of the then-recent First World War (1914-1918), the operational level of war had to be developed in depth. In this regard, Isserson (1936) explained that the real challenge of the operational level of war was to make the transition between linear manoeuvre and frontal penetration, which is a natural consequence of changing from one operational method to another.

The concept of frontline depth was also developed in the West by military thinkers such as John Fuller and Basil Liddell-Hart. Fuller (1927: 457), in his so-called “1919 Plan”, already spoke of the deep penetration of armoured forces with the aim of destroying the enemy’s main nodes. Moreover, he considered the main element of the manoeuvre to be “the development of mobility through offensive power”. In the same vein, Liddell-Hart (1924: 49-50) declared that firepower multiplied by speed was strength in warfare, replacing the traditional conception of massed infantry forces.

In this sense, Western military theorists advocated the specialisation of armies and, consequently, the reduction of their numbers. But Soviet thinkers rejected this outright, as they understood that only a large mass of forces was capable of succeeding in modern operations. Triandafillov (1929: 27) did not accept that “small forces, albeit motorised”, could conquer modern states, while Isserson (1936) considered it contradictory to the evolution of military systems in capitalist countries.

Using the operational level of war as a strategic basis, Tukhachevsky developed the principles of deep battle, which became the official Soviet tactical doctrine until mid-1937. Tukhachevsky devised a staggered system of offensive waves, each with a specific role in the battle: the first echelon was formed by aviation, tasked with providing close air support and gaining air superiority; the second was intended to achieve a breakthrough in the enemy front, employing infantry support tanks and heavier tanks to provide support from more remote distances; once the breakthrough

was achieved, fast tanks and motorised or mechanised units of the third echelon were to exploit the success of the breakthrough, ensuring the continuity of the operation; and finally, the reserve echelon, composed essentially of infantry, was tasked with securing the ground gained.

The primary objective was advancing deep into enemy territory, employing tank, artillery, aviation bombing and even paratrooper forces, along with confusion and deception operations (*maskirovska* in Russian) to distract enemy forces (McPadden, 2006: 16). Thus, tanks played a decisive role in the doctrine and specialised in fulfilling certain tasks, including supporting the infantry in the assault, penetrating the rear, scattering the enemy and isolating the reserve troops (creating pockets, similar to the German concept of *Kessel*). In this way, the tanks were to force the enemy to retreat and eventually destroy them, in a continuum of exploitation of success and retreat. At the same time, artillery, command posts and their communication nodes had to be neutralised (McPadden, 2006: 17). This cycle of exploiting success is framed within the operational strategy of interrelated battles, where cumulative successes shape the theatre of operations and contribute to overall success.

Despite these theoretical and doctrinal developments, Tukhachevsky was executed in the Stalinist purges in the summer of 1937, and the doctrine of the deep battle disappeared with him. Thus, during the Second World War, Soviet tank brigades were mainly used in a dispersed and infantry support role and were available according to the needs of the front or the divisional commander. At that time, only Marshal Yakov Fedorenko managed to implement the ideas behind the deep battle, but without directly mentioning Tukhachevsky (Vlakancic, 1992: 8).

The onset of de-Stalinisation brought about significant doctrinal changes in the Soviet Union, including a revision of the theoretical foundations of the deep battle, which had been abandoned for more than twenty years. But the introduction of nuclear weapons also triggered a revision of the Soviet strategic approach (Vlakancic, 1992: 29-30). In this regard, nuclear weaponry was given the role of penetrating deep into enemy territory, while ground forces would only deal with shallow enemy concentrations (Vlakancic, 1992: 30).

The successful Marshal Georgi Zhukov undertook a series of reforms aimed at gradually reducing the large Soviet mechanised divisions inherited from World War II into more mobile, motorised and armoured units (Noorman, 2023). This modification of Soviet military units together with the revision of their strategic and tactical concepts gave rise in the 1980s and 1990s to new military paradigms, such as non-linear warfare and non-contact warfare (Noorman, 2023), framed within the new Russian strategy known as new generation warfare (Grau and Bartles, 2016: 40). In this way, the doctrine of the deep battle acquired a strategic dimension beyond that conceived by Tukhachevsky at the tactical and operational level.

Some authors argue that the Russian General Staff employed the basics of deep battle at the strategic level in the wars in Georgia in August 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014-2015 (Sinclair, 2016; Morris, 2020). In this approach, the traditional concept of offensive

echelons is maintained, but with the use of other actors replacing military units. In the above-mentioned cases, Russia used the pro-Russian population in Georgia and also in Ukraine as a first echelon as a justifiable approach, in addition to intelligence gathering and sabotage operations with paramilitary groups (Morris, 2020: 8). This falls under the concept of hybrid warfare, where both civilian populations and paramilitary and military elements are integrated into the overall strategy to achieve the stated objectives.

In the case of Georgia, for example, casualties among Russian peacekeeping forces in the face of a Georgian attack served as justification for launching a massive operation with conventional forces, which may be framed within the third echelon of the deep battle, aimed at exploiting the gap. In this case, it was achieved through Georgia's internal destabilisation, indirectly provoked by Russia. In this regard, Sinclair (2016: 10-11) explains that the Kremlin used the justification of protecting the Russian-speaking population to execute its invasion plan, a precursor to what happened subsequently in Crimea and the southern territories of Ukraine (Colom Piella, 2023).

3 Changes introduced with the Russian military reform of 2010

While there is consensus that there was a major doctrinal change in the Russian Armed Forces, the question arises as to whether there really was a revolution in military affairs in Western terms. As part of the military reform initiated in 2010 by then Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, not only were the number of ground units significantly reduced, but divisions were also replaced with brigades as the main manoeuvre force. If attention is paid to the 2010 model of the Russian mechanised brigade compared to Tukhachevsky's design in 1936, it can be seen that it is essentially a similar organisation, with fewer tank battalions in favour of more mechanised battalions (equipped with BTR-82 type wheeled armoured vehicles and BMP-2 and 3 type infantry fighting vehicles), but with more firepower due to the current means and threats.

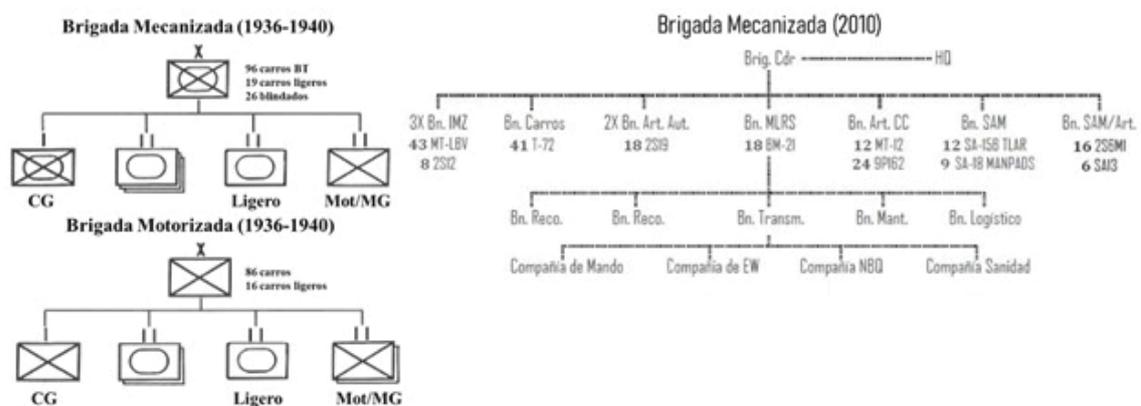


Figure 1: Soviet (left) and Russian (right) mechanised brigades. Source: Grau and Bartles, 2016: 31, and Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017: 53

The reduction in the number of armoured battalions in favour of mechanised battalions responds to the need to bring mobility and agility to the front line. Given the vast borders it must protect, the Russian General Staff considered the brigade to be the ideal unit in terms of rapid deployment (Grau and Bartles, 2016: 33), along with the ability to generate Battalion Tactical Group or BTGs, successfully used in 2014-2015, but totally incapable of sustaining prolonged efforts or extended fronts by their very configuration (Saurín Martínez, 2023a), as demonstrated during the first weeks and months of the invasion of Ukraine after the failure of the initial assault operation (Dacoba Cevíno, 2022).

The general reduction in large Russian manoeuvre units inevitably translated into a lower concentration of forces on the front line. Traditionally, operational-level of war theorists advocate a large offensive mass as an indispensable element for success (Isserson, 1936; Triandafilov, 1929), including the German General Heinz Guderian (2008, original published 1937). The doctrinal, organisational and operational changes of 2010 tend to employ smaller, more deployable elements to compensate for the lack of numbers. This reduction was aided by the emergence of advanced surveillance systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (RPAS), loitering munitions and effective electronic warfare.

The use of long-range weapons also helped to shape a new concept of the battlefield. Retired Lieutenant General Sergey Bogdanov and reserve Colonel Sergey Chekinov explained that, within the concept of new generation warfare, the front lines are blurring and the areas of impact are extending beyond the conventional front (Noorman, 2023). These authors, who published prolifically between 2010 and 2017, have not published any works afterwards and their current status is unknown. Among other things, they warned that a future war would start with electronic operations and unmanned systems (Thomas, 2020). In turn, the current Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, argues that the dispersion of units, linked to a single intelligence and information space, is progressively replacing the traditional concept (Noorman, 2023). The Nagorno-Karabakh War between September and November 2020 is an example of the ongoing doctrinal shift, in which most Armenian casualties were due to the intensive use of loitering munitions by Azerbaijan, which blocked manoeuvres and prevented the concentration of Armenian forces capable of mounting counter-attacks or offensive actions of any significance. This is another situation that also characterises the land front in Ukraine.

4 Current challenges on the Ukrainian-Russian front

The war in Ukraine is in a state of stalemate and attrition, especially on the ground, as a result of the massive use of artillery, the intensive use of loitering munitions of all types and configurations, and the permanent surveillance of the battlefield (transparent front) by both sides. As Frías Sánchez (2024) explains, this has led to the loss of surprise and the easy detection of troops, which favours the defence and makes the offensive

increasingly complex. It is a situation characterised by the apparent superiority of defence over offence, similar to that experienced barely a century ago during the First World War. It was precisely at this time that the tank emerged as an alternative means of penetrating enemy lines and bringing manoeuvre back into battle. However, in Ukraine, the tank is proving incapable of providing mobility, therefore its current usefulness is in question (Fox, 2022; Zabrodsky, 2022). Pérez Franco (2024) explains that the new means of combat, especially RPAS, have once again created a no man's land in a context where securing a few kilometres of frontline has become an arduous and costly task.

In an attempt to counter the effectiveness of fire and the intensive use of loitering ammunition, improvised initiatives have emerged, especially on the Russian side, applied to T-72, T-80 and T-90 tanks, as well as BTR-82 and BMP tanks, to improve their protection: reactive armour augmentation, mesh roofs, side gratings, ball chains on turrets and, more recently, the so-called "turtle tank", which consists of the installation of complete metal structures, either with metal mesh or solid panels which, together with active electronic warfare systems, make it possible to repel guided munitions and counter attacks by loitering munitions. Some of these applications have become standard on new or used ex-factory vehicles. Although they represent a significant increase in vehicle weight and reduce the situational awareness of their crews, their survivability on the battlefield has improved. However, these are solutions that, as it has been said, have failed to bring mobility to the front.

This is because there are fundamental flaws that result in the armoured assets failing to fulfil their mission. One of them, according to Amos Fox (2023), is the dispersed use of units. According to this expert, light forces lack the power to both strike the enemy and to defend against it due to their wide dispersion. In his opinion, the small Russian and Ukrainian units are not capable of providing decisive results to operations, which results in very small offensive actions and minimal advances that do not significantly change the front line and do not even generate operational successes.

This reality has forced the Russian General Staff to modify the main organisation of its land forces, although a return to the division as the primary unit of manoeuvre (Grau and Bartles, 2016: 33) had been planned halfway through the last decade. As it shall be seen a little later, the evolution and lengthening of the conflict has led to the reintroduction of the division with enhanced capabilities, moving from a basic brigade-based force structure to a mix of brigades and divisions, the latter similar in composition to the old Soviet motorised and armoured divisions (Clark and Hird, 2023).

Moreover, modern warfare's current demands have raised a similar doctrinal discussion in the United States. As a result of the challenges of advanced observation assets and long-range fire power causing near-total stalemate on the front lines, some US thinkers began to develop the notion of multi-domain warfare (Jensen, 2016; Perkins, 2017). This doctrine sees the battlespace as having expanded to the point of involving cyberspace, outer space, electronic warfare and information as an intrinsic part of the battlefield. Thus, the frontline or theatre of operations expands exponentially to the very rear of the enemy country (Army Capabilities Integration Center, 2017).

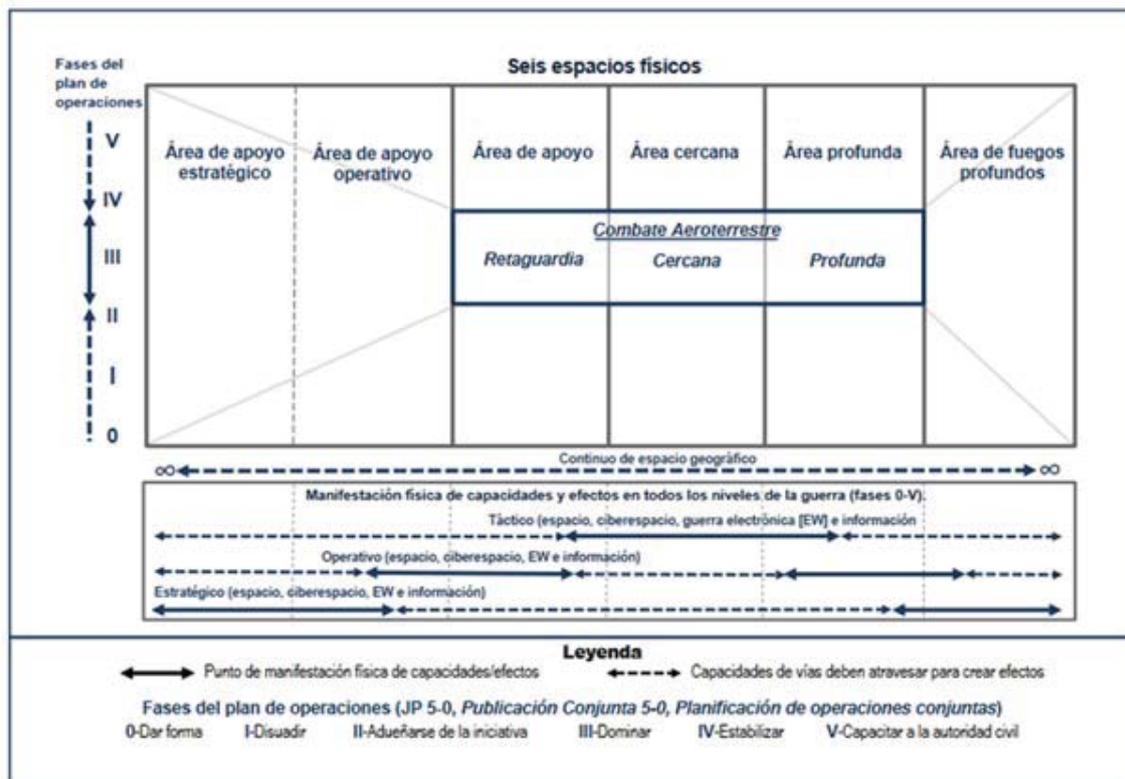


Figure 2: Comparison between multi-domain and air-ground battles. Source: Perkins, 2018: 47

The latter corresponds to the doctrine applied in conflicts such as World War II or the 1992 Gulf War. It is the evolution of doctrines developed in the 1930s, such as the aforementioned deep battle or *Gluboki boi*, the German mechanised warfare popularly known as *Blitzkrieg* or the postulates of Fuller and Liddell-Hart outlined above. Generally speaking, deep penetration by using agile mechanised forces as well as the combination of armour, artillery, infantry and aviation were essential elements for success, as well as suppressing pockets of enemy resistance as they advanced towards the enemy's core (Cranston, 1995). In France, similar ideas were developed by theorists such as Charles de Gaulle, Emile Allehaut and Jean-Baptiste Estienne (Fenby, 2012; Doughty, 1985; Chaix, 1996). Their application shares certain common elements: the compartmentalisation of the battle space into three main areas —rearguard, close area and depth—, with the close area being the site of the breakthrough in order to penetrate deep into enemy territory, either through frontal attacks or envelopments. The origins of this doctrine hark back to the Prussian concept of *Schwerpunkt*, which was to achieve force superiority at decisive points on the front as quickly as possible to avoid a stalemate (Vego, 2007: 103).

Success in the new theatre of operations therefore requires a return to mobility. However, the execution of manoeuvres and envelopment as they were known varies in its application in the multi-domain battlefield. Units will have to manoeuvre in an agile manner and on dispersed axes, always with the superiority of the different domains regulating the battlefield, which are cyber warfare, electronic warfare and airspace (including manned and unmanned aircraft), among others. The goal is to create an advantageous or unpredictable situation (surprise) for the adversaries, leading them to

be disorganised, at the same time as one's own units manoeuvre without being seen, while retaining the initiative (Army Capabilities Integration Center, 2017: 37-42).

This is therefore where the fundamental question arises: what role do armoured assets currently play in the war in Ukraine? How do they fit into the current doctrine? Understanding the multi-domain battle and the evolution of the deep battle doctrine are key to analysing the current situation. Armoured assets have been (and continue to be) among the hardest hit in the war as a result of a general lack of protection both at the active level and in their integration with other weapons (air superiority or mechanised infantry). But the war in Ukraine also demonstrates that it is now much cheaper to destroy armoured vehicles which are much more expensive, than the artillery munitions, loitering munitions or anti-tank missiles that are used against them. In the air-ground battle doctrine, the solution to the weakness of armoured assets was solved with the collaboration of infantry and air assets. However, the proliferation of unmanned weapons and the extension of the depth of the front have led to the general insecurity of those assets (Losacco, 2023). Infantry support is no longer the only solution to mechanised warfare; the effective use of armoured assets requires increasingly transparent multi-domain control of the battlefield where superiority in all domains is absolutely necessary for success.

Between these changes imposed once again by technology and their use in combat, tanks have the capability to bring mobility back to the front line, but a new approach is required to do so. Additionally, armoured standards are changing rapidly and a new concept of the main battle tank (MBT) is emerging as a weapons platform (equipped with active protection systems, unmanned vehicles and electronic warfare and connected to an extensive operational network) with a minimum manning level (Saurín Maartínez, 2023a). Consequently, the development of large manoeuvre units must be accompanied by technological innovation to enable them to operate safely on the battlefield (Fox, 2024: 4).

5 Mobilisation and expansion of the Russian Armed Forces

The greater or lesser success of Russian armoured assets in Ukraine is due not only to the doctrinal factor, but also to the capacity of the Russian economy and State to sustain a protracted war effort. Paul Kennedy (1987) already explained that the way in which a State employed its economic resources in times of war, as well as the length of time its armed forces fought in a conflict, conditioned victory or defeat. Furthermore, he also explained that the improvement or worsening of a power's economy must also be considered in relation to that of its neighbouring powers (Kennedy, 1987). These ideas are of great importance when applied to the Ukrainian conflict, as Russia's industrial and economic capacity is much greater than Ukraine's and consequently influences the course of events. Next, how Russia mobilised its economy and resources at the start of the war will be looked at.

On the 24th of February 2022, the same day as the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Armed Forces brought under its command all military units of the Militias of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic (1st and 2nd Army Corps) totalling 50,000 troops. However, as a result of the heavy losses they were suffering, in July 2022, the Russian authorities activated the first mobilisation measures to restore the combat capability of the most worn-out units. The first step was the creation of a new army corps (3 AC), two mechanised infantry divisions (motor rifle divisions in Russian terminology), one armoured division, three mechanised infantry brigades and one artillery brigade. At the same time, a covert recruitment campaign was launched, enabling up to thirty-five infantry battalions to be formed under the umbrella of the Combat Army Reserves of the Russian Armed Forces (*Boevoi Armeiski Rezerv Strani* or BARS in Russian) with personnel from all backgrounds. Additionally, assault units staffed by private military companies (the acronym PMC has become widespread) were created, following the *modus operandi* initially applied during the intervention in the Donbas in 2014.

However, the attrition of Russian units in terms of personnel and material was so severe that it was necessary to mobilise the armed forces reserve, which before the war was estimated to number some two million men (*The Military Balance*, 2022). For this reason, on the 21st of September 2022, President Putin signed a partial mobilisation decree, which included the call-up of reserve personnel¹. The Ministry of Defence immediately activated the recruitment of 300,000 reservists with an emphasis on those who had served in certain specialisation fields during their military service (drivers, artillerymen, gunners, tank crew, engineers) and those with combat experience in order to replenish the diminished units on the Russian-Ukrainian front. At the same time, the volunteer recruitment campaign, which began in July and is ongoing as of today, continued thanks to the offer of large sums of money for enlisting and remaining in the service².

Three months later (on the 21st of December 2022), during a very important annual meeting of the Russian Defence Ministry board in Moscow, Putin announced that an operational reserve of 150,000 troops had been formed and was in the rear in training; by this time Russian forces had already been forced to withdraw, first from Kharkiv and then from the western part of the Dnieper River, but without significant casualties or material losses. He also stated that the defence industry was increasing the pace of production to meet the forces' requirements, especially for artillery and aviation ammunition, and steps had been taken to encourage the massive uptake of RPAS. Furthermore, he stated that there were no budgetary restrictions on the funding of the armed forces for the duration of the war.

1 Decree No. 647/2022 of the 21st of September 2022 can be found on the Kremlin website: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69391>. President Putin's televised speech justifying the partial mobilisation measure may be consulted on: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69391>.

2 The monthly enlistment rate is estimated at 24,500 compared to an average of 29,000 in 2023.

The then Defence Minister, General Sergey Shoigu, also announced an ambitious programme to expand the Russian Armed Forces. The number of military personnel would increase from 950,000 to 1.5 million (an increase of more than 30%) through the incorporation of more professional troops (he set a target of 695,000 recruits) and extending the recruitment age for replacement military personnel to 30 years, a measure that since its implementation means that there are more personnel available for military service and also in the reserve. He also announced the creation of military districts in Moscow and Leningrad and a North-West Forces Group stationed in Karelia on the Finnish border. He also outlined plans for the formation of twelve new ground divisions: five mechanised divisions, two Airborne Forces (VDV) and five Naval Infantry divisions from the five pre-existing brigades.

While the Russian Government justified these measures as part of the response to the NATO threat (both due to its presence near Russia's borders and because of its support for Ukraine in the war), in reality they highlighted the inability of the Russian armed forces to fight and win a full-scale war in Ukraine with the resources they had put on the ground in February 2022.

Thus, in May 2023 began the formation of the 40th AC with the creation of four new mechanised infantry regiments and one artillery regiment. In June, the Russian General Staff announced the formation of five divisions and twenty-six brigades. It is worth pointing out that during this period, the Russian Armed Forces had started to show an increasing ability to learn and adjust to the tactical and technological challenges of the Ukrainian battlefield.

During the summer of 2023, the creation of new land units accelerated with the constitution of the cores of two new mechanised armies (combined arms, as they are called in the Russian Armed Forces), a mechanised infantry division, an airborne division and the activation of the core of the first Naval Infantry division in the Pacific Fleet. Likewise, the formation of three new mechanised brigades began, as well as another three from as many pre-existing regiments and two new artillery brigades. This mass of manoeuvre began arriving in southern Ukraine in late September 2023, where it participated in the blockade and subsequent defeat of the Ukrainian summer offensive (Saurín Martínez, 2023b).

In early 2024, the headquarters of the new Leningrad and Moscow military districts were activated as a result of the division of the Western Military District and the elimination of the Northern Military District, which was responsible for the Arctic regions. On the 20th of March 2024, the Russian Defence Minister announced two more mechanised armies, a total of fourteen divisions and sixteen brigades. In April, the troop core of the North-West (Karelia) 44th AC and two mechanised divisions were formed in the Leningrad Military District, and the formation of two other mechanised divisions and an artillery brigade in Leningrad, two mechanised divisions in the Moscow and Central Districts (considered the operational reserve of the Russian Armed Forces), two mechanised brigades in the Eastern Military District and one other airborne division was initiated. It should be noted that the new mechanised divisions

have three mechanised infantry regiments and one armoured regiment, which should have an operational impact through increased armour and mobility.

By July 2024, the Russian Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine had 625,000 troops, including a rear reserve of 200,000 troops in training (five times more than in February 2022) and an armoured mass of 2,800 tanks and armoured vehicles (more than twice as many as at the time of the invasion) drawn from long-term storage depots, upgraded with the equipment indicated above and sent to the area of operations³. However, this mass of forces lacks strategic impact due to the current impossibility (as the authors insist at this point) of achieving a concentration of means at one point on the front to achieve a decisive breakthrough.

6 Capacity to sustain large-scale warfare

Sustaining the war in Ukraine and creating a huge mass of military units and their full equipment requires the adoption of a set of economic, financial and industrial measures that allow this effort to be undertaken with guarantees of success and over a prolonged period, only starting to yield results in the medium term (Pérez Gil, 2024). In short, it is about placing the country on a war economy footing (Karaganov, 2024).

Specifically, the Russian defence budget rose from \$66 billion in 2021 to \$87.9 billion in 2022, within a context of a shrinking Russian economy with a fall in gross domestic product (GDP) of 2.9%, although initial estimates were much more negative (10-15%) (Sonin, 2022). Furthermore, most analysts pointed out that the Russian economy was facing an extremely complex situation caused by the massive imposition of Western sanctions, the freezing of Russian State assets deposited in Western countries and the disruption of traditional financial and energy flows with the West as well (Pardo de Santayana, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the Russian Government, as well as the main State agencies and departments, began to implement measures to mobilise national resources, approved significantly expanded military spending and gave strong support to defence industries, financing them with increased State revenues, the reduction of public items not directly related to the war effort and extraordinary recourse to the National Welfare Fund (Russian sovereign wealth fund).

On the 5th of August 2023, the Russian Government published that military spending in the first half of the year had reached \$54 billion and announced a total forecast for the end of the year of close to \$100 billion. According to estimates by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2024, Russia's actual expenditure in

³ At the start of the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Armed Forces had some 3,400 tanks in service and 12,000 in reserve. In *The Military Balance, 2022*, op. cit., pp. 194 ff.

2023 was \$109 billion (5.9% of GDP), a 24% year-on-year increase compared to 2022⁴. In other words, Russia's defence budget almost doubled in three years.

A month later (on the 9th of September 2023), the Russian Ministry of Finance reported that the fiscal deficit for the first eight months of the year had been 1.5% of the GDP (with initial forecasts of 2-2.5%) and on the 18th of September the Russian President declared a GDP growth estimate of 2.8%. Ten days later, the Government announced a 68% increase in defence spending for the 2024 fiscal year. The financial plan was based on a sharp increase in revenue (22%) and expenditure (16%), with defence accounting for 29% of the national budget.

Finally, on the 27th of November 2023, President Putin signed the law on the federal budget for 2024 and the 2025-2026 period planning, characterised by a high level of spending, fiscal deficits, and with significant items being declared confidential. By 2024, revenues were estimated at \$393.8 billion, expenditures at \$411.7 billion and a deficit of \$17.9 billion. This means that between 2021 and 2024 the Russian defence budget rose from \$66 billion to \$111.34 billion, equivalent to 6% of GDP, although the existence of those secret budget items could raise it to 10-12% of GDP.

The tax system reform that started in July 2024 means that the Russian Government will continue to draw resources from the private production sector, primarily Russia's giant energy corporations, to finance the war in order to have a much larger, more capable, better equipped and better prepared armed forces in the long run to face new wars. Therefore, all this planning would not only seek to overcome the current stalemate in Ukraine, but also to prepare for future confrontations with other actors of equal or greater importance.

To achieve this, however, war production must remain stable in the coming years by supplying the fighting forces with the necessary means and, at the same time, continuing to equip the newly created units. In this regard, the support of key business and strategic partners, such as China, Iran and North Korea, is seen as essential to enhancing these capabilities. Moreover, most analysts (Russian and non-Russian) believe that a level of military spending of this magnitude is unsustainable for the Russian economy, places a strain on public funds, and, if sustained over a prolonged period of time, could generate scenarios of social unrest that have so far been avoided at all costs by the Russian leadership.

7 Conclusions

Technology is once again bringing about a change in how war is waged in a scenario where defence appears to be prevailing over offense, as it did on several occasions in the 20th century.

⁴ Comparatively, Ukraine's spending rose to 37% of its GDP to \$64.8 billion, an increase of 51%. This represents 59% of Russia's, but if foreign military assistance (estimated at \$35 billion) is added, the ratio jumps to 91% (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024).

The war in Ukraine is fought mainly with armoured and mechanised means developed during the Cold War, which have been adapted to the tactical and operational requirements of the new multi-domain warfare scenario but are unable to play a decisive role in breaking the deadlock.

Both operational and tactical factors are involved in the stalemate on the Russian-Ukrainian front, such as the transformation of cities into defensive strongholds, real-time access to information from all battle spaces, the proliferation of unmanned systems of all types, the intensive use of guided artillery munitions, advanced satellite communications down to the tactical level, intensive application of information technologies, and the use of truly effective electronic warfare.

In the face of this stalemate, the Russian leadership appears to have taken the necessary decisions to consider a long-term war in which it would seek to impose the weight of its immense material resources, growing armed forces and reserves which are far greater than those of its opponent, and to prove its ability to overcome the West's containment policies.

This scenario would favour Russia because Ukraine is currently facing the same problems of lack of battlefield mobility, where Western doctrine based on air-ground warfare has also failed to provide a viable solution. To this must be added the lower levels of Ukrainian reserves, the attrition of the limited operation in Kursk without the expected results, and the impact of the presidential change in the United States, until now its main supporter in the war effort.

Consequently, the Russian Armed Forces have initiated a programme of changes aimed at increasing and improving the combat capabilities of their ground units with a return to the mechanised division as the main manoeuvre unit. In the medium term, they have neither the personnel nor the means to equip the entire planned mass of troops, which means that the training process will take four to five years. The Russian leadership believes that this period of time would enable it to fulfil its plan to expand its ground forces, achieve its strategic objectives in Ukraine, and be in a position to contain the Western Bloc.

However, even with fully equipped units thanks to the war economy and their war industry producing at full capacity, they will be unable to bring about operational change unless they come up with new tactical solutions to break the lack of mobility at the front.

Thus, economics, technology and how people fight are closely interlinked in a solution that may have various outcomes based on changes to any of these variables.

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Artificial intelligence and biometric systems for military use: redefining artificial intelligence from an ethical and legal perspective

Abstract

This article addresses the need for prevention, without limiting or doing it just enough, so that artificial intelligence, as an almost plenipotentiary tool, may make a major contribution to security and defence applications. More specifically, the use of biometric systems opens up a whole world of opportunities in the security sector, but at the same time it clashes with inalienable rights and guarantees. This confrontation must be resolved on the basis of ethics and law, without in any case setting an absolute limit to the use of a decisive tool, with basic and essential military applications.

Keywords

Technology, Military applications, Biometrics, Ethics, Control.

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I Introducing predictive artificial intelligence

To predict means to be able to anticipate that which is undesirable in order to prevent it or, on the contrary, to take advantage of the opportunities that prior knowledge can bring, obtaining optimal results. Prediction, according to the definition provided by the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy of Language, can be arrived at by revelation, founded knowledge, intuition or conjecture. This assumes, eliminating the option of intuition, where one starts from indications or observations, that prediction, in the end, is an analysis of data obtained in different ways. In a way, it all depends on the meaning, within those that are accepted, which people seek to give to the concept of intelligence. This concept coincides with that of prediction, in that both involve data analysis to obtain knowledge that, once applied, may be used for problem-solving, decision making, etc.

By now, almost everybody is familiar with the concept of artificial intelligence (hereinafter AI), therefore, all that has been said until now is perfectly transposable at this point. However, we must approach it in relation to predictive analytics. If the concept of artificial intelligence is approached, especially in relation to its nature which is alien to human behaviour, algorithms that are capable of predicting behaviour have to be used, especially when the variables do not allow, for reasons of volume, human decision-making, or make it ineffective due to the time required to make a prediction.

It is then when one will be able to speak of predictive artificial intelligence, when that, and no other, is the objective to be pursued: to predict. In general, artificial intelligence implies that it is the machine that thinks, that it can even learn to think, i.e. *machine learning*, but predictive artificial intelligence goes further. *Machine learning* implies that a machine can learn to classify, cluster and especially compute by developing algorithms based on a previously given set of data. But predictive analytics interprets and, above all, puts into practice all the results obtained —information— from the data provided, which is the precise moment when prediction becomes intelligence.

Predictive artificial intelligence (hereinafter, PAI) is a data analysis method that, unlike AI, allows prediction and anticipation, insofar as the full set of possible scenarios has been simulated, based on all current and past information collected within a given domain. This means that without this data, it would be impossible to model useful and effective predictions. In no case can it be reduced to a mere forecasting process, as the data incorporated into the forecasting equation that enables the generation of more accurate forecasts, also use real-time data. Here one can also distinguish between traditional AI, where data is processed with a previously written program —algorithm— in order to generate results, and machine learning processes, where the program is generated based on the data and its historical results, in an automated and continuous machine learning process. In this way, what is learned may be reused, predicting what will happen next and making it possible to propose specific and appropriate actions to optimise results or achieve objectives.

The volume and variety of data, as well as the automation of learning, boost accuracy, and create a robust system. One factor which has not been addressed so far, but which plays an undeniable role in this entire system, comes into play at this point: the data quality. It is certainly worth considering the existence of adjacent factors that distort the data, even intentionally, for example by resorting to counter-intelligence. While it is true that the more internal or external data used, the more accurate the PAI will be, the data quality may distort the results, even if specific scenarios have been taken into consideration and generated accordingly.

So far little progress has been made on the original question of this paper, or at least it may seem so. However, it is perhaps not as far away as it may appear. It is well known that nowadays almost every security application uses biometric systems to protect people and facilities. Armed forces around the world use biometrics to control access to facilities, equipment and IT systems, above all. Biometric technology used to identify adversaries on the battlefield or in operational terrain is of a more advanced nature. Even cutting-edge biometric technology goes beyond the more traditional realm of defence and plays a role in intelligence. It is clear then that biometrics goes far beyond what has been its main objective: to recognise a person's identity for the purpose of prohibiting or restricting access, based on whether they are authorised and their level of authorisation, and if not authorised, prohibiting access to physical spaces within the physical area or virtual environment they are confined to (Illanas, 2024).

These biometric systems are defined by the collection of data from individuals for the purpose of unequivocal recognition, automatically applying a series of techniques to the physical or behavioural traits of each person. But is legislation keeping pace with the technical progress of biometric systems? Clearly, the answer is no, as is generally the case when it comes to technology and personal data.

The current situation may be said to be one of complete legal uncertainty and the reasons for this are none other than the uniqueness of the subject matter, the variety of authorities and "voices" that issue their opinions and doctrine on this matter and the unstoppable advance of technology, which is increasingly sophisticated and intrusive in terms of people's privacy.

Science and technology have brought to the fore the question of what is possible and feasible from a scientific and technical perspective so that, in these times of metaverses and avatars⁵, the definitive advent of robots is not surprising, and may even seem obsolete. But, beyond the automation implied by their use in physical or mechanical tasks⁶, it is especially interesting when referring to the non-mechanised

⁵ According to the Royal Spanish Academy of Language or RAE, (RAE 4. M. Inform.), an avatar may be defined as the graphical representation of a user's virtual identity in digital environments. In turn, the Oxford English Dictionary or OED, 1.1992–Computing (originally Science Fiction), recognises "metaverse" as a colloquial term used to describe a representation of reality executed by means of virtual reality programmes, a meaning that has been validated by the DRAE, but not yet included in its Dictionary, accepting that it covers universes based on virtual environments.

⁶ Automation refers to means by which different processes of production, data management, instrumentation, compilation, etc. may be controlled externally. In short, it is the implementation of machines, computer systems, robots or intelligence

aspect of these tasks, which is their ability to take decisions instead of humans having to take decisions for them. Humans are also interested in intelligent robots.

After so much time among people, they have almost suddenly realised that the fact that a robot is capable of “thinking”, even artificially, is due to the algorithm, and under no circumstances is this because of the machine, which is merely a medium, regardless of its configuration. Algorithms have been around for 3,000 years, which makes it clear that there is no absence of human intervention in its origin. Obviously, the moment in which a human being establishes a set of rules that, systematically applied to suitable data, can solve a specific problem, is when we have an algorithm. This is how it has evolved over the centuries until recently. Now, moreover, this algorithm is incorporated into a computerised tool capable of undertaking an amount of data management and processing that would be unmanageable for a human being.

The evolution of computer science together with the variable that is the algorithm has finally led to the generation of AI. Once formulated, technological development means that, based on its initial configuration, this algorithm, which is becoming increasingly complex as a result of technical circumstances, is capable of creating other algorithms. If one stops at this initial stage of the question, it is clear that people are not dealing with a behaviour alien to human beings and, it is therefore, subject to rules determined by them. Even the possibility of progress implies that the human factor has foreseen this possibility, has agreed to it, so that its willingness to “transfer” the decision to the machine is clear. What we will explore below will determine even the possibility of attributing responsibility to the creator of the original algorithm, insofar as they could have, but did not avoid contingencies, deliberately leaving it up to the algorithm to make decisions that were their responsibility.

2 Approaching biometrics from the perspective of AI

It would not be far-fetched to say that AI exists because machines are able to perceive their environment and, consequently, carry out actions that maximise their chances of success in certain goals or tasks. Without going into a comprehensive analysis from the perspective of language, the term “artificial intelligence” is used to refer to a machine that mimics the cognitive functions of human beings, who in turn associate them with other human minds, such as the ability to perceive or reason, but, above all, with the capacity to learn and to solve problems. A more elaborate concept would see it as the recognised ability of a system to correctly interpret external data, learn from that data and use this acquired knowledge to perform tasks and achieve specific goals through flexible adaptation, the latter being the characteristic feature of AI (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2018).

That machines are becoming increasingly capable means that technology once thought to require intelligence will fall outside the definition, just as there are different kinds of

programmes in the different production fields mentioned above.

perceptions and actions, which may be elicited and produced respectively by physical sensors and mechanical sensors in machines; electrical or optical pulses in computers; as well as by inputs and outputs of *bits* and *software* environments, which, having become part of our routine, might seem far from the consideration of AI, but are nevertheless perfect examples of it. Systems control, automated planning, the ability to respond to diagnostics and consumer queries, optical character recognition, speech recognition, and pattern recognition are integrated into everyday reality. Fields such as economics, medicine, engineering, transport, communications and defence, among others, cannot be understood without the presence of AI, and it is even present in leisure by means of different software applications present in strategy games or even in chess itself⁷.

There is no denying the intelligence of AI, but one should not mistake it for human intelligence, simply because the two are substantially different, at least for the time being. For example, AI has no fixed values and is not one-dimensional, which means that it cannot be compared⁸. However, within the context of AI, they cannot be compared with each other, because they are different AI systems, just as substantially different objects cannot be compared from single perspectives or key points. Similarly, it makes no sense to ask which algorithm is smarter, nor does it make sense to ask whether one object is better than another when the two are different. The advocated narrow character of AI undermines this line of discussion⁹.

7 It is necessary to consider that the move towards non-human pattern-based learning models moves AI away from human-like behaviour. This is undoubtedly an advantage, but not without ethical problems, as it may generate results that are unacceptable to individuals even if they are optimal for the machine. A well-known case is that of the AlphaGo Zero robot in 2016, which was trained by a method known as *Reinforcement learning*, where it does not need to learn from human behaviour but is able to generate knowledge from scratch. These learning patterns allow machines to accumulate the equivalent of thousands of years of learning in a matter of hours, which meant that AlphaGo Zero was able to beat the Go world champion by 100 games to zero. If one refers to other major AI challenges such as self-driving, avoiding taking the human factor into consideration will mean that AI decisions may become incompatible with human thinking, thus being rejected by humans. It should not be forgotten that neither ethics nor morality are at the core of AI but are incorporated through training based on human behaviour.

8 It is interesting that even though we are talking about intelligence, it is not possible to apply the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) to AI. IQ compares a subject's ability to learn, to understand, to form concepts, analyse information, apply logic and reasoning, in relation to others. It is informative in nature and therefore reflects the influence of uncommon characteristics that may only be determined in society. Thus, from the perspective of relationships, the presence of isolation, rejection or distancing, even pondering them, can be detected, while at the same time it is possible to appreciate the facilities and/or difficulties encountered in intellectual activities. This would lead us to understand that some achievements by individuals require less cognitive effort than others, or that the same achievements do not require the same level of effort for all subjects. It is absolutely correct to state that IQ is basically a formula for estimating intelligence, which mostly does not respond to a single factor; in fact different standardised tests are used to determine it. Therefore, the measurement of intelligence is in itself questionable, although in any case it should be recognised as having a predictive value when applied to certain functions or behaviours.

9 In understandable terms, one cannot compare a car with a house. They can be evaluated separately and always in comparison with similar objects, but not with each other. Individually (without any comparison) one could only say whether they like the object or not, whether they are satisfied with their use, and so on. It is not that people seek to avoid the eternal question "car or house", it is simply that intelligence cannot compare both objects because of the differences between them. Obviously, depending on the information about a given situation, it would be able to determine whether it is more interesting to buy a car or to buy a house in a specific case, and it could even determine the ideal purchasing system and, from that perspective alone, determine which is not better, but ideal. This is even more accentuated in the case of AI, as its narrow character is derived from the AI's own ability to solve a problem. This leads humans to affirm that the fact that a given AI is capable of finding the solution to a problem does not mean that it has the capacity to solve a different problem. Only by submitting the new problem to its consideration, can one ascertain this capacity, without the result, positive or negative, in terms of recognising the capacity, in turn allowing humans to predicate the same with regard to a new problem.

The use of the term AI by laypersons lacks rigour. Its general use is not possible, precisely because there is no single AI, therefore it would only be correct to express the certain presence of AI, but in a partial manner, rather than to confirm that AI has done this or that.

In this sense, the use of AI in the military domain enables the creation of tools that can collect, process and store biometric indicators, fingerprints, eye scans and facial parameters in order to establish, with the help of databases and AI, indicators of matches when identifying a potentially hostile individual. However, the system should be subject to supervision and rely heavily on the human factor (the latter will decide the criteria to be followed by the system in order to identify subjects, the aspects on which to focus its search, and will also be able to control and deactivate the system in case of error).

Although AI systems have converted devices such as drones and unmanned vehicles into autonomous units (especially in the military), the United Nations and the European Union recommend that they should always be subject to human factors, without total autonomy in their actions¹⁰. Moreover, current biometric identification systems include AI systems in conjunction with satellites hosting defence systems or are ready to collect and store such biometric data, thanks to the use of *Big Data*; all activities in which the human factor must be involved, both in the programming and in the subsequent control of their execution¹¹.

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 already states “the need to contribute to reducing the dangers of armed conflict and of misunderstanding or miscalculation of military activities which could give rise to apprehension, particularly in a situation where the participating States lack clear and timely information about the nature of such activities”. Without expressly mentioning a reality that did not exist at the time, this reflection by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (hereinafter OSCE) may be extrapolated to the current situation if the goal is to reduce the risks inherent to conflicts, including improving transparency in the area of military planning and activities¹². This is obviously not an explicit reference to the use of AI in the field

10 At EU level, see document 2018/2752(RSP) Resolution on Autonomous Weapon Systems. Similarly, the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee of 31 May 2017 advocates an approach to artificial intelligence based on human control and a ban on lethal autonomous weapons systems. This ideology may be summed up in recent statements by the UN Secretary-General who has said that “what’s most serious is that artificial intelligence is eroding the fundamental principle of human control over the use of force,” citing the selection of targets via algorithms to make life-and-death decisions. See: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2024/12/1535261>

11 The Spanish Data Protection Agency has recently imposed a fine (not yet final) of 200,000 euros on GSMA LIMITED, the organiser of the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona (the world’s leading technology conference), for not clearly informing a citizen who attended the event as a speaker about its use of the biometric data obtained from her at the congress itself. The resolution is available at: <https://www.aepd.es/es/documento/ps-00553-2021.pdf>

12 A key element of the OSCE is the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, which promotes confidence and predictability through verification and transparency measures covering armed forces and major equipment systems. The Framework for Arms Control, agreed in 1996, recognised that arms control, including disarmament and confidence- and security-building, is integral to the OSCE’s comprehensive and co-operative concept of security. The Vienna Document, the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and the Open Skies Treaty constitute a web of interlocking and mutually reinforcing arms control obligations and commitments. Together they enhance predictability, transparency and military stability and reduce the risk of a major conflict in Europe.

of armaments, but the continuous reference to the existence of controls, the need for trust and predictability, distances itself from the idea of an autonomous decision making option by weapons systems without ultimate human control.

This leads to the debate around Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS), robotic weapons or even killer robots. Again, the question is whether it is necessary, desirable, or essential to set limits and controls on the autonomy of these systems, given the collateral effects of such technological devices, even when they are controlled by operators or controllers, even in compliance with the rules of international humanitarian law (Queirolo Pellerano, 2019).

It is appropriate at this point to make a brief reference to the difference between strong and weak AI. The latter is designed to perform specific and easily predictable tasks, while strong AI has the ability to learn and adapt to new situations. Expressed in other terms, one may consider strong AI as that which is capable of reasoning and making decisions on its own —self-learning— while weak AI simply follows instructions, so that the human factor is decisive in the latter case, both in terms of carrying out instructions and, above all, because of the perpetual capacity for control. A weapons system with a weak AI would be acceptable, as both decision making and control originate in and are implemented by a human being. However, the same will not be true for a weapon system that employs strong AI.

2.1 *Intelligent machines*

Strictly speaking, an algorithm, regardless of whether it is a formula, a method, even a procedure, in itself does not necessarily have to be AI. As long as the result of its application is the exclusive product of that user-specified formula, it would not be a manifestation of AI. When John McCarthy defined it in 1956, he defined it as the “science and engineering of making intelligent machines”, that is, a combination of algorithms designed to create machines with the same capabilities as human beings. If this combination is not completed and the algorithm is limited to the formula that provides results according to its programming, one will be dealing with automation, but not with AI¹³.

Ultimately, the defining characteristic of AI is that it makes it possible for machines to learn from their own experience, while adjusting to new contributions and, like human beings, to carry out tasks. This requires three processes: learning (the acquisition

¹³ One cannot fail to refer to the man considered the father of artificial intelligence. In 1947, Alan Turing's (1912) answer to the question “Can a machine think?” laid the foundations of AI. The publication of this response in 1950 is the first bibliographical manifestation of AI. While the answer is not irrefutable nor absolute, it outlines the general lines along which an answer that combines a certain precision with ease of use should be developed. These lines, the Turing Test, lead to the conclusion that a machine is deemed capable of thought if a human being communicating with the machine and with other human beings is not able to distinguish between their interaction with the machine and with another human being.

of information and the application of rules for the use of information)¹⁴, reasoning (the use of rules to arrive at approximate or definitive conclusions) and self-correction.

These processes occur in all types of artificial intelligence, as every time one seeks to categorise something, it must always be executed taking into account the classifying criterion, if not the lens through which it is observed or, in other words, the subjectivisation of the expert. Without any conceit, but simply for the sake of clarification, it may be said, with relatively little chance of being mistaken, that the manifestations of AI may be divided into two groups. Firstly, there are those that only use logic, as opposed to those that use intuition in addition to logic.

The first, which are the most recurrent, apply algorithms (rational principles of human thought). The second group, which includes intuition, is called “artificial neural networks”, whose precursor is Hinton. Similar to the first group, they work with algorithms, but these are designed much like human neurons, so that the machine may learn by itself. This group is possibly better known by its colloquial name “*deep learning*”¹⁵. In short, in the first case, the algorithm operates on an individual basis, and the result it produces is a direct consequence of said individual operation. Conversely, deep learning contemplates multiple algorithms, such that one algorithm is designed to in turn create other algorithms, thus contributing to learning processes based on the results obtained by one and the others, in what is an entire training process¹⁶.

Within a legal limbo as regards the complete regulatory framework applicable to the use of biometric systems in terms of privacy, the use of AI applications for biometric identification is becoming increasingly common. The regulatory issue of the “custody” of biometric data and the various processing operations to which they may be subjected have only been addressed in a variety of ways from the perspective of data. From applications to detect body language that may indicate the commissioning of a legally inadmissible behaviour (criminal or at least illicit behaviour), to voice analysis to replace the traditional polygraph in job interviews, especially in senior management positions or positions that require specific qualifications, and where it is necessary to reduce the risks inherent to the candidate seeking to occupy the post.

14 Here, in the learning process, is where the question of the use of data becomes important and where all data protection regulations are manifested, insofar as the data are of a personal nature, being a maximum manifestation of the links between AI and the law.

15 Also known as connectionist systems, it is characterised by the fact that neurons, forming a neural network, are connected to other neurons through links that determine the effects on adjacent neurons. Thus, these systems learn and train themselves, rather than being explicitly programmed, and excel in areas where solution or feature detection is difficult to express with conventional programming (Hinton, 1912).

16 One of the best known examples is that of trial-and-error algorithms. These include the Newton-Rapshon method. It is a type of recursive “backwards and forwards” search algorithm, which is based on reapplying the result of previous applications, which can be done an infinite number of times. For example, it is used for training computers in games such as chess. Thus, a (recursive trial-and-error) system is set up where the tests performed by the computer build up a series of search paths for solutions. These search paths will generate a subtask tree, where some paths do not reach the solution while others do. In short, it is a system of repetitive tasks that seeks to gradually improve the result by means of “deep layers”. This how neural networks operate through deeper and deeper layers of information to make predictions, solve problems or detect features in objects or situations.

The truth is that humans are facing a situation of reduced legality due to the only certain feasibility of being able to apply data protection regulations (at the European level, unlike other nations such as the PRC, USA, Japan, etc.).

This situation, which is certainly close to a legality, keeps supervisory authorities all over Europe on edge and, far from maintaining common criteria, they occasionally overwhelm the citizen with discretionary resolutions with the catchphrases “in case of doubt, the most favourable interpretation”, and must overcome the judgements of “suitability, necessity and proportionality in the strict sense”, “a regulation with the status of law is not sufficient”, “the need for the processing is not justified”, “necessity cannot be confused with convenience”, “the current regulation is insufficient” or the use of this technology must be considered “the last resort”¹⁷.

But if data protection has not yet solved the legal problems posed by globalisation and technology, Europe is not going to fare any better with biometric systems and AI.

The *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence - A European approach to excellence and trust* (2020)¹⁸ explains that the collection and use of biometric data for remote identification carries specific risks to fundamental rights, and concludes that in order to address possible societal concerns regarding the use of AI and in order to avoid fragmentation within the internal market, the Commission will launch a European debate on the specific circumstances, if any, which may justify such use, as well as on common safeguards.

2.2 Legal response

As stated above, the law cannot be content to follow reality, reflecting the context, but must be able to respond adequately to the challenges posed by the new scenarios. The law must understand its implications, functioning and uses. However, given the nature of the new reality, one has to anticipate and suggest future applications derived from the computation, calculation and use of AI, in everything that entails an aid to decision-making, especially if it is decided to delegate decision-making to AI itself, as it evolves and approaches human *ratio decidendi* (Hoffmann, 2018).

Following the above discussion, the mere execution of systematic tasks, reproducing mechanisms, where decision-making capacity is circumscribed by specific limits that govern their functioning is what we know as automation, not AI. Certainly, examples such as the Automated Complaints Centre of the Directorate General of Traffic (ESTRADA), which automatically and immediately handles the offences captured by radars or cameras installed on Spanish roads by selecting the images captured by the radars and discarding those that “in its judgement” do not meet the requirements

¹⁷ See, among others, COM(2021) 205 final, COM(2024) 28 final.

¹⁸ COM (2020) 65 final.

to initiate penalty proceedings with guarantees¹⁹, are highly simple manifestations of AI. The most interesting part, from the perspective of this work, is that it raises the possibility of a robot making its own decisions or even going a step further, developing its own ideas, to the extent that the ownership of these ideas may be enquired, whether one may understand them as a direct consequence of the initial programming, which depends on people or, conversely, at least in part, is the result of the system's own learning via data processing.

Following on from the above example, AI systems, when used for active defence in the military domain, may coordinate and carry out certain pre-emptive attacks virtually autonomously and recognise devices, military elements and individuals.

It would be necessary to determine to what extent technological advances and the growing autonomy of these systems to the detriment of the human factor (in data collection, processing and decision-making), now affect the control of weapons by states. The ability to monitor and process data through AI systems facilitates the monitoring and verification of limits set by international law or agreements between states, while increasing and improving the quality of stored data.

The human factor would be reduced to monitoring and decision-making at the lower levels of the system, as well as controlling the flow of information derived from the implemented systems.

3 Ethics in AI. What is and what ought to be

It is irrefutable that artificial intelligence is one of the most advanced but, at the same time, most compromising technologies of recent times. The numerous applications that help to improve social, economic, traffic, health and educational systems, among many others, should not obscure their many risks, as machines have an automatic character, especially when it comes to applying privacy and data protection rights, which have been protected by other regulations in recent years²⁰.

¹⁹ According to the Directorate General of Traffic itself, as reported on its website, (<https://www.dgt.es/menusecundario/dgt-en-cifras/dgt-en-cifras-resultados/dgt-en-cifras-detalle/Evolucion-de-Denuncias-e-Ingresos.-Denuncias-en-funcion-de-la-provincia-y-el-precepto/>), the National Centre for the Processing of Automated Complaints handles approximately 1.5 million complaints for traffic violations every year, of which around 40% are usually discarded because the image captured may raise doubts or does not meet the requirements. The system works on the basis of the images taken by the radar or camera, detecting speeding or other traffic offences such as not wearing a seat belt or not respecting traffic signs such as “not stopping at traffic lights”, stop signs, etc. The information is then sent via satellite to the processing centre, where the offender is identified by consulting the general vehicle register; the system itself generates the report notification and also automatically notifies the owner of the vehicle.

²⁰ The European Commission itself, in conjunction with the Member States, executed a plan for proper regulation of this particular issue which resulted in the publication of the non-binding “Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technologies), *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI*, (Publications Office, 2019, see: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/14078>). In turn, the Parliament has also approved certain resolutions within the scope of Artificial Intelligence, such as the most recent European Parliament Resolution of 3 May 2022, on artificial intelligence in a digital age (2020/2266(INI)). But the proposal for a regulation that would establish both ethical principles and legal obligations for the development as well the implementation and use of

The existence of unknown, “*opaque, unregulated and irrefutable* algorithms” (O’Neil, 2016) is causing a major setback for citizens’ freedoms and real equality.

It is not clear how they operate, occasionally people are even unaware of their existence, but the most striking thing is that they are also unaware of their capabilities: the maximisation of the result sought from them may surprise us. By discovering connections and patterns that human beings do not pick up by detecting coincidences and regularities that humans would overlook in the vast amount of data they are trained on, such discoveries are now elevated to results that accurately predict that those coincidences will occur in the future. They serve, then, not only to explain, but also to “predict” and guide human decision-making, even if they do not make such decisions on their own. But they do so based on correlations and the rules of human behaviour that have been called Law and which are based on causality and responsibility.

On the other hand, the data used to train such systems are conveying real information, which also communicates current social biases. If people let AI systems interpret such data as the only data to be considered, will they not reinforce existing inequalities, biases leading to injustice that are offered by the current data?²¹

Technology has been busy providing good and efficient solutions through massive data analysis, computation and algorithms, but have people ensured its suitability to their values of dignity of the person, liberty and duty, equality and solidarity, which should be the principles of all *ius algorithmia*? And, furthermore, have people taken care that such solutions respond to *human rules*? Because, in the end, this is what it is all about: technical solutions, which produce excellent results, are based on a non-causal (*non-responsible*) consideration of human behaviour. The law, the rules of the law of today were built on the assumption of responsibility and causality. Is society heading towards an algorithmic right of simple *correlation*?

At the very least it will be possible to generalise some general legal principles of *ius algorithmia*. Human beings have a right to know about the existence of AI systems that influence their legal position. It does not matter now, whether or not they function by establishing “profiles” in a strictly normative sense. Any decision based primarily or exclusively on the use of AI systems must have, as a prerequisite for its legal admissibility, the possibility that the human logic on which it is based may be challenged. It is therefore a prerequisite that its existence be made public. Even the

artificial intelligence, robotics or other technologies of a similar nature is undoubtedly noteworthy: *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 April 2021 laying down harmonised rules in the field of artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act) and amending certain legislative acts of the Union (COM(2021)0206)*. Undoubtedly, there is a clear intention to regulate high-risk technologies, those that are considered to have a significant risk of causing some kind of harm to people or society, especially by breaching fundamental rights or EU standards, which undoubtedly includes AI.

²¹ The philosopher Daniel Innerarity (2022) has not hesitated to point out that “algorithms are conservative, and our freedom depends on them letting us be unpredictable”. It is not a question of denying the outcome of what is ultimately humans’ own work, people simply have to adapt to new realities, while also doing the same with procedures and institutions. All of this without renouncing the human essence, such that technology will make tasks easier, rather than the determination of their purpose.

awareness of its existence would not be sufficient; as long as it is not positive, it will not be subject to examination²².

After transparency, the precautionary principle (prior assessment) is fully consolidated by Community law, which has declared it to be a general principle of Community law (Judgement of the Court of First Instance of 26/11/2002, *Artegoda and Others v Commission*)²³. Accordingly, not every algorithm will be admissible in law because, for example, its use may end up leading to anti-competitive practices. Thus, this principle would operate in a very simple way, which could be graphically summarised with a basic algorithm: scientific uncertainty + suspicion of harm = precautionary action. The issue is not unknown to Cotino Hueso (2019) and Fernando Pablo and Terrón Santos (2019), who consider ethics as a definitive tool to address the risks of AI with a similar argument.

The application of this principle requires taking into account the unique aspects of this reality, where technology without Law will encounter serious problems in its implementation due to the inherent risk of its use, of which there is a growing awareness. The progressive awareness of the problems linked to AI lead people to rethink, not its undisputed usefulness, but the need, which will end up being unavoidable, to understand how this reality works, in order to control algorithms as far as possible and, when this is not possible, to limit their use (Bostron, 2014). If humans do not

22 With regard to transparency and in relation to the right of access to software used to appoint the members of the committees responsible for assessing the public university entrance exams, Resolution 200/2017, of 21 June, of the Commission for the Guarantee of the Right of Access to Public Information of Catalonia, recognised the claimant's right to access the source code of the software used by the Inter-University Council to appoint the members of the selection boards responsible for assessing the public university entrance exams, for reasons similar to those that led this Commission's Resolution of 21 September 2016 to uphold Complaint 124/2016 and declare the right to know the mathematical algorithm implemented by the said software. It states that:

“ [...] the source code of a computer program used by the Administration to appoint members of evaluation tribunals constitutes public information for the purposes of Article 2.b of Act 19/2014, of 29 December, on transparency, access to public information and good governance (LTAIPBG). According to this provision, public information is understood to be 'the information produced by the administration and that which it has in its possession as a consequence of its activity or the exercise of its functions, including that which is supplied to it by other entities subject thereto, pursuant to the provisions of this act'. This definition includes all information produced or held by the Administration in the exercise of its functions, regardless of the language or form in which it is expressed. Public information thus includes not only that which is expressed in natural language (in words, which is the most common), but also that which is expressed through photographs, videos, maps, signs, etc. or through other languages, such as mathematical or, in this case, computer language. Article 19.1 LTAIPBG confirms this broad notion of public information when it provides that 'the right of access to public information includes any form or medium in which this information has been prepared or in which it is kept'. The same follows from Article 13 of the Basic State Law 19/2013, of 9 December, on transparency, access to public information and good governance, when it states that 'public information is understood to be the contents or documents, whatever their format or medium, which are in the possession of any of the subjects included in the scope of application of this title and which have been drawn up or acquired in the exercise of their functions'”.

23 Judgement of the Court of First Instance of 26 November 2002 *Artegoda and Others v Commission*, Joined cases T-74/00, T-76/00, T-83/00 to T-85/00, T-132/00, T-137/00 and T-141/00. The dispute arose over the withdrawal of marketing authorisation for a medicinal product for human use with an anorexic effect. Paragraph 184 of the judgement states:

“It follows that the precautionary principle can be defined as a general principle of Community law requiring the competent authorities to take appropriate measures to prevent specific potential risks to public health, safety and the environment, by giving precedence to the requirements related to the protection of those interests over economic interests. Since the Community institutions are responsible, in all their spheres of activity, for the protection of public health, safety and the environment, the precautionary principle can be regarded as an autonomous principle stemming from the above-mentioned Treaty provisions”.

understand the workings of the technological mechanisms on which algorithms are based, it is difficult to justify their results. This leads people to observe that it is equally important to identify the objectives sought to be achieved by their use, as only then will people understand what role regulation should play. Otherwise, any attempt to limit the use of AI through regulations will be a failure by any standard²⁴.

For example, what would happen if a robot —a deep learning algorithm— were designed for a certain task but, as a result of this task, invented something? Would the result of their work be the property of the purchaser of the robot or of the initial programmer? It is clear that the *software* allows for two rights holders, the initial manufacturer or programmer, and the user who obtains this intelligence that can conduct further programming. From a legal perspective the answer comes to light almost immediately: it will depend on what is agreed in the contract of sale or transfer of use. Thus, situations may arise in which the user only obtains a licence of use and not the ownership of the algorithm itself, or the opposite. But it would also be problematic if people were to consider the robot as having a legal capacity of its own. In such a case, who would have ownership of the invention? The answer can only be approached from the different question of whether the AI has the ownership of the legal person, in which case the dispute will be between the manufacturer, the user or between the robot itself (Eidenmüller, 2017). Until legislation clearly clarifies this issue, it is not possible to say with certainty who the true owner of the discovery is.

4 Limits to artificial intelligence

This issue has already come up before, as shown by the fact that in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, i.e. more than 15 years ago, the need to control AI from a legal perspective was already being considered²⁵. Developments in this area have moved away from those initial pronouncements that liability derives from ironclad

24 Opinion shared by Boix Palop (2007: 145), who advocates for the correct, as well as consensual, identification of what should be the final objectives of the regulation, without forgetting the values which it should serve. This reasoning implies that only if they are aware of the implications, will people be able to draft regulations that program AIs to achieve certain objectives or others. Therefore, in the face of this new third technological and productive revolution, the role of the law must be fully consistent with this need to establish objectives and goals and from there, to try to reorient the functioning of these instruments.

25 Various media outlets at the time reported that the issue had been the subject of more detailed analysis in countries such as Japan and South Korea, to the point that first in Japan and then in South Korea documents were drawn up which, taking up Asimov's basic principles, argued for the clear intention that machines should always be under human control, without the possibility of attributing legal or any other kind of ownership to robots. Among others, see the article by Delclos, (2007). Asimov (1942) laid down the three laws that should govern the existence of robots: «A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law». In conclusion, a robot will do what it is told, but not what is wanted or needed. The European Parliament's Resolution of 16 February 2017 with recommendations to the Commission on Civil Law Rules on Robotics (2015/2103(INL)) acknowledges the existence of precedents for the adoption of regulatory measures in the field of robotics and artificial intelligence, even with certain positive results, to the extent that certain Member States had tentatively approached the drafting or amendment of legal standards in order to include new technological applications.

human control. But the circumstances are in charge and nowadays it is difficult to claim “algorithmic responsibility” for the developers of certain programmes, especially those that use machine learning (see: <https://www.abogacia.es/2018/05/14/ese-algoritmo-el-discriminador/> - *ftn2*). The absence of this intended control means that preventive methodologies must be sought to avoid biases in automatic decision-making that could affect fundamental rights²⁶ and to avoid the existence of pre-programmed and self-executed discrimination²⁷. In short, to avoid “unwanted” liability.

Certainly, machine learning machines pose more perplexing challenges to the values embedded in administrative law than the first wave of expert systems. Transparency, responsibility, predictability, equality before the law, even coherence, are fulfilled as long as certain rules prevail, and the specific technology implemented in accordance with them is valid. But the rapid evolution of AI means —note that it is in the present tense— that algorithms are increasingly embedded in opaque decision-making processes, without human intervention, which will make it extremely difficult to challenge them, with the obvious loss of guarantees that this entails. This leads to the fact that the decision regarding the degree of sophistication of the automation to be implemented must be carefully considered among the elements designing a specific rule to confer decision-making power²⁸.

AI systems, whether used by public authorities for citizens’ security or by the military to guarantee the effectiveness of their actions, have been the object of international regulation and of demands to limit their capacity to act. In 2017, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 2396/2017, which is mandatory for all States Parties and obliges them to implement biometric data collection systems in order to improve security measures to prevent terrorist attacks. These systems involve better identification of citizens (facial scanners, fingerprints), as well as the use of cross-data systems between government and security agencies and organisations, at national and supranational levels.

Also at European level, in 2021 the European Union (EU) declared itself in favour of strict regulation of the collection of biometric data in public spaces as a threat to security²⁹.

26 Creating systems that learn automatically, that is to say, identifying complex patterns in millions of data items, means that the algorithm reviews this data and is capable of predicting future behaviour, transforming them from reactive to proactive. In this context, it also automatically implies that these systems improve autonomously over time, without human intervention.

27 A good parameter for legislators would be to try to review the presentations and subjects addressed at Neural Information Processing Systems, one of the major international meetings on algorithms and information processing. Setting limits on the requests made by the system, something similar to what Amazon ML does (see: <https://amzn.to/2TDQQPF>) may also be considered.

28 For further information, see Pasquale, 2015: 147. The 2004 Report of the Australian Administrative Review Council, particularly highlights that already long before 2000, administrative bodies used to resort to automated processes in relevant decision-making, often without even mentioning it in the decision itself.

29 C(2021) 32 Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/27 of 7 January 2021, on the request for registration of the European citizens’ initiative entitled “Civil society initiative for a ban on biometric mass surveillance practices”.

In Europe, biometric techniques are assessed by the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (hereinafter ECHR). This type of technology presents certain vulnerabilities, such as the reasonable doubt that arises in relation to its possible failures, whether provoked or fortuitous. Moreover, the ethical concerns inherent to the use of a fully autonomous system and the implications of misidentification of persons (at civilian or military level) are shown: for example, AI failures to identify certain racial or sexual patterns are common, or the relative ease with which the AI can be “fooled” when identifying the biometric data obtained³⁰.

4.1 Responsibility

Beginning from the premise that law and society are not rivals —on the contrary, they are symbiotic and inseparable elements—, it must be noted that law is necessary for social development and evolution. Therefore, it cannot limit itself to providing answers but must also remove obstacles and facilitate scientific and technological progress, which is only possible through regulatory anticipation. Achieving this is a matter of flexibility rather than adaptation³¹.

Flexible rules, based on logic and up-to-date general principles, will offer this safeguard to society so that it does not lose the legal guarantees it requires for its normal development.

Among these legal guarantees is obviously being subject to the principle of legality, which is as much the basis for the prominence of the law as fairness, transparency, rationality and responsibility.

This article has already focused on the issue of ethics, accompanied by transparency and rationality from an ethical perspective. Next, the question of responsibility as applied to AI will be discussed. It is worth remembering that algorithms serve not only to explain, but also to “predict” and guide human decisions, if not to make them themselves. But they do so on the basis of correlations and the rules of human conduct which, having been called law, are based on causality and responsibility.

³⁰ A simple test is enough to confirm this. If one searches for an image of a successful man or a beautiful woman on any search engine, the results are much more likely to show images of Caucasians, thus excluding racial diversity. Though a simple example, it is a significant one, as it demonstrates how algorithms display biases towards certain racial groups and discriminate against or undervalue others.

³¹ “The law must develop in greater proportion to technical progress, increasing its role and its responsibility. The law-technology dilemma can bring factors that threaten the already existing divergence between technical-economic and legal development. Showing this has been one of the aims of this work, which I conclude with the awareness that it is only a warning and not a solution”. With these words, Villar Palasí (1975) refers to the need for the law to resort to logic to avoid being disconnected from development, taking for granted that development will happen, even with a legal framework that is not ideal for it, although it may be slowed down, with the obvious social harm that this would entail. Therefore, contrary to the opinion of those who only see law as the persecutor, the science of law must be the promoter of scientific and technical development, and by extension, economic development, for the benefit of society.

Technology has traditionally been concerned with providing solutions that are generally valid and positive, through the analysis of massive data, computation and algorithms. It so happens that, in doing so, the appropriateness of these solutions for our values of personal dignity, freedom and equality, solidarity and, of course, responsibility have been set aside, which should be the principles of all *ius algorithmia* (Terrón, 2022). Going further, it can be said with little room for error that humans have neglected to ensure that such solutions respond to human rules, which should have been the main argument to make. Because, in the end, this is what it boils down to when technical solutions producing excellent results are based on a non-causal (non-accountable) consideration of human behaviour. The law, the rules of today, were built on the assumption of responsibility and causality, but society has moved (without realising it?) towards an algorithmic law of simple correlation.

Although the discussed topic is AI, sight must be not lost of the fact that this is not behaviour that is alien to human beings, as has already been made clear. This means that it is humans who set the rules—they develop the source code—and therefore the AI engine's algorithm is subject to human determinations from the outset. There is certainly the possibility of “transferring” the decision to the machine, but it will always depend on the willingness to do so. This is directly related to the possibility of attributing responsibility to the material authors of the original algorithm since they will be responsible for the contingency that they did not prevent with their decision when they could have done so. Deliberation implies the attribution of responsibility, which may even be understood as a manifestation of bad faith by attempting to waive the known responsibility by attributing the decision to a third party, the algorithm in this case. It would not be a case of neglect of duties, nor would it be strictly speaking a delegation of powers; rather, it is particularly aimed at preventing the decision-makers from being liable even though they should be.

If this were about dealing with mere manifestations of automation, the question would undoubtedly be much simpler, since in this case the entity's responsibility for its acts, including automated acts, is determined to be continuous, and these must be based on a specific and known procedure. But since it is not possible, nor is it wise, to equate automation with discretion, since the technological resource of automation is restricted to clearly regulated and very limited scenarios with regard to possible variations, AI poses a challenge from the perspective of responsibility.

It is not time at this point to analyse all possible manifestations of responsibility as far as AI is concerned. But it is possible to state that, for the sake of technological neutrality, the question should be cleared up, even in broad terms, as the impact of AI on society is clear. In this regard, it is a priority to strengthen mechanisms of responsibility and accountability, while guaranteeing the protection of the rights and freedoms of citizens, whether natural or legal persons in their different

manifestations³². This can be achieved in only one way and that is by setting constraints on the configuration of the algorithms. Formulas such as algorithm auditing, raising awareness among technological developers —digital humanism— and public evaluation when developing algorithms can serve as mechanisms for achieving the explicability of the algorithm, without the need to go to the extreme of liberalising the algorithm in order to take a break from its intellectual property.

The understanding of the algorithm is crucial in order to attribute responsibility, since only when it is clear that there has been no neglect of duty, in that there was no will to transfer responsibility for the decision generating the circumstance, can liability for the circumstance be avoided, and the algorithm itself be held liable, which may be equated to a cause of *force majeure*. In other words, the determination of the end is something that must be inherent and exclusive to the human essence. The goal may be more or less ambitious and, if it involves “using” the algorithm by not determining the goals, which should have been determined by the programmer, the responsibility will continue to be the latter’s, and it will not be useful to blame the algorithm (Innerarity, 2022).

5 Conclusions

What is presented here is not the result of chance or inventiveness. Many international organisations (United Nations, OSCE, etc.) have expressed their concerns regarding the use of biometric systems and their military application, without ignoring attempts, so far in vain, to regulate this resource. As the issues arising from autonomous AI systems come closer, the main concern is derived from the collection of biometric indicators, such as facial recognition. Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems or LAWS are the focus of civil society and binding political organisations, such as the EU, are exploring legislation to regulate the use of LAWS and other types of autonomous weaponry based on multilevel coordination through AI. In all of them, the use of biometric data as a means of target identification is an indispensable, but not uncontroversial, element.

Europe and the EU undoubtedly represent a space in the global arena, but are not major players in the global geopolitical scenario. As risky as it may be for the author to make this assertion, the truth is that as long as the United States, China, Russia, even North Korea, Iran or Israel, do not show any interest (indeed they all seem far from doing so, beyond the odd token gesture) in drafting actual legislation regarding LAWS or autonomous drones, the problem is not going to go away³³.

32 For this purpose, see the “Algorithm Audit Guide” produced by Eticas Research and Consulting S.L., available at: <https://bit.ly/3hBvtX9>.

33 The paper *Principles and Good Practices on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems*, signed by Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States, was presented at the headquarters of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the Group of Governmental Experts (CCW and GGE) on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems, without advocating a total ban on LAWS, limiting their use to those stated in international humanitarian law.

It is also not legitimate to deny that there are initiatives in the US Congress aimed at assessing the risks involved in the development of this type of autonomous systems, but they do not go beyond a risk analysis and are far from being a standard for the application and regulation of the use of these systems³⁴.

In Europe, biometric techniques are covered by the generic umbrella of the ECHR, although with limited effectiveness due to the scope of its coverage and relative application, given that the convention does not cover, much less regulate, the use of weapons that involve biometrics for autonomous decision-making, but it is the text that would cover, to date, their use. The members of the Council of Europe, including the 27 EU states, the UK and Türkiye, are party to the ECHR, so the level of protection might seem higher, especially because of Russia's presence until September 2022, but in reality, it is not and has not been the case.

If it were infallible, the problem would be lesser or non-existent, but the truth is that biometric technology is not without its vulnerabilities. At the very least, a reasonable doubt as to the systems' integrity will have to be addressed. The possibility of failure is inherent to any piece of technology. Regardless of the origin, the results may be the same whether the systems failure is caused by malfunctioning or malicious manipulation. Then, if something goes wrong, it had better be the human decision-maker. Even when it may be controlled by setting up technological mechanisms such as double-checking systems, confirmation requirements, etc., which at least keep unintentional failure at bay. Ethical behaviour can be demanded of human beings; of AI, only that it may inherit it from the data it is trained on. Consequently, there must be ethical concerns inherent to the use of a fully autonomous system. Moreover, that would mean entering into another issue such as responsibility arising from the autonomous error of the AI. Who is responsible, the algorithm, its developer, who would go bankrupt in the case of deep learning, or the system user? There are many possibilities for an answer that may seem simple, but has very delicate implications when humans resort to tools where it is known that ethics does not prevail, expecting moral impunity.

Moreover, AI failures are not exceptions to the general rule. Sexual, racial, ethnic, and other patterns are not foreign to automatic biometric systems, which may be deceived both in the capture of biometric indicators and in the identification of these indicators. Would society accept a system of whose ability to discriminate between military and civilians it were not absolutely certain?

All these questions are beyond the ethical dilemma, or perhaps not. Continuous technological advances cannot be left to develop at will, relying on a system that uses data, especially when these data must be controlled to ensure the feasibility of the outcome precisely because of the quality of the information that has been

34 Congressional Research Service Report R44466, *Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems: Issues for Congress*.

provided. Those who advocate intervention, regulation, ethics, etc., are hardly going to come closer to those laxer, distracted moral subjects who do not see, or do not want to see, the risk in the form of arms control.

In an already present future, it is a reality that emerging technology will determine the relationship between states, necessitating arms control mechanisms and agreements. New weapons, higher risk. The greater the risk, the greater the need for prevention and anticipation in order to achieve early warning of attacks, which are increasingly capable of destabilising a state. One solution would be to limit, where possible, the use of such weapons or other non-conventional systems to ineligible users. It is evident it does not work like that. Technology sooner or later becomes accessible, maybe not the latest, but possibly the one immediately preceding it. Even biometric data itself will be subject to transformation. The collection of biometric data will refine its accuracy, thus increasing the reliability of the AI itself, provided that transparency, which is ultimately what guarantees security, is not lost.

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Applying content analysis to the formulation of migration strategies: a comparative study

Abstract

Migration policy strategy papers have risen to the top of the security agenda in many countries, both in Europe and South America. The issue is highly relevant today due to the south-south migration driven mainly by the economic and political crisis in Venezuela. These new migration flows have turned traditional countries of origin of migrants into transit or destination countries. This study aims to examine and compare strategy documents from four South American countries (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru), plus two European countries (Portugal and Spain) as benchmarks. It uses a qualitative content analysis methodology and examines current trends and challenges. The results point to the countries' readiness for a migration crisis, highlighting similarities and differences in their documents.

Keywords

Strategies, Migration, South America, Qualitative content analysis.

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1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of the strategic documents of South American countries (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru), and as a benchmark, of two Southern European countries (Portugal and Spain), using a qualitative content analysis methodology. The goal of this analysis is to demonstrate the level of readiness of the countries to deal with a migration crisis, also highlighting similarities and differences between the documents. It is important to identify good practices and limitations of strategies in order to determine the analysed countries' readiness for migration. Exhibiting an appropriate strategy may serve as an example to other countries and provide a basis for comparing other strategies in order to identify key criteria for their development and that of migration policies.

Several studies have used content analysis to compare strategies. This method may have multidimensional objectives and a variety of approaches. As an example, João Estevens' (2018) study focuses on European countries, examining the migration and security strategies of 27 EU Member States from three perspectives. Relevant research on the South American region includes the analysis by Daniela Briones Riverosa (2014), which assesses the security strategies of Spain and certain South American countries, as well as the study by Anna Urbanovics and Rodrigo Guajardo (2022), which analyses the cybersecurity strategies of six Latin American countries. Compared to the rest, however, here the content analysis is carried out by means of Maxqda Analytics Pro software and includes South American and European countries.

This article poses three fundamental research questions: 1. Do the strategies of the analysed countries generally meet the basic requirements for strategy formulation? 2. Which countries implement strategies that may be considered appropriate? 3. Are there differences between the migration strategies of European and South American countries? The study also seeks to verify the following hypothesis in relation to South American countries: South American countries have less developed strategies than those of European nations; and the Venezuelan migration crisis needs to be addressed from a security perspective. Following a brief presentation of the migration flows of the analysed countries and the methodology used, the study presents a detailed analysis of the strategic documents.

2 Migration flows of the countries analysed

Migration in South America is increasing, and migrants are seeking new destinations within the region as an alternative to the United States and Europe. This new migratory flow has turned former origin countries into transit or destination countries. There is extensive intra-regional migration, with approximately 11 million people deemed migrants in South America, of which 6.59 million are Venezuelans who have fled their country's political and economic devastation (International Organization for Migration, 2022; R4V, 2024). Colombia has been the main destination of Venezuelan

migrants (2.86 million), followed by Peru (1.54 million), Chile (532.7 thousand) and Ecuador (444.8 thousand) (R4V, 2024). Moreover, following the migration and refugee crisis in 2015, a significant number of refugees have arrived in the European Union since 2022, as a result of the war between Ukraine and Russia. Some 7 million Ukrainian refugees have been registered in Europe. In Spain, approximately 300,000 Ukrainians live with valid residency documentation (Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración, 2024; Statista, 2024).

To obtain a more accurate picture of migration flows, it is essential to consider the net migration rate. For example, this rate (Figure 1), which began to rise in Chile since the start of the 21st century with the arrival of Peruvian immigrants (Stefoni, 2002), reached a value of 6.02 in 2020. Currently, this indicator is slightly higher in countries such as Austria and Germany, with a rate of 7.35 and 6.57, respectively.

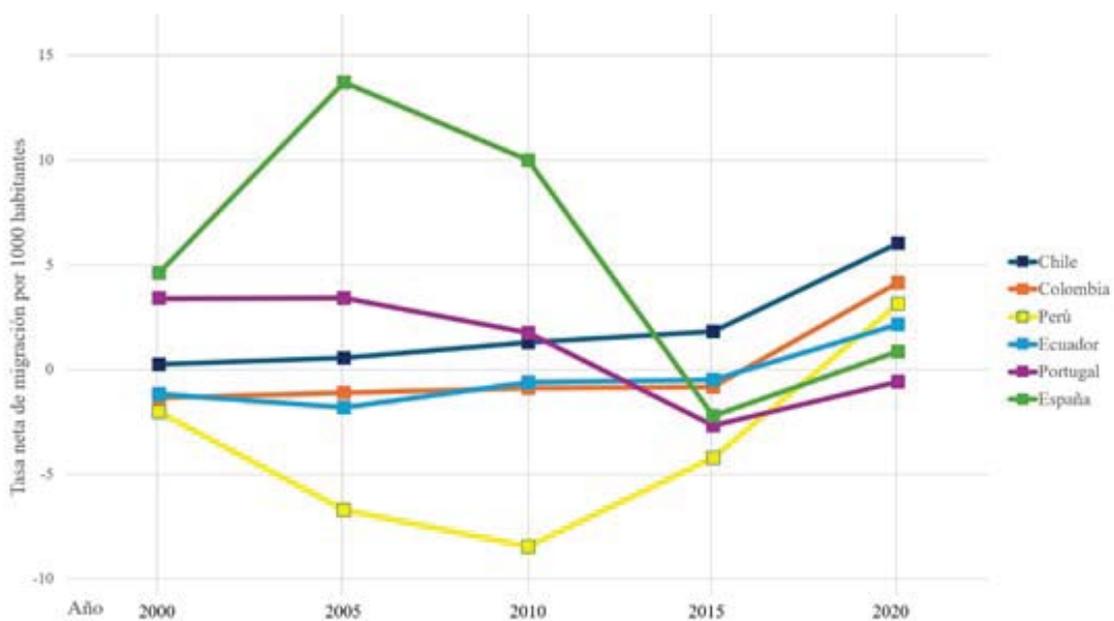


Figure 1: Net migration rate per 1000 inhabitants (2020) of the studied countries. *Source:* authors' own based on Our World in Data - Net migration rate

The other analysed South American countries (Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) have been mainly countries of origin of migrants and have become transit or destination countries due to the “Venezuelan exodus” since 2015, as shown in Figure 1. Peru displays the most notable change of the three countries analysed. In 2010, the net migration rate was negative (-8.46), however it reached 3.12 in 2020.

In the case of the analysed European countries, the net migration rate in Spain has been falling since 2005, becoming negative in 2015 (-2.22) as a result of the 2008 economic crisis. In spite of this, there is still a significant migrant population (6 million). Portugal is mainly a country of origin of migrants with a negative net migration rate (-0.58), although nearly one million migrants live in the country, mainly from Angola, Brazil, Cabo Verde and France (Migration Data Portal, 2025; Our World in Data, 2024; Pires, Vidigal and Pereira, 2022).

3 Methodology

The research methodology consists of a comparative cross-sectional analysis of the strategy documents of six countries. The qualitative analysis was carried out via software (Maxqda Analytics Pro), which enabled the processing of the documents, building the categorisation system, designing the coding system, and then visualising the results in the code matrix viewer tool.

Content analysis is classified as a “hands-off” methodology (Babbie, 2008: 351) and has a large amount of literature devoted to it (Guix, 2008; Krippendorff, 2004; Gheyle and Jacobs, 2017). It is a research technique that allows “replicable and valid conclusions to be drawn from texts” (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). The analysis may be manual, but software-assisted content analysis, such as NVivo and Maxqda Analytics Pro, is becoming increasingly common.

The coding system was designed by means of a deductive procedure, and during documentation control, the codes were merged inductively, and a new code was determined, if necessary. When analysing the strategies, the unit of context was chosen, i.e. the analysis focused on the meaning of the text, not on the frequency of a word (Gheyle and Jacobs, 2017: 8; Krippendorff, 2004: 101). The codes are mutually exclusive and they were used only once for a single unit of analysis, which ensured the absence of duplication.

The countries selected were four South American countries (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru), which are the most affected by the Venezuelan migration crisis in the region, and two European countries (Portugal and Spain). Both Portugal and Spain have strong links (historical, cultural, economic, diplomatic, etc.) to South America and are also traditional destinations for South Americans. Both European countries must deal with migration and have developed strategy documents that may influence the formulation of similar documents in South American countries. For these reasons, it was important to select the two European countries as benchmarks for the analysis. Comparing the formulation of strategy documents of these six countries will allow for a more complete picture, highlighting both regional differences and similarities.

The main criteria for the selection of the strategy documents were the following:

- For South American countries, the strategies were developed following the Venezuelan exodus (2015).
- The latest migration strategy, effective in early 2023, coincides with the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, as several countries initiated new strategic processes following the pandemic. This enables the analysis of strategies developed within the same time period (cross-sectional analysis), while recent changes are analysed in the section on “Major Changes”.
- If the country does not have a migration strategy, the security and/or defence strategy is analysed.

Based on these criteria, the migration strategies of three countries and the security and/or defence strategies of three other countries were analysed. The detailed description of the documents selected for analysis is shown in Table I.

Country	Strategy	Publication	Pages	Graphs/images
Colombia	Ministry of National Defence - Colombia. Defence and security policy (PDS)	2019	84	YES
Chile	National Defence Policy of Chile	2020	110	YES
Ecuador	National Plan for Human Mobility. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility	2018	54	YES
Peru	National Migration Policy	2017	23	YES
Spain	Royal Decree 1150/2021, of the 28 th of December, approving the National Security Strategy	2021	36	NO
Portugal	Strategic Migration Plan	2015	74	YES

Table I: All 6 selected documents. Source: author's own

Taking into account the objective of the research, the coding system was divided into two main themes:

- Codes related to the topic of migration, focusing on the representation of migration in strategic concepts.
- Codes related to the assessment of the strategy, which examine and evaluate the structure of the strategy and whether it meets basic requirements.

Figure 2 displays the seven main dimensions, and four sub-dimensions related to migration¹:

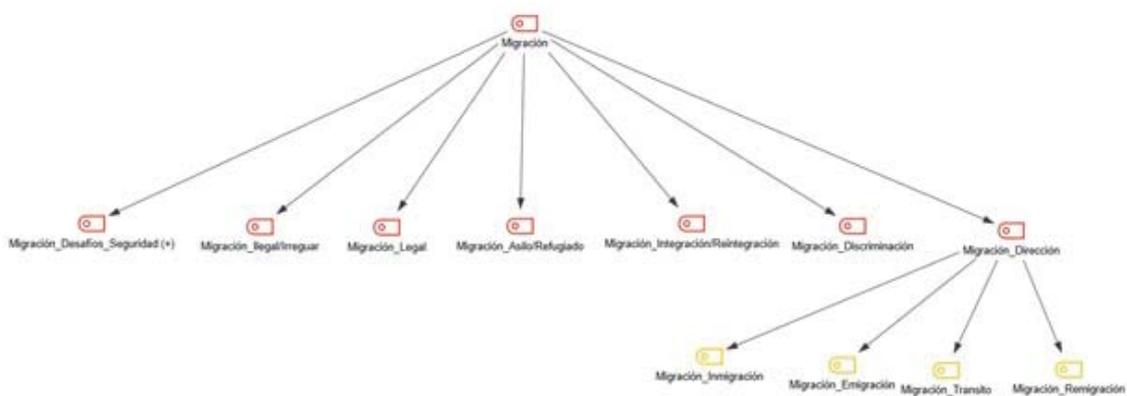


Figure 2: Coding system used for the content analysis of the 6 country-specific strategy documents: migration-related codes. Source: author's own with Maxqda Analytics Pro software

1 1. Migration: as a challenge to security; 2. Migration: illegal/irregular; 3. Migration: legal; 4. Migration: asylum/refugee; 5. Migration: integration/reintegration; 6. Migration: discrimination; 7. Migration: direction (immigration, emigration, transit, return). The 7 codes in red are at the same level and those in yellow are under code 7.

Figure 3 displays the five codes related to the strategic approach, whose objective is to assess strategic documents².

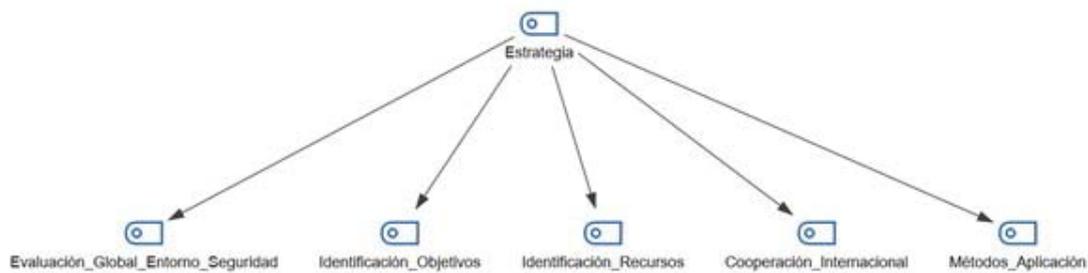


Figure 3. Coding system used for the content analysis of the 6 country-specific strategy documents: strategy-related codes.
Source: author's own with Maxqda Analytics Pro software

Over 2,000 codes were assigned in the coding of the 6 strategic documents under analysis (the coding was done manually). The software aids visualisation, making it easier to compare documents. The disadvantage of the methodology is that errors cannot be excluded during the coding process, and, on the other hand, a detailed codebook is essential for the research to be reliable, valid and reproducible. The research procedure and the results were reviewed by two independent researchers.

4 Strategy documents: theory vs. practice

Strategy, according to Bryson (2004: 46), is defined as “a pattern of purposes, policies, programmes, actions, decisions or resource allocations that determine what an organisation is, what it does and why”. Nickols (2016: 3) states that “strategy refers to a general plan of action for achieving one’s goals and objectives”. Strategies may emerge from policy reviews, scoping studies or specific planning; however, comprehensive approaches are rare (International Organization for Migration, n.d.).

Strategy documents, as well as the strategy formulation process itself, are not uniform. Depending on the goal and contents of the strategy, one may distinguish between declarative strategies that formulate guidelines, and descriptive, normative and prescriptive strategies that focus on tasks (Csiki, 2013: 29-30). At the same time, strategy documents are developed according to specific guidelines and expectations. According to Csiki (2013: 31), a well-founded strategy suitable for implementation should contain the following elements:

- A comprehensive assessment of the security environment, including challenges, risks and threats as well as opportunities.

² 1. Overall assessment of the security environment; 2. Identification of objectives; 3. Identification of resources; 4. International cooperation; 5. Methods of application. All 5 categories are at the same level.

- The prescriptive approach required to achieve the expected end state.
- Consistency between objectives, means, implementing parties and methods of implementation.
- The identification of specific objectives.
- The precise identification and scheduling of resources for the planning period.

Palacios Rodríguez (2020) proposes a thematic approach for drawing up a strategy document, with similar ideas but specific emphasis on identifying those responsible for each specific objective, financial programming and the importance of monitoring results.

In many countries, the boundaries between security, defence or other strategies are blurred in terms of their purpose, so they are usually presented as a sort of combination (Csiki, 2013: 32; González Guyer, 2017: 18-19). Not all countries have a specific migration strategy but rather focus on migration and associated risks within security or defence strategies (Estevens, 2018:3-5). According to Caudle (2009: 1), there is a growing trend towards a holistic approach to security. This approach is reflected in strategic documents that combine national military defence with national and homeland security strategies, with the aim of developing a unified strategy to ensure the security of society as a whole. In parallel, migration is increasingly analysed from a security perspective, arguing that it could represent a risk to both national sovereignty and human security (Tálas, 2019; Aranda and Thomázy, 2023; Wohlfeld, 2014). Furthermore, “securitisation³ of migration mostly centred on the nation-State and national security rather than on people and human security” (Estevens, 2018: 3).

The migration strategy itself is a sectoral strategy within the security strategy. According to the International Organization for Migration (n.d.), “a coherent migration strategy is the perfect starting point for addressing the opportunities and challenges posed by migration ensuring its effective implementation”. The strategy papers for countries vary according to their concept of migration. The objective varies between former colonialist countries and Central European or Latin American countries, as the former are traditionally receiving countries and the latter, generally, sending countries.

The strategies of Ecuador, Peru and Portugal are classified as sectoral strategies, while Chile, Colombia and Spain do not have specific migration strategies, as these three countries address sectoral strategies, including migration, within their security and/or defence strategies. Considering the contents and objectives of the strategies, those of Portugal, Ecuador, Peru and Spain are rather normative, although they occasionally also include a descriptive approach, while the strategies of Colombia and Chile are mainly descriptive.

³ The concept of securitisation was first introduced in the work of Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998), *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Securitisation is defined as a process by which an issue is represented as an existential threat through discourses. In this context, migration, or the increase in the number of migrants, can become an existential threat.

5 Comparison of strategic concepts using qualitative content analysis tools

Table 1 summarises the most important information from the analysed documents. It may be observed that the longer strategy documents (Chilean, Colombian and Portuguese) are more complete and include numerous photos, figures, infographics and tables, while the relatively shorter Spanish strategy does not include any of these. In terms of pages, the Peruvian document is the shortest, but the font size and the two-page layout make it of average length, similar to the other strategies. The analysed strategic concepts are in Spanish, with the exception of the Portuguese strategy.

Within the methodological part, the content analysis was studied in detail. A total of 7+5 dimensions (4 sub-dimensions) were defined when designing the coding system. It is important to note that, although the texts vary in length, the content analysis measures relative rather than absolute frequency in the comparison. Maxqda Analytics Pro compares each code with the others and visualises the frequency. Figure 4 illustrates the result after coding.



Figure 4. Comparison of the researched countries' strategies via qualitative content analysis (Code Matrix Viewer).

Source: author's own based on Maxqda Analytics Pro software

The strategies were developed between 2015 and 2021. While each migration strategy is the first of its kind, the analysed countries were able to build on existing strategic concepts when preparing their security and defence strategies. Peru's and Ecuador's

migration strategies were driven by growing migratory pressures and were prepared in parallel to increasing migratory pressures in Venezuela. Portugal's strategy, on the other hand, was created in the opposite direction: "Portugal is facing a demographic deficit that has become a national social, economic and political emergency" (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, 2015: 17).

The Portuguese strategy promotes immigration, and, in its introduction, the document also highlights the problems of an ageing society, emigration and the sustainability of the pension system. Compared to South American countries, Portugal has a high proportion of immigrants in relation to its population (9.8%, equivalent to 2.1 million). However, one of the main objectives of its strategy is to further promote immigration.

Chile, Colombia and Spain do not have a specific migration strategy, despite the fact that both South American countries have received significant numbers of migrants (8.6%, equivalent to 1.6 million; 3.7%, equivalent to 2.5 million, respectively) in recent years and are the main destinations for Venezuelan migrants. Among the countries surveyed, Spain (14.6%, equivalent to 6.8 million) is the country with the highest number of migrants (Thomázy, 2022: 23; Migration Data Portal, 2025).

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the differences and similarities between the documents under study. In general, there is a fundamental difference between the two migration strategies (Ecuador and Peru) and the national security and defence strategies (Chile, Colombia and Spain). In migration strategies, the presence of codes related to migration is more pronounced, while in security and defence strategies, the presence of codes related to security and defence strategies is higher. The Portuguese document is an exception, as both the strategic and migration dimensions are relatively balanced, with a slight bias towards migration. The migration dimension is analysed first, followed by the strategic dimensions.

5.1 Assessment of strategic documents — migration-related codes

- *Migration as a security challenge*⁴. With regard to the security dimension, it was important to identify the security risks associated with migration in each country. In each document, migration, organised crime and human trafficking are mentioned. Spain is the only country that addresses migration in relation to organised crime, both in countries of destination and origin. Spain also highlights religious extremism and terrorist groups as a major security risk in relation to foreigners but indirectly links migration from the South (African countries and the Middle East) to the description of security risk. The surveyed countries do not consider migration or mass migration per se as a security risk,

⁴ Migration as a security challenge and code for human security have been merged (indicated by the "+" sign in the first dimension of the figure), as the two dimensions were not mutually exclusive in the analysis.

but associate the phenomenon of migration with some security challenges, such as human trafficking, organised crime, etc.

In Ecuador's paper, the human security of migrants is described as a security challenge. Migrants are identified as victims of crimes committed by smuggling networks and gangs. The Portuguese and Peruvian documents make similar observations. At the same time, the security risks for Peruvian migrants due to the high level of emigration are also analysed in detail in the Peruvian strategic concept.

In Portugal, the sexual exploitation of migrants is identified as a risk factor, as well as the recruitment of foreigners to participate in armed conflicts. In Ecuador, Peru and Portugal, the focus is mainly on human security, while Spain's strategic concept emphasises terrorists and jihadists. Chile presents a mixed picture in this respect. Its strategic concept includes terrorism and organised crime in general, but also human security in relation to migration.

- *Illegal/irregular migration-legal migration.* In the Spanish and Portuguese documents, the terms irregular and illegal are mainly used as synonyms and are therefore both included in the same code. These countries call for joint EU action on irregular migration, highlighting the control of employers and the dismantling of labour market-based migrant networks and irregular employment as means to eradicate irregular migration.

Chile and Colombia only superficially mention irregular migration, despite the fact that both countries were facing significant irregular migration at the time of writing. In turn, Ecuador considers migration as a fundamental right, citing in its strategy paper the 2008 Constitution, which underlines that it does not recognise illegal migration and therefore does not consider any person to be illegal. Thus, foreigners enjoy the same rights as local citizens in Ecuador. Peru is also taking a similar stance against the criminalisation of irregular migration. Both Ecuador and Peru analyse irregular migration in greater detail than other countries.

Legal migration only appears in the documentation of Ecuador and Portugal. Portugal explicitly seeks to promote legal migration, which it hopes will reduce irregular migration. It stresses the need for broad socio-political consensus on the issue, as well as the need to strengthen policies such as labour market mobility and family reunification. Ecuador will focus on reducing the administrative burdens of residence permits, which could also encourage legal migration. Labour market mobility linked to economic migration is only present in the Portuguese document.

- *Asylum/Refugee.* Only three countries mention this issue: Ecuador, Peru and Spain. Spain calls for an update of the definition and international regulation of asylum seekers. Ecuador underlines the importance of the refugee issue and stresses its leading role in the region in hosting refugees. Peru recognises that the number of asylum seekers has increased exponentially since 2004, making it imperative to develop new processes. Although the number of applicants for

refugee status has increased in recent years in the countries under study, the proportion of people with refugee status is low, with the exception of Spain. By way of example, in 2023, 23,382 people were considered as refugees in Chile, 1,382 in Colombia, 38,570 in Spain and 628 in Portugal (UNHCR Refugees Data Finder, 2023).

- *Integration/reintegration.* Spain briefly mentions the importance of integration, while Chile and Colombia do not. Among the strategic concepts, Ecuador, Peru and Portugal do not only analyse in detail integration but also reintegration and consider the integration of returnees to be essential. Reintegration is driven by significant emigration from these three countries, the main objective of which is to encourage young people to return through various programmes.

Ecuador, Peru and Portugal have similar strategic concepts, but in the case of Peru there is greater emphasis on the reintegration of nationals than on the integration of migrants. In Ecuador, knowledge transfer and cultural diversification are more prominent, and the recognition of higher education qualifications acquired abroad is mentioned as a difficulty for integration and reintegration.

The integration of immigrants in Portugal is not a recent phenomenon, for which NGOs, the Church and specialised government agencies were responsible. Since 2007, the High Commissioner for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue (HCICD) has been overseeing this process (Kiss and Soltész, 2013: 61).

The Portuguese strategy specifically addresses the need for the differentiated integration of highly skilled migrants, as well as those with lower levels of education. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of language training and broad educational accessibility, which will make integration more effective. Within the process of integration into the labour market, it is crucial that highly skilled migrants are employed in their professions and not in low-skilled jobs, as this does not benefit the country. In this context, Portugal's local and regional needs are also considered.

The integration of migrants is also presented in the Portuguese document as a way of harnessing talent and human capital, which can contribute to the economic development of the country. The strategic concept highlights the need for the political participation of immigrants, promoting family reunification and facilitating the acquisition of citizenship, all of which also strengthen integration processes.

- *Discrimination.* Discrimination is addressed in all three migration strategies and in Spain's strategic concept. The papers focus mainly on the importance of public policies in this area. In addition to discrimination, the Spanish strategy also highlights the issue of xenophobia: "It is essential to improve coordination between the three levels of the General State Administration and to establish public policies aimed at eradicating any form of discrimination, racism or xenophobia" (Spain, 2021: 30).

With regard to discrimination, the fundamental aspects are similar in the above-mentioned strategic concepts. The Ecuadorian document also speaks out against discrimination against Ecuadorians living abroad. It also refers to irregular migration, which can lead to forced labour and modern slavery.

- *Direction of migration (immigration, emigration, transit and return)*. An important question is how different countries deal with migration, as migration itself is a multi-directional process. South-South migration destination countries are both transit and sending countries. The strategy documents of Ecuador, Peru and Portugal reflect multi-directional migration flows, and all three countries analyse the four directions in detail.

In the case of Portugal, the specific objective is to encourage and facilitate skilled migration, which can contribute to addressing the problems of an ageing population, the sustainability of the pension system, as well as economic development.

The Peruvian strategy is the one that most emphasises emigration and its difficulties. Portugal and Ecuador analyse return migration and its facilitation in detail. As an example, the Portuguese strategy presents the diaspora as a new source of migrants, complementing the document with a detailed plan to promote the return of Portuguese individuals living abroad.

The Ecuadorian strategic concept summarises the initiatives in place since 2007 to encourage the return of Ecuadorians who have been abroad for at least two years. These include:

- Tax and customs benefits.
- Administrative aid for return, which also extends to family members.
- Preferential loans for the purchase of real estate and to help start businesses.

The Peruvian strategy, however, draws attention to the importance of reforming the current regulatory system regarding the return of migrants. The return and integration of Peruvians trained and educated abroad face numerous difficulties.

Of the countries analysed, Peru and Ecuador are transit countries, and both include information on this aspect in their strategies. In the case of Ecuador, the strategic concept highlights information from the Ministry of the Interior highlighting that: “two out of every three Venezuelan citizens who enter Ecuadorian territory, mostly by land, continue their journey to southern countries” (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana, 2018: 22).

This example shows that temporary migration can also be a problem for transit countries. These migrants often remain “invisible”. They do not apply for residence permits, they enter the country on tourist visas or by crossing

informal or unauthorised border crossings, so their numbers can only be estimated. If they work during their stay, they increase the proportion of workers in the informal economy.

5.2 Evaluation of strategy documents — strategy-related codes

- *Overall assessment of the security environment.* In relation to the assessment of the security environment, 338 codes were assigned. Of the countries analysed, Chile's document is the most comprehensive in terms of describing the security environment: it also conducts analyses at the regional and international level, as well as the emergence of new threats related to cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. The Spanish strategy also contains a comprehensive analysis and, of course, highlights the European Union and its security environment. Colombia provides a highly detailed description of armed conflicts, but because of this, the assessment of the security environment is more limited to regional problems. The Portuguese document also addresses the assessment of the local, regional and international environment in relation to migration. As in the Spanish concept, the European Union is also mentioned in detail in the Portuguese strategy paper. The Ecuadorian and Peruvian strategies only briefly address the analysis of the security environment.
- *International cooperation.* The description of international cooperation is reasonably detailed for each country. In relation to cooperation, neighbouring countries, international organisations and, in South American countries, organisations related to regional integration are mentioned. Examples include: UNASUR, MERCOSUR, as well as defence cooperation, which is also present in Chile and Colombia. In the two European countries, mostly the role of the European Union in descriptions of cooperation is emphasised. It is often over-generalised, as in the case of Chile.

International cooperation on migration, both in Portugal and in Spain, focuses mainly on joint cooperation with countries of origin. Ecuador details the rights of migrants and the need for international cooperation, also highlighting the rights of Ecuadorians living abroad. It is worth mentioning that the Spanish strategy already addresses the problem of climate refugees, stressing the importance of environmental protection and international cooperation, as lack of access to basic resources (such as drinking water) can lead to hunger and forced migration.

- *Identification of objectives/resources/methods of implementation.* From a strategy development point of view, the three themes are interconnected, therefore it is useful to analyse the related dimensions together. The identification of objectives is present in all analysed countries. Chile and Colombia define the objectives in great detail, unlike Peru and Ecuador. In the case of Southern European countries and South America, there is a difference in the definition of objectives. In the analysed South American countries, the identification of objectives is

often too general and less specific. The same applies to resource identification, which is completely absent in Ecuador.

Methods of implementation, with the exception of the Portuguese strategy, contain few specific details in all countries. Often they merely refer to legislation (Chile) or mention general implementation methods that are likely to be defined in the future (Ecuador). Ecuador, for example, sets out a number of objectives in its strategic document, broken down by institutions, but lacks a specific implementation and resource identification method.

Portugal's is the only strategy where there is consistency between detailed objectives, methods of implementation and identification of resources. It summarises the main actions in tabular form, grouped around five main themes, including the name of the organisation responsible for implementing the action, the indicators and the duration of the action. The main themes are the integration of migrants, coordination of migration processes, policies that strengthen legal migration, etc.

6. Significant changes

Since 2015, the Venezuelan migration crisis and its impact have brought significant changes in the region. Ecuador has implemented a practice that hinders migration flows in the country. The modification of Ecuador's migration law even permits deportation. Changes were also made to the residence permit issued by UNASUR, which cannot be applied for or renewed since 2021, making it difficult for Venezuelans to immigrate and stay (Ecuador, 2021). The aforementioned modifications have resulted in a practice contrary to the concept of free mobility and "universal citizenship" enshrined in the Ecuadorian constitution (2008) (Velasco, 2020). As a result, there has been an increase in irregular stay and informal work among migrants, as well as xenophobia and anti-migration protests (Célleri, 2023).

In February 2021, Colombia decided to create a new migration strategy to address the Venezuelan crisis. At the same time, in August that year, it passed a law to facilitate the creation of a comprehensive migration policy. The new strategy will focus on human rights and the cultural and social integration of migrants (Colombia, 2021). In May 2023, the Colombian Ministry of Defence (2023) published its new strategy: *Security, Defence and Citizen Coexistence Policy 2022-2026*. The text makes little mention of migration or the problems of Venezuelans.

Chile, in comparison to other South American countries, has chosen to harden its stance. The Senate approved the new migration law in April 2021, which entered into force in February 2022 (Chile, 2021). At the end of 2023, Chile published its new national migration policy, which was criticised by the opposition due to insufficient migration control (Aranda, 2024; Chile, 2023).

El Tren de Aragua, a Venezuelan mega-criminal gang, has expanded in South America, mainly in Colombia, Peru and Chile, and engages in extortion, kidnapping and human smuggling, taking advantage of the vulnerability of migrants. This situation aggravates the humanitarian crisis faced by Venezuelan migrants (Ávila, 2022).

Spain's new strategic concept, "Spain 2050", was published in May 2021. The document includes the promotion of legal and skilled migration (191,000 people per year) in order to address the problems of an ageing society and the collapse of the pension system (La Moncloa, 2021: 221). Portugal's and Spain's migration policy may be significantly influenced by the European Commission's September 2020 proposal for a new migration and asylum pact, on which, after lengthy negotiations, an agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the Council in December 2023. An important element of the pact is solidarity between Member States, although it does not include mandatory quotas. Solidarity allows for technical assistance, sponsorship of returns or financial support (European Commission, 2023).

The number of unauthorised border crossings increased significantly in parallel to the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in South American countries due to the migration crisis from Venezuela. Travel restrictions and the closure of immigration offices during the pandemic resulted in a significant increase in irregular migrants, leading to the implementation of regularisation programmes in the analysed countries (Paez and Arrieta, 2024; Thomazy, 2022). In turn, the Spanish Parliament is discussing a possible extraordinary regularisation of migrants (Padinger, 2024). Arrivals of irregular migrants to Spain increased significantly in 2024, mainly to the Canary Islands from African countries. Although irregular immigration is one of the most important challenges the Spanish Government faces, the Spanish Parliament has not yet reached an agreement on the issue. According to the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, Spain requires 300,000 migrant workers per year (Mosquera, 2024).

The number of Venezuelan migrants may increase in 2024 and in the coming years, as following the presidential elections of the 28th of July 2024, the National Electoral Council declared Nicolás Maduro as President (Arias Montenegro, 2024; Campos, Prieto and López, 2024). A new wave of migration would affect several countries, not only in South America, but also in Europe, such as Spain.

7 Discussion

The three migration strategies (Ecuador, Peru and Portugal) have many similarities. The analysis clearly shows that as the oldest, the Portuguese document may have served as a model for both the Peruvian and Ecuadorian strategies. The Chilean and Colombian strategy documents are very similar, even in the code matrix table.

The three migration strategies include multidirectional migration flows (immigration, emigration, transit and return). Irregular migration is addressed in all three documents. Legal migration appears both in Peru and in the Portuguese

document. Although transit migration is the subject of analysis in Ecuador and Peru, neither offer solutions for the presence of migrants in transit, despite it being a real problem in the countries affected by Venezuelan migration.

When developing a strategy, it is important to underline that it should not only focus on irregular migration, as in the case of the Colombian or Chilean documents, but should analyse the entire migration flow. Of particular note is the Portuguese strategy, which describes economic migration and the promotion of return in detail. The same may be said of the Ecuadorian strategy, which promotes return programmes (credits, tax and customs exemptions) for those who decide to return to the country. An important innovation in the Portuguese and Ecuadorian strategies is the detailed analysis of migrant integration. Portugal sees integration as a comprehensive long-term process and extends its integration programmes also to returnees.

The Colombian and Chilean strategies are more general and do not address migration in detail in the documents. They focus mainly on irregular migration and related security challenges (organised crime, human trafficking). Although these strategies were drafted during the Venezuelan migration crisis, migration is not presented as a prominent security challenge in either strategy.

Conversely, the Spanish strategic concept provides much more detailed information on migration, even though it is not a migration-specific strategy. It also links migration to a security challenge.

The strategies of Peru and Ecuador, in comparison to those of the countries analysed above, are highly people-centred (human security, migrants' rights, migrants' security, etc.). In the Ecuadorian and Peruvian documents, as in the Chilean document, migration is not presented as a security challenge, although human security also appears in the Chilean document.

International cooperation is present in all strategies. In the case of South American countries, the lack of cooperation in defence and security, and the disintegration of regional organisations (UNASUR, PROSUR, etc.) pose obstacles to this cooperation, and only a few recent initiatives are considered viable (Nolte, 2022; Frenkel and Dasso Martorell, 2021).

8 Conclusion

The study analysed the strategic concepts of four South American countries (Chile, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru) and, as benchmarks, two Southern European countries (Portugal and Spain), using qualitative content analysis tools. Answers to the following questions were sought: 1. Do the strategies of the analysed countries generally meet the basic requirements for strategy formulation? 2. Which countries implement strategies that may be considered appropriate? 3. Are there differences between the migration strategies of European and South American countries? Additionally, the study sought to analyse and test the following hypothesis: South American countries have less

developed strategies than those of European nations, and the Venezuelan migration crisis needs to be addressed from a security perspective. The analysis clearly demonstrates that all strategies meet the basic formulation requirements; however, implementation and resource identification methods are incomplete in most documents. The second research question, which sought to determine which national strategy may be considered the most appropriate, can only be partially answered. The Portuguese strategy is the one that best meets the basic requirements, as the identification of objectives, resources and methods of implementation are well defined.

With regard to the third research question, there is a clear difference between South American and Southern European strategy documents in terms of migration. South American documents deal with migration from a more social and humanitarian perspective. Another difference is that the identification of objectives is too general in South American countries and resource identification is either completely absent (as in the case of Ecuador) or very perfunctory. Finally, the research hypothesis is confirmed: the strategic concepts of the South American countries are less developed than those of the two European nations. Moreover, they are insufficient to address the crisis. In the case of Chile, despite significant migratory pressure, the strategy does not include a detailed analysis of migration and related security challenges. The same may be stated of documents from Ecuador and Peru, or even Colombia.

However, based on the methodology proposed in this research, it is possible to identify the most appropriate strategy, considering the dimensions established in the analysis (section 3). Figure 4 presents the results of the qualitative content analysis (Maxqda Analytics Pro, Code Matrix Viewer), using two coding systems: a) migration-related and b) strategy formulation. Furthermore, this methodology may be applied in the future to analyse and compare strategic texts in different contexts. The Portuguese document is the most complete and meets all fundamental requirements, as illustrated in the code matrix. Although basic requirements can be established during the strategy formulation, adaptation to said requirements and the approach adopted by the contents of the strategy will always depend on the country in question. Spain conducts an in-depth discussion of terrorism, while Portugal omits this issue, as it has not had to deal with terrorist attacks.

Based on the analysis of the six studied documents, good practices and shortcomings as key criteria for the formulation of migration strategies may be identified:

- A complex analysis of migration flows affecting the country⁵.
- Identification of migration-related security challenges and threats.
- Identification of short- and long-term objectives (supplemented by integration programmes).

⁵ The strategy must define a complex concept of migration, including immigration, emigration, transit and return migration, as well as internal migration.

- Determination of resources.
- Methods of application.
- Identification of the bodies in charge of implementation and monitoring.

However, the contents of the strategy will always be influenced by the specific country and the migration flows that affect it, as well as the region, including political and social objectives and needs.

In the case of 21st century migration flows in South America, migrants mostly share a similar language and culture. However, migration management and administration, human rights protection and social and economic integration pose challenges for South American countries. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that South America has successfully integrated large groups of Arab (Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian), Japanese and Chinese immigrants over the last century (Vilchez, 2016; Wail, 2019). Integration processes have turned South America into a “culture melting pot”.

Among the countries analysed in the study, mainly those affected by the Venezuelan migration crisis, it is essential to formulate appropriate migration strategies to address, in both the short and long term, the challenges posed by the massive influx of migrants. Portugal provides an example of integration programmes that have welcomed and integrated large numbers of immigrants from its former colonies.

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The geopolitics of Russian gas pipelines in Europe. Between energy realism and liberalism

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 intensified the conflict that began in 2014, raising concerns regarding Europe's energy security due to its dependence on Russian natural gas. Three of the four pipelines supplying Russian gas to Europe were of particular concern: Nord Stream (1 and 2), Yamal-Europe and the Ukrainian Transmission System, piping gas to Germany, Poland and Ukraine, respectively.

This article analyses Russia's relations with these countries from the perspectives of realism and liberalism, examining how both theories interpret energy geopolitics. While Poland and Ukraine treat Russian gas from the perspective of offensive realism and view their dependence as a strategic vulnerability, Germany has traditionally adopted the stance of institutional liberalism, and perceives gas as a commercial good that promotes stability.

The facts shed light on the differences in perceptions of natural gas, pipelines and the relationship with Russia, as well as national energy strategies, and how these differences did not prevent the disruption of gas supplies, with offensive realism emerging as the dominant interpretative approach. This has led to a new pipeline map and a new policy towards Russia.

Keywords

Energy insecurity, Natural gas, Ukraine war, Economy, National security.

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I Introduction

In 2022, the Russian Federation carried out a full-scale invasion of several regions of Ukraine, marking a significant escalation of the conflict that had begun in 2014. One of the immediate concerns was a potential energy insecurity in Europe due to a possible shortage of Russian natural gas. This fear was based on the combination of two facts: Europe's traditional dependence on Russian gas supplies (around 40%) and Russia's previous track record of using natural gas as a political tool, as perceived by some importing countries in Europe. Concerns about an eventual decline or disruption were especially high regarding gas flows through three of the four pipelines transporting gas from Russia to Europe: the Ukraine gas pipeline system¹, the Yamal-Europe pipeline and the Nord Stream pipeline system.

Given the uncertainty over European energy security and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the EU drafted the RePowerEU Plan (European Commission, 2022a) with the intention of finding natural gas to progressively replace Russian gas and stop importing it by 2027.

Their suspicions became reality when the Yamal and Nord Stream pipelines stopped transporting gas in April and September 2022, respectively. In turn, Ukraine's gas pipeline system brought Russian gas to Europe in minimal quantities, however, the contract between the two countries expired on the 31st of December 2024, and there is no prospect of renewal, at least for the time being.

Since the outbreak of the war, there has been a steady flow of studies and analyses on the energy situation resulting from the invasion, focusing mainly on the consequences of the interruption of Russian supply (Aitken and Ersoy, 2023; Henderson and Chyong, 2023; McWilliams *et al.*, 2023; Selei *et al.*, 2022) and on the paradigm shift caused by the energy crisis in the EU (Kuzemko *et al.*, 2022; Mišík and Nosko, 2023; Osička and Černoč, 2022).

The aim of this article is to understand Russia's relations with Ukraine, Poland and Germany in terms of the gas piped through the Ukrainian, Yamal and Nord Stream pipelines by framing them within two theoretical currents in international relations: offensive realism and institutional liberalism. Through them, whether the aforesaid realist and liberal conceptions of natural gas have influenced the situation brought about by the war in Ukraine will be explored.

Poland, Ukraine and Germany have been chosen for this analysis due to their geopolitical relevance, and it is believed that this choice will illustrate how historical, economic and geopolitical factors condition diverging energy strategies within the same regional framework.

¹ The term "Ukrainian gas pipeline system" refers to the network of pipelines originating in Russia and running through Ukraine. The Amistad and Soyu pipelines and their branches are therefore grouped under this heading.

The first part of the article outlines the characteristics of the theories of offensive realism and institutional liberalism. It identifies the features that are essential to understanding the relations between the above European countries and Russia, and their transfer to the scenario of the relationships developed around the different gas pipelines. One of the main results is the identification of what has been called “energy realism” and “energy liberalism”.

In the second part, after presenting each theoretical framework, the current status of the gas flows through the aforesaid pipelines is discussed, explaining the conditioning factors.

It is concluded that the reception of Russian gas via the Nord Stream, Yamal and the Ukrainian transit system pipelines has been interpreted very differently by Germany, Poland and Ukraine. These diverging perceptions of the energy relationship with Russia have led to different concepts of energy security and different national strategies. At the same time, the difference in the perceptions of Russia as a supplier has not prevented the experienced energy crisis after the escalation of the war that began in 2022.

The study seeks to innovate in two ways: from a theoretical perspective, considering the premises of institutional liberalism and offensive realism in the area of energy, and from a concrete and applied dimension, contributing the theoretical conclusions derived from the study of the aforementioned cases for the assessment and design of European Union (EU) security policies.

2 Gas pipelines and geopolitics: an interpretation based on the theories of realism and liberalism

Energy is very often present in international relations. In this regard, Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs stated in 2006: “We have seen that the issue of energy supply security has become an international relations issue”.

Given the relationship between both spheres, two of the most important theories in international relations are applied to the energy scenario: realism and liberalism, aware that there are currents and interpretations that coexist within both realism (classical realism, structural realism or neorealism, defensive realism, offensive realism, neoclassical realism) and liberalism (commercial liberalism, democratic peace or neoliberal institutionalism).

The validity and usefulness of these theories are not, however, free from detractors or critics who consider the arguments that pit State and market against each other to be limited, for considering that they emphasize power politics and strategic interactions between states (Judge and Maltby, 2016), or for not including non-State actors and multiple political scales in their approach (Stoddard, 2013).

It is also true that there are limitations to the application of theories, as it is difficult for a scenario to be fully identified with a theoretical discourse. This study will use the currents of institutional liberalism and offensive realism; both present ideal models that serve to classify similar policies, but it is difficult for them to display an absolute pattern of countries' actions. These are ideal models and not clearly established paradigms (Wilson, 2019).

In any case, both theories remain valuable tools for analysing and understanding complex scenarios such as the pipeline map from Russia to Europe.

2.1 Institutional liberalism and energy

The ideas underpinning liberalism have their roots in the 18th century² and are based on the links between freedom of trade and the peaceful behaviour of states. This theory considers open markets and economic interdependence to be effective means of pacifying governments' external behaviour; the existence of a network of common trade interests discourages war as a means for a State to increase its power (Doyle, 1986).

Institutional liberalism has its philosophical roots in this 18th century Enlightenment thinking and the ideas of cooperation and universal rights championed by thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Locke. As a formal theory in international relations, it emerged in the 1970s and was consolidated in the 1980s, especially through the work of Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (1977). Their joint publication *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* redefines international relations by including economic and transnational factors as key to inter-State cooperation. Keohane (1984) subsequently develops these dynamics further by exposing how international institutions foster cooperation even without hegemonic power.

Some of the most relevant postulates are as follows: there are transnational relations between private actors, not only between states, which deepen their interdependence; defence issues are not a priority in international relations; and the probability of the use of force between two states decreases as their interdependence increases. Within the field of energy, "economic interdependence can foster peace and cooperation, as states become more reluctant to disrupt relationships that benefit their mutual prosperity" (Saaida, 2024).

Economic exchanges promote communication and understanding between states, which fosters cooperation. In turn, economic actors put pressure on their respective governments to maintain this cooperative relationship, deterring hostile actions (Jordan, 2013).

² The ideas on which commercial liberalism and complex interdependence are based are deemed to have originated in *The Spirit of Laws* (Montesquieu, 1748) and, later, in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776).

Furthermore, institutional liberalism recognises the importance of international regimes, understood as sets of principles, norms, rules and procedures that guide the behaviour of actors in specific areas of international relations. These regimes facilitate cooperation by providing structured frameworks that reduce uncertainty and promote shared expectations among states (Krasner, 1983). It also highlights the relevance of democracy and human rights as foundations for lasting peace, arguing that democracies tend to have more peaceful and cooperative relations with each other (Doyle, 1986).

Finally, institutional liberalism stresses the ability of institutions to adapt and evolve in the face of changes in the international environment, enabling them to continue to effectively promote global cooperation and stability (Barbé, 1989).

How liberalism understands energy relations may be deduced from the meaning it gives to natural gas, the relationship around energy resources and pipelines. Natural gas, from this perspective, is a commercial good and, as such, the object of sale and purchase. Commercial relations are generated and developed around it, subject to the trade rules that regulate and define them.

The second key aspect is the relationship between countries with regard to natural gas. The energy resource here is the object of a relationship characterised not by dependence, but by interdependence, based on the reciprocal interest of both parties (buyer and seller) in maintaining this commercial transaction: the State that acquires the natural gas has the same interest in supplying itself as does the producing/exporting country (and, where appropriate, the transit country) in selling and profiting from it.

Interdependence within the framework of institutional liberalism implies a relationship of mutual dependence in which the actions of one State directly affect others, creating incentives for continued cooperation. Applied to energy, this interdependence manifests itself in the relationship between natural gas exporting and importing countries: the former depend on sales to sustain their economies, while the latter require a secure supply to maintain their productive systems. This connection encourages cooperative behaviour, as any interruption in the flow would be detrimental to both parties. Moreover, energy interdependence is not symmetrical; some states are more vulnerable than others depending on their diversification of sources and suppliers, which can lead to complex negotiations and the creation of institutional frameworks to minimise risks and ensure a stable and predictable supply (Nye and Keohane, 1977).

Gas pipelines are interpreted in this perspective as facilitating said cooperation and representing the common interest.

All three elements affect how energy security is understood, which is in turn determined by aspects such as the global demand outlook, price volatility or the real capacity of producer countries to supply the energy required, also conditioned, for example, by available investments. Energy security depends on competitive and open markets, therefore energy insecurity issues are addressed through supply and demand and prices (Harris and Naughten, 2007); for this reason, actions to ensure energy supply include facilitating trade and investment. The reciprocal benefit of the

natural gas transaction between states would be conducive to interdependence and cooperation. Consequently, international markets would function as a “global public good”, improving the energy security of all economies, providing a strong incentive for governments to take collective action to support and increase these markets (Wilson, 2019). Energy security thus takes on a “market-based” meaning (Chester, 2009), depending on the latter’s proper functioning.

From another perspective, interdependence also affects energy security because very few states possess the full range of energy assets that their economies require (Nance and Boettcher, 2017).

Energy security is therefore embedded in economics and industry. These perceptions of natural gas, the interdependence relationship, pipelines and energy security would define what may be termed institutional liberalism in energy relations or institutional energy liberalism.

While institutional liberalism argues that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict by creating incentives for cooperation, it does not guarantee the total absence of tension or breakdown in international relations. Interdependence entails potential costs in case of disruption of relations, but these costs may be borne for political, strategic or national security reasons. According to Keohane and Nye (1977), states are rational actors seeking to maximise their interests in an environment of complex interdependence, but they also face security dilemmas and are subject to pressure from internal and external factors that may lead to decisions that run counter to cooperative logic. Indeed, other authors point out that interdependence can generate strategic weaknesses, which may motivate states to diversify their relations or to confront their trading partners if they perceive threats to their security or sovereignty. Therefore, interdependence does not eliminate conflict, but shapes the way in which states manage their interests in an interconnected global context (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016; Rose, 1998).

In addition to this critique, there are other challenges to the application of liberal theory to energy relations. For example, “liberal theory may underestimate how competition for strategic energy resources can lead to conflict or how energy dependence can be used as a tool for political influence” (Singh, 2019).

Additionally, liberal theory has been criticised for its tendency to rationalise the political agenda, which may limit its ability to address the complexity of international energy relations (Reus-Smit, 2001).

2.2 *Offensive realism and its embodiment in energy*

Within the context of international relations, the theory of realism is one of the most recurring theories for understanding power dynamics between states. It has its precedents in Sun Tzu, Machiavelli or Hobbes, one of its main premises being that the State is the main actor and develops in a context of international anarchy where there

is no central authority to regulate relations with other states or between them (Tariq *et al.*, 2018).

In offensive realism, the national interest is the overriding variable (Riaz *et al.*, 2021) and both military and economic power are essential to achieving these national interests and shaping the anarchic political system (Walt, 2017). There is a relationship between security and power, and in turn, the pursuit of power is a cause of war and conflict. Strategies such as power maximisation, international alliances, arms races and diplomacy are seen as means for states to increase their security (Walt, 2017). At the same time, this current perceives State insecurity as the main problem in international relations, leading to a system of self-help in which states must provide for their own security in the absence of a higher authority.

The combination of group primacy, selfishness and anarchy means that international relations are marked by the quest for power and security (Wohlforth, 2010).

When applied to energy, this realism entails discerning how three of its constituent elements are understood: the energy resource, the energy relationship and the pipelines.

Here, natural gas is a strategic resource that goes beyond its mere status as a commodity. States consider it not only as an economic resource but also as a source of power that may be used in aid of foreign policy action. It constitutes yet another instrument to achieve goals, a strategic tool that states may use to compete for political supremacy in the international arena (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

The perception of natural gas has an impact on how the relationship between exporting and consuming countries is understood:

“Dependence on foreign producers is a risk to energy supply, a potential threat to security. Conversely, for producer states, the enormous economic importance of energy makes it an important coercive asset in a state’s foreign policy arsenal. This can include using gas as an energy weapon (where supplies are withheld as a threat) or energy diplomacy (where preferential treatment is offered as an incentive)” (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

For states seeking to maximise their power and security in this anarchic international system, energy is a crucial strategic resource for survival and power (Lawson and Usiemure, 2018). So much so that energy is considered a central element of power, foreign and security policy.

Potential international cooperation for energy is perceived by realists as a means to promote national and security interests, rather than as an end in itself (Bovan *et al.*, 2020; Saligin, 2014). These energy relations are perceived differently if the realist nation is an importer or an exporter of energy resources. In the first case, energy security emphasises energy autonomy and independence (Karunathilake *et al.*, 2022), and focuses on competition for energy resources. This competition for resources and pursuit of energy autonomy would be motivated not only by domestic concerns for survival and economic growth, but would also be justified

by the belief that states view energy as a strategic resource that tends to be used as leverage to achieve political goals. It would be a defensive strategy in the belief or possibility that states seek “to obtain as much relative power as possible to increase their security, and one of the most important forms of power is energy” (Mearsheimer, 2003).

Realist nations with energy resources which export them would seek to create dependencies that they can use for their own national interests. These countries seek to “employ control of energy resources as a means of influencing other states and strengthening their own position in the international system” (Waltz, 1979).

The belief that the producer country could interrupt gas supplies to the consumer country for political purposes assumes that the former can bear the losses from unrealised gas sales. This means that there is no interdependence but dependence (or asymmetric interdependence). In the absence of interdependence, the deterrent to the use of gas as a political weapon disappears, and the risk of this possibility means that dependence is understood as a weakness. Pipelines would then be merely the instruments available to governments seeking to exploit their energy reserves to further political objectives.

As a consequence of these perceptions, energy security would be placed within national security, the two being inseparable. Indeed, from this perspective of offensive realism, natural gas —and energy in general— may be interpreted as a means to achieve supremacy in the international system, as a key tool to accumulate power in an anarchic international system. States, motivated by the need to maximise their power, seek to control these resources, considering them geopolitical elements rather than mere economic assets. Additionally, controlling energy resources allows states to achieve regional hegemony, consolidating their supremacy and decreasing their vulnerability to potential threats (Henderson and Mitrova, 2016; Kuzemko, 2013; Mearsheimer, 2003).

Trade in strategic resources is strictly determined by national interests, and concerns for power and survival in the international system are prioritised. Cooperation thus seems meaningless given the chaotic nature of the international context.

In short, offensive realism provides a framework for understanding energy security as an extension of power politics, whereby states act to ensure their survival and position in the international system. Energy security becomes a critical aspect of State strategy, as energy resources are essential to a state’s power and influence (Kilinç-Pala, 2021; Mohapatra, 2017).

Realism has been deemed limited with regard to understanding energy relationships. Some authors suggest that it has not taken into account the role of non-State actors and market forces. In turn, the concept of energy security has evolved to include the physical availability of energy resources as well as the environmental and economic aspects of energy use.

3 Russian natural gas in Europe: pipelines and energy scenarios

Europe has traditionally purchased much of its natural gas—liquefied or gaseous—from Russia: in 2021, the EU imported a total of 155 bcm (billion cubic metres) from Russia, accounting for about 45% of its gas imports and almost 40% of its total consumption (International Energy Agency, 2022).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine set off alarm bells about Russian natural gas supplies to Europe and the European Commission (2022a) designed the RePowerEU Plan to address the energy crisis. Proposed actions include energy savings, diversification of energy supplies and rapid deployment of renewable energy to replace fossil fuels; it also formulated the goal of ending Russian hydrocarbon imports by 2027.

The EU also imposed economic sanctions banning imports and exports of certain products. For now, the sanctions have not affected natural gas, which can continue to be traded, unlike crude oil which, in the sixth sanctions package established by the European Commission in 2022, banned the purchase, import or transfer of crude oil by sea and of certain petroleum products from Russia to the EU (European Commission, 2022b).

The difficulty in reaching the unanimity required to impose sanctions on Russian gas imports led the EU to explore alternatives to reduce its energy dependence on Russia. In December 2023, the European Parliament and the EU Council agreed on a mechanism allowing national governments to temporarily prevent Russian and Belarusian exporters from reserving capacity in essential natural gas supply infrastructure, both pipelined and liquefied natural gas (LNG) (Krukowska, 2023). At the individual level, European Commissioner Kadri Simson (Martín, 2023) and the Spanish Minister for Ecological Transition, Teresa Ribera Rodríguez (Antonio, 2024) called upon states to stop buying Russian natural gas.

In the absence of sanctions and the difficulty of reaching an agreement, measures that may be adopted individually and voluntarily by Member States are being proposed, creating a scenario of “soft rules” (Urbasos, 2024).

Since the publication of the RePowerEU Plan (Comisión Europea, 2022a), the EU has achieved a significant reduction in pipeline imports of natural gas from Russia. In 2021, approximately 40% of EU gas imports came from Russia through pipelines, while in 2023, this share decreased to approximately 8% (Council of the European Union, 2024). This has been made possible by the development of LNG import capacities and the construction of interconnections, and without having had to resort to energy rationing measures or renounce support for Ukraine (Urbasos, 2024). Despite the EU's efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian natural gas after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, LNG imports from Russia have increased significantly. In the first half of 2023, EU purchases of Russian LNG increased by 40% compared to pre-conflict levels (Zachmann *et al.*, 2024).

For most of the energy crisis, the flow of natural gas through the Nord Stream, Yamal-Europe and the Ukrainian transit system pipelines remained a cause for concern since any disruption to their supply could have fatal consequences for Europe.

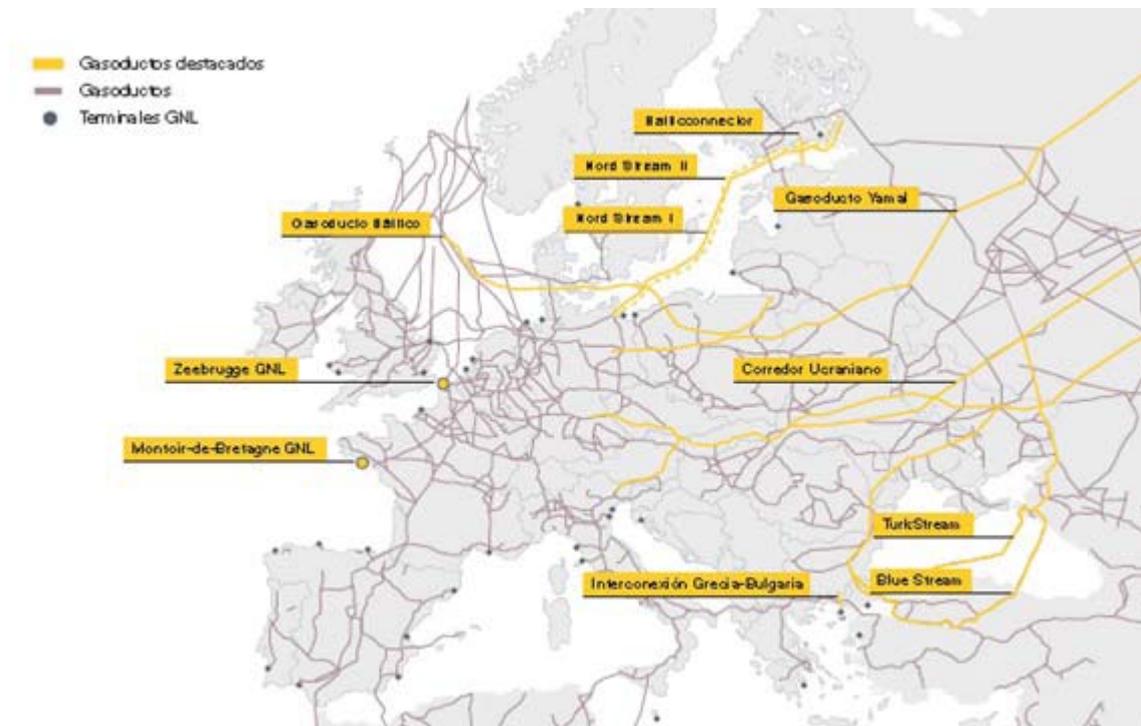


Figure 1. Map of the main LNG pipelines and terminals in Europe. Source: Urbasos, 2024

3.1 Germany, Nord Stream and Russia

3.1.1 Nord Stream: Europe's natural gas supply hub

Nord Stream refers to two parallel pipelines (Nord Stream 1 and 2) running along the Baltic Sea bed, designed to transport natural gas from Russia to Germany in order to supply its regions and other European countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom).

Nord Stream 1, which is 1,200 kilometres long, has been one of the world's most important gas pipelines in terms of capacity, transporting up to 55 bcm of natural gas annually from the Russian city of Vyborg to Greifswald in Germany. It was opened in 2012 and became the mainstay of Russian exports to northwest Europe.

Nord Stream 2 was fully built in 2021 and also has a capacity of 55 bcm per year. This pipeline runs from the Russian city of Ust-Luga to the German city of Lubmin. Unlike the previous pipeline, it is not yet operational as it was pending operational certification by the German regulator and the German Government. To do so, the Nord Stream 2 operator would have needed to establish a German subsidiary, in

accordance with German law. In February 2022, Germany halted the approval process altogether after Russia officially recognised two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine and shortly afterwards, the war broke out (Marsh and Chambers, 2022).

Institutional liberalism in the gas relationship with Russia

Nord Stream has been a key element in the map of gas supply to Germany and, from there, to other European countries. Its planning and construction gave rise to very different opinions in Germany and abroad. This may be seen in statements by contemporary German politicians. The following declarations made in 2007 in the German Bundestag are indicative of the general German perception on this issue:

“Dependence on Russia is not problematic for Europe or Germany. The problem is that 80 percent of the gas is transported through pipelines running through Ukraine. We will therefore be constantly involved in the unresolved conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and therefore risk suffering from being taken hostage every winter. Alternatively, there are two additional pipelines [...]: the Nabucco pipeline transporting gas from the Caspian to Europe and the Baltic Sea pipeline. It would be desirable not only for the elder statesmen to support these projects, but also for Europe and the German government to promote them more strongly”³ (Heinrich, 2018).

“[...] around 80 percent of European natural gas imports are transported through Ukraine. Even after the completion of the *Nord Stream* pipeline in the Baltic Sea, this amount will only be reduced to 66 percent. [...] The German Bundestag calls on the government to: [...] promote cooperation on energy issues between EU countries more strongly than before. The goal of a European energy community should not only include the establishment of international standards but also coordinated responses to supply disruptions. European standards for the storage of oil and especially gas stocks need to be developed in order to initiate solidarity measures to protect all Member States from the consequences of such disruptions”⁴ (Heinrich, 2018).

The then-Chancellor Angela Merkel also defended the pipeline as “a commercial project in which there are private investors” (Gabriele Steinhäuser, 2015). In the same vein, also in 2015, the German Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, in a meeting with Putin, stated that the construction of the pipeline was part of the economic relations between the two countries, and was in the commercial interest, not only of Germany, but also of the rest of Europe (Kremlin, 2015).

The discussions on Nord Stream were actually about increasing natural gas purchases from Russia, and in the arguments put forward by German authorities, one may detect elements of what we have called “energy liberalism”.

³ Statement by the MP Manfred Grund (CDU/CSU) in the Bundestag in 2009.

⁴ Statement by the FDP parliamentary group in the Bundestag in 2007.

For Germany, natural gas has been an object of trade and Nord Stream has been a means of cooperation and thus a source of security. Germany's relationship with Russia, with regard to the pipeline, was one of interdependence, as Russia has been dependent on sales to Germany, given that oil and natural gas revenues together accounted for 46.8% of its federal budget in 2021 (Alexeev *et al.*, 2024).

In Germany's view of energy security, the risk was not its dependence on Russia, but its dependence on Ukraine as the transit country for part of the gas it consumed, due to the ongoing disagreements between the two latter countries. Consequently, the solution to maintain supply was not to diversify suppliers, but to diversify the natural gas route. Indeed, Germany's relationship with Russia was seen as a strength: the Nord Stream pipelines, which for many were a paradigm of Europe's gas dependence on Russia and constituted a threat, for Germany, they increased national and European energy security by diversifying routes, avoiding supply disruption in case of conflict, as had already happened.

This must be contextualised in recent German history and, in particular, within the framework of *Ostpolitik*. This policy encouraged cooperation with Russia on the basis of trade and energy partnership, in the knowledge that shared interests in the energy sector had encouraged cooperation between the two countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "German leaders largely see it as a successful policy, which proved crucial in reducing tensions in Cold War Europe and ultimately created the conditions for the reunification of Germany" (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

The commercial treatment of energy relations with Russia does not mean ignoring the fact that gas is a strategic commodity of paramount importance for Germany's economic progress and social welfare, but rather the application of economic rules to ensure energy security.

Germany's Energy Strategy or *Energiewende* has had the goal of transitioning to renewable energy resources and encouraging energy efficiency, for which it is expected to reduce hydrocarbon consumption, without specifically seeking disengagement from Russian natural gas, rather in the search for sustainability itself.

The war in Ukraine has affected *Nord Stream* operations in different ways and for different reasons. German politicians expressed their rejection of the invasion of Ukraine and this stance led them to participate in the EU's adoption of sanctions against Russia (European Council, 2024). In 2022, Russia changed the terms of gas sales and announced that natural gas sold to Europe would have to be paid for in roubles, a decision opposed by Germany (Jennen and Hordern, 2022). This increased uncertainty about the future of natural gas supplies through this pipeline.

Another event that affected the flow of gas through *Nord Stream* was the incident raised by Gazprom regarding the failure of a turbine in the pipeline. The pipeline was being repaired in Canada and, according to the Russian company, sanctions would have prevented its repair and transfer to Europe to be included into the infrastructure, which would have made it impossible to maintain the pipeline (Chatterjee, 2022). As a result, natural gas supplies were reduced to zero in early September 2022 (Lawson, 2022; Zachmann *et al.*, 2024).

On the 26th of September 2022, an explosion ruptured the two pipelines that make up *Nord Stream 1* and one of the *Nord Stream 2*, which were rendered unusable for the foreseeable future (Cursino and McGarvey, 2023). This means that only one line, with a useful capacity of 27.5 bcm, is fit for use. Currently, as of 2022, there are no gas flows through *Nord Stream* (Zachmann *et al.*, 2024).

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 radically transformed the relationship between Germany and Russia, previously marked by energy cooperation. Germany adopted a *Zeitenwende* (change of era) approach, as Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Belov, 2024) described it, redefining its energy, diplomatic and military policies. The country imposed broad economic sanctions, supported restrictive EU measures against Russia and approved massive military aid packages to Ukraine. With regard to energy security, it implemented a comprehensive strategy to reduce its dependence on Russian gas. One of the most significant decisions was the accelerated construction of LNG terminals in Brunsbüttel, Wilhelmshaven and Stade (Kotov, 2022).

Thus, energy cooperation, the cornerstone of the German-Russian relationship, crumbled when pipelines were no longer seen as an infrastructure for economic interdependence but as a geopolitical weapon. Institutional liberalism, as noted above, argues that cooperation and interdependence reduce the likelihood of conflict, but do not eliminate it. For a long time, this approach allowed for a stable relationship between Germany and Russia based on shared economic interests, but this balance was upset when Russia used energy as an instrument of strategic pressure (Kotov, 2022).

In this new scenario, the theory of offensive realism seems to provide a more appropriate response to the relationship maintained between the two states until the war in Ukraine. Subsequently, Germany changed its behaviour towards Russia, based on a new perception: it recognised Russia as a direct threat to its security and stability, and redefined its foreign and defence policies to prioritise its national security over any economic benefits derived from energy deals (Halser and Paraschiv, 2022).

Institutional liberalism's economic interdependence was no longer a factor of containment but a strategic vulnerability. As a result, Germany adopted a policy based on offensive realism, focusing on national security, military deterrence and diversification of its energy sources.

3.2 Poland and Ukraine and their perception of Russia as a player in the European energy scene

3.2.1 Yamal Europe (Poland) pipeline: description and background

The *Yamal Europe* pipeline has been a mainstay of Russian gas exports since its construction in 1999. It runs from north-west Russia through Belarus and Poland to northern Germany, with a capacity of 33 bcm per year. The existence of this pipeline

has to be understood in the context of the former Soviet Union. The design and implementation of an extensive pipeline network in the second half of the 1960s enabled the Soviet Union to become the world's largest exporter of natural gas. This network was to be completed by the Yamal-Europe pipeline, linking to Germany via Belarus and Poland (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

What had been a unified network of gas pipelines began to unravel after the collapse of the Soviet Union, ushering in a new era in which Russia's strained relations with some of the transit countries in Eastern Europe would largely condition European energy relations.

Thus, the ongoing conflicts with Ukraine, which were particularly intense in 2005-2006, 2009 and 2014-2015, led to disruptions in Russian gas supplies to European countries.

These frictions and potential conflicts prompted Russia to outline a route diversification plan as part of its export strategy to European countries, and this had an impact on the energy policies of Eastern European countries, including Poland. Russia's diversification plan and the fear that Russia would use energy as a geopolitical tool led Poland to embark on a plan to progressively wean itself off Russian gas until it stopped all purchases. This is precisely what makes the Yamal-Europe pipeline special within the context of the current war in Ukraine: since June 2021, flows have been decreasing to coincide with the expiry of the contract between Gazprom (Russian gas company) and Europol Gaz (Polish gas company) at the end of 2022. Since this was a calculated reduction in the flow of natural gas, alternatives to Russian gas could be implemented.

3.2.2 Transit gas pipeline system through Ukraine: concept and context

The gas transmission pipeline system through Ukraine is the historical artery through which the Soviet Union exported gas to Europe since the late 1960s (Högselius, 2014). Gas enters Ukraine from Russia through two inputs (Sokhranivka and Sudzha) and reaches the output point in the Slovakian town of Velke Kapusany on the Ukrainian border. There was also another gas route to Turkey, via Romania and Bulgaria, but it ceased to operate when the TurkStream gas pipeline was opened.

The Ukrainian transmission pipeline system has a maximum capacity of 142 bcm per year, and, similar to the Yamal pipeline, has served multiple purposes: supplying Ukraine and serving as a transit route for gas piped to other countries. The financial management of this dual purpose was as follows: Ukraine paid Russia for the natural gas it consumed, and, at the same time, Russia paid Ukraine a toll fee for using its territory as a transit space to third countries.

The disagreements and lack of understanding between the two countries on this issue caused conflicts that led to supply disruptions in 2005-2006, 2008-2009 and 2013-2014. The presence of power networks linked to oligarchies and the persistence of

corruption in Ukraine would have contributed to the adoption of strategic decisions that, while seeking to reduce energy dependence and strengthen the country's sovereignty, also responded to domestic interests and the influence of lobbies with the capacity to shape national energy policies (Balmaceda, 2023). These disagreements caused Ukraine to stop consuming Russian gas that passed through its territory, however, the pipeline crossing the country was still used to export Russian gas to Central Europe (Henderson and Chyong, 2023).

3.2.3 Polish and Ukrainian perceptions of Russia as an energy supplier

Poland and Ukraine's perception of Russia as a natural gas supplier is manifested in their position on the Nord Stream project. It should be borne in mind that at the time of construction of this pipeline, Poland and Ukraine were transit countries for Russian gas to Germany, which may have influenced their positions on Russia as a supplier of natural gas to the rest of Europe. In any case, the statements made by Polish and Ukrainian politicians provide an insight into how both countries interpret this infrastructure and indeed, in a broader sense, the relationship with Russia.

In Poland, the general feeling is expressed in the following speech in 2005 by the Member of the European Parliament, Bogusław Sonik:

“The Baltic Sea pipeline [...] harms our energy security; it also harms the energy security of Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Czech Republic and Slovakia and —taking into account environmental damage— Estonia, Sweden and Denmark. [...] Poland needs Russian gas and sensible diversification of supply. We have no aversion to Russia, but common sense requires us to diversify our suppliers. Energy security is one of the most basic objectives of any state. It is therefore also a priority for the European Union”⁵ (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

In the same vein, the following statements made by Polish MPs in 2008 are also worth noting:

“The majority of public opinion in our country sees this investment as an attempt by Russia to increase its influence in Central and Eastern Europe. This view is shared by our current Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski, who compared the construction to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. [...]. The gas disputes between Ukraine and Russia are proof that such blackmail is possible”⁶ (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

⁵ Statement by MEP Bogusław Sonik in 2005. Gazowy szantaż, Rzeczpospolita, 2nd of July.

⁶ Statement by the Member of Parliament Jarosław Jagiełło in 2008. Interpellation no. 4634 on the construction of Nord Stream at the 21st session of the Sejm on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of September 2008.

“I would like to remind you that the Moscow-Berlin gas pact is not the first agreement in the history of these capitals to have ignored Poland and gone against Polish interests. The Baltic Sea pipeline, which connects Russia directly to Germany without passing through Poland, is a political decision with strategic consequences for Poland. [...] Has the minister not heard of the economisation of Russia’s foreign policy, achieving its political goals by using resource dependence? The Russians openly admit that gas transit has a political, even strategic, dimension. If the construction of the Baltic Sea pipeline were a purely economic investment, why would investors be willing to pay four times the amount required for the construction of the *Yamal II* pipeline?”⁷ (Szulecki *et al.*, 2018).

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine increased the rift between Poland and Russia and accelerated all plans, which were framed in a finalist strategy of disengaging from Russian natural gas (Henderson and Chyong, 2023). As Poland had been adopting measures to this end for some time, it was able to act with considerable versatility in the face of the energy crisis arising from the Ukrainian conflict. So much so that it was able to reject Gazprom’s demands to pay in roubles and even to terminate the contract early. Additionally, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Polish authorities sanctioned Gazprom and suspended its rights as a shareholder in Europol Gaz (where it held a 48% stake and owned the Polish segment of the 680-kilometre pipeline), imposing a temporary administration of its shareholdings (Jakóbiak, 2021). The acquisition of Gazprom’s stake in Europol Gaz by the Orlen Group (Polish oil company) was assessed as being of “fundamental importance for the public interest and security of our country, not only in terms of energy” (Afanasiev, 2023).

The consequence was that Poland integrated the *Yamal-Europe pipeline* into its national gas system instead of leaving it as an import and transit route. The pipeline stopped pumping Russian natural gas in May 2022 (Zachmann *et al.*, 2023), after the Kremlin decided to sanction the project in response to Poland’s action against Gazprom. Since then, Poland has been using the Yamal pipeline in reverse mode, importing gas from the German market and then marketing it domestically.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, the rejection of the gas project may be summed up in the statements included in a letter signed by members of the Ukrainian parliament in 2020:

“The project’s profile is not commercial but geopolitical: to threaten the world. That is why the Kremlin spends so relentlessly on redundant pipelines and fights so fiercely to get them up and running [...]

The Kremlin does not believe in the market, but in the exercise of geopolitical power. This informs the true purpose of the pipeline, which is to boost Russian influence in Europe and cripple Ukraine. Russia

⁷ Member of Parliament Elżbieta Kruk (PiS). Abbreviated report of the 107th session of the Sejm of the 7th of July 2005.

currently relies on Ukraine to sell billions of dollars' worth of natural gas to customers in Europe. The Kremlin despises this dependence because it prevents Moscow from further aggression against our country.

Ukraine's role in the transit of Russian gas to Europe is a deterrent against escalating Russian military adventurism. This is the Kremlin's rationale behind *Nord Stream 2*. Completion of the pipeline would remove Ukraine's key leverage over Russia, leaving our country totally vulnerable to Russian subjugation. For Ukraine, it is an almost existential question of national defence and security [...].

Proponents of *Nord Stream 2* expect us to believe that the pipeline is simply another method of supplying energy to Europe. But *Nord Stream 2* does not bring any new gas to Europe, it simply diverts existing Russian gas flows away from Ukraine and concentrates them in the Baltic Sea. There is no further diversification of natural gas and delivery routes, which is the essence of energy security.

[*Nord Stream*] would undermine Europe's energy security. This could prove to be a more threatening and more easily usable weapon than Russia's nuclear arsenal' (Szulecki, K. *et al.*, 2018).

Zelensky described the project as a "danger" to his country and his position may be summed up in this statement: "I am the president of a country at war [...] we consider this project to be a dangerous geopolitical weapon wielded by the Kremlin" (Olearchyk and Miller, 2021).

Poland and Ukraine's negative assessments are based on their perception of Russian energy policy. It is clear from the statements of politicians from both countries that they place Russia's actions within the realm of offensive realism, which may be seen in both countries' conception of each element. For Russia, natural gas is a geopolitical weapon to serve its interests, which would involve extending and increasing its power, isolating Ukraine and Poland, and dividing Europe. Additionally, by connecting Russia directly to Germany, the Nord Stream pipelines lowered transport costs and increased the benefits for both Russia and Germany by eliminating the need to pass through third countries. This strategy was directly detrimental to Ukraine and Poland, which lost significant revenues from gas transport tariffs. The creation of a direct route undermined their economies and, from a geopolitical point of view, limited their ability to influence the European energy market (Batzella, 2022; Kardaś, 2019).

Until the construction of Nord Stream, it could be understood that Russia was dependent on pipelines that crossed Poland and Ukraine to reach the rest of Europe in order to sell its natural gas, and this situation would be a deterrent to a hypothetical Russian intention to cut off supplies. The construction of alternative pipelines would make Yamal or the Ukrainian transit system no longer necessary to supply gas to Germany, a major player in Europe, and thus remove the deterrent —if any— of cutting off supplies as blackmail to achieve other political aims.

For Poland and Ukraine, the construction of alternative routes allowed Russia to threaten them and take hostile action against them insofar as they no longer constituted

a necessary route, but rather a complementary one. Moreover, with Germany and other European countries dependent on Russian gas, the fear grew that, in the event of disruptions or suspension of gas supplies to Ukraine and Poland, the rest of Europe would not come to their aid, thus dividing the continent in the face of such an event. There were also fears in both countries regarding the loss of transit duties and a lack of gas for their own supply.

Russia is perceived by Poland and Ukraine from a realist perspective as a revisionist state, eager to change or revise the established order to increase its power and influence. This view would be based, as it has been seen, on a number of events, such as the continuing energy crises, Russia's attempts to build pipelines to bypass its territories and, recently, Russia's policies towards Ukraine, including its invasion and subsequent energy crises.

However, Poland and Ukraine do not necessarily have a realist perception of the international system. Their perception of Russia as a revisionist State and its assertive and hostile policies have led to a defensive attitude towards this particular country, as both nations have interpreted the energy relationship with Russia as a vulnerability and therefore both Poland and Ukraine have aspired —with more or less success— to disengage from Russian natural gas, which is demonstrated by their respective strategies.

In Poland, fears of Russia using energy as a geopolitical tool prompted the country to take protective measures and expand its infrastructure to diversify energy supplies between 2014 and 2021, reducing gas imports from Russia by 14% in the same period.

Poland's energy strategy considered the diversification of Russian supplies among the primary objectives of its energy security:

“The development of interconnections with neighbouring countries, together with the development of the national transmission network and the expansion of gas storage facilities, is the second element of the strategy for the diversification of the natural gas supply, which will simultaneously create conditions to develop the market and to increase Poland's importance as a regional centre for the transmission and trade of natural gas” (Ministry of Climate and Environment, 2021).

Some of the measures to disengage from Russian gas were the commissioning of the Baltic gas pipeline linking Poland to Norway (Baltic Pipe Project, 2022), the construction of a floating storage regasification unit in Gdansk Bay (*LNG Prime*, 2023), the expansion of the LNG terminal in Świnoujście to significantly increase import capacity (GAZ system, 2020), and the construction of interconnections with Lithuania and Slovakia.

In turn, Ukraine's fear of the risks of supply disruption has led it to devise policies to reduce its dependence on gas imports and diversify its supply sources and routes. It set the target to increase domestic natural gas production and expand reverse flow import capacities from the most competitive European markets.

From 2017 onwards, the *Energy Strategy of Ukraine until 2035* (ESU, 2017) has been in place, as part of Ukraine's efforts to promote a more systematic and holistic approach to reforming the energy sector, which would improve energy efficiency, security, competitiveness and Ukraine's integration into the EU energy space in line with its commitments to the EU and IMF (OECD, 2020). Among the main identified challenges were geopolitical tensions with Russia, which could result in a significant loss of Russian gas transit revenues. At the same time, the chance for Ukraine to boost its energy independence by reducing its dependence on gas imports from Russia was seen as an opportunity (OECD, 2020).

In 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the *Energy Strategy of Ukraine until 2050* (Enerdata, 2023), which takes special account of the consequences of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, boosting the stability of its energy system and strengthening the role of energy security, which appears as a priority, including energy independence from the Russian Federation.

Energy security has been a priority in Ukraine's strategic approach, and one of its main risks is its dependence on Russia, which is why one of the actions planned to alleviate this weakness is to achieve energy independence from the Russian Federation (Janasz and Obrycki, 2022). As a matter of fact, and within the context of the war, the viability of natural gas supplies from Russia was affected by the Russian army's seizure—in May 2022—of the region where one of its two entry points is located: Sokhranivka, located in Luhansk Oblast, a Russian-speaking area on the border between the two countries. The Ukrainian transmission system operator reported that the situation did not allow them to secure the supply properly and declared *force majeure*; since then Russian gas has entered through a single point: Sudzha, located in Kursk Oblast, on the Russian side of the border (Elliott, 2022).

Thus, Ukraine's perception of Russia and fear of the risks of disruption of Russian supply led it to design policies to reduce its dependence on gas imports and to diversify its supply sources and routes. It had contingency solutions, such as increased domestic production and expanding reverse-flow import capacities from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, thereby increasing its presence in the more competitive European markets.

Gas continued to flow through this pipeline, but in a much smaller quantity than stipulated, due to the war (Zachmann *et al.*, 2024). Its operation was based on the contract between the two countries that expired on the 31st of December 2024, when it should have been decided whether to renew it, terminate it or agree on a new one, which was rather unlikely.

Currently, and since 2022, Russia has stopped channelling more than 80% of its pipeline shipments to the EU, reducing inflows from Nord Stream and the Yamal pipeline to zero. Natural gas shipments through the Ukrainian corridor were at historic lows until it halted following the expiry of the contract at the end of 2024. Only the TurkStream pipeline, which crosses the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey, continues to deliver natural gas normally to southeast Europe (Urbasos, 2024).

4 A European reality and different national perceptions

4.1 *Perceptions of the energy scenario*

The situation of the flow of Russian natural gas to Poland, Ukraine and Germany has been analysed on the basis of offensive realism in the first two cases and institutional liberalism in the last case (an interpretative theory valid until the escalation of the war in 2022). In each case there have been different perceptions of Russian natural gas flowing through pipelines, of the pipelines themselves, of the relations between countries, and of energy security itself.

For Poland and Ukraine, the energy relationship with Russia (not necessarily with other suppliers) is based on a realist perception. In this relationship, natural gas is a strategic good with significant value in terms of power and security, which has the capacity to influence inter-State relations and power balances.

The pipelines crossing both countries go beyond being the consideration of natural gas transport and distribution routes and constitute strategic instruments for Poland and Ukraine, as well as Russia. They are perceived as a foreign policy instrument that may be used to achieve political objectives, including as a means of blackmail. Energy security in relation to Russia is marked by patterns of behaviour and ambition aimed at expanding its power and influence.

It was precisely the fear of the use of gas as a geopolitical weapon that spurred countries such as Poland and Ukraine to take steps to disengage from this dependence.

For Germany, natural gas has been primarily a commodity, the trade of which promotes stability and progress; Nord Stream was an infrastructure at the disposal of interdependent trade relations, with energy security being conditioned by economic and technical factors. This interpretation —as it has been seen— is in line with the premises of institutional liberalism: energy security depends on the fulfilment of agreements and economic variables, which are those that have defined the energy relationship with Russia, although without forgetting that it is a vital strategic asset for the country.

With the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, the relationship between Germany and Russia can no longer be interpreted in line with the principles of institutional liberalism, but rather realism. Natural gas, once an economic good subject to international trade rules and agreements, became a tool of geopolitical pressure, and economic cooperation and interdependence ceased to be stabilising factors. Germany, facing a direct threat to its energy and geopolitical security, reorganised its foreign policy, aligning itself more closely with NATO and adopting an energy diversification strategy that would reduce its vulnerability.

4.2 Gas flow after the invasion of Ukraine: different situation, same result

The natural gas relation with Russia has traditionally developed on different assumptions in Germany, Poland and Ukraine. All three countries, however, have had their supplies cut off by Russia after condemning the invasion of Ukraine.

For a long time before the last invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it was debated whether Russia would be able to use the gas to achieve political goals and cut off Nord Stream supplies, or whether the revenues from its sale would deter it. The question was answered in the affirmative or in the negative, depending on whether the answer came from realism or liberalism, respectively. From the carried-out case study, it is clear that liberal perceptions have not had the expected effect, as interdependence has not prevented Russia from using natural gas as a geopolitical weapon. Germany, despite having a liberal conception of its energy relationship with Russia, has suffered equally from the supply cut.

It seems, therefore, that what is decisive is not so much the theory on which the gas relationship is interpreted, but rather the theory by which the behaviour of the supplier country is interpreted. And to this the following may be added: the relevant realist perception would not be that of the consumer countries regarding the elements under examination but that which is projected onto these elements by the supplier country, Russia, in this case. What is conclusive in predicting whether interdependence will pose a deterrent or not is not so much the reciprocal benefits of the energy relationship, but rather the supplier's profile. Its liberal or realist character is probably what defines whether the energy relationship is primarily commercial or geopolitical. However, this practical assumption does not eliminate the debate between the two theories.

The disparity in perceptions of the energy relationship with Russia did not lead to different supply situations but did inspire different strategies. For Poland and Ukraine, supply disruption was a likely scenario and consequently, they had adopted plans to disengage from Russian gas. Germany, on the other hand, considered the suspension of supply unlikely, and therefore did not envisage alternatives to Russian gas. It did have measures to reduce the hydrocarbon share in its energy mix for environmental reasons, but not due to geopolitical fears, unlike Poland and Ukraine.

It is clear from the above that the German and Polish-Ukrainian national energy strategies were very different.

5 Conclusions

Poland, Ukraine and Germany's energy relationship with Russia over the gas it pipes to them may be explained via different theoretical assumptions.

Poland and Ukraine's energy relationship with Russia is developed on the basis of offensive realism: natural gas is a strategic commodity, pipelines are potential

geopolitical weapons, their relationship with Russia has been one of dependency and vulnerability.

In the view of these two countries, natural gas transcends its economic value to become a key tool in the fight for national security. Russia, acting as a revisionist actor, would have instrumentalised its energy exports to consolidate power and exert political pressure. The construction of alternative infrastructures and the diversification of energy supplies by these countries reflect a realist understanding of the international environment, where strategic resources are factors of State power and survival.

Based on these realist interpretations, the possibility of Moscow using gas as a political weapon led both countries to view this dependence as a critical vulnerability. As a result, they prioritised strategies aimed at diversifying their suppliers and strengthening alternative infrastructures.

In Poland, this materialised in the construction of LNG terminals and the expansion of energy interconnections with Europe. As for Ukraine, it developed strategic alliances with the EU and the US to secure alternative routes and promote its own energy sources.

Germany had framed its energy relationship with Russia within the theory of institutional liberalism. Natural gas was seen as a commercial commodity, pipelines were avenues for collaboration and the relationship around gas was one of interdependence, mutually beneficial to both countries. From this perspective, the construction of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines was based on the premise that energy trade would create lasting economic ties that would deter conflict and promote mutual stability. Germany relied on long-term contracts and stable prices, believing that a strong trade relationship with Russia would provide energy stability.

The benefits of this relationship and the deterrence of the use of gas as a political weapon meant that the energy relationship with Russia was seen as a strength. However, this vision proved vulnerable to changing geopolitical dynamics.

In 2022, it became clear that the disparity in energy conceptions and strategies adopted by Poland, Ukraine and Germany did not lead to different scenarios and all three countries were equally affected by Russia's use of natural gas as a political weapon. Despite varying approaches—from the offensive realism adopted by Poland and Ukraine to the institutional liberalism guiding German energy policy—Russian control over pipelines turned energy supply into a tool of geopolitical pressure.

Russia's attempt to influence European support for Ukraine through the strategic use of gas exposed a common weakness: dependence on Russian energy supplies. The stopping of gas flows through Nord Stream, initially conceived as a symbol of cooperation and commercial stability, demonstrated the limits of economic interdependence when confronted with broader strategic considerations. The liberal approach that viewed this infrastructure as a basis for reciprocal stability crumbled in the face of geopolitical realities.

The war in Ukraine thus marked a turning point in Germany's energy and foreign policy, redefining its stance towards Russia and its theoretical approach to international relations. Until then, Germany had followed an approach based on institutional liberalism, but Russian aggression demonstrated the limits of this perspective, pushing Germany towards a stance of offensive realism.

German energy policy underwent a drastic readjustment: natural gas, previously considered a commercial commodity under a market logic, was transformed into a strategic resource subject to the geopolitics of power. Germany reacted by redefining its energy security and adopting a policy of supply diversification. The accelerated construction of LNG terminals and the signing of agreements with countries such as the United States, Norway and Qatar reflect this paradigm shift.

This strategic shift also manifested itself in foreign policy. Berlin hardened its stance towards Moscow through severe economic sanctions and military support for Ukraine, adopting a logic of power and security typical of offensive realism (Belov, 2024). The concept of *Zeitenwende* (change of era) articulated by Chancellor Olaf Scholz underlined this transformation. Germany recognised that relying on a single energy supplier compromised its sovereignty and geopolitical stability.

Within this context, the supposed logic of mutual benefits inherent in energy trade was displaced by a logic of power. The idea that economic ties could deter aggressive behaviour proved insufficient to contain Russia's strategy. Energy supply, far from acting as a stabilising element, became a vulnerability exploited for the Kremlin's geopolitical interests.

Ultimately, Germany's change of position shows how crises can profoundly alter the theoretical interpretation of international relations. Offensive realism prevailed over institutional liberalism, demonstrating that, in extreme crisis scenarios, national security and State power trump the logic of trade and cooperation. This structural change in German politics redefines its role within the international system, consolidating it as an actor aware of power dynamics in an increasingly volatile global environment.

Germany moved from the liberal logic of economic cooperation to a security posture based on offensive realism. This evolution not only illustrates theoretical flexibility in the practice of international politics, but also demonstrates how the quest for security and power remains a key driver in the global system.

In summary and as a final consideration, it is clear that based on the preceding analysis, a new energy order began to take shape after 2022 with repercussions on a European and international scale. In order to understand and design security policies within this new order, it is enlightening to study the cases of Poland, Ukraine and Germany in their gas relations with Russia, in both contexts of peace and conflict.

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Democracy, security and secrecy: How does democratic control of the intelligence community work in Spain?

Abstract

This article studies how Spanish democracy controls its intelligence community through three analytical dimensions: the political direction that the Government exercises over the set of organizations that make up the Public Administration, among which are the intelligence services; the parliamentary supervision developed by the Parliament and, finally, the jurisdictional control exercised by the bodies that make up the judicial power. The article studies aspects of configuration, design and performance of this type of control instruments and points out how they have a direct parallel with the development that the institutions that make up the Spanish political system have known..

Keywords

Intelligence community, Secret services, Accountability, Intelligence, Official secrets.

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1 Introduction

One of the most interesting aspects of the study of public organisations dedicated to protecting State integrity and security is linked to the secrecy and discretion that characterises a great deal of their actions. This interest is especially relevant when such actions are carried out within the framework of democratic systems where public authorities and their administrative agents are subject, in general, to the principle of openness of their actions and public scrutiny of their management.

According to Troy (2008: 433), the function of the intelligence service is defined by three elements. The first of these has to do with the fact that its scope of action is projected onto those threats that compromise the security of the state, its integrity, as well as its democratic nature. The second relates to the state's own need to collect, analyse and process information from all sources. Finally, it is imperative to stress that, in order to ensure the success of the functions and the efficiency of the information tasks, they must be carried out under the protection of confidentiality and secrecy.

It may be pointed out that secrecy is perfectly compatible with democracy, as long as it is exceptional (Bobbio, 1991: 20). This relationship operates on two levels: on one hand, that which has to do with classified information and the processing of official secrets, where the rules on classification, procedures and deadlines where secrecy operates must be clearly delimited. On the other hand, it is essential that State structures dedicated to this type of function have instruments to control the different powers in order to avoid arbitrariness and deviations of power.

In this regard, the main research question of this article is to understand how the activity of the Spanish intelligence community is controlled by democratic institutions. In order to answer the above question, this research is clearly structured into four distinct parts: first, a review of the literature and current scientific approaches to the relationship between intelligence services and the democratic system; this analysis, together with the study of the structure of the intelligence community in Spain, constitutes the theoretical framework of reference. Secondly, the research design is presented, based on the study of three dimensions of control (executive, parliamentary and jurisdictional) of the secret services. The third part of the article presents and discusses the main findings of the research and finally, its general conclusions.

2 Democracy and the intelligence services

The security and integrity of any State is affected by risks of a multidimensional nature, ranging from arms races to environmental issues, technological development, organised crime networks, disinformation and trade relations (Kriele, 1980: 268; Navarro, 2007: 117).

According to Alcantud (2005: 15) and Colonieu (1888: 32), intelligence was originally linked to the collection of information of a political nature related to the stability and evolution of other countries or to the military sphere through the study of defensive and offensive capabilities, as well as to the strategic operational doctrine of other states (Dupuy, 1990: 152). This vision has been surpassed today due to the emergence of dimensions that may generate risks for a State and its institutions, which has led to the need to reformulate this type of organisation that, born out of an imitation of police organisation models, has over time acquired a key role in political systems as advisory bodies with essential information for public decision-making processes (Díaz Fernández, 2005: 50).

The execution of these functions may be described according to two broad models: the first model consists of concentrated systems, where all these tasks are carried out by a single entity that centralises them. In comparison to this model, the second one may be defined as complex structures where intelligence functions are assumed, in a specialised way, by various entities that make up a network or community (Wheaton and Beerbower, 2006: 321).

Type	Subtypes
Concentrated	
Diffuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical: they are linked to a specific space (interior-exterior). • Specialisation: they act in relation to a particular field requiring specific knowledge (signals, environmental, industrial, technological, financial intelligence). • Sectoral: they focus on a specific environment (military, criminal, terrorism intelligence).

Table I. Organisational models of intelligence agencies. *Source:* author's own

The choice of a diffuse model will determine the existence of multiple organisations acting on the basis of differentiated criteria. When the criterion is geographical in nature, one may speak of bodies dedicated to internal intelligence (targeting internal threats within the State itself), external intelligence (targeting threats from other countries) and even geospatial intelligence. (Kovacic, 2012: 3; Ugate, 2012: 123). The second criterion that explains the existence of a diffuse model is related to the technical complexity of matters such as signal technology, environmental issues or financial intelligence. In this case, the existence of multiple entities that focus their action on each of these issues based on their specific knowledge can be observed. Finally, the third justification of the diffuse model is linked to the sectoral actions of each intelligence organisation, which may be military, counter-terrorist or organised crime intelligence (Díaz Matey, 2016: 217; Uribe and Mesa Palacio, 2020: 91; Ferrato, 2014: 62; Sansó-Rubert, 2006: 209).

According to Whitaker (1999: 17), the existence of intelligence structures, which are essential in a democratic state, entails the need for political instruments of control by the public authorities in order to prevent these types of organisations from carrying out arbitrary actions that are far removed from their primary function of protecting the security of the State and the democratic nature of its institutions. To this end,

instruments of political control are usually defined by the executive, as the power responsible for the State Administration (López Guerra, 1988: 17), for supervision by the legislature within the framework of its power of parliamentary control (Seseña Santos, 2007: 307) and for legality by the judges and courts in charge of applying the law (Alfonso Rodríguez, 2023: 58).

The political steering function is related to the executive branch and refers to an initial governmental control over the secret services. This is the initial mechanism for overseeing its functioning which is linked to the Government's position as the directing body for domestic and foreign policy, as well as for the different branches of the state's Public Administration (Porras, 1998: 338). In this regard, the intelligence structures constitute different branches under departments that make up the executive branch, which carry out their administrative tasks by setting objectives and schedules for the agencies under them.

As entities dependent on different branches of the executive branch, the intelligence services constitute a space on which the legislature projects its function on three levels. Firstly, by exercising the law-making function that provides such organisations with a regulatory framework within which to operate. Secondly, by providing the financial means to carry out its activities, through the budgetary function and, finally, through the parliamentary control exercised by the chambers that make up the legislature over the different bodies and institutions of the Public Administration. In this regard, it is necessary to highlight that of the three basic functions of the legislature, the fact is that the implementation of welfare states and public policies have, over time, generated a rationalisation of parliamentary work, the main consequence of which is a functional shift of regulatory and budgetary power towards the executive branch, leaving political control as its most relevant activity in the legislature (Cuocolo, 1983: 226; Di Ruffia, 1965: 404; Aragón, 1994: 23).

In turn, the judiciary focuses on ensuring that the actions of intelligence agencies are in line with the regulatory framework, and there are no deviations of power in the use of these exceptional mechanisms in democracy, and supervises the impact of these actions on fundamental rights and public freedoms in maintaining the integrity of the State and its institutions (Sansó-Rubert, 2019: 131). This control may be carried out by common bodies, when it is the ordinary judges and courts that supervise these functions, by means of specialised bodies, established exclusively for judicial supervision, or by means of hybrid ones, when both approaches are combined.

3 The creation of intelligence structures in Spain

3.1 Background

As Zorzo (2005: 76) points out, the initial direct precedent for Spain's current intelligence structure is the creation of their own intelligence services by both sides during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Following the 1936 *coup d'état*, in order to prevent

the spread of the uprising among the Armed Forces, the democratic Government of the Second Republic decreed the dissolution of the Army, although it maintained the Central General Staff of Defence, which proceeded to reorganise the Second Section from the very outset. This section was responsible for executing the functions of the military intelligence service (Rodríguez Velasco, 2016: 3) with the aim of providing the new regular army with an organisation dedicated to information supply.

Under the command of Colonel Estrada Manchón, and especially after the socialist politician Indalecio Prieto took office as Minister of Defence in Juan Negrín's first cabinet, the structure was redefined and an organic regulation was drafted that placed Republican military intelligence under the General Staff and the functional direction of the Presidency of the Government and the Ministry of Defence. Pérez Cipitria (2022: 72) notes that the new intelligence service was divided into six sections (Organisation, Information, Strategic Military Information, Strategic Technical Information, Military Intelligence, Photography and Cartography, and Special Section).

At the same time, in early 1937, the Minister of State, Álvarez del Vayo, promoted the reorganisation of the Diplomatic and Special Information Service (SIDE), linked to the Foreign State Administration, with the aim of controlling the activity of foreign intelligence services and neutralising the activity of agents of the rebel side. At the domestic level, efforts were also directed towards defining an internal intelligence structure, under the command of the Ministry of the Interior, with the creation of the Special Department of State Information (DEIDE) led by the Minister Julián Zugazagoitia (Preston, 2013: 551).

In August 1937, the Minister Indalecio Prieto carried out a restructuring of internal intelligence with the creation of the Military Information Service (SIM). The creation of the SIM, recommended by Soviet advisors in the image of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), entailed the absorption of DEIDE and the elimination of all internal intelligence entities run by the parties and trade unions that remained loyal to the Second Republic, as well as those created by the Autonomous Governments of the Basque Country and Catalonia (Navarro, 2007: 159).

On the pro-coup side, the need to set up information structures was slower. The Decree of 28 February 1938 completed the merger of existing organisations with the embryonic Information Service of the Northeast Frontier of Spain, the Information and Investigation Service linked to the sole legal party (Falange Española Tradicionalista y las JONS), and the Military Information Service into the Information and Military Police Service (SIPM) under the command of Colonel Ungría Jiménez and achieving successes in rearguard operations carried out mainly in Madrid, which remained under Republican control throughout the war (Thomas, 1976: 817).

3.1.1 Intelligence structures during Franco's dictatorship

The end of the Civil War led to the restructuring of the intelligence organisations, the defeat of the Republican side meant the dissolution of the SIM and the dismantling

of the Second Section of the General Staff, as well as the SEIDE. In turn and as part of a process of institutionalisation of the Dictatorship, the military coup plotters proceeded to replace the SIPM with a dual structure in which the Third Information Section of the Upper General Staff (SIAEM) assumed, with the Reserved Order of 5 February 1944, the function of confronting foreign intelligence services within Spain and “coordinating the action of the various bodies responsible for repressing them”, for which it created a sub-service called the National Counter-Subversive Organisation (OCN) specialising in infiltrating student movements. From 1940 onwards, the General Directorate of Security (DGS), under the command of the Ministry of the Interior, was responsible for functions related to police intelligence and focused on the repression of internal political movements that challenged the Franco dictatorship (Moreno Tejada, 2022: 80).

The structure would be maintained until 1972, when Luis Carrero Blanco, Undersecretary of the Presidency, promoted the creation of the Central Documentation Service (SECED) as an intelligence service directly reporting to the Head of the Government and which would absorb the capacities of the OCN (Villar Cirujano, 2015: 28), but above all with the aim of both subverting anti-Francoist movements and dealing with incipient terrorist threats.

3.1.2 The intelligence services during the Transition and under the 1978 Constitution

The end of the dictatorship and the process of political transition led to a new reorganisation of the intelligence structure in 1977, merging the SIAEM and the SECED and creating the Higher Centre of Defence Information (CESID) in 1977. The new intelligence structure of the young Spanish democracy was based on CESID as the governing body of the system, and the existence of information services in the State Security Forces and Corps (*Policía Nacional* and *Guardia Civil*) as well as in the three divisions of the Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force), which had their own military intelligence units. CESID was under the Ministry of Defence but had functional links with the Presidency of the Government (Ruiz Miguel, 2005: 126).

Between 1977-2001, there were several attempts at improving the efficiency of the Spanish intelligence system with the dual purpose of dealing with incipient threats such as radicalisation, economic or technological threats, but above all with the search for a structure comparable to that of Western European countries, given that the CESID had a pre-constitutional origin. In 2001, under the first absolute majority of the Popular Party (PP), the Government led by José María Aznar reached a consensus, mainly with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), to promote the transformation of the CESID into the current National Intelligence Centre (CNI).

As Villalonga (2005: 163) points out, the CNI is characterised by decisive progress in its civilian nature by making clear that it is functionally under the Presidency of

the Government (although it may be attached to the Ministries of Defence or the Presidency) as well as by defining its operational objectives through the Directives approved by the Council of Ministers. The second characteristic is its configuration as a special public body that enjoys functional autonomy in carrying out its functions and, finally, that its management is entrusted to a Secretary of State-Director who is the main National Intelligence Authority and at the same time assumes the management of the National Cryptology Centre (CCN, within the CNI).

Scope	Agencies
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Intelligence Centre Dependent body: National Cryptology Centre
Interior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime Dependent body: information divisions of the State Security Forces and Corps and Penitentiary Institutions Coordinating: information services of the Autonomous Police Corps and the Customs Surveillance Service
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Armed Forces Intelligence Centre Dependent bodies: information and intelligence structures of the Army, Navy, Air and Space Force

Table II. Structure of the intelligence community in Spain. *Source:* author's own

At the same time, Act 11/2002 (LOCNI) maintains the existence of other intelligence bodies, forming a community which, together with the CNI, has components of internal intelligence (through the Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime —CITCO—, responsible for coordinating police intelligence entities and reporting to the Ministry of the Interior) and military intelligence (through the Armed Forces Intelligence Centre —CIFAS—, which integrates the intelligence sections of its three divisions).

The latest system restructuring has focused on its governance rather than the transformation of the Spanish intelligence community. They are implemented with the approval of Royal Decree 1119/2012 of the 20th of July, creating the Department of National Security (DSN) attached to the Presidency of the Government, as a support, advice and strategic monitoring unit for crisis situations, as well as the approval of Act 36/2015 on National Security, which configures a new Government Delegate Commission, called the National Security Council (CSN), responsible for immediate assistance to the President of the Government, as director of security policy and which enables coordination of the capacities of different ministerial departments and other responsible bodies.

4 Research design

Based on the study on the relationship between intelligence services and democracy, as well as the evolution of the organisation of the secret services in Spain, which constitute the theoretical basis and the analytical framework of this research, the

main question guiding this paper is to understand how the activity of the Spanish intelligence community is controlled by democratic institutions.

The main objective of this research is to conceptualise intelligence structures as an essential component for the functioning of Spanish democracy based on the balance between their capacities and the political control of their actions. Specific objectives include the modelling of democratic control mechanisms and the study of their performance.

Areas	Variables	Sub-variables
Political administration	Governmental control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year of creation • Type of organisation • Criterion • Organisational dependency • Functional dependency
Legislative oversight	Parliamentary control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chamber • Extension of control capacity • Regulatory basis • Composition • Performance
Jurisdictional oversight	Judicial control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations • Regulatory basis • Type of organisation • Composition

Table III. Dimensions of analysis. *Source: author's own*

To address the question and achieve the stated objectives, this research focuses on the study of three key analytical dimensions:

- a) Political administration of the intelligence services
- b) Instruments of parliamentary control and analysis of their performance
- c) Jurisdictional oversight mechanisms

The time period ranges from 2002, when the current intelligence community was created, and 2023, the end of the 14th Legislature of the democracy. It therefore covers legislatures VII, VIII, IX, X, XII and XIV. Legislatures XI and XIII have not been taken into account since they did not manage to form a government and, consequently, have a short duration and little activity.

4.1 *The political administration of the intelligence services*

As Table III demonstrates, the first variable to be analysed in this study is the control exercised by the executive branch. Although it is an element not usually taken into account in various studies on the secret services which analyse their structure and functioning, it is worth remembering, in the same way as indicated in the theoretical background of the research, that the structures dedicated to intelligence functions are part of the Public Administration and, therefore, within the Spanish political system

they are placed under the higher administration of the Government as the body responsible for domestic and foreign policy, as well as the General State Administration (López Guerra, 1988: 17).

Therefore, the first connection between intelligence and politics is created within the executive branch, to which they report on an organisational and functional basis. This connection is key to determining essential questions about the intelligence model of any country, such as the means of conceiving this policy by opting for a concentrated or diffuse model; how threats are perceived according to the degree of sectoralisation or specialisation of the agencies; or whether dimensions of functional decentralisation or hierarchy are observed in the case of a community network system or if, on the contrary, strongly subordinated agencies are opted for.

This research approaches the study of political administration on the basis of six parameters. Firstly, the year of creation of each organisation within the intelligence community in order to determine their age and the political moment in which they were established; secondly, the organisation type in order to study the greater or lesser degree of functional autonomy, taking as reference whether they are independent agencies, autonomous bodies, departments or mere divisions of military institutions; thirdly, it is essential to determine the criteria behind their creation, as they may be geographical (based on the physical space where they carry out their actions), sectoral (based on an understanding of the nature that defines their function—civil or military—) or specialised (based on the specific area in which they conduct their actions). Finally, their organisational hierarchy is studied, which allows the visualisation of the matrix of relations with the administration and certain parameters of formal hierarchy, as well as functional dependence which demonstrates how decisions are taken in the structure.

4.2 *The parliamentary control model*

The study of the Parliament's control mechanisms is crucial to understanding the powers of democratic oversight of intelligence structures. In this regard, it is necessary to remember that although it is true, as Fernández Sarasola (2000: 91) rightly points out, that initially the parliamentary function was linked to drafting legislation and preparing budgets, the current reality of parliamentary political systems, in the opinion of Vergottini (1973: 49), Paniagua Soto (2015: 4) and Montero and García Morillo (1984: 26) has seen a shift in their capabilities towards the tasks of control and promotion of governmental teams that are politically accountable to the legislature and which, in order to be established or remain in service, require its majority backing.

The mechanisms of parliamentary oversight are addressed on the basis of four sub-variables of study. Firstly, bearing in mind that Spain is an imperfect bicameral model, the supervisory powers of each body that makes up the *Cortes Generales* with

regard to the intelligence services are analysed, determining the type of specific control body. The second consists of understanding the type of capabilities of each chamber, which may involve complete control (when it covers all types of actions) or limited to certain issues. The third relevant aspect is linked to the regulatory basis of each oversight body, which makes it possible to appreciate a greater or lesser degree of interest on the part of the Government or the *Cortes Generales* in terms of oversight. Finally, the composition and performance linked to aspects of great relevance such as the Government's capacity to influence the parliamentary agenda is studied since, although in Spain the executive power participates in the organisation of legislative activity via the State Secretariat for Parliamentary Relations in the meetings of the decision-making bodies of the Congress of Deputies and the Senate, this capacity for influence may also be seen in the coincidence of the political colour of the head of the oversight body with that of the Government.

4.3 Judicial oversight

As explained in the theoretical framework of this research, the democratic control of intelligence services requires the supervision of their activity by the power that directs the administration (executive), the power that provides the regulatory framework, budgetary capacity and political impetus to the Government (legislative), and the power that ensures compliance with the law and the defence of fundamental rights and public liberties (judicial).

The tasks of judges and courts may be conducted via two models. On the one hand, it can be specialised when an *ad hoc* jurisdictional body is created, whose sole function lies in supervising intelligence structures, as in the case of the United States, where Article 50 of the US Code provides for the existence of a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC), composed of 11 judges appointed directly by the Chief Justice, and whose decisions may be appealed before the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review (FISCR), composed of 3 judges appointed in the same way. On the other hand, control may be vested in specific bodies that are part of the ordinary judicial system, as is the case in Australia, where these functions are performed by the Federal Court and reviewed by the High Court. These two models may be combined by the use of mixed criteria, such as the assignment to chambers or members of the ordinary judiciary of specific oversight functions over the work of the intelligence services, as is the case in the United Kingdom with review by specialised chambers of the Court of Appeal of England and Wales or the Inner House of the Court of Session in Scotland, both of which are subject to review under the *Investigatory Powers Bill* of 2016 by the British Supreme Court.

The study of the Spanish model addresses three elements to establish the type of judicial control system in place, which consist of determining: which courts have the capacity for control, what their regulatory basis is, what their composition is and, finally, what type of court they constitute (specific, ordinary or mixed) and its composition.

5 Results

5.1 *The function of political administration of the intelligence community in Spain*

As indicated in the methodological section, the first of the analytical variables is concerned with the study of the intelligence services, as an element that is part of the Public Administration, and which, consequently, is subject to the function of political control and direction that Article 97 of the Constitution grants to the Government.

The first of the issues to be highlighted is that Spain has an intelligence community made up of 9 organisations which, in most cases, predate Organic Act 11/2002, regulating the National Intelligence Centre, with the cases of the Guardia Civil's Information Service, set up in 1941, and the National Police's General Intelligence Commissariat of 1976, being of particular note. It should also be noted that three Autonomous Communities, the Basque Country, the Community of Navarre and Catalonia, have information divisions within their respective autonomous police forces that have integrated security functions in the territory.

It should also be noted that, although they are —strictly speaking— not part of the intelligence community, there are another five bodies: the General Commissariat of Judicial Police of the National Police, the Central Operational Unit of the Guardia Civil, the Customs Surveillance Service, the Executive Service of the Commission for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Monetary Offences (SEPBLAC) and the Prison Security Coordination unit, which perform a series of functions linked to obtaining police, tax, financial and penitentiary information and intelligence that place them as hybrid bodies essential to understanding the intelligence functions in Spain.

	Creation	Type	Criterion	Organisational dependency	Functional dependency
National Intelligence Centre	2002	Autonomous body	Integral	Ministry of Defence/Ministry of the Presidency	Presidency of the Government
Armed Forces Intelligence Centre	2004	General Staff Division	Sectoral: military intelligence	Ministry of Defence	Chief of Defence Staff
Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime	2014	Sub-Directorate General of the Ministry of the Interior	Specialised in: terrorism and organised crime	Ministry of the Interior	State Secretariat for Security
General Intelligence Commissariat	1976	National Police Division	Specialised in: police intelligence	Ministry of the Interior	Deputy Operational Director, National Police

	Creation	Type	Criterion	Organisational dependency	Functional dependency
General Commissariat of Judicial Police	1978	National Police Division	Specialisation: police intelligence and organised crime	Ministry of the Interior	Judiciary and Public Prosecutor's Office
Guardia Civil Intelligence Service	1941	Guardia Civil Division	Specialisation: police intelligence, counter-terrorism and organised crime	Ministry of the Interior	Deputy Operational Director, Guardia Civil
Central Operational Unit	1987	Guardia Civil Division	Specialisation: police intelligence, counter-terrorism and organised crime	Ministry of the Interior	Judiciary and Public Prosecutor's Office
Prison Security Coordination	1994	Department of the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions	Specialisation: prison intelligence, counter-organised crime, counter-terrorism and violent radicalisation	Ministry of the Interior	General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions
Executive Service of the Commission for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Monetary Offences	1980	Administrative body	Specialisation: financial intelligence	Ministry of Economy, Trade and Enterprise	Commission for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Monetary Offences
Customs Surveillance Service	1982	Department of the Ministry of Finance and Public Administration	Specialisation: tax and customs intelligence	Ministry of Finance and the Civil Service	Deputy Director of Customs Surveillance, the Judiciary and the Public Prosecutor's Office
Intelligence Division	1983	Mossos d'Esquadra Corps Division	Specialisation: police intelligence	Regional Council of the Government of Catalonia	Major, Mossos d'Esquadra
Information and Analysis Unit	1982	Ertzaintza Division	Specialisation: police intelligence and counter-terrorism	Regional Council of the Interior of the Basque Government	Chief Intendant of the Ertzaintza Police Force
Intelligence Division	1987	Navarre Regional Police Division	Specialisation: police intelligence	Regional Council of the Interior and Civil Service of the Provincial Government of Navarre	Chief of the Navarre Regional Police Force

Table IV. Organisational and functional assignment of intelligence structures. *Source:* author's own

As may be seen in Table IV, there are four organisational models. Firstly, one may speak of a model of functional autonomy in the case of the National Intelligence Centre, which is an autonomous body, pursuant to its Organic Act of creation, which means that, according to Article 98 of Act 40/2015 on the Legal Regime of the Public Sector, it is an entity with legal personality, treasury, its own assets and autonomy in its management for the execution of functions inherent to the Public Administration. In turn, most of the agencies constitute divisions of the State Security Forces and Corps (*Policía Nacional* and *Guardia Civil*) and the regional police forces (*Ertzaintza*, *Policía Foral* and *Mossos d'Esquadra*), while CITCO, the Prison Security Coordination, CIFAS and the Customs Surveillance Service constitute departments of the Ministries of the Interior, Defence, Finance and Public Function, respectively.

The creation criteria are diverse. Once again, the CNI is unique in that its function is comprehensive and involves any geographical area (internal and external), as well as various sectors and specialisations, with sections on police intelligence, radicalisation, economic intelligence, counterterrorism and even communications intelligence, through the administration of the National Cryptology Centre. Military intelligence is the responsibility of CIFAS, while the State Security Forces and Corps have specialised police intelligence bodies that also carry out anti-terrorist intelligence and fight against organised crime (General Intelligence Commissariat of the National Police, Guardia Civil Intelligence Service, Central Operational Unit, Commissariat of Judicial Police, and intelligence divisions of the regional police forces). The Customs Surveillance Service specialises in tax and customs intelligence and drug trafficking and smuggling, SEPBLAC specialises in financial intelligence, while the Prison Security Coordination Unit is responsible for obtaining and analysing information on counter-terrorism, violent radicalisation and organised crime in the prison system.

Within this security scheme, most of the agencies are linked to the Ministry of the Interior or the competent Regional Councils in Catalonia, Navarre and the Basque Country. The Customs Surveillance Service is historically part of the Ministry of Finance and Public Function, the CIFAS is attached to Defence, while the CNI, according to its Organic Act, may be integrated into the Ministry of the Presidency or the Ministry of Defence. In this regard, it should be noted that in the Governments led by the Popular Party (2000-2004 and 2011-2017) it has been attached to the Ministry of the Presidency, while under Socialist Presidents (2004-2011 and 2018 on) it has been part of the organisational structure of the Ministry of Defence.

More complex is the functional dependency of the group of agencies that carry out intelligence functions in Spain. As mentioned above, the National Intelligence Centre, which may be a part of the organisational structure of two ministries (Presidency or Defence), is functionally dependent on the Presidency of the Government, whose regulatory framework assigns it the responsibility of providing the President with information, analyses or studies that enable action to be taken in the face of any type of threat or risk to the independence and territorial integrity of Spain (Article 4 of the LOCNI). The CIFAS reports functionally to the Chief of Defence Staff, who, in accordance with Article 12.1 of the Organic Act on National Defence, is the senior

advisor on military operations to the President of the Government, the Minister of Defence and is responsible for the operational direction of the Armed Forces.

The Secretary General of Penitentiary Institutions, who reports to the Minister of the Interior, directs the Prison Security Coordination. Whereas the Deputy Operational Directors of the National Police, the *Guardia Civil* and the Customs Surveillance, as well as the Major of the *Mossos d'Esquadra*, the Chief Intendant of the *Ertzaintza* and the *Foruzainburua* (Chief of the Navarre Regional Police) exercise operational management functions, respectively over the General Intelligence Commissariat, the *Guardia Civil* Intelligence Service, the Customs Surveillance Service, the Intelligence Division, the Information and Analysis Unit and the Intelligence Service. SEPBLAC is functionally dependent on the Commission for the Prevention of Money Laundering and Monetary Offences, which is the body responsible for directing and coordinating policies for the prevention of money laundering and terrorist financing in Spain.

In this regard, it should be noted that Spain's intelligence structure has two bodies whose functional leadership does not fall under the executive branch. Article 547 of the Organic Act of the Judiciary determines that the Judicial Police is responsible for assisting the judiciary and the public prosecutor's office in the investigation of acts constituting a crime. In compliance with this mandate, the General Commissariat of Judicial Police of the National Police and the Central Operational Unit of the *Guardia Civil*, whose operational management, as units acting within the framework of judicial investigations, falls to the Judiciary and the State Attorney General's Office, as those responsible for the investigation of cases before courts and tribunals.

5.2 *Parliamentary control*

The second analytical dimension of this research explores the relationship between intelligence structures and the legislature. This function ties in with one of the pillars of modern liberal democracy: the principle of the executive's accountability to parliament. The notion of responsibility has two explanatory dimensions. On one hand, in parliamentary systems such as Spain (Article 1.3 of the Constitution), the legislature is the only body that has a direct relationship with the depositary of national sovereignty, and is thus the institution that expresses the plurality of Spanish society; on the other hand, it is necessary to remember that it occupies a position of political centrality, which means that the rest of the powers of the State need to have parliamentary legitimacy in order to be constituted and to operate fully.

In the case of intelligence structures, as part of the State Administration, whose political administration is entrusted to the Government, their activity is subject to oversight by the legislature. As indicated in the methodological section, the first area of study of this dimension has to do with the powers of control entrusted to each chamber of the *Cortes Generales*. In this regard, it is necessary to remember that in the Spanish political system the Parliament has an imperfect bicameral structure.

	Chamber	Control	Basis	Composition
Committee for the Control of Credits Earmarked for Reserved Funds	Lower House	Complete	Act 11/1995 and Resolution of the Presidency of Congress of the 11 th of May 2004	President of the Congress and Spokespersons of the Parliamentary Groups
Joint Committee on National Security	Parliament	Limited to operational oversight of the Government's actions in the area of National Security	Act 36/2015 on National Security	Ordinary
Defence Committee	Lower House	Limited to budgetary and operational aspects not declared secret	Standing Orders of the Congress	Ordinary
Committee of the Interior	Lower House	Limited to budgetary and operational aspects not declared secret	Standing Orders of the Congress	Ordinary
Committee of Economy, Trade and Digital Transformation	Lower House	Limited to budgetary and operational aspects of SEPBLAC not declared secret	Standing Orders of the Congress	Ordinary
Defence Committee	Senate	Limited to budgetary and operational aspects not declared secret	Standing Orders of the Senate	Ordinary
Committee of the Interior	Senate	Limited to budgetary and operational aspects not declared secret	Standing Orders of the Senate	Ordinary
Committee of Economy, Trade and Business	Senate	Limited to budgetary and operational aspects of SEPBLAC not declared secret	Standing Orders of the Senate	Ordinary

Table V. Main parliamentary oversight bodies. *Source:* author's own

In terms of parliamentary control of intelligence structures in Spain, there are a number of bodies with oversight capacity. There are three in the Lower House. The first is the Committee for the Control of Credits Earmarked for Reserved Funds, popularly known as the Official Secrets Committee, which has a dual nature as its existence is mandated by Act 11/1995 while its composition and functioning is a consequence of the Resolution of the Presidency of Congress of the 11th of May 1995. This is a body directed by the Presidency of the Lower House with a number of members equal to the number of constituted Parliamentary Groups, which need the support of three fifths of the Plenary of the Chamber in order to be elected, so that its composition must be agreed by a qualified majority. It has a dual function: on the one hand, it extends its jurisdiction to overseeing the activities of public services that are carried out with reserved funds; on the other hand, its members have the right to request a report on those matters subject to the Official Secrets Act, so that the exercise of this parliamentary supervision does not undermine the performance of activities under the principle of confidentiality. Its sessions are secret and neither its minutes nor the Journal of Sessions are published, and its members are obliged not to divulge any

information of which they have knowledge (Article 16 of the Standing Orders of the Congress), and they may incur criminal liability if they do so.

The *Cortes Generales* have seven other parliamentary oversight mechanisms, namely the Interior, Defence and Economy Committees, whose oversight of the Intelligence Community is limited to operational and budgetary aspects that have not been declared secret. The composition of these committees is the same as that of the ordinary committees of both chambers and is determined by resolution of their respective presidencies at the beginning of each legislature. Finally, there is an additional oversight mechanism, created in 2016 under Act 36/2015 on National Security, which is the Joint Committee on National Security, a body made up of representatives from both chambers.

It may therefore be noted that both chambers have similar oversight instruments (such as the Interior and Defence committees) and a shared space (the Joint Committee on National Security); however, it can also be observed that parliamentary control, much like the political system as a whole, displays an imbalance between the powers of both chambers, as the Lower House has greater oversight through a specific committee that extends its power of control to all activities of the intelligence structures, without there being a parallel structure in the Upper House.

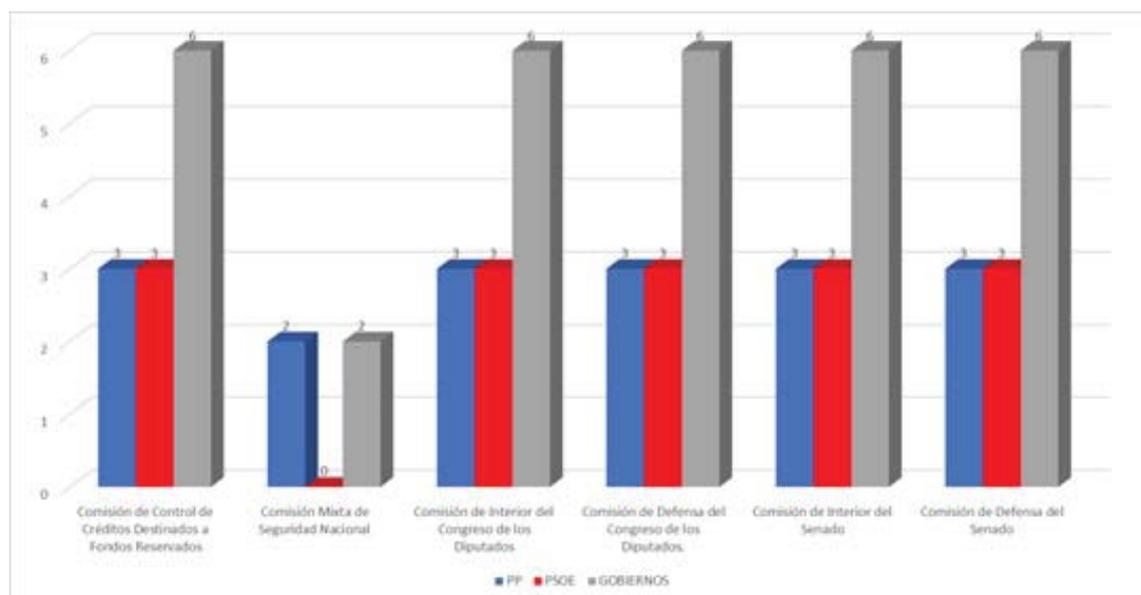


Figure 1. Control of the presidency of the main parliamentary oversight committees (2000-2023). *Source:* author's own based on www.congreso.es and www.senado.es

As may be seen in Figure 1, since 2000, six governments have been formed; the PSOE has governed three times (2004-2008, 2008-2011 and 2018-2023) while the PP has governed three times (2000-2004, 2011-2015, 2016-2018). This balance is seen in the control of the presidencies of the main specific committees overseeing the intelligence structures for each chamber, meaning that each party has controlled the presidencies

as many times as it has won the chamber's investiture'. The exception to this pattern may be seen in the Joint Committee on National Security, which has always been chaired by the Popular Party since its creation, regardless of the political leanings of the Presidency of the Government.

This balance shows a tendency of the party leading the cabinet to hold the presidency of each of these committees and, therefore, to influence their work agenda, however, this balance has been broken in the Defence Committee of Congress, chaired by a Socialist MP in Mariano Rajoy's second term (2016-2018) and currently, under the PSOE-Unidas Podemos coalition Government (2019-2023) by a Partido Popular MP.

5.3 *Jurisdictional control of the intelligence community*

The last analytical variable is related to the judiciary's oversight of intelligence structures. Article 24 of the Spanish Constitution establishes that courts have the power to exercise effective judicial protection in order to protect the free exercise of fundamental rights and the subjecting of the public authorities, as well as the citizens as a whole, to the fundamental and other rules of the legal system.

The intelligence services are still an organisation of the General State Administration which act, under the political direction of the Government and with parliamentary supervision by the *Cortes Generales*, albeit in an exceptional manner, limited to the protection of national security, the integrity of the State and its democratic institutions, but also limited to a regulatory framework that defines the parameters of its activity. Therefore, much like any administrative structure of the state, there must be oversight based on the protection of fundamental rights and the guarantee of legality. To this end, two main models of judicial control have been defined in comparative political systems, as mentioned in the theoretical section. There are *ad hoc* bodies created for the oversight of intelligence structures, such as FISC and FISCR in the United States, but this function may also be entrusted to judges and courts that are part of the ordinary structure of the judiciary, as in Australia or the United Kingdom.

Scope	Characteristics
National Intelligence Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sole Magistrate and two alternative Magistrates Appointment by the President of the Supreme Court Authorisation of activities of the CNI that affect the secrecy of communications or the inviolability of the home
Other intelligence structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common procedure for obtaining information set forth in the Criminal Procedure Act for internal intelligence agencies Channelling through the Secretary of State-Director of the CNI for military intelligence agencies

Table VI. System of judicial control of the intelligence community. *Source:* author's own

¹ The Committee of Economy has not been included in this analysis as during several legislatures it has been integrated with the Finance Committee or subdivided with other areas depending on the composition of the Government.

As may be seen in Table VI, in the Spanish case, the current configuration of the intelligence community is that of a hybrid model of jurisdictional control. Firstly, it is necessary to highlight that Act 2/2002, of the 7th of May 2002, which regulated the prior judicial control of the National Intelligence Centre, opted for a mixed control model. Thus, its Sole Additional Provision modifies Article 125 of the Organic Act of the Judiciary and configures an *ad hoc* magistrate with supervisory powers over the activity of the CNI, whose appointment, similar to the US system, falls to the President of the General Council of the Judiciary (who is also the President of the Supreme Court), who must appoint a sole Magistrate belonging to the Second (criminal) or Third (contentious-administrative) Chamber of the Supreme Court. The function of this magistrate will be to authorise requests made by the Secretary of State-Director of the CNI for activities affecting the fundamental right to secrecy of communications or the inviolability of the home, which must contain details of measures, duration and persons to whom they are addressed.

The mechanism of jurisdictional control foreseen for the CNI is expansive in nature towards entities of the Armed Forces Intelligence Centre, which acts through the Secretary of State-Director of the CNI, as High Intelligence Authority, reporting on its activity to the executive branch, but also requesting authorisation for its activities. However, this mechanism does not apply to the vast majority of internal and police intelligence agencies, which are subject to the procedures contemplated in Title III of the Criminal Procedure Act (LECRim) on the functions of the judicial police. It is the ordinary jurisdiction bodies that are competent, due to the subject matter, to authorise and supervise the intelligence functions carried out by the State Security Forces and Corps, by the Autonomous Police, and coordinated by entities such as CITCO, which reports to the Secretary of State for Security.

6 Discussion of results

Four main preliminary considerations can be drawn from the research. First, it can be noted that the system shows a centripetal tendency, which is observed in the configuration of the intelligence community itself, which has an asymmetric structure.

Table IV shows the existence of thirteen agencies with intelligence functions in Spain. There are organisations attached to the Ministries of Defence (CIFAS), Interior (CITCO, General Intelligence Commissariat, Guardia Civil Intelligence Service and Prison Security Coordination), Finance (Customs Surveillance Service), Economy (SEPBLAC), linked to regional governments (intelligence units of the Basque, Catalan and Navarre police) and even functionally attached to the judiciary (General Commissariat of Judicial Police and Central Operational Unit of the Guardia Civil). The CNI, functionally linked to the Presidency of the Government, is an entity with a surprising configuration given that it is an agency with a concentrated vocation, as its scope of activity in intelligence matters covers all sectoral, geographical or specialisation criteria coexisting alongside

multiple specialised entities (police intelligence, anti-terrorism, the fight against organised crime, fiscal or prison intelligence) or sectoral entities (CIFAS in military intelligence) and even houses within its structure an organisation such as the CCN, which specialises in signals intelligence.

For reasons of functional linkage with the Presidency of the Government (responsible for the political direction of the General State Administration and domestic and foreign or defence policy), this hybrid and asymmetrical structure allows the CNI to act not only as the leading agency in the model but also to exert a kind of force or *vis attractiva* of its activity over the rest of the organisations, given that, together with its functional connections, its comprehensive vision of intelligence matters (which includes all kinds of specialisation, sectoralisation and territorialisation criteria) can lead it to become an entity that channels the main tasks of the Spanish intelligence system. This position is reinforced by judicial control, where, compared to other entities subject to the ordinary jurisdictional control, the CNI has a specific control mechanism which rests in a specific Supreme Court magistrate, structured in Table VI, which facilitates the agility of its functions.

The second consideration relates to a relevant aspect of the results, namely that the intelligence structures reflect the functioning of the Spanish political system on two levels. On one hand, with regard to the configuration of executive power, in Spain the Government responds to a “Chancellor model” in which the President enjoys a privileged position with respect to the Ministers. Enjoying the confidence of the Lower House, the President has the power of control over the Government, which can be seen in the ability to appoint and dismiss members at discretion, or in the power to settle conflicts of competence between departments.

This presidential nature may be witnessed in the evolution of the intelligence services, summarised in Table IV, in the configuration of the CNI, the replacement of the former CESID, whose design disassociates it from the Ministry of Defence, attaching it to the Presidency or Defence, but above all, functionally, to the Presidency of the Government, for which it is a strategic advisory body. This trend may also be seen in the definition of the governance bodies of the intelligence community, where the Department of National Security and the National Security Council are linked to the figure of the President of the Government.

The relationship between the political system and the intelligence community also applies to the instruments of parliamentary oversight. As defined in the results sections, Spain has an imperfect bicameral system where there is a clear predominance of the Lower House, which has a key and exclusive role in shaping the cabinet through the investiture of the President of the Government, as well as in maintaining confidence in the executive. This position is reflected in the instruments of parliamentary control, as, while it is true that there are identical interior and defence committees in the Lower House and the Senate—and even a joint committee on national security, as shown in Table V—, the truth is that their oversight capacity is limited to operational and budgetary aspects not

considered classified. Only Congress, through the Official Secrets Committee, has full oversight capabilities over intelligence activities.

	VII	VIII	IX	X	XII	XIV
Committee for the Control of Credits Earmarked for Reserved Funds	PP	PSOE	PSOE	PP	PP	PSOE
Joint Committee on National Security					PP	PP
Committee of the Interior of the Spanish Congress of Deputies	PP	PSOE	PSOE	PP	PP	PSOE
Defence Committee of the Congress of Deputies	PP	PSOE	PSOE	PP	PSOE	PP
Committee of the Interior of the Senate	PP	PSOE	PSOE	PP	PP	PSOE
Committee of Defence of the Senate	PP	PSOE	PSOE	PP	PP	PSOE
Presidency of the Government	PP	PSOE	PSOE	PP	PP/PSOE	PSOE
Government	PP, absolute majority	PSOE (ERC, PNV, IU coalition)	PSOE (PNV, IU coalition)	PP, absolute majority	2016-2018 PP (coalition with Ciudadanos) 2018-2019 PSOE (United Podemos, PNV and ERC coalition)	PSOE (coalition with Unidas Podemos)

Table VII. Political leanings of the Presidency of the Government and of the chairs of the main parliamentary committees with powers in the oversight of the intelligence community bodies (by party and legislature).
Source: author's own

Additionally, it is necessary to point out that in practice there has been a double dynamic in the functioning of these parliamentary oversight bodies, expressed in Figure 1, whereby the party that controls the Presidency of the Government also controls the presidency of the majority of parliamentary committees overseeing the intelligence services. These posts are not granted to parties with which there are government coalitions or legislative agreements and which, in the event that they are ceded to another party, go to the main opposition party, as in the case of the PP in the 12th Legislature when it ceded the presidency of the Congressional Defence Committee to the Socialists, or as the PSOE has been doing the other way around with the presidencies of the Joint Committee on National Security and the Senate Defence Committee, in the latter case during the 14th Legislature.

7 Conclusions

Three final conclusions can be drawn from the findings. Firstly, in relation to the research question of how the activity of the Spanish intelligence community is controlled by democratic institutions, the research shows that the intelligence structures are a faithful reflection of the Spanish political system.

This parallelism can be seen in two key points: on one hand in their political direction, where there is clearly a presidential aspect to the system, not only through the configuration of the National Intelligence Centre as a governing body of the model that functionally reports to the Presidency of the Government, but above all because, although the intelligence system maintains a community configuration of 13 organisations, its governance channelled through the DSN and the CSN also tends to reinforce the powers of the presidential centre over the set of structures that make up the intelligence community in Spain.

This aspect may also be seen in their parliamentary control, where the imperfect bicameralism that defines the Spanish political system is reflected in the supervision of the intelligence structures, given that, although there are similar bodies in both chambers, as shown in Tables V and VII, the Lower House also has a privileged position in this area, as it is the only body of the *Cortes Generales* that has a committee (known as the Official Secrets Committee) that supervises all activities of the secret services.

The second conclusion reached, derived from the first, is that the parallelism observed between the political system and intelligence structures offers a highly relevant research question as to the extent to which the functioning of this type of community is linked to the configuration of the political system via the study of three variables: political leadership, governance and parliamentary control. In this regard, a future line of research might be to focus not only on the formal aspects of control mechanisms, inherent to the democratic nature of political systems, but also explore their links with aspects of performance and the design of decision-making processes, which undoubtedly offer a broader vision of the role played by intelligence structures in contemporary democracies.

Finally, it may be noted that this research offers, in view of this future line of research, a methodology that combines theoretical reflection on intelligence services with key aspects of the configuration of the instruments of control, as well as their political performance, which may be exported to other case studies.

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Chinese-Russian strategic synergies in North Africa: application of the Carlisle Scholars Program's Strategic Analysis Model

Abstract

This article examines the potential synergies between Russian and Chinese strategies in North Africa by applying the Army War College's (AWC) U.S. Carlisle Scholars Program (CSP) Strategic Analysis Model. The research analyses how coordinated efforts between the two powers in the diplomatic, media, military and economic domains could significantly amplify their regional influence and undermine Western interests. The study employs a systematic methodology that assesses the ends, ways and means of each actor, identifying specific areas of strategic convergence. The findings suggest that this cooperation, although not formalised in an explicit alliance, generates effects in terms of synergy that amplify the influence of both powers and effectively challenge Western interests in the region, particularly in the control of critical infrastructure, military power projection and anti-Western narratives. The analysis suggests that the war in Ukraine has accelerated this coordination, as evidenced by the divergent responses of North African countries to the conflict. The article concludes by proposing specific

recommendations for adapting Western strategies to this emerging strategic environment, emphasising the need for a comprehensive approach that recognises the particularities of each North African country.

Keywords

Strategic analysis, Geopolitical competition, Multilateral influence, North Africa, Regional synergies.

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I Introduction

The growing presence and influence of Russia and China in North Africa constitutes one of the most significant geopolitical challenges for the West in the region (Droin and Dolbaia, 2023: 2-3). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has intensified the debate about how these two powers might coordinate their efforts to challenge the established international order (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman, 2021a: 4). Although they have different strategies and capacities, their potential coordination could generate synergistic effects that would significantly amplify their impact beyond the mere sum of their individual efforts.

This study addresses this problem by systematically applying the strategic analysis model developed by the U.S. Army War College's Carlisle Scholars Program (CSP) (Yarger, 2006: 1-5). This methodology, which systematically examines the alignment between objectives, ways and means of strategic actors, provides a robust methodological tool to identify and assess potential synergies between different national strategies. Its application to the case of North Africa allows for a disaggregation and analysis of the fundamental components of Chinese-Russian cooperation, revealing patterns of complementarity that could have significant implications for the regional order.

The importance of this research is based on three critical factors. Firstly, North Africa represents a region of vital strategic importance to Europe and the United States, both because of its geographic proximity and its role in security, migration and energy issues (Hill and Yerkes, 2021: 1-3). The divergent responses of North African countries to the war in Ukraine have highlighted the complexity of regional alignments and the effectiveness of Chinese-Russian influence. For example, while Morocco has supported resolutions condemning the Russian invasion, Algeria has maintained a posture of strategic neutrality that reflects its deep dependence on Russian armaments and its growing ties to Chinese infrastructure projects.

Secondly, the war in Ukraine has accelerated the reconfiguration of global alliances, with direct implications for North Africa (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman, 2021b: 4-6). Russia's need to evade Western sanctions has intensified its search for alternative partners, while China has taken advantage of the situation to expand its economic influence in the region. These dynamics are evidenced by the significant increase in bilateral trade with North African countries and the deepening of strategic cooperation agreements.

Third, Chinese-Russian coordination in North Africa could serve as a model for broader collaboration in other regions of the world (Pardo de Santayana, 2023: 5-6). The patterns of cooperation identified in this study could be replicated in other geographical contexts, with significant implications for the international order. The ability of the two powers to complement each other's capabilities and resources without the need for a formal alliance presents particular challenges to traditional Western containment and deterrence strategies.

The article is structured in six main sections. Following this introduction, the second section describes the CSP strategic analysis model in detail and justifies its application to the case study. The third section examines the current context of North Africa as a strategic theatre, looking particularly at the impact of the war in Ukraine on regional dynamics. The fourth section analyses Russia's and China's individual strategies in the region, while the fifth section identifies and assesses potential synergies between the two. The sixth section examines US and EU regional strategies, the implications of a potential Chinese-Russian synergy for Western interests and proposes strategic recommendations.

This research contributes to the academic and policy debate on contemporary strategic competition in three key ways. Firstly, it systematically applies an established model of strategic analysis to a contemporary case study, demonstrating its usefulness in understanding complex dynamics of great power competition. Second, it provides a detailed and up-to-date assessment of Chinese-Russian synergies in North Africa, based on recent empirical evidence. Third, it offers concrete recommendations for Western policy, based on a rigorous analysis of regional dynamics.

The methodology employed in this study combines documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources with a structured analytical framework. Official Russian and Chinese foreign policy documents, statements from their respective African summits, and recent academic studies on their presence in the region have been examined. The CSP model is applied systematically to analyse the strategic objectives, operational approaches and resources employed by each actor, allowing points of convergence and complementarity to be identified. This rigorous methodological approach facilitates an objective assessment of the potential synergies between Russian and Chinese strategies, as well as their implications for Western interests. The research pays particular attention to the evolution of these dynamics since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, incorporating updated data on UN voting patterns, trade flows, and military cooperation agreements.

The findings of this research suggest that Chinese-Russian coordination in North Africa is more sophisticated and effective than is generally recognised, particularly in areas such as the control of critical infrastructures, military power projection and the dissemination of anti-Western narratives. The war in Ukraine has accelerated these trends, creating new opportunities for bilateral cooperation and challenging Western influence in the region.

2 Methodological framework: the Carlisle Scholar Program's Strategic Analysis Model

The strategic analysis model used in the AWC's CSP is a systematic and structured methodological tool for assessing national strategies and their interactions. This analytical framework is based on the definition of strategy: "the risk-informed alignment of ends, ways and means to achieve proposed goals" (Yarger, 2006). This methodology

was chosen for this study because of its ability to systematically disaggregate and analyse the key components of national strategies, allowing for the identification of areas of convergence and complementarity between different actors.

The model structures the strategic analysis into three interrelated building blocks:

- “Strategic aims” (*ends*): they comprise both permanent national interests and context-specific objectives.
- “Modes of action” (*ways*): they encompass the full spectrum of actions that an actor can take to achieve its objectives.
- “Means available” (*means*): it refers to the instruments of national power available in the diplomatic, informational, military and economic (DIME) domains.

The analysis of *strategic goals* requires a clear distinction between fundamental national interests and specific regional objectives.

- National interests represent the permanent aspirations of any State, such as survival, economic prosperity or global influence.
- Regional objectives, on the other hand, are more concrete and contextualised goals that contribute to the achievement of these national interests. This distinction makes it possible to assess the coherence between the two levels and to understand how regional actions align with the actor’s global ambitions.

As for the *modes of action*, the model identifies six main categories of strategic action that form a continuum from persuasion to the use of force:

- Persuasion: the use of logical arguments and appeals to shared interests to influence the behaviour of other actors.
- Incentives (*inducements*): offering tangible or intangible benefits to motivate desired actions.
- Guarantees (*assurances*): promises of restraint or moderation conditional on compliance with specific demands.
- Coercion (*compellence*): threats or limited use of force to modify the behaviour of other actors.
- *Deterrence*: demonstration of ability and willingness to impose significant costs to prevent unwanted actions.
- Brute force: direct application of military power to achieve objectives when other methods have failed.

The *available means* are analysed through the DIME framework, which examines the four key instruments of national power:

- Diplomacy: it includes bilateral and multilateral relations, participation in international organisations, and use of formal and informal diplomatic channels.

- Media: it encompasses information operations, public diplomacy, strategic narratives and the ability to influence global perceptions.
- Military: it includes conventional and non-conventional capabilities, military presence, joint exercises, arms sales and defence cooperation.
- Economic: it encompasses trade, investment, development aid, economic sanctions and control over strategic resources.

Practical application of the model requires a systematic analysis of how these three components interact and reinforce each other. For each strategic actor, a matrix is constructed that relates ends, ways and means, allowing to identify patterns of behaviour and to assess the internal coherence of their strategy. This approach facilitates the identification of strengths and vulnerabilities, as well as points of convergence or friction between different actors.

The methodology is particularly appropriate for analysing strategic synergies for several reasons. First, its systematic structure allows for the disaggregation of complex strategies into analysable components, facilitating the identification of areas of complementarity. Second, the DIME framework provides a common basis for comparing the capacities and actions of different actors. Third, the distinction between different modes of strategic action allows us to understand how actors with different approaches can effectively coordinate.

In the specific case of Chinese-Russian synergies in North Africa, the model is applied at three levels (Arquilla *et al.*, 2019: 117-120):

1. Individual analysis of Russian and Chinese strategies, assessing the coherence between their ends, ways and means in the regional context.
2. Identification of areas of convergence and complementarity between the two strategies, particularly in terms of capabilities and operational approaches.
3. Assessment of the combined impact of these strategies on Western interests and regional stability.

This methodological framework provides a solid basis for assessing Chinese-Russian strategic synergies in North Africa, allowing for the identification of both explicit patterns of cooperation and more subtle forms of operational complementarity. The systematic application of the model in the following sections of the analysis will demonstrate its usefulness in understanding complex dynamics of great power competition and its implications for regional stability.

3 North Africa as a strategic theatre

North Africa is a critical geopolitical space that connects European, US, Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan strategic interests. The region, comprising Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and the disputed territory of Western

Sahara, is undergoing significant transformations in its international alignments and internal dynamics, catalysed by the growing Chinese-Russian presence and relative Western retreat, and intensified by global developments such as the war in Ukraine and growing competition between great powers (Yerkes and AlHomoud, 2023: 236-238).

3.1 *Current geopolitical context*

Regional dynamics are characterised by a multidimensional transformation that simultaneously affects the political, economic and security spheres. The gradual withdrawal of Western influence has created vacuums that Russia and China seek to fill through differentiated but potentially complementary strategic approaches. These dynamics play out against a backdrop of persistent structural challenges including chronic political instability, intense demographic pressures, recurrent economic crises and multifaceted security threats.

The region experiences basic transformations in three interconnected spheres (Gebremariam *et al.*, 2022: 16-18). On the economic front, the search for diversification beyond oil and gas coincides with ambitious infrastructure projects, mainly driven by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The need for infrastructure modernisation creates opportunities for external economic penetration, particularly in strategic sectors such as ports, energy and telecommunications.

In the security sphere, the proliferation of unconventional threats, from transnational terrorism to irregular migration, generates new dynamics of cooperation and competition between regional and international actors. Regional experience with groups such as the Islamic State in Libya has created demand for security and counter-insurgency assistance, opening spaces for Russian influence through private military contractors and arms sales.

At the political level, the permanent tension between authoritarian stability and reformist pressures continues to define national trajectories. The Chinese-Russian ability to offer support without democratic conditions is particularly attractive to regimes seeking to maintain control while modernising their economies.

3.2 *Impact of the war in Ukraine*

The Ukrainian conflict has acted as a catalyst, exposing and accelerating pre-existing trends in the reordering of regional alliances. The divergent responses of North African countries to the Russian invasion have revealed the complexity of their strategic calculations and structural dependencies (Ramani, 2022: 4-6).

Algeria has adopted a stance of deliberate strategic neutrality, abstaining on crucial UN votes while deepening its military and energy ties with Russia. This position reflects both its historical dependence on Russian weapons and its desire to maintain strategic

autonomy. Egypt has implemented a more nuanced approach, formally backing resolutions condemning the invasion but maintaining significant cooperation with Russia, particularly on the El-Dabaa nuclear project and grain trade. Morocco, more clearly aligned with the West after the Abraham Accords, has consistently supported resolutions against the Russian invasion.

The war has also intensified competition for strategic resources and trade routes. Europe's search for alternatives to Russian gas has renewed interest in North African producers, while sanctions against Russia have accelerated efforts to develop alternative trade routes, potentially benefiting Chinese infrastructure projects under the BRI.

3.3 Key regional dynamics

The regional strategic environment is shaped by multiple interrelated dynamics that create both opportunities and challenges for external influence. Historical tension between Algeria and Morocco, exacerbated by the Western Sahara dispute and Moroccan normalisation with Israel, constitutes a significant factor of instability that conditions regional and international alignments (Pavia *et al.*, 2022: 33-35).

The persistent migration crisis profoundly affects relations with Europe and generates significant internal socio-political pressures. Mixed migration flows, combining economic migration with forced displacements, have turned border control into a strategic negotiating tool with European partners.

The continuing threat of violent extremism has a decisive influence on security policies and international partnerships. Regional experience with groups such as the Islamic State in Libya has generated demand for security and counter-insurgency cooperation, creating opportunities for Russian influence through private military contractors and arms sales.

The development of critical infrastructure, particularly ports and energy connections, emerges as a crucial field of strategic competence. China, through the BRI, is establishing a significant presence in key points such as the Suez Canal and Mediterranean ports, while Russia seeks to secure access to strategic military installations such as Port Sudan.

3.4 Country analysis

The materialisation of China's and Russia's strategies varies significantly between countries in the region, reflecting different national contexts and specific vulnerabilities.

Algeria maintains a distinctive position as Russia's main military customer in the region, receiving approximately two-thirds of its weapons from Moscow since 2002. This relationship is complemented by a growing trade dependence on China,

which accounts for about 18% of Algerian imports and maintains a significant presence in infrastructure projects. This double dependency exemplifies the potential complementarity between Russian and Chinese influences (Zoubir, 2023: 1-3).

Egypt has developed a sophisticated balance of power policy that maximises its strategic autonomy. Its comprehensive strategic partnership with China since 2014 coexists with significant Russian military cooperation, including the El-Dabaa nuclear project and major arms purchases. Egypt's position in the Ukrainian conflict reflects this search for balance, avoiding alienating key partners while keeping its options open.

Libya continues to experience significant instability following the fall of Gaddafi, with different powers backing rival factions. The presence of the Russian Wagner Group alongside Chinese infrastructure investments illustrates how Beijing and Moscow can pursue complementary objectives even in highly volatile contexts. The Libyan situation represents a microcosm of how Chinese-Russian coordination can effectively challenge Western influence even without explicit formal cooperation.

Morocco has deepened its ties with the West, particularly following the Abraham Accords and the US recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara. However, it has a significant economic relationship with China, evidenced by its accession to the BRI in 2022 and the 50% increase in bilateral trade since 2016. This diversification of relationships reflects a sophisticated strategy of maximising strategic autonomy in a multipolar environment.

Sudan represents a particularly illustrative case of potential Chinese-Russian cooperation. Russian interests in gold mining and the development of a naval base in Port Sudan are complemented by massive Chinese investments in port infrastructure and energy projects. This convergence of interests could significantly alter the strategic balance in the Red Sea, a vital commercial artery for global trade.

3.5 Implications for strategic competence

This complex regional landscape offers both opportunities and challenges for Chinese-Russian coordination. The diversity of national contexts and the multiplicity of actors involved create spaces for strategic complementarity, but also introduce potential frictions and constraints. The effectiveness of this coordination will depend to a large extent on Moscow and Beijing's ability to adapt their approaches to local realities while maintaining the coherence of their broader strategies of challenging the liberal international order.

4 Analysis of individual strategies

Applying the CSP model to the analysis of Russia's and China's strategies in North Africa reveals distinctive approaches that, while different in their means and modes of implementation, present significant potential for complementarity (Kendall-Taylor and

Shullman, 2021b: 1-2). This section systematically examines the individual strategies of each actor, providing the basis for subsequently identifying specific areas of synergy.

4.1 *Russia's strategy: opportunistic disruption and power projection*

Russia's strategy in North Africa has intensified markedly since the invasion of Ukraine, evidencing an opportunistic approach that capitalises on State fragility and regional conflicts (Townsend *et al.*, 2021: 9). Quantitative data support this observation: Russian trade revenues with African countries doubled in the period 2013-2021, while its share of grain supplies to the continent reached 30%. Particularly significant is its dominance in the weapons, where Russia accounts for 40% of African imports of major systems between 2018 and 2022 (Droin and Dolbaia, 2023).

Russia's strategic aims in the region are articulated on two levels. At the level of national interests, Russia seeks to reassert its status as a great power in a multipolar world and exert dominant influence beyond its traditional post-Soviet space. At the regional level, it pursues three main objectives: gaining diplomatic support in international forums, establishing strategic military advantages, and securing economic opportunities to counter the impact of Western sanctions.

Russian modes of action range from persuasion to brute force, with particular emphasis on coercion and guarantees of non-interference. Persuasion is exercised mainly through promises of continued military support, while incentives include debt relief and preferential trade agreements. Coercion manifests itself in veiled threats to withdraw critical military support, particularly effective with dependent partners such as Algeria. Direct employment of force is done through private military contractors.

	RUSSIA	PRC
ENDS. National interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Great power status in a plurilateral world Exerting dominant influence in the post-Soviet Eurasian space Defending Russian interests, countering Western influence Access to resources and markets (Mazarr, 2022: 31) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inviolability: sovereignty, survival, CCP legitimacy and territorial integrity (including Taiwan) Global social stability: sustainable economic and social development Become a global superpower by reforming the global governance system (Allal, 2022: 128; Mazarr, 2022: 28)
ENDS. Regional objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain diplomatic support Military advantage, increase presence Secure economic opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain diplomatic support Economic growth: expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Protect citizens, investments and resources
WAYS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persuasion through promises of continued military support and diplomatic alignment Incentives through debt relief, preferential arms deals and investment opportunities Guarantees of non-interference in internal governance matters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persuasion by appealing to shared histories of colonial exploitation Incentives through unconditional infrastructure investments and favourable commercial terms Guarantees of non-interference in internal governance matters

	RUSSIA	PRC
WAYS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coercion by threatening to withdraw assistance or exploit vulnerabilities of client regimes Deterrence of NATO/US/EU forces through existing military deployments in the region Brute force through direct kinetic warfare, mercenary operations and hybrid tactics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coercion through threats of economic isolation of non-compliant regimes Brute force: applied exclusively by Chinese private contractors (PMCs) to defend BRI projects against hostile intentions
MEANS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diplomacy, intelligence, military cooperation, arms sales, mercenary groups, economics, debt relief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economy, diplomacy, information, infrastructure projects, arms sales, debt relief

Table I. Strategic analysis matrix of Russia and China in North Africa. *Source:* author's own work

The means employed by Russia are concentrated in the military and security domains. The Wagner Group has emerged as a key instrument of power projection, operating in countries such as Libya and Sudan. Arms sales are another key pillar, with Algeria receiving 76% of its arms imports from Russia since 2002. Energy diplomacy and nuclear cooperation, exemplified by the El-Dabaa project in Egypt, complement this arsenal of leverage tools. (Townsend *et al.*, 2021: 4-5).

Actors	Putin's regime, Russian oligarchies, Russian State-owned enterprises, the Wagner Group
Facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persuasion: Russia has provided political and military advisers and assistance in Sudan. This allows Russia to have a military base with access to the Red Sea, exploit valuable resources and achieve its strategic objectives (Arbuniés, n.d.). Incentives: Putin invited Algerian President Tebboune to visit Moscow from 13th to 17th of June 2023. They discussed ways to strengthen bilateral relations. Russia considers Algeria as one of Africa's top three economic partners. Algeria has received 76% of its arms imports since 2002 from Russia. Algeria does not criticise the intervention in Ukraine (Askar, 2023). Guarantees: Russia provided a 'green light' and protected at the UN the military regime that seized power in Sudan after the October 2021 <i>coup d'état</i>. These actions were aimed at securing Moscow's preferred political outcome and military operational privileges (Abdelaziz <i>et al.</i>, 2021). Coercion: Russia could limit arms supplies to its clients or withdraw military support to some factions in Libya or Sudan. Currently, there is no evidence of coercion. Dissuasion: Russia provided arms, funding and mercenaries to support the Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar. This support has had a tangible impact on the ground, influencing the balance of power in the conflict. A blockade of oil installations and Russian support have deterred further external intervention (Wehrey, 2020). Brute force: The Wagner Group contractors operate alongside Moscow-sponsored militias in Libya, where violent clashes have caused hundreds of casualties since 2020 in battles over sovereign territory. These kinetic deployments and mercenary operations generate bloody geopolitical coercion, fulfilling Russian objectives (Wehrey, 2020).

Table II: Implementation of Russia's strategy in the region. *Source:* author's own

4.2 China's strategy: systematic expansion and enduring presence

The Chinese strategy contrasts sharply with the Russian approach, characterised by a more robust presence defined by decades of growing economic and commercial activity (US Department of Defense, 2023: 1). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the main framework for this expansion, reflecting deliberate efforts to take a leading position in a competitive multilateral world.

China's strategic goals prioritise the sanctity of its sovereignty and the survival of the CCP regime, along with sustainable economic development objectives and favouring the reshaping of the international order. At the regional level, China seeks to secure strategic resources, expand markets for its products, and establish critical infrastructure to facilitate its global trade.

Chinese ways of action emphasise persuasion and economic incentives, generally avoiding explicit coercion. Persuasion is based on narratives of shared history and common development, while incentives take the form of massive investments in infrastructure and favourable terms of trade. Guarantees of non-interference in internal affairs are particularly attractive for regimes facing Western criticism.

Actors	PRC Government, Chinese State-owned and private companies, security contractors
Facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasion: in 2016, China launched the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) to strengthen anti-imperialist solidarity with Arab League members, including key North African States. This seeks to encourage a preference for greater Chinese regional economic engagement (BRICS Policy Center, n.d.). • Incentives: on the 19th of August 2022, China announced that it would forgive 23 interest-free loans (IFLs) for 17 African countries by the end of 2021 (Hwang, 2022). These actions encourage greater PRC collaboration by paying States to accept and rely on additional Chinese assistance (Mukete Dynamic, 2020). • Guarantees: PRC State Councillor Wang Yi in July 2021 said: "China firmly supports Algeria in the pursuit of a development path suited to its national conditions", signalling an unwavering defence of interests. Algeria regards China as a "geopolitical insurance policy" (Foreign Ministry, 2021; Yi, 2021). These appeals to regimes facing Western pressure over domestic policies ensure that China will protect and support their questionable actions, offering a more convenient alternative (Zoubir, 2023: 1). • Coercion: after Australia called for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19, China halted imports of beef and barley and imposed tariffs on wine exports. Similar coercive economic isolation can await individual North Africans (Walsh, 2021). • Brute force: Chinese private security contractors occasionally collaborate with local armies in countries such as Egypt and Algeria to defend PRC assets and personnel against non-State extremists or criminal groups that threaten key Silk Belt and Road Initiative projects. Violence is concentrated only on designated hostile elements, rather than on overt political blackmail (Arduino, 2023).

Table III. Implementation of China's strategy in the region. *Source:* author's own

The means deployed by China are concentrated in the economic and technological domains. The BRI has channelled significant investments into port, energy and digital connectivity projects. Bilateral trade has grown substantially, with China accounting for about 18% of imports in countries such as Algeria. Cultural diplomacy, through Confucius Institutes and educational exchange programmes, complements this multidimensional approach.

4.3 Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis reveals fundamental differences in strategic approach. Russia takes a more opportunistic and disruptive approach, capitalising on existing instabilities and employing military and security tools. In turn, China is pursuing a more systematic and long-term oriented strategy, prioritising economic influence and infrastructure development (Hamilton, 2023: 7-11).

Differences are also apparent in the scope and depth of their regional engagement. Russia's presence, while significant in specific sectors such as defence and energy, lacks the breadth and sustainability of China's footprint. The BRI provides China with a coherent framework for expanding its influence, while Russia operates in a more *ad hoc* manner, responding to tactical opportunities.

However, these differences do not exclude the possibility of strategic complementarity. Russia's military expertise and willingness to take security risks can complement China's ability to finance and develop critical infrastructure. The convergence of their interests in countering Western influence provides a basis for tactical coordination, even in the absence of a formal alliance.

4.3.1 Practical implementation of strategies

The materialisation of these strategies on the ground reveals distinctive patterns of action. In the Russian case, implementation is characterised by significant tactical flexibility. In Libya, for example, support for General Haftar's Libyan National Army combines elements of direct military cooperation, through the Wagner Group, with diplomatic backing in international fora. This multifaceted approach has allowed Russia to establish a significant presence at a strategic point in the Mediterranean, despite its limited economic resources.

The Chinese strategy, on the other hand, demonstrates greater coherence and systematisation in its implementation. The development of the port of El Hamra in Egypt illustrates their characteristic approach: long-term financing, technology transfer, and linkage to wider regional connectivity initiatives. This project not only strengthens China's presence in a crucial node of global maritime trade, but also creates structural dependencies through debt and technological integration.

4.3.2 Adaptation to national contexts

The effectiveness of both strategies depends significantly on their ability to adapt to specific national contexts. In Algeria, the convergence of strategic interests with Russia, particularly in the military sphere, has facilitated a privileged relationship that includes preferential access to advanced weaponry

and cooperation in military training. Recognising this reality, China has complemented Russian influence with significant investments in civilian infrastructure and industrial development.

In Morocco, the situation is reversed. The country's traditional pro-Western orientation has limited Russian penetration, but has not prevented China from establishing a substantial economic presence. Morocco's accession to the BRI in 2022 and the 50% increase in bilateral trade since 2016 demonstrate China's ability to advance its interests even in countries aligned with the West.

4.3.3 Post-Ukraine developments

The war in Ukraine has catalysed significant changes in the implementation of both strategies. Russia has intensified its efforts to secure diplomatic and economic support in the region, as evidenced by the second Russia-Africa summit in 2023. Increased grain trade and the expansion of bilateral currency agreements reflect attempts to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions.

China has strategically taken advantage of this juncture to deepen its economic penetration in the region. The availability of Chinese financing and its willingness to trade in local currencies have gained additional relevance in a context of global financial uncertainty. The development of alternative international payment infrastructures, for example, has found fertile ground among countries seeking to reduce their vulnerability to Western sanctions.

4.3.4 Dimensions of complementarity

The comparative analysis reveals several key dimensions where Russian and Chinese strategies could effectively complement each other:

- Military and economic capabilities: Russian expertise in military operations and counter-insurgency complements China's ability to finance and develop strategic infrastructure. This combination is particularly potent in countries facing security challenges while pursuing economic development.
- Political and technological influence: Russia's willingness to openly challenge Western norms may create space for the more subtle expansion of Chinese influence. Chinese surveillance technology, for example, finds natural application in regimes backed militarily by Russia.
- Networks of influence: Russian military contacts inherited from the Soviet era complement the new economic and technological networks developed by China. This overlapping relationship strengthens joint resistance to Western influence.

5 Identification and analysis of strategic synergies

Systematic application of the CSP model reveals multiple areas where Russian and Chinese strategies in North Africa exhibit effective synergies that transcend mere tactical coordination. These synergies emerge from the natural complementarity between their capabilities and strategic approaches, creating effects that exceed the sum of their individual actions (Berzina-Cerenkova and Rühlig, 2023: 5-7).

5.1 Synergies in the diplomatic domain

In the diplomatic sphere, Chinese-Russian coordination manifests itself mainly in their ability to align positions in multilateral fora and provide mutual support for their regional initiatives (Hamilton, 2023: 7). This cooperation is evidenced by coordinated voting patterns at the UN and reciprocal support for their respective projects in the region. For example, China has consistently avoided criticising Russian military operations in Libya, while Russia actively supports the expansion of the BRI in North Africa (Guan, 2022: 21-38).

The effectiveness of this diplomatic coordination has been particularly evident in regional responses to the war in Ukraine. The abstention or veiled support of several North African countries for the Russian position reflects the combined influence of Moscow and Beijing. In particular, the Chinese-Russian ability to influence the positions of key countries such as Algeria and Egypt demonstrates how their cooperation can effectively counter Western influence.

Diplomatic synergies materialise at three main levels:

1. Coordination in international organisations: Russia and China systematically align their positions in the UN Security Council and other multilateral fora when addressing North African issues. This coordination significantly increases their ability to block unwanted Western initiatives.
2. Mutual support to regional initiatives: China tacitly supports Russia's military presence in countries such as Libya and Sudan, while Russia facilitates the expansion of Chinese infrastructure projects through its political and military influence.
3. Complementary diplomatic narratives: both powers promote discourses that emphasise non-interference in internal affairs and criticise Western interventionism, resonating particularly in countries with colonial experiences.

5.2 Synergies in the information domain

Collaboration in the information domain represents one of the most sophisticated and effective aspects of Chinese-Russian cooperation. State media in both countries mutually

amplify narratives that challenge the Western-led international order and promote alternative models of development and governance (Gebremariam *et al.*, 2022: 62-64).

This information synergy is materialised through:

- a) Coordinated media platforms: *RT*, *Sputnik*, *CGTN* and *Xinhua* develop complementary narratives that reinforce each other's key messages. Russian coverage tends to emphasise security and sovereignty issues, while Chinese media focus on economic development and South-South cooperation (US Department of State, n.d.).
- b) Digital influence operations: Russian capabilities in information warfare are complemented by China's technological infrastructure, creating an alternative information ecosystem that effectively challenges Western narratives.
- c) Coordinated cultural diplomacy: Chinese Confucius Institutes and Russian cultural centres operate in a complementary way, promoting alternative visions to the Western model of development and governance.

The effectiveness of this information coordination is evidenced by the growing regional receptivity to anti-Western narratives and the progressive legitimisation of authoritarian development models.

5.3 Synergies in the military domain

In the military sphere, the complementarity between Russian and Chinese capabilities creates significant opportunities for coordinated power projection. Russian expertise in military operations and arms sales is complemented by China's ability to finance and develop military infrastructure (Arduino, 2023).

Military synergies are manifested in a number of activities:

- a) Military infrastructure cooperation: port facilities developed with Chinese funding can serve as staging points for Russian naval operations. The case of Port Sudan exemplifies this complementarity, where China's port infrastructure facilitates Russia's naval presence.
- b) Weapons systems integration: Russian weapons systems are increasingly integrated with Chinese command and control technology, creating capabilities that benefit both powers.
- c) Training and doctrine: Russian expertise in counter-insurgency operations combines with China's focus on information and cyberwarfare, providing its regional partners with multidimensional capabilities.

Joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean, initiated in 2015, demonstrate the evolution of this military cooperation towards regular demonstrations of coordinated capabilities.

5.4 Synergies in the economic domain

Chinese-Russian economic coordination in North Africa represents perhaps the most promising area for expanded collaboration. The integration of China's BRI with Russian trade corridors creates an infrastructure and trade network that could significantly reduce Western economic influence in the region (Shakhanova and Garlick, 2020: 34-49).

Economic synergies are manifested in:

- a) Financing and infrastructure: China's ability to finance and build critical infrastructure combines with Russia's political and military influence to secure strategic projects. Mediterranean ports and energy facilities exemplify this complementarity.
- b) Alternative financial systems: cooperation in the development of alternative payment mechanisms to SWIFT and the promotion of trade in national currencies reduce vulnerability to Western sanctions.
- c) Joint energy projects: Russian expertise in hydrocarbon exploration and production is complemented by China's ability to finance and develop energy infrastructure.
- d) Resilient supply chains: the combination of Russian overland routes with Chinese maritime corridors creates alternative trade networks that are less vulnerable to Western disruption.

5.5 Combined impact analysis

The synergy between the Russian and Chinese strategies has the potential to produce effects that exceed the sum of their individual components:

- a) Multiplication of influence: the combination of Russian military and Chinese economic power creates a more robust and multidimensional presence than either could achieve individually.
- b) Vulnerability reduction: the weaknesses of each actor are offset by the strengths of the other, creating a presence that is more resilient to Western pressures.
- c) Expanding strategic options: North African countries gain diplomatic and economic flexibility, reducing their dependence on traditional Western partners.
- d) Creation of alternative spaces: Chinese-Russian cooperation facilitates the development of institutions and mechanisms parallel to those dominated by the West, contributing to the gradual erosion of the liberal international order.

5.6 Limitations and vulnerabilities

However, this cooperation faces significant limitations:

- a) Structural asymmetries: disparities in economic capacities and strategic priorities can lead to tensions in the implementation of joint projects.
- b) Residual competence: in certain areas, such as arms sales and infrastructure projects, Russia and China continue to compete for influence.
- c) External constraints: international sanctions and Western pressure may also limit the scope for Chinese-Russian cooperation, although paradoxically these restrictions have tended to intensify their collaboration in search of alternatives to Western-dominated economic and financial systems.

5.7 Future perspectives

The future development of these synergies will depend on several key factors:

- a) Resolution of the Ukrainian conflict: the outcome of the war will significantly influence Russia's ability to maintain its regional presence.
- b) Evolution of the BRI: the sustainability of the Chinese funding model will condition the scope of future joint projects.
- c) Western response: the effectiveness of Western initiatives to counter Chinese-Russian influence will determine the space available for cooperation.

The deepening of these synergies could signal a fundamental transformation in the regional order, with significant implications for Western interests. This emerging reality requires a coordinated and nuanced Western response, a theme that will be explored in the next section.

6 Implications for Western interests

Growing Chinese-Russian coordination in North Africa presents multidimensional challenges to Western interests that require a fundamental reassessment of traditional US and EU strategies in the region. Systematic analysis of these implications, using the CSP framework, reveals significant vulnerabilities in the Western position that demand urgent adaptive responses (Hill and Yerkes, 2021: 6-9).

	United States	European Union
ENDS. National interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguard the security of the nation • Maintain technological and economic strengths and advantages • Preserve a global system and regional orders that represent free sovereign choice • Achieve a sustainable balance between competition and cooperation with rivals (Mazarr, 2022: 22; US Government, 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote peace, its values and the well-being of its citizens • Contribute to peace and security as well as to the sustainable development of the planet • Contribute to solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, poverty eradication and the protection of human rights • Strict observance of international law (European Union, 2007)
ENDS. Regional objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit the influence of your competitors • Promote regional stability • Address security threats • Support economic prosperity and democratic governance • Protect their economic interests (Hill and Yerkes, 2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote regional stability • Stabilisation of economic development • Security and counter-terrorism • Control migration and mobility • Diversify energy suppliers (Megerisi and Stella Martini, 2023)
WAYS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasion: diplomatic efforts, economic incentives and promotion of shared values and interests • Incentives: assistance, investment or security cooperation to encourage positive behaviour or policy change • Guarantees: avoid neo-colonialism and promote regional development • Coercion: imposing sanctions or other measures • Deterrence: credible threat of military force or other measures • Brute force: if necessary, to protect their interests or respond to security threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasion: diplomatic efforts, economic incentives and promotion of shared values and interests • Incentives: financial assistance, trade incentives and development programmes to encourage positive behaviour or reforms • Guarantees: avoid neo-colonialism and promote regional development • Coercion: imposing sanctions or other measures • Deterrence: credible threat of military force or other measures
MEANS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplomacy, military cooperation, economics, trade agreements, USAID projects, counter-terrorism operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplomacy, military cooperation, economics, trade agreements, development aid, counter-terrorism operations

Table IV. US and EU's strategic analysis matrix in North Africa. *Source: author's own*

6.1 US strategy: promoting stability and containing terrorism

The US strategy in North Africa focuses on promoting regional stability, combating terrorism and supporting democratic political transitions (Hill and Yerkes, 2021). The US has been a key actor in supporting economic reforms and improving the security capacity of States in the region. This strategy is articulated through a combination of military, economic and diplomatic assistance, seeking to strengthen bilateral relations and promote mutual interests.

US national interests include the security of its European allies, access to critical energy resources and the containment of extremist groups that might threaten its interests. At the regional level, it seeks to ensure a stable environment conducive to international trade and investment free from the destabilising influence of rival powers such as Russia and China (US Government, 2022: 42-45).

The US employs a variety of tactics ranging from active diplomacy and governance support to direct military intervention in extreme cases. Development initiatives and economic aid are used to promote stability and reduce the appeal of extremism. Military cooperation and training of local security forces are essential to combat terrorism and improve regional security.

Means employed include high-level diplomacy, strategic military presence through bases and defence agreements, as well as economic leverage through direct aid and preferential trade agreements. In addition, programmes such as the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) underscore the US commitment to long-term regional security.

Actors	Pentagon, Department of State, USAID
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasion: US diplomats urged Tunisia's leaders to continue democratic reforms in the wake of the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, including electoral integrity and civic freedoms. This sought a gradual realignment compatible with American political values (US Embassy in Tunisia, n.d.). • Incentives: after Morocco normalised ties with Israel in 2020, the US recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This rewarded a key regional partner for a diplomatic concession in tune with US priorities (Yerkes and AlHomoud, 2023: 239). • Guarantees: not observed.
Facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coercion: the Trump Administration briefly withheld \$300 million in military aid to Egypt in 2017 over human rights concerns, although the funds were later released citing security imperatives. The threat of suspension and withdrawal of aid seeks to compel an improvement in governance (Gallo, 2017). • Brute force: US special operations raids and drone strikes assist local partners in counterterrorism missions targeting violent extremists, especially those affiliated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda, across North Africa. These direct actions project military force where terrorist movements threaten regional stability and American interests (Bergen and Sims, n.d.).

Table 5. Implementation of US strategy in the region. *Source:* author's own

6.2 *The EU strategy: promoting stable neighbourhoods and managing shared challenges*

The EU's strategy in North Africa is strongly influenced by its geographical proximity and shared challenges in the areas of migration, security and energy (Megerisi and Stella Martini, 2023). The EU seeks to promote a stable neighbourhood through support for political and economic reforms, security cooperation and critical infrastructure development.

The EU's strategic objectives include promoting stability and security on its southern border, managing migration flows and diversifying its energy sources. At the regional level, it aims to create an environment of economic and political cooperation that prevents the proliferation of conflicts and the strengthening of extremist groups.

The EU uses a combination of diplomatic, economic and, to a lesser extent, military tools. It prioritises soft diplomacy through the negotiation of free trade agreements

and association agreements, and promotes regional integration through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Means include significant investments in development aid, funding for critical infrastructure and support for institutional and economic reform through programmes such as the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). Security cooperation and border management are handled through agencies such as Frontex and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations.

These analyses highlight how, despite their different approaches and priorities, both the US and the EU seek to positively influence development and stability in North Africa, each using their strategic capabilities and tools to achieve their respective regional and global objectives.

Actors	European Commission, European Council
Facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persuasion: the EU uses increased trade and investment opportunities to encourage progress on human rights, democratisation and good governance in North Africa (European Commission, n.d.). <li>• Incentives: the EU has pledged millions of euros for migration control in Morocco and Tunisia. These funds provide budgetary support for the country and facilitate migration cooperation (European Parliament, 2023). <li>• Guarantees: the EU is the largest donor of development assistance in Africa, promoting sustainable development and negating suspicions of neo-colonialism (European Parliament, 2023). <li>• Coercion: the EU has taken action against migrant trafficking, including the threat of sanctions to compel local authorities to contain security threats and migration flows.

Table VI. Implementation of the EU strategy in the region. *Source: author's own*

6.3 Challenges for the regional security architecture

Chinese-Russian synergies create multiple challenges for the Western security architecture in North Africa. The combination of Russian military capabilities with Chinese infrastructure creates restricted access zones that limit Western freedom of operation (Henriksen, 2023: 3-5). This phenomenon is particularly evident in three critical areas:

- a) Maritime control: the emerging network of Chinese-Russian naval facilities, from Port Sudan to Mediterranean ports, threatens to upset the regional naval balance. China's ability to finance and develop port infrastructure, combined with Russia's naval presence, creates strategic control points that could restrict Western maritime access in crisis situations.
- b) Air defence: the integration of Russian air defence systems with Chinese surveillance technology, particularly in countries such as Algeria, establishes zones of denial of access that compromise traditionally-assumed Western air superiority in the region.

- c) Counter-terrorism: the presence of the Wagner Group, backed by Chinese infrastructure and funding, complicates Western counter-terrorism operations by introducing additional actors with potentially divergent agendas.

6.4 Economic challenges

In the economic sphere, Chinese-Russian coordination presents significant challenges to Western interests:

- a) Alternative financial systems: the development of payment mechanisms independent of the SWIFT system and the promotion of trade in domestic currencies erodes the effectiveness of economic sanctions as a Western foreign policy tool.
- b) Critical infrastructure control: the combination of Chinese funding and Russian security in strategic infrastructure projects creates structural dependencies that are difficult to counteract. Ports, pipelines and telecommunications networks under Chinese-Russian influence can be used as instruments of pressure against Western interests.
- c) Competition for resources: Chinese-Russian coordination in the energy sector threatens Western access to strategic resources. The combined capacity to offer integrated development and security packages often surpasses Western alternatives.

6.5 Challenges for political and diplomatic influence

The effectiveness of Chinese-Russian coordination in the diplomatic sphere generates particular challenges:

- a) Influence erosion: the Chinese-Russian ability to present credible alternatives to the international liberal order weakens Western diplomatic influence. The abstentions of North African countries in crucial votes on Ukraine exemplify this trend.
- b) Narrative competence: the mutual amplification of anti-Western narratives by Russian and Chinese State media effectively challenges the credibility of Western messages in the region.
- c) Fragmentation of alliances: the Chinese-Russian ability to exploit divisions between Western partners, particularly between the US and the EU, complicates the implementation of coherent strategies.

6.6 *Western structural vulnerabilities*

The analysis reveals fundamental vulnerabilities in the Western position that require urgent attention (Carter, 2023: 8-11):

- a) *Asymmetry of commitment*: the perception of fluctuating Western engagement contrasts with a consistent Chinese-Russian presence, undermining Western credibility as a reliable partner.
- b) *Conditionality vs. pragmatism*: Western demands for political and economic reform contrast with the more pragmatic Chinese-Russian approach, creating competitive disadvantages in relations with authoritarian regimes.
- c) *Institutional complexity*: Western decision-making processes, characterised by multiple layers of oversight and approval, make it difficult to respond swiftly to Chinese-Russian initiatives.
- d) *Fragmentation of approximations*: the lack of effective coordination between US and European initiatives reduces their combined impact and creates opportunities for Chinese-Russian penetration.
- e) *Budgetary constraints*: Western financial commitments often cannot compete with Chinese financing, particularly in large-scale infrastructure projects.
- f) *Divergence of priorities*: differing threat perceptions between the US and the EU complicate the development of effective coordinated strategies.

6.7 *Implications for strategic adaptation*

These realities suggest the need for significant adjustments in the Western approach (Anonymous, 2021: 14-16):

- a) *Strategic coordination*: the US and the EU must develop more effective mechanisms to align their regional strategies, particularly in critical areas such as maritime security and infrastructure development.
- b) *Competitiveness of offers*: Western initiatives must evolve to offer more attractive and practical alternatives to Chinese-Russian cooperation, especially in terms of financing and infrastructure development.
- c) *Tactical adaptability*: Western strategies must demonstrate greater flexibility to respond to local realities without compromising fundamental values.

To maintain its influence in North Africa, Western strategic adaptation must include:

- The development of more competitive and agile financial instruments for strategic infrastructure project.

- The strengthening of coordination between US and European initiatives.
- The reconsideration of the balance between value promotion and pragmatism in relations with regional partners.
- The improvement of the ability to offer integrated security and development packages that can compete effectively with Chinese-Russian offers.

These implications suggest the need for a fundamental reassessment of Western strategies in North Africa. The effectiveness of Chinese-Russian coordination evidences that traditional approaches may be insufficient in an increasingly competitive and complex strategic environment.

7 Conclusions

The systematic analysis of Chinese-Russian strategic synergies in North Africa, conducted through the application of the CSP model, reveals significant patterns of complementarity that transcend mere tactical coordination. This research has evidenced that, despite their different approaches and capabilities, Russia and China have developed effective forms of cooperation that amplify their regional influence and challenge Western interests more significantly than their individual actions.

The used methodology has identified four main domains where these synergies are particularly effective:

In the diplomatic sphere, Chinese-Russian coordination is evidenced by the ability to align positions in multilateral forums and provide mutual support for their regional initiatives. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the effectiveness of this coordination, as evidenced by North African countries' divergent responses to the conflict and their increasing willingness to challenge Western positions in international forums.

1. In the information domain, the complementarity between Russia's information warfare capabilities and China's technological infrastructure has created an alternative media ecosystem that effectively challenges Western narratives. The mutual amplification of anti-Western messages and the coordinated promotion of alternative models of development and governance have found particular resonance in societies with colonial legacies.
2. Synergies in the military field are particularly significant. Russian expertise in military operations and arms sales is effectively complemented by China's ability to finance and develop strategic infrastructures. The emerging network of naval facilities and military bases that combines Chinese funding with Russian operational presence exemplifies how this cooperation can fundamentally alter the regional strategic balance.
- c) In the economic domain, the integration of China's Belt and Road Initiative with Russian trade corridors is creating an alternative economic architecture

less vulnerable to Western influence. The development of payment mechanisms independent of the SWIFT system and the promotion of trade in national currencies demonstrate how such cooperation can reduce the effectiveness of traditional Western instruments of influence such as economic sanctions.

Country-by-country analysis reveals differentiated but complementary patterns of Chinese-Russian influence. In Algeria, Russia's military dependence is complemented by a growing Chinese economic presence, creating a multidimensional dependency relationship that is difficult to counter. In Egypt, the combination of Russian energy projects with Chinese investment in the Suez Canal has significantly strengthened the combined influence of the two powers in a crucial geostrategic location. In Sudan, the convergence of Russian mining interests with Chinese investment in port infrastructure threatens to establish a strategic corridor to the Red Sea that could fundamentally alter regional equilibriums.

The war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst, accelerating and deepening these dynamics of Chinese-Russian cooperation. Russia's need to evade international sanctions has intensified its reliance on alternative partners, while China has strategically exploited this juncture to expand its economic influence in the region. These developments suggest that the identified synergies could be further strengthened in the near future.

The implications for Western interests are profound and multifaceted. The effectiveness of Chinese-Russian coordination in North Africa fundamentally challenges traditional Western approaches based on unilateral influence and political conditionality. Russia and China's ability to offer credible alternatives in critical areas such as financing, infrastructure development and security cooperation is progressively eroding Western influence in the region.

The West's response to these challenges requires a fundamental reassessment of its regional strategies. The research suggests that this response should be articulated at three distinct but interrelated temporal levels:

1. In the short term, it is crucial to strengthen coordination between US and European initiatives to maximise their combined impact and avoid counterproductive duplication. This coordination should particularly extend to critical areas such as maritime control and strategic infrastructure development. The creation of formal US-EU consultation and coordination mechanisms specifically dedicated to North Africa could facilitate more coherent and effective responses.
2. In the medium term, there is a need to develop more competitive and agile financial instruments that can effectively rival Chinese-Russian offers in critical areas such as infrastructure development and energy cooperation. This could include the creation of specific investment vehicles for critical infrastructure and the development of more flexible financing mechanisms that combine public and private resources. The Build Back Better World initiative and the European Global Gateway must evolve to offer truly competitive alternatives to the Chinese BRI.

3. In the long term, the West must fundamentally rethink the balance between value promotion and pragmatism in its relations with regional partners. Without abandoning fundamental principles, there is a need to develop more nuanced approaches that recognise local realities and offer realistic pathways for incremental progress. The effectiveness of Chinese-Russian coordination demonstrates the limitations of overly doctrinaire approaches.

The research has also highlighted a number of areas that require further study. Firstly, it is necessary to analyse in depth how different North African societies perceive and respond to Chinese-Russian influence, beyond the official positions of their Governments. Secondly, a more detailed assessment is required on the relative effectiveness of different leverage tools used by China and Russia, particularly in the context of growing technological and information competition. Finally, it is crucial to examine how the specific dynamics observed in North Africa might inform our broader understanding of global strategic competition between the great powers.

The application of the CSP model of analysis has proven useful in systematically examining the complexities of contemporary strategic competition. Its emphasis on the interrelationship between ends, ways and means provides a robust analytical framework to identify and assess strategic synergies between different actors. Extending this methodology to other regional contexts could provide valuable insights into emerging patterns of cooperation between revisionist powers and their implications for the international order.

The evolution of Chinese-Russian relations in North Africa represents a microcosm of the broader challenges the liberal international order faces. The ability of these powers to coordinate their actions effectively, despite their different approaches and priorities, suggests the need to fundamentally rethink how the West conceptualises and responds to strategic competition in the 21st century. The future success of Western policy in the region will depend on its ability to design approaches that are inspired by principles whilst being pragmatic, recognising the legitimacy of regional development aspirations while upholding fundamental values.

Building a more stable and prosperous regional order will require a sustained engagement that goes beyond traditional geopolitical competition to address the root causes of instability and underdevelopment. The effectiveness of Chinese-Russian coordination evidences the importance of multidimensional approaches that integrate diplomatic, media, military and economic elements in a coherent manner. The Western response must evidence similar sophistication and adaptability, recognising that lasting influence requires more than substantive or moral superiority; it demands the ability to offer practical solutions to the specific challenges North African societies face.

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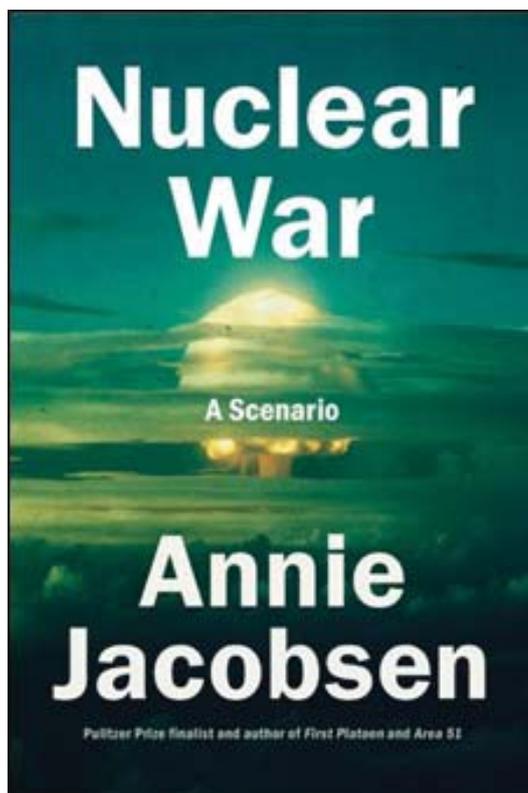
REVIEW

Nuclear war: a scenario

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After dominating the Cold War, nuclear weapons appeared to have fallen into a state of strategic decline, which suggested that their importance would diminish until they ended in a sort of obsolescence as a means of wielding power. It was the post-Cold War period, the end of history announced by Francis Fukuyama, of Krauthammer's unipolar moment, and of the definitive globalisation under the same principles shared by all (meaning the great powers). Thus, from 1991 to 2018, the nuclear arsenals of the two great powers were reduced from absolutely gigantic numbers to 13,400 nuclear warheads, ninety-two percent of them held by the United States and Russia as the only internationally recognised successor of the defunct Soviet Union.

Additionally, a series of treaties (now almost completely dismantled) consisting of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) of December 1987, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START Treaties) of July 1991 and April 2010, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (Moscow Treaty) of May 2002 and the Treaty on Open Skies of March 1992, together with a very important set of declarations, gave legal form to this new global scenario, known as the strategic stability regime based on the principles of bilateralism and nuclear parity. Thus, the danger of nuclear war between great powers receded, while globalisation rapidly expanded the benefits of the so-called post-Cold War "peace dividend", which reached communist China itself. The existence of a nuclearised North Korea in this period did not change the overall scenario and it could even be contained by means of coordinated action by the major powers within the UN Security Council.

However, the conflict in Ukraine renewed the relevance of nuclear weapons as a mechanism of pressure to achieve political ends by major nuclear powers, precisely those who are called upon to guarantee international peace and security; and it is precisely this responsibility that explains and justifies their right of veto.

Currently, both the United States and Russia are engaged in costly modernisation programmes for their respective nuclear arsenals (the famous nuclear triad) amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars, plus more hundreds of billions of dollars in life-cycle operating cost, under the premise of maintaining deterrence. In turn, China, which has become the emerging great power in political and strategic terms, is increasing its own nuclear arsenal while maintaining a policy of not being bound by any international agreement that could restrict its ability to arm itself to at least the level of the US or Russian capacity to generate mutually assured destruction in the event of a direct confrontation. Although six other states possess nuclear weapons, only those three have the capability to initiate a war of catastrophic proportions for the whole of humanity. Or at least that is what most experts think.

This is where the book by journalist Annie Jacobsen (Middleton, Connecticut, 28th of June 1967), which is the subject of this review, comes in. In her Introduction, the author states that the book is the result of research she started during the COVID-19 lockdown in Washington. During this time, she had the opportunity to hold lengthy discussions with senior US national security officials, debates with leading specialists from different scientific disciplines (nuclear physicists and engineers, electronic,

computer and systems engineers, meteorologists and oceanographers), and consult with historians and the heads of State archives and repositories, to shape the theme of the book's title: building a nuclear war scenario. An initial section of the interviews identifies these experts by name and speciality.

In a surprising twist, she reveals the outcome of this scenario in the prologue, i.e. she begins by detailing the terrible consequences of a nuclear attack on the Pentagon (the headquarters of the US Department of Defence) with a megaton of explosive power, which has devastated the US capital, Washington D.C., caused the immediate death of a million people, and injured as many to varying degrees of severity. This is why she rightly calls it "Hell on Earth". It is thus an impact scenario in the terms of scenario generation.

From this initial situation, the author builds, chapter by chapter, a timeline encompassing a period of hours, which give each chapter its title, from the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) against the United States. In these chapters, the author explains the rationale for the attack, how it came about and, much later, the motivations that led to the decision to attack the political and administrative heart of the United States. The reader will discover, strikingly, that it was neither Russia nor China that carried out the strike, despite the fact that each has its own interests and areas of confrontation with the global hegemonic power. This responsibility lies with the North Korean regime, the sole and exclusive decision of its leader, Kim Jong-un, reviled by the West but deified in his own country. The attack on the Pentagon by a newly developed North Korean ICBM, whose launch was detected but could not be intercepted by the very limited and ineffective missiles of the Alaska-based ballistic missile defence system (*Ground-Based Midcourse Defence* or GMD), is part of a coven of destruction launched by North Korea against the United States. This is followed by an ICBM against the Pentagon, then a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) against the only nuclear power plant on the coast of California, named the "Diablo Canyon" (or Devil's Canyon in its original geographic name in Spanish), and the detonation of a nuclear warhead in space designed to completely override the US electrical system through the effects of a high-energy electromagnetic pulse (EMP). She also mentions briefly a fourth ICBM, which failed in flight and had no direct destructive consequences.

The activation of the nuclear response plan (*Single Integrated Operational Plan* or SIOP) highlights fundamental issues that require detailed explanations by the author. On one hand, the lack of time between the attack and response that is required for a measured decision (remember the Cold War incidents, from the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 to the NATO exercise Able Archer-83 in November 1983) and, at the same time, the physical inability to bring the top political leadership, including the US President and his surrogates (including the official presidential succession list of twelve senior officials in order of precedence) to safety in the event of a devastating attack on the federal capital. On the other hand, it highlights the brutality of the US's own reaction within the framework of the nuclear response plans, which seeks to raze North Korean territory and its crazed leader (Kim) to the ground, but without

measuring the immediate consequences of such acts; let alone the global consequences for humanity or the climate. The nuclear decision-makers, i.e. the President and his civilian and military advisors, know that US missiles (some 50 of them) will fly over Russian territory via the Arctic Ocean to reach their targets in North Korea, but do not inform the Russian side of such launch; significantly, the well-known “Red Phone” with Moscow is not used in advance, highlighting the need to maintain permanent communication channels at various levels. But they also ignore the destructive consequences of a response of such magnitude (a total of eighty-two nuclear warheads) on the populated Chinese cities near the North Korean border, which will inevitably suffer hundreds of millions of casualties from the collateral effects of dozens of nuclear explosions.

Here, in what she aptly calls Armageddon (after the final battle announced in the Book of Revelations), the author plays with the failures and manifest errors within the US nuclear command and control system, with the inability of those in charge to make rational decisions in the face of the pressure of response times. But it also relies on the supposed irrationality of Russian leaders (who were forewarned by their own warning systems of US launches), who launch a massive nuclear response to what they believe to be the onset of a nuclear attack on their own territory (their systems observe hundreds of US warheads flying towards Russian territory from the Arctic and Pacific Oceans). This fulfils the maxim enunciated by the Soviet and later Russian leaders that a nuclear attack on their country will always be met with a massive response. It is the fundamental principle of nuclear deterrence in a system of two or more actors, and when it fails, any scenario is possible. Incidentally, only two pages of the book's 373 are dedicated to the annihilation of Europe.

In reality, this is but one scenario of many that may occur. The end result is however clear: a nuclear war will be a war of global destruction. In doing so, Jacobsen builds a case against the idea that it is possible to win a nuclear war and, consequently, destroys the fallacy of limited nuclear war, a notion that has been advocated by Western policymakers, military and academics since the 1970s during the Cold War. By creating a terrifying and desolate scenario (the destruction of human civilisation itself), the book makes a profound reflection in favour of the thesis of nuclear abolition, which extends far beyond arms control or nuclear disarmament, both of which are insufficient to free the world from the catastrophe of war, as Jasmine Owens recently argued in a controversial but timely article published in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (11th of July 2024).

It is worth noting that this is a very well-written story, easy to read and gripping at times, precisely because the author does not hold back on the details of every decision to use nuclear weapons and the terrible consequences they shall have for civilians and the environment. While it also makes an important educational effort that includes nine explanatory sheets throughout the book (called history lessons), as well as explanatory tables and images, it is a work intended for specialists (policy-makers, civil servants and analysts). On one hand, this is because of the amount of information regarding the functioning of the US and Russian nuclear warfare command and

control systems, the nuclear capabilities of major powers and their nuclear strategies on advanced developments with applications in the field of nuclear warfare that have been obtained from the interviews mentioned at the beginning. On the other hand, due to the abundance of technical data on the use of nuclear and non-nuclear systems, the physical consequences of nuclear detonations, as well as on the functioning of emergency systems in the event of a disaster, which will ultimately be completely useless in caring for the millions of survivors of a nuclear war.

It is precisely this target audience (the specialists) that Jacobsen hopes to reach and possibly to attempt to change consciences or the dynamics of individual and group thinking by US policy makers, as glimpsed at various points in the book because, according to the author herself, the others (both Russians and North Koreans) are driven to total destruction by their own paranoia. However, it also raises the question that all rationality and technological capacity of a political system that considers itself intrinsically superior to all others (the famous American exceptionalism) is incapable of preventing its own destruction and thus of others as well. And the prospect of applying Artificial Intelligence to nuclear planning does not seem to bode well either, as Cameron Vega and Eliana Johns have argued in a recent article in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (22nd of July 2024).

All in all, this is a book for specialists that must be read and reflected upon in depth, all the more so in today's times where nuclear leaders fantasise about an escalation game that cannot be played, because the end result is always complete annihilation.

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RECENSION

Winston Churchill y su época. El político bipolar

(Winston Churchill and His Age: the Bipolar Politician)

José Ignacio Domínguez García de Paredes

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WINSTON CHURCHILL Y SU ÉPOCA

EL POLÍTICO BIPOLAR

José Ignacio Domínguez García de Paredes

Prologo de Juan José Laborda



The hymn *Jerusalem* was composed by the English poet William Blake around 1804 and set to music by Sir Hubert Parry, as early as 1916, during the First World War. In 1922, Edward Elgar wrote its orchestration in homage to the composer after his death.

The text is inspired by Milton and the legend of the passage of Jesus and St. Joseph through Glastonbury (Somerset). He speaks of founding a new Jerusalem in England from a pastoral perspective as opposed to an industrialised world symbolised by “satanic mills”. The hymn is available on YouTube and it is definitely worth listening to.

This music, which symbolises the essence of the nation, has sometimes been played as England’s national anthem since, being a part of the United Kingdom, it has no official anthem of its own. Hugh Hudson’s *Chariots of Fire* (1981) takes its name from one of Blake’s verses quoted to describe the British elitist atmosphere of the 1920s within the context of the Paris Olympics.

It is precisely this idea and spirit that underlie the book *Winston Churchill y su época. El político bipolar (Winston Churchill and His Age: the Bipolar Politician)*. This 678-page book, published by *Silex* in 2022, was written by José Ignacio Domínguez García de Paredes, with a foreword by the former President of the Spanish Senate, Juan José Laborda. Domínguez, a great lover of history, has a degree in law and is a political analyst. He has been a Labour and Social Security Inspector since 1975 and in addition to possessing diplomatic experience.

In this work, the figure of Churchill, who was a highly active participant in the decisions of the time, is used as a script or *leitmotif* to describe a time and characters (Chamberlain, Halifax, Patton, Eisenhower, Montgomery) of great interest today. It is set in a pivotal period of history, following Queen Victoria’s reign and the first reconfigurations of the Middle East. One might even call it a watershed moment, or following Chinese tradition, it may well be described as “interesting times”, due to the geopolitical, political and social changes it embodies. This translates into a remarkable density of events of historical significance, as well as the characters that deal with them and are, therefore, of strategic interest.

There is a transition from one empire, the British, to another, the American, which gains awareness of itself and turns into a global power within the context of the changing *status quo*. This is the replacement of an unbalanced multipolarity by a bipolarity made up, moreover, by emerging actors.

This experience is useful. History consists of empirical or inductive knowledge and its use as a tool is, moreover, in the best British tradition, in opposition to the deductive and archetypal nature of French rationalism. To quote Mark Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

Churchill, the source of many opportune and audacious quotes, is a figure deformed by myths and emotions, but also by the relevance of his political contribution to the history of mankind, which makes it easy to be lenient with the mistakes of an impulsive

man. In fact, as he himself stated, concerned about how history would portray him, he decided to do it himself, winning no less than the Nobel Prize for Literature in the process. A very timely and intelligent course of action. As an example, Lord Balfour considered his seminal work *The World Crisis*, devoted to the First World War, to be “a brilliant autobiography, disguised as a history of the universe”.

He had a highly complex life. Born at Blenheim Palace in 1874, his father was the third son of the 7th Duke of Marlborough; and his mother was the American socialite Jennie Jerome; they had two children in total. It was a marriage of money and nobility. The price paid was, however, high. His father died of syphilis in 1895, at the age of 45, and his mother had multiple lovers. As a result, he would be educated with affectionate coldness, albeit in the best boarding schools, and while his scholastic journey was without any special lustre, it would be complemented by a self-taught education favoured by his mother. He also made provision in his will for funds to maintain his nanny’s grave, which he personally tended.

He thus belonged, by right and culture, to the most stale and distant of the British aristocracy, of whose lifestyle and standards of conduct he could serve as an exponent. This of course required a huge financial outlay, which he met by his own means all throughout his life. He married Clementine Hozier, of humble though noble origins, with whom he had five children. Despite this, the family’s life was not a happy one. Indeed, alcoholism and depression —an illness from which the Prime Minister also suffered and which he referred to as his “black dog”— were not uncommon, to the extent that one of his daughters eventually committed suicide.

He entered Sandhurst military school, in the cavalry, and after completing his studies —a year and a half— he was posted to India. He travelled to Cuba as an observer accompanying Spanish forces. He travelled to war zones as a journalist and commenced a literary activity that would become a constant in his life. Thus, he was in Malakand (north-west India), in Omdurman during the Mahdist War, and in the Second Boer War where he was taken prisoner, but escaped.

Following this military and operational transition, he entered the political world in 1900 and would not leave it until 1964, the year before his death. It was a time when, initially, the aristocracy still dominated the country’s politics and culture. Churchill was its last great representative, thus definitively ushering in the bourgeoisie and the welfare state following World War II, in which the leader who had led the nation to victory was defeated at the polls following a poorly conducted election campaign.

He was viewed with suspicion in peacetime because his vigorous nature was ill-suited to the problems of the day; yet he proved to be an unequalled encouraging leader only because he was more dominant and more aggressive than any of his peers. In 1945, after the end of the conflict in Europe, he was ousted from power. His case proves that, in a democracy, those who win a war rarely remain leaders in peace, especially in low-militarised societies. They fulfil their tasks, after which societies look to other leaders to solve new problems.

Personally, he combined pride with a need for recognition. Sharp-witted, his work as a politician and writer, two appropriate means of earning a living for members of his class, reinforced each other and benefited from each other.

Thus, his political work benefited from his communication skills at a time when popular opinion was already indispensable for political action. His oratory, the best of British parliamentarianism, has left famous and historic speeches that are references for humanity. And his literary work benefited in turn from his political experience and, above all, from his access to people, documents and sources that served the decision-making process. And, again conversely, it was used to valorise or justify his political activity and decisions; and even to justify himself and his past rivals. In his writing, he took ownership of the truth.

His political life, which was spent between the Liberal and Conservative parties, was marked by war, as he was a member of the British cabinet during World War I and led it during the World War II, and he also had to deal with the problem of Ireland, which became independent in 1924. War is the abrupt and bloody disruption of geopolitical relations, which explains the times in which he lived. His return as Prime Minister in 1951, at the age of 77, and until 1955, when his health began to fail, is redolent of those times.

As Juan José Laborda points out, his multi-faceted personality combined thoughts, convictions and desires that he could not integrate into a single space, and even less so, within his moral foundations. Thus, an agnostic, he was an archetypal imperialist who did not understand Gandhi or decolonisation but supported the creation of the State of Israel, and, although he viewed colonialism in a positive light, he disagreed with slavery and racism, being particularly wary of dictators who disregarded the necessary limits of political action, and which are precisely the foundations of British parliamentarism. Indeed, he was among the first to comprehend the danger posed by Hitler.

Once the urgency imposed by a war together with its black and white perspective faded, the result of many contradictions became schizophrenic within the political sphere and it is not surprising that it ends up spreading into human side and deriving into pathology. Unless the opposite was true; or, more likely, the overlapping of the two processes made him the man of the hour. Gifts and defects, when they are great, upset the always difficult balances with which personalities are built. And it is even more likely when they are coupled with a permanent will for power, which accentuates the always complex balances of personality.

By means of Domínguez's work, it is worth mentioning that leadership is a process that, when assumed, is self-nourishing, so that the leader will increasingly demand

more power and be more demanding in terms of receiving it¹. In this vein, Nixon², quoting McGregor Burns, argues:

“Presidents must possess a will to power or they will not be successful presidents. They must constantly seek power, building it, if necessary with every shred of formal authority and personal influence they can find. They must constantly guard whatever power they have achieved. They must hoard power so that it will be available in the future³”.

Compare this with the view expressed by Vallejo-Nájera:

“The born leader is one because he has imbued his entire being with the passion to command and with it an almost fanatical condition of commitment to the contagion of his ideal and the willingness to sacrifice everything to achieve it... and automatically to impose it. Talent is not enough, nor are personal conditions; what is needed is a motivation so emotionally charged that it goes beyond the premises of what is reasonable⁴”.

From a psychological approach, one can explain a person's struggle to rise to the top of power as a form of compensation for personal complexes that leads them to face difficulties head on⁵. Such is the case with Churchill and the reason that made him a providential leader.

In any case, because of his determination and proclivity for action, Churchill is a controversial and even feared figure by all and sundry. His great value, of which there is no doubt, was his clear understanding of the dangers embodied by Nazism, which led him to actively combat it, positioning himself from the outset against both a pacifist right and a pacifist left.

But there are also a number of failures, a natural result, perhaps, of his proactivity and of being permanently on the front line. Some of these are well known, such as the defeat at the Dardanelles (Gallipoli) when leading the British navy during World War I.

1 Various authors (1999). *Apuntes de Polemología*. Escuela Superior del Ejército, Escuela de Estado Mayor. Documentos de Trabajo del Departamento de Estado Mayor. Chapter X.

2 H. R. Haldeman, Chief of Nixon's Cabinet between 1965 and 1973, reveals in his memoirs the former US President's paranoia. Not only was he obsessed with image, but his fury boiled over when he read press summaries contrary to his policies. Matey, P. (1994). Delirios de Grandeza [online]. *El Mundo*. [Accessed: 2024]. Available at: <http://www.elmundo.es/salud/1994/129/00500.html>

3 Nixon, R. M. (1980). *The Real War*. Barcelona, Editorial Planeta, p. 281.

4 Vallejo-Nájera, J. A. (1992). *Locos egregios*. Editorial Planeta.

5 Various authors (1999). *Apuntes de Polemología*. Escuela Superior del Ejército, Escuela de Estado Mayor. Documentos de Trabajo del Departamento de Estado Mayor. Chapter X.

There have been other cases, similarly controversial yet less emphasised, perhaps in recognition, as has been said, of his efforts against Nazism. This is the case of the handing over of Poland to the USSR when its invasion, as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, had been the cause of the world war. All prisoners of Polish origin who had fought on Germany's side during the war were transferred to the USSR and the former Yugoslavia. Or, in the context of the latter, the refusal to aid India during the Bengal famine whose immediate cause was a typhoon in 1943, which may have killed 1.5 million people.

In short, Churchill is the *leitmotif* of a book that highlights an entire era and a specific type of strategic leaders. His personality demonstrates how determination, bravery, courage and tenacity are essential for this purpose. Leadership and courage are inextricably linked. Without courage, there is no decision and without decision there is no leader. In many cases, attitudes are more relevant than skills. Additionally, when skills are added to attitudes, recklessness is discarded and results are obtained. Strategic leaders must have a certain aggressiveness dominated by reason. In this way, they always move along the limits of possibility, creating and expanding the framework of available options.

His mythification and the forgetting of his failures have made him a hero, a cross between a god and man, a myth to which he undoubtedly contributed with a remarkable writing of his own history, as Domínguez says, portraying an entire cast of leaders and a decisive era.

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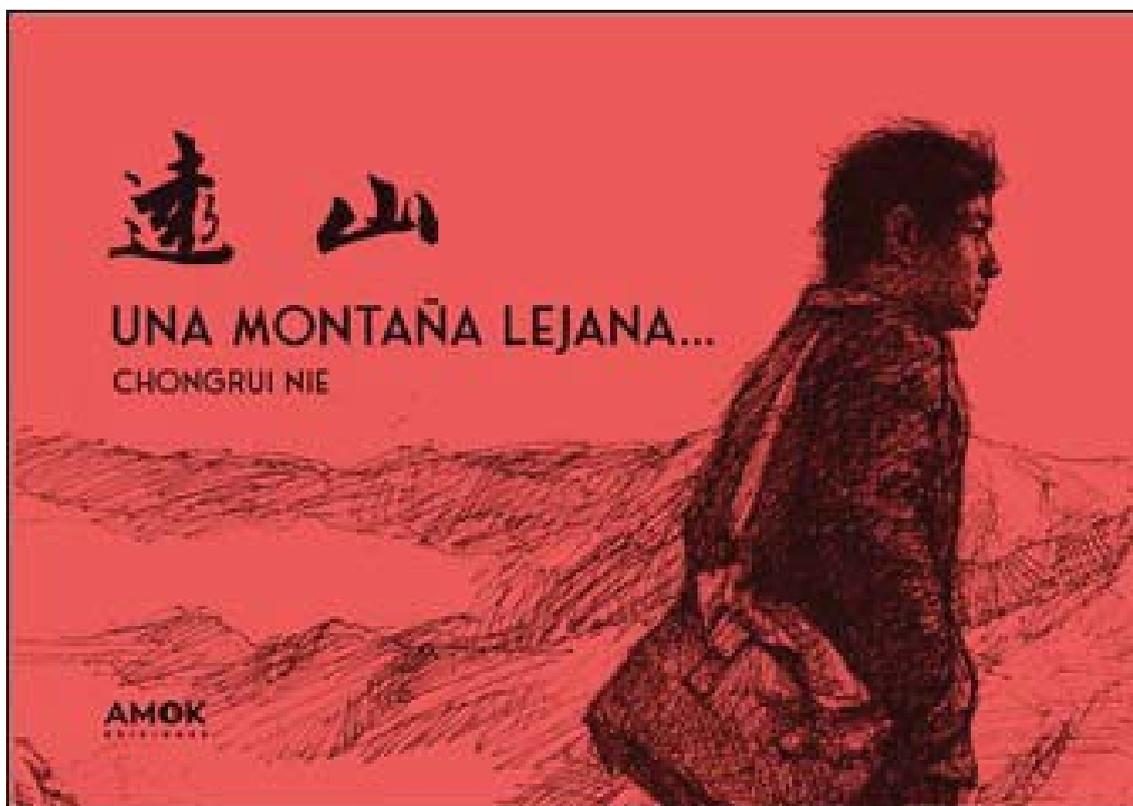
REVIEW

Una montaña lejana... (au loin, une montagne...)

Chongrui Nie

Published by: Amok Ediciones, Madrid, 2024 (372) pages

ISBN: 978-84-19211-54-5



Not so long ago, to speak of a comic strip or book was to speak of children's entertainment, animation or science fiction, beyond even the narrative quality of the story and of course, the drawing technique and the means used to capture the story. However, this vision, not really attuned to the fact that people were in front of authentic literary or pictorial works, or a symbiosis of both, began to change at the end of last century. To cite a before and after, in 1992 Art Spiegelman received the Pulitzer Prize for his work *Maus*, until then the only one awarded to a comic book author, although Spiegelman had already perceived comics from an *underground* perspective as a model of visual experimentation, yes, but also as the ideal vehicle for telling stories as shocking as that of his father, a Holocaust survivor in a world of mice, cats and pigs. The 80s and 90s were also the years of genre greats such as Will Eisner, Frank Miller and Alan Moore. The concept of "graphic novel" was born to magnify the genre, although there is no reason why it should be denigrating to talk about "comics", given that it is fairly recognisable that they are pictorial and literary art worthy of both academic research and exhibition in museums.

The work of the Chinese artist Chongrui Nie —although based in France for decades—, *A Mountain Far Away...* or, to mention its original name in French, *Au Loin Une Montagne...*, belongs to the comic genre and to the genius within it. Moreover, if society's lack of knowledge of authors, narratives and works from far-off China are taken into account, it is a great success for the Amok publishing house to have published it in Spanish from the original French, translated by Fabián Rodríguez Piastrí, in this excellent edition available in hardback and paperback and in its original format —large, 30 X 21 cm. This allows the reader to dwell on the beauty and symbolism of Nie's drawings, as well as on the interior narrative of the protagonist, Nie himself, as *A Mountain Far Away...* is an autobiography of Nie's own experiences during the Cultural Revolution in Mao's China (1966-1976).

Amok specialises in bringing Asian literature to Spain, from China to Laos, including Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka, as a result of the personal experience of its editors in the vast continent of Asia and their interest that authors famed in their own countries and beyond —in the United States and other European countries— should also be recognised in Spain. Without going any further, Chongrui Nie is also the artist of *Judge Bao*, a series that oscillates between the genres of detective fiction and mystery, set in China in the of the 10th-11th centuries, also published by Amok. This is a series that entertains the reader who is simply looking for thrills and good literature, while simultaneously serving as a first-hand source for other readers interested in learning more about Chinese history. The same may be claimed of *A Mountain Far Away...*, which depicts the China of yesterday and today in every word and image.

The book, originally written in French in 2019, is set, as stated above, in the period between 1966 and 1976 in China, during Mao's Cultural Revolution, which supposedly pursued the utopia of creating a new society and a new man, detached from a past presented as a dark era and contrary to all the revolution's ideals of

equality. Thus, millions of young city dwellers were moved to distant rural areas to work as peasants and labourers. One must not forget that the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, was one of them, Chongrui Nie was another, and in this work he recounts his experience, full of dark and light moments and not exempt from criticism. He became a mechanic and was sent to build weapons factories in the remote province of Shanxi. Nie was soon caught up in the breathtaking natural beauty that surrounded him, exposing the contradiction of the destroyed landscape, peace, remnants of the past in the form of temples and formerly sacred sites due to over-industrialisation, the savage exploitation of resources, urbanisation and the fast-paced economic development of a changing new China. It was the beginning of an accelerated time as opposed to the proverbial Chinese patience, something that can be seen multiplied exponentially today if one takes a look at the course of the last decades in China and the current geopolitical situation, where all deadlines appear to be shortening.

Like the talented comic book artist that he is, Nie introduces the reader to the story by means of a powerful visual narrative, large panels that guide the reader through the story, with a pacing determined by the framing, the arrangement of the images and the expressiveness of the characters that appear in the story: the bonhomie of the peasant and his family who are obliged to house the officials and workers sent by the Party, Nie's surprise at the beauty of his surroundings and their progressive deterioration, not only in terms of the natural elements, biodiversity—deeply rooted until then in the conception of the world by these tranquil rural enclaves for hundreds of years— or the contrast between the industrial worker and the farmworker, but in terms of the appearance of the evil inherent in man. Nie dwells on the artistic expressiveness of the faces, which reveal fears curdled into violence, the narrow-minded rejection of otherness, the cynicism of following orders to progress, or dogmatic intransigence. While characters and expressions of friendship, love and joy do appear, they are but brief situations that are eventually uprooted by the pragmatism of reality, like an inevitable and fatal tsunami that takes the reader to the machine-man.

In addition to the detailed depiction of the characters and their expressions, the use of perspective, the shading that provides drama and depth to the scenes, and the interplay of black and white to convey atmospheres and emotions are also noteworthy. The author has sometimes stated that his style is inspired by the Chinese painter and draughtsman Wang Huaiqi. Similarly, Nie also stands out for his exquisitely detailed and realistic style, reminiscent of classical engravings or traditional Chinese illustrations. His stories are made all the more captivating, as in *A Mountain Far Away...*, since he looks not at great characters or events, but on their impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people, which is an exercise in humanising the reader, an “it could be you” that reinforces the narrative, in this case to depict the harshness of Chinese history with a shocking realism, but one that is devoid of sordidness or pathos. Everything flows towards an inevitable end that is accepted.

Although it might seem otherwise, and although he lives between France and the United States, Nie's comics —much like *A Mountain Far Away...*—, which often explore historical, social and political themes, and approach Chinese history with an admittedly critical perspective, have had no problems getting published in China either. In fact, between 1997 and 2003 he held the post of artistic director of the Beijing People's Fine Arts Publishing House, although he eventually left it to devote himself more deeply to painting. In this sense, Nie's stance is partly reminiscent of Xi Jinping's own stance regarding Mao's Cultural Revolution, of which he and his family were also victims. It was a Red-Guard-led nightmare that brought repression and death to China, but it was also the painful economic basis, with the sacrifice and hard work of millions of people, for the start of China's launch. Until today. However, Nie opted to adapt and let himself be led by the system. As a matter of fact, he himself appears in this work highlighting the injustices and violence against opponents or simple people who did not agree with the repressive measures, although never confronting them and seeking, so to speak, to live in a sort of inner exile. On the contrary, Xi Jinping experienced his and his family's misfortune —his parents nearly lost their lives— with the aim of “becoming redder than red”, as quoted in his excellent biography by Stefan Aust and Adrian Geiges, *Xi Jinping: The Most Powerful Man in the World*.

Ultimately, in 1966, Chongrui Nie was first forced to work as a labourer in a construction factory in Beijing, then as a mechanic in Dongzhai and Guan Cen Shan, which led him to turn away from his youthful dream of becoming a painter. More than fifty years later, with that dream come true, he brings the reader closer to look out of a small window, his own, on China's Cultural Revolution. He undoubtedly does so without rancour or to settle any supposed scores, considering this experience as an opportunity that he was given, beyond the harshness of the work and the political risk of falling foul of the Red Guards, thanks to the beauty of the environment that surrounded him. *A Mountain Far Away...* also owes its existence to the drawings that Nie began sketching in small notebooks. For the reader, the results may prove jarring with Nie's calm vision: a reality of Chinese youth under the aforesaid Cultural Revolution, the impact of unbridled industrialisation that became devastating for natural resources and incompatible with the social tradition that had existed until then, especially in rural areas, rooted in ancestral traditions and beliefs. The author's illustrations also become the latest testimony of the destruction of these remnants, many of them from the centuries-old Ming dynasty, during the Maoist era.

Since then, as is also depicted, the mountains of Guan Cen Shan have never stopped calling on Nie to return. This is also reflected in the work, and the contrast between the idyllic and rugged landscape of his youth, and the radical march of time is even more unavoidable, although not so much for the rural communities he knew. Life appeared to advance in step with this nature that man tries to tame. As if it were a magic number, fourteen years later, Nie returned once again to Guan Cen Shan, and a following fourteen years later, he made a third trip. With each visit, China changed, and his pencil captured that transformation. This work ends

with a glossary of names that the reader will appreciate, thanks to Natalie Nie — the author’s wife—; an extensive biography of Chongrui Nie himself; numerous photographs of the region; and notes and drafts used by the author as the basis for his drawings. Amok’s decision to include them is a felicitous one. If one were to summarise this magnificent work in one sentence, it would be to say it is a comic that takes people back in time to the Cultural Revolution China. As Nie himself says: “Art not only documents history, but also questions it. Through my strokes, I attempt to rescue what time and man strive to erase.”

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