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Víctor Mario Bados Nieto
Director of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies

Introduction to Issue No. 27 of the *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*

We are pleased to present a new issue of the *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, at a time when the international geopolitical landscape is becoming increasingly turbulent, complex, fragmented and unpredictable. The succession and, above all, the overlapping of crises and conflicts are shaping a strategic landscape characterised by competition between major powers, leading us towards growing uncertainty, in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to isolate regional events from the structural transformations the international system is undergoing.

The ongoing war in Ukraine, which has now become a protracted conflict with far-reaching consequences for European security and for relations between Russia and the West, is compounded by the emergence or intensification of other hotspots of instability. Particularly noteworthy among these is the war in Iran, which has once again placed the Middle East at the centre of the international strategic agenda and has highlighted, yet again, the extent to which regional conflicts can rapidly take on global implications. Added to this are the persistent tensions in the Indo-Pacific, growing competition in Africa and instability in other strategic regions.

We are therefore not merely facing an accumulation of crises. We are witnessing the symptoms of a more profound transformation of the international system. Power politics is once again gaining prominence and the scope for cooperation appears to be shrinking precisely at a time when global challenges would demand greater levels of coordination. The result is an increasingly fragmented world, in which alliances are becoming more flexible and multi-alignment more common, whilst alliances are less permanent, and numerous actors and middle powers seek to expand their scope for strategic autonomy.

This transformation is also taking place in parallel with a growing erosion of the rules-based international order. The multilateral norms, institutions and mechanisms built up over decades are finding it increasingly difficult to manage contemporary security crises. The United Nations, particularly its Security Council, is probably the most visible example of this situation. Vetoes, the conflicting interests of the major powers and the instrumentalisation of international institutions are reducing their capacity to provide effective responses to some of the major conflicts of our time.

We can thus speak of a gradual "demultilateralisation" of the international system. This does not necessarily mean the disappearance of multilateralism, but rather its weakening as the organising principle of international relations and the growing tendency of states to resort to limited coalitions, bilateral agreements, flexible partnerships or unilateral decisions to defend their interests. Multilateralism continues to exist, but it increasingly shares the stage with transactional and competitive dynamics that reflect a redistribution of global power.

It is precisely against this backdrop that the contributions featured in this issue of the journal are set. Six articles which, drawing on different approaches and methodologies, enable us to examine some of the most significant manifestations of this transformation of the international strategic landscape.

The first article, "Turkey Facing Strategic Uncertainty: Between Hedging and Decisive Projection in Syria, Libya and Somalia", by Carlos Ortega Sánchez, analyses the reconfiguration of Turkish foreign policy in an international environment marked by uncertainty and competition amongst major powers. The author examines the combination of two distinct strategic behaviours. On the one hand, Türkiye resorts to strategic hedging in scenarios such as Ukraine-Russia and Gaza-Israel relations, avoiding rigid alignments with more powerful actors. On the other hand, it pursues what the author terms "decisive projection" in priority areas such as Syria, Libya and Somalia, combining limited military instruments, political agreements, control over institutions and infrastructure, and soft power tools. This dual strategy provides a better understanding of Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy and its implications for Europe and the Mediterranean.

The second paper, "Strategic Coherence and Democratic Stability in Europe: Lessons from the Spanish Case for Political Risk Assessment (2012-2020)", by Marcos Lara Sánchez, extends the analysis to the sphere of European democracies and examines the consequences of the emergence of challenger parties within political systems. Drawing on a comparative study of Podemos, UPyD, Ciudadanos and Vox, the author analyses the relationship between political innovation, antiestablishment rhetoric and strategic coherence. The paper argues that the ability to maintain coherence between discourse, proposals and political action is a key factor in channelling discontent, and proposes observable indicators that can contribute to the ongoing assessment of political risk in European democracies.

The third article, "Technology and Armed Conflict: The Transformation of War in the 21st Century", by Tania Vidal López, addresses one of the most profound transformations in contemporary security: the impact of new technologies on the

nature and conduct of conflicts. In an increasingly multipolar and competitive international system, state and non-state actors have new tools at their disposal capable of exploiting the vulnerabilities of modern societies. Cyberspace has emerged as a new arena of confrontation that overlaps with traditional domains and enables the destabilisation of critical infrastructure and information systems. The article situates this development within the paradigm of hybrid warfare and demonstrates how the incorporation of digital tools is altering states' strategies, organisations and defence capabilities themselves.

The informational and cognitive dimension of this transformation is precisely the subject of the fourth paper, "Russian cognitive warfare in Africa: from the Sahel to the European Union", by Manuel José Gazapo Lapayese. The author examines the expansion of Russian influence operations in Africa, initially carried out through the Wagner Group and subsequently via Africa Corps. The analysis shows how Russia has exploited existing vulnerabilities in the information ecosystems of countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to disseminate anti-Western narratives and shape social perceptions. These actions extend beyond the African context, as they contribute to creating environments less favourable to the European presence and affect the European Union's capacity for dialogue and strategic projection on its southern flank. The study therefore emphasises the need for comprehensive and coordinated responses in collaboration with African partners themselves.

The fifth article takes us to one of the key arenas of competition between major powers. In "An Uncomfortable Triangle: China, Taiwan and the United States. An Analysis Using Game Theory", Enrique Martín Quilis examines the complex strategic interaction between the three actors regarding Taiwan's status and the risk of a potential armed conflict. Using game theory and its dynamic extension, movement theory, the author constructs a sequential model that allows for the examination of different behaviours and issues of asymmetric information. The study highlights Taiwan's central role in this interaction, China's growing assertiveness, and the long-term difficulties that the traditional US policy of strategic ambiguity may present.

Finally, Daniel Flores Flores, in "The (un)just war of the United States against Venezuela: hegemony, oil and geopolitics in the 21st century", offers a critical analysis of US military actions in Venezuela based on the just war theory developed by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in *Demócrates II*. The paper analyses the evolution of US policy from the "maximum pressure" strategy towards the direct use of force and examines the legitimising narratives linked to democracy, drug trafficking and security, as well as their relationship with strategic resources and US hegemony. Within the analytical framework adopted, the author argues that these actions do not meet the classical criteria that would allow them to be classified as a just war, and analyses their consequences for international law and regional stability.

This issue is rounded off with three reviews that broaden the discussion to other relevant areas of strategic studies.

The first, written by IEEE analyst Javier Fernández Aparicio, examines the book *National Armies and NATO, 1949-1991*, edited by Jan Hoffenaar and Brian

McAllister Linn. The book focuses on the relationship between the Atlantic Alliance and national armies during the period from its creation to the end of the Cold War, offering a historical perspective of particular interest at a time when NATO and its member states are once again facing significant debates on collective defence, capabilities and strategic adaptation.

The second review, by Diego Cánovas-Cánovas, presents *Ocean Governance and Conflict in the East and South China Sea* by Christian Schultheiss, a work devoted to maritime governance and the dynamics of conflict in the East and South China Seas. Its subject matter ties in directly with the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific and with the tensions arising from sovereignty, maritime security and competition between regional actors and major powers.

Finally, Luis de la Corte Ibáñez reviews *A Deceptive World: The New Global Order in the Age of Algorithms and Manipulation* by Ángel Gómez de Ágreda. The book examines one of the major challenges of our time: the impact of algorithms, the manipulation of information and the transformation of the digital environment on our societies and on the international system itself. This subject is directly linked to several of the topics addressed in this issue, particularly the growing importance of the informational and cognitive domains in contemporary strategic competition.

The six articles and three reviews that make up this issue ultimately offer different perspectives on a single reality: the rapid transformation of the international system. From Türkiye to the Sahel, from Ukraine to the Indo-Pacific, from the evolution of our democracies to cyberspace and cognitive warfare, we are witnessing a growing interrelationship between power, technology, information, legitimacy and geopolitical competition.

In a world that is more turbulent, more complex, more fragmented and less multilateral, strategic analysis takes on renewed importance. Precisely when certainties diminish and the pace of events accelerates, it becomes all the more necessary to have spaces for rigorous, pluralistic and multidisciplinary reflection. This remains the fundamental purpose of the *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*: to contribute to a better understanding of an increasingly complex strategic landscape through rigorous academic analysis, thereby helping to anticipate its transformations and the challenges they may bring.

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Türkiye in the face of strategic uncertainty: between hedging and decisive projection in Syria, Libya and Somalia

Abstract

This article analyses how Türkiye is reshaping its foreign policy in a highly uncertain environment, combining a hedging strategy with decisive projection in regional scenarios considered a priority for its security and interests. Using a qualitative comparative analysis approach, this study briefly examines two areas where Türkiye resorts to hedging (Ukraine-Russia and Gaza-Israel) in contrast to three where it resorts to decisive projection (Syria, Libya and Somalia) to assess the scope of Turkish strategic autonomy. The article introduces the concept of decisive projection as a form of proactive strategic autonomy, combining limited military instruments with political agreements, institutional control, control of infrastructure and the deployment of soft power tools. This contrasts with hedging, defined as a strategy of diversification and balance in the face of rivalry between great powers.

Through a scenario-based comparison, it is concluded that Türkiye maintains a dual rationale: it avoids rigid alignments through hedging *vis-à-vis* major powers (Russia, Israel-US), whilst deploying decisive projection in its neighbourhood to secure its security, energy and regional influence interests. Thus, the article offers insights into the understanding of strategic autonomy from a European and Mediterranean perspective.

Keywords

Turkey, Strategic autonomy, Hedging, Decisive projection, Middle East.

Cite this article:

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1 Introduction

Türkiye's foreign policy constitutes one of the most dynamic and adaptive vectors of the contemporary international system. In a global context increasingly characterised by the erosion of the liberal order and uncertainty, Ankara has adopted a foreign policy approach aimed at preserving its strategic autonomy whilst maximising its room for manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* major powers. This combination of flexibility and ambition makes the Turkish case a prime analytical laboratory for understanding how middle powers manage the transition towards a multipolar system in which rigid alliances are losing their centrality.

1.1 Objectives, guiding questions and hypotheses of the analysis

The study of Turkey's dual logic, based on a combination of hedging and decisive projection, is of key relevance to Spain, the European Union and NATO. Türkiye is not only an essential partner in managing Mediterranean security, but also an actor that has redefined the concept of strategic autonomy outside the Western framework since 2011. Analysing this transformation is key to gauging the degree of convergence or friction between the European position and Türkiye's interests in a context where Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Israel's devastating bombardment of the civilian population in Gaza, and growing competition in the Red Sea are significantly influencing European political agendas.

This article aims to analyse how Türkiye has proceeded to reconfigure its external projection to maximise its strategic autonomy in times of high uncertainty, distinguishing between patterns of hedging behaviour (understood as a form of risk management *vis-à-vis* major powers) and decisive projection (conceived in this study as a proactive form of strategic autonomy aimed at directly influencing priority regional environments).

The guiding question for this analysis is as follows*: How is Türkiye reconfiguring its foreign policy to maximise its strategic autonomy in times of high uncertainty, and what are the distinguishing patterns between 'systemic hedging' scenarios (Ukraine, Gaza) and 'decisive projection' scenarios (Syria, Libya, Somalia)?*

Two sub-questions arise from this:

- Sub-question 1: *How do the exogenous conditions arising from the situations in Ukraine and Gaza shape Türkiye's hedging behaviour and limit its scope for strategic autonomy?*
- Sub-question 2: *What combination of instruments does Türkiye use in Syria, Libya and Somalia to project its power, and what external and internal constraints does it face?*

Thus, two main hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. In the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, Türkiye prioritises hedging, understood as selective engagement and diversification of alliances to avoid

the costs of rigid alignment. In these scenarios, Ankara seeks to preserve its autonomy by minimising the risks of retaliation and maximising its value as a diplomatic intermediary between conflicting blocs.

– H2. In the three decisive scenarios analysed (Syria, Libya and Somalia), Türkiye adopts a decisive projection strategy based on a combination of *hard power* (limited interventions, military support and control of critical infrastructure) and *soft power* (political agreements, institutional cooperation and sustained presence). This proactive approach reflects Ankara's desire to consolidate its strategic autonomy through direct control of situations where its interests are immediate and the instruments are directly manageable by the Turkish state.

1.2 Method, sources and relevance of the analysis

This article adopts a qualitative approach to comparative strategic analysis, based on the systematic study of specialised academic literature, secondary sources (think tank reports and policy papers) and selected primary documentation, in particular Turkish institutional reports, news articles and institutional websites. Using this approach, the article analyses Türkiye's hedging strategy aimed at preserving its strategic autonomy, in contrast to three forms of decisive projection in scenarios considered priorities: Syria, Libya and Somalia. These three cases are examined comparatively through three common dimensions (strategic interests, instruments employed, and constraints or rivalries), with the aim of offering an integrated understanding of how Türkiye navigates a geopolitical environment characterised by high uncertainty, as well as of possible future trajectories in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

The article is structured in three parts: a theoretical framework setting out the key concepts for the analysis, an analysis of the exogenous conditions and Türkiye's hedging strategy in the contexts of Ukraine and Gaza, and an analysis of three scenarios of decisive projection (Syria, Libya and Somalia).

2 Analytical framework

2.1 The doctrinal trajectory of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP and its fit with the analytical framework

Turkish foreign policy in the era of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) can be understood as a trajectory of doctrinal recalibration in which the pursuit of strategic autonomy shifts from relying on interdependence and low-friction diplomacy to being increasingly combined with an expeditionary projection towards key scenarios for its economic, energy and security interests, within doctrinal frameworks of regional competition. In an initial phase (2002–2011), Ankara pursued an agenda of expanding influence that prioritised mediation, trade, con connectivity and institutional densification. The *zero problems with neighbours* formula and the notion of *strategic depth*, developed by Türkiye's former Prime Minister and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, functioned as

an essential technology of power: maximising regional centrality through economic ties, political openness and cultural outreach, whilst reducing security costs through normalisation with the surrounding region and convergence with Euro-Atlantic frameworks (Balcı, 2015; Papuççular, 2023).

That balance began to erode rapidly from 2011 onwards. The Arab uprisings, the war in Syria, the militarisation of conflicts involving *proxies* and the rise in cross-border threats (terrorism, migratory pressure and state fragmentation) turned Türkiye's neighbourhood into an area of persistent risk, where influence is no longer gained solely through interdependence, but through the ability to manage the environment coercively. In this phase, Turkish foreign policy incorporated a more visible identity-based dimension, with debates on *neo-Ottomanism* and regional leadership: rather than a restorationist ambition, *neo-Ottomanism* operates as a discursive framework that revalues the Ottoman imperial legacy to legitimise an active presence in the former Ottoman space (the Balkans, the Levant, North Africa), combining historical and cultural references with contemporary instruments of influence (religious, educational, media and humanitarian). In practice, this narrative was linked to an ambition for regional centrality and to the idea of Türkiye as a protective and mediating power in the Muslim world, reinforcing the domestic legitimacy of a more assertive foreign policy. At the same time, a logic of securitisation took hold: borders, local governance and de-escalation came to structure strategic calculations (Balcı, 2015; Papuççular, 2023).

It is here that two key features emerge which underpin the argument of this study: compartmentalisation (simultaneously cooperating and competing with the same actor across different dossiers) and the acceptance that certain scenarios require cumulative instruments to produce lasting effects, that is, decisive projection.

Since 2016, this transition has led to a more explicit practice of strategic autonomy: diversification of partners, transactional diplomacy and the growing centrality of the military instrument and the defence industry, with sustained deployments and expeditionary capability. The attempted coup of 15 July 2016 acted as a catalyst for this shift, by reinforcing the centralisation of the decision-making process, intensifying national security priorities and consolidating a foreign policy more geared towards reducing external dependencies and expanding Türkiye's operational autonomy within its regional environment. This diversification also includes strategic ties with Qatar and, to a lesser extent, with Pakistan, which broaden the diplomatic and security scope from which Türkiye sustains its regional influence. In parallel, and in line with this shift, Ankara has moved towards a transactional pragmatism: it normalises or repairs relations with rivals (such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia) in relation to its interests in energy, trade, investment or regional de-escalation, and deliberately separates issues to prevent a crisis from undermining areas of cooperation, even amidst tough public rhetoric. Within this framework, the maritime dimension crystallised in the Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, a strategic framework which, from the late 2010s, served to underpin territorial claims and signal a naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, at odds with the prevailing interpretation of the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), although by 2025 this doctrine has fallen significantly into disuse.

In analytical terms, this set of transformations does not represent a rhetorical shift, but rather the consolidation of a foreign policy capable of alternating between risk management and the production of effects: the doctrinal backdrop that explains why, as will be seen in this analysis, Türkiye resorts to hedging in contexts of systemic uncertainty *vis-à-vis* major powers and to decisive projection when it perceives that it can generate cumulative and controllable results in priority theatres.

2.2 Hedging and strategic autonomy

When we speak of hedging or strategic hedging, we refer to a behaviour of seeking points of security that states employ in situations of high uncertainty and risk. Thus, it is a set of strategies aimed at cultivating an intermediate position—that is, a balance—to avoid or postpone the need to choose a side in a rivalry between great powers at the expense of the other. According to Kuik, this search for points of security is defined by (1) not taking sides or avoiding rigid alignments, (2) carrying out contradictory or opposing measures to offset risks, and (3) diversifying one's actions to keep options open for as long as possible (2021, 303). Goh, for her part, in her analyses of hedging in Southeast Asia, identifies three key elements of hedging, which are (1) indirect or soft balancing aimed at persuading other powers to act as counterweights to a rival's regional influence, (2) establishing complex political, economic and strategic ties with powers in the hope of integrating them into international norms, and (3) involving multiple great powers in regional affairs so that all have a stake in a stable order (2005, IX). The author argues that hedging is carried out not against specific actors, but against general risks, particularly the hegemony of a single power, the withdrawal of a traditional protector, or regional destabilisation due to a conflict between great powers.

Much of the literature has therefore focused on the study of hedging in the Indo-Pacific, and how small and medium-sized states use it to avoid having to choose between the United States and China. This is the case with Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia (Goh, 2005; Lim and Cooper, 2015; Kuik, 2021; Aydin-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman, 2025). On the other hand, Tessman applies the term to more influential actors, dividing them into two categories: Type A states, which seek to improve the state's competitive capacity to prevent the leader of a system from exploiting those weaknesses (for example, by diversifying energy supplies), and Type B states, dedicated to insuring themselves against the loss of goods or subsidies that the system leader provides but might cease to supply (for example, by establishing regional organisations to substitute security functions and promote stability) (Tessman, 2012).

As will be seen in this analysis, Türkiye is a state that engages in strategic hedging through a multidirectional foreign policy that seeks to maximise strategic autonomy, avoiding rigid alignment with a single bloc.

2.3 Scenario-based comparison: decisive projection

Whilst we use the concept of hedging to define Türkiye's position regarding uncertainty and major conflicts, this analysis employs the term decisive projection to examine how the country positions itself and deploys resources in specific scenarios with the aim of directly influencing them.

Although decisive projection derives from power projection—that is, a state's capacity to deploy and employ military and strategic resources outside its territory (Gunzinger, 1993)—the concept of decisive projection is characterised by the sustained and multifaceted positioning of state capabilities in a scenario deemed a priority, with the aim of directly and persistently influencing the local political balance and security, generating concrete and controllable strategic effects. Therefore, in this article, decisive projection is conceptualised as an expanded power projection strategy, combining limited military instruments with political agreements, control and management of critical infrastructure, political instruments and institutional presence, aimed at producing lasting strategic effects in scenarios prioritised by a state.

This conceptualisation aligns with recent studies on proactive strategic autonomy and the sustained projection of middle powers, which highlight the combination of military, diplomatic and economic resources to generate prolonged regional influence (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Dalacoura, 2021; Sarı and Sula, 2024). From this perspective, decisive projection can be understood as the operational translation of strategic autonomy, applied in a sustained manner in theatres where the state seeks not only to react to uncertainty, but to actively shape the environment.

As will be seen in the present case, whilst Türkiye strikes a balance with regard to certain conflicts involving major powers, it assumes a key leading role in its policy towards post-war Syria or the stabilisation of Somalia or Libya, all with the aim of protecting and advancing its strategic, security or energy objectives at the regional level.

3 Türkiye and hedging: evolving exogenous conditions

Turkish foreign policy over the last decade has evolved towards a distinctive form of strategic autonomy characterised by growing independence in decision-making and an active search for its own room for manoeuvre within a multipolar international environment. This strategy is based on the premise that the international order led by Western hegemony has come to an end, giving way to a multipolar and post-Western world. For Türkiye, strategic autonomy is articulated through three dimensions: military power and defence, diplomatic manoeuvring, and economic pragmatism by diversifying trade relations and strengthening ties with Asian countries and Russia, without abandoning its institutional connections with the West (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Šišić and Kurtanović, 2025).

Türkiye seeks to preserve its influence and manage the systemic uncertainty arising from the rivalry between major powers. Far from a passive or neutral stance,

Turkish hedging consists of a deliberate practice of selective alignment, functional compartmentalisation and the pursuit of mutual benefits, allowing Ankara to maintain simultaneous ties with both Russia and the West without being entirely dependent on either (Ulas, 2026).

Thus, whilst strategic autonomy constitutes the structural objective (the aspiration to full decision-making sovereignty and sustained global projection), hedging acts as an operational balancing mechanism that enables Türkiye to navigate between conflicting pressures (Šišić and Kurtanović, 2025). This strategy does not imply a disengagement from NATO, but rather a form of functionally ambivalent membership: Türkiye continues to regard the Alliance as a central anchor of security, deterrence and interoperability, whilst seeking to expand its autonomous room for manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* its Western partners. This dual logic is intensified by the exogenous conditions imposed by conflicts such as the war in Ukraine or the genocide in Gaza, which reshape the country's room for manoeuvre and test the flexibility of its diplomacy and its ability to maintain effective autonomy within NATO and *vis-à-vis* Russia.

3.1 Türkiye's room for manoeuvre in relations with Russia and the US in the context of the war in Ukraine

Turkey's room for manoeuvre in the war in Ukraine stands as a paradigmatic case of systemic hedging: a strategy of selective alignment and compartmentalisation that seeks to maintain institutional commitments to the West without severing critical interdependencies with Russia. On the one hand, Ankara remains a loyal member of NATO; on the other, it maintains vital interests with Moscow in the energy, food and tourism sectors. This dual axis reflects what Balta and Bal (2025) present as a balance between allied cohesion and domestic interests, such that Turkish behaviour oscillates between alignment, autonomy, opportunism and dissonance.

This logic is based on a doctrinal premise: the relative decline of the Western order and the consolidation of a post-Western environment where regional powers can expand their scope for action (Aydın-Düzgit, 2025). Within this framework, Türkiye aspires to act as a pivotal actor, capable of cooperating and competing simultaneously with rivals, whilst preserving flexibility and avoiding irreversible commitments (Shlykov, 2023; Kara, 2024). The war forced Ankara to implement this logic in a visible manner: a policy described as pro-Kyiv but not anti-Moscow (Ulaş, 2026).

On the military-strategic front, Türkiye has provided material support to Ukraine (including the supply of Bayraktar TB2 drones and public backing for its territorial integrity) whilst avoiding measures that would place it in direct confrontation with Russia. On the economic front, it refused to join Western sanctions, prioritising macroeconomic stability and access to energy (Lesage, Daşkin and Yar, 2022). Compartmentalisation thus becomes a structural feature: cooperation on one issue does not necessarily block cooperation on another, reducing the risk of a spiral of retaliation.

The material basis for this calculation is a vulnerability stemming from interdependence: over 40% of natural gas, the majority of imported wheat and a significant portion of tourism come from Russia (Dalay, 2022; Ünlühisarcıklı, 2023; Irkhin and Moskalenko, 2024). Consequently, Turkish strategic autonomy does not entail a break with Moscow, but rather the prudent management of dependencies to avoid domestic shocks. This constraint explains Ankara's moderate tone even at critical moments in the conflict.

On the diplomatic-institutional front, Türkiye has exploited instruments that maximise influence without crossing thresholds. Control of the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits offers a unique lever: by invoking the 1936 Montreux Convention to bar the passage of warships, Ankara limited Russian operational freedom without adopting an openly hostile stance, thereby preserving its role as a mediator (Lesage, Daşkin and Yar, 2022, Šišić and Kurtanović, 2025, Tykhonenko and Rachynska, 2025, Ulas, 2026). In the same vein, Turkish diplomacy facilitated the Black Sea Grain Agreement (July 2022), prisoner exchanges and rounds of negotiations in Istanbul and Antalya (Ulaş, 2026, Yesiltas, 2026), bolstering its global profile and bargaining power *vis-à-vis* Washington and Brussels.

The drive towards autonomy also translates into capabilities: reindustrialisation in the defence sector and a reduction in technological dependencies (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Shlykov, 2023; Rudn, 2024). However, this very shift is causing friction with the United States: the purchase of the S-400 led to CAATSA sanctions and expulsion from the F-35 programme (Reuters, 2025a). Ankara has responded by combining pressure and negotiation (for example, by adjusting its stance within the NATO-Sweden framework and using its regional role to reopen dialogue on the F-16s), which demonstrates its ability to operate 'on two fronts' (Reuters, 2025b). Finally, the discourse of strategic autonomy serves a domestic function: it reinforces legitimacy among an increasingly nationalist electorate and is linked to the techno-nationalism associated with the defence industry (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021; Yesiltas, 2026; Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman, 2026).

In short, the war in Ukraine has not distanced Türkiye from the West, but has instead consolidated a deliberate ambiguity: sufficient support for Kyiv to maintain its credentials as an ally, and sufficient restraint towards Moscow to avoid economic and security costs. This pattern illustrates a 'mature' systemic hedging strategy: a policy of active balancing and diversification that seeks to translate proclaimed autonomy into real room for manoeuvre, under significant structural constraints.

3.2 Gaza-Israel-US

Secondly, the strategic uncertainty regarding Israel's massacres in Palestine stems not only from the military dynamics on the ground, but also from the way in which the situation is reshaping alignments and generating reputational costs at the regional and transatlantic levels. In this case, Türkiye is avoiding 'crossing the threshold' of Turkish alignment, that is, avoiding an irreversible strategic rupture with the US and

NATO, with its capacity to manage risks gaining greater weight than its capacity to shape the scenario. Following 7 October 2023, the Israeli campaign in the Gaza Strip, marked by sustained bombardment and massive destruction of infrastructure, has come under international legal scrutiny and has been described as a possible crime of genocide by the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024). In this context, the US has maintained diplomatic support and military assistance to Israel, including extraordinary accelerations of aid, which increases the cost of any rigid alignment against Israel in the context of the genocide in Gaza and in the face of US support, particularly for a NATO member such as Türkiye (U.S. Department of State, 2025). It is precisely in this tension that one can see, in a manner parallel to the situation in Ukraine, the Turkish strategic dilemma and its hedging.

This strategic dilemma stems from the state identity defined under the AKP government, based on a strong Islamic and neo-Ottoman ethos that seeks to present Türkiye as a key state in the Muslim world and to actively engage in defending the Palestinian cause and fiercely criticising Israel (Uzer, 2022; Erdoğan, 2024; Pribadi *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, a neoclassical realist understanding of international relations views Israel as a necessary partner for balancing regional threats, as well as a key economic partner (Efron, 2018). Among the factors exacerbating this dilemma, we can see that, on the one hand, Türkiye has shifted in recent years from seeking to be a central mediator in Palestinian-Israeli relations to becoming a political patron of Hamas, thereby undermining trust with Israel (Çevik, 2025). Historically, Türkiye has managed to compartmentalise its relations with Israel, maintaining growing trade despite political crises, reaching a bilateral volume of USD 7 billion in 2023, as well as being a key supplier of crude oil to Israel via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (Akram, 2024). Thus, for years Türkiye has been Israel's fifth-largest trading partner, with trade weathering incidents such as the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, when Israeli forces boarded a Freedom Flotilla vessel bound for Gaza in international waters, killing ten Turkish activists and triggering a serious diplomatic crisis.

The crisis has indeed affected relations between the two states, as since 2025 Türkiye has severed trade ties, adopting an increasingly aggressive stance towards Israel and labelling it a 'terrorist state' (Soylu 2025). Ankara has stated that it will only resume trade if an uninterrupted flow of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians is permitted. However, on the other hand, Türkiye has kept the aforementioned Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline open (the possible closure of which would profoundly affect Israeli energy security) as a form of material compartmentalisation, whilst at the same time presenting itself as a mediator and aspiring guarantor of peace in Gaza. Whilst Türkiye has maintained positive relations with Hamas, this dialogue allows it to claim influence over the organisation and to present itself as one of the four guarantors of the ceasefire in Gaza alongside Egypt, Qatar and the US, enabling it to remain at the centre of regional diplomacy and to present itself to Washington as an ally capable of shouldering the burden of stabilisation. In this context, whilst balancing its rhetoric against Israel, Türkiye keeps the pipeline open and has agreed to purchase US liquefied natural gas at higher prices to reduce its dependence on Russian gas (Gazprom), thereby demonstrating its strategic loyalty to Washington (Çevik, 2025).

Whilst these three elements (offering to mediate, preserving certain aspects of Israeli energy security and reducing energy dependence on Russia) can be understood as balancing instruments, Turkey's position towards Israel remains constrained by structural limitations that hinder its stability. Among these, the ideological imprint of the AKP government stands out, pushing Ankara to maintain a stance of condemnation against the Israeli massacres in Gaza, denounced by the Turkish authorities as genocidal.

In this regard, this situation severely hampers Türkiye's ability to hedge, something that is not the case with Ukraine. Israel is firmly opposed to any Turkish military or administrative presence in Gaza, a stance driven both by Ankara's rhetorical support for Hamas and by Türkiye's condemnatory rhetoric towards Israel. Netanyahu's government has begun to view Ankara as an unsuitable and unreliable actor, opting to maintain its freedom of unilateral action in Gaza, on the grounds that a Turkish presence would entail operational restrictions, forcing Israel to coordinate or justify its attacks, which would heighten the risk of accidental clashes between the two armies (Çevik, 2025). Thus, Türkiye appears to be playing an increasingly central role in the Israeli narrative of existential insecurity.

Nevertheless, a kind of equilibrium in the positions of both states within the context of two deeply charged narratives is visible: on the one hand, Israel increasingly perceiving Türkiye as an existential threat and, on the other, Türkiye denouncing Israel's war crimes. This follows a key trend in both states, which find political benefit in rhetorically exaggerating their mutual hostility to strengthen their domestic position, creating cycles of inflammatory rhetoric that are difficult to break even in contexts where there are mutual interests (Erdoğan, 2024).

Türkiye's behaviour on the Gaza–IsraelUS axis clearly follows a logic of hedging: Ankara combines rhetoric of moral confrontation with selective material measures aimed at avoiding irreversible strategic costs, thereby preserving its autonomy and its value as a mediating actor. Unlike the Ukrainian case, where hedging relies on relatively stable functional compartmentalisation, in Gaza this strategy is more fragile and volatile, as it is conditioned by a heavy ideological burden and by identity-based narratives that limit the sustainability of the balance and heighten the risk of strategic incoherence.

4 Türkiye and its 'decisive projection'

As a middle power with growing expeditionary capabilities towards the Global South and a strategic autonomy articulated outside rigid alignment frameworks, Türkiye has moved from managing uncertainty through hedging to intervening in a sustained manner to generate controllable strategic effects in priority regional scenarios. This section examines 'decisive projection' as a form of proactive strategic autonomy: a sustained combination of limited military instruments, political agreements, and economic and institutional levers aimed at producing controllable effects in priority theatres. This analysis argues that, unlike hedging, Ankara does

not primarily seek to keep options open and reduce risk *vis-à-vis* major powers, but rather to actively shape regional environments where it perceives immediate interests in security, influence and connectivity. To this end, three scenarios (Syria, Libya and Somalia/Red Sea) are compared using the same framework: interests and context, instruments deployed, and constraints/rivalries that shape the scope of the strategy.

4.1 Scenario 1: Türkiye in Syria

As of January 2026, the Syrian conflict entered an unstable post-war phase following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2024 and the consolidation of a fragile transitional government in Damascus. Although large-scale violence has subsided, Syria remains territorially fragmented, with precarious local balances and a sustained presence of external actors. Türkiye has established itself as one of the decisive actors on the ground, maintaining a direct military presence and structural influence in the north of the country. Far from a temporary involvement, Ankara has developed a strategy of sustained projection in Syria, aimed at shaping the security environment, influencing local governance and safeguarding immediate strategic interests in the post-war landscape.

Since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, Türkiye's strategic dilemma has centred on the tension between two priority and often conflicting objectives: promoting the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and preventing the YPG/PYD[1] , the political-military core of the SDF (a Kurdish-Arab coalition) and perceived by Ankara as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party[2] (PKK), from establishing an autonomous entity on its border. This dilemma was exacerbated by the presence of the US, which cooperated with the SDF against ISIS/Daesh, creating a degree of protection over north-eastern Syria and heightening potential friction within NATO due to the contradictions between the US and Türkiye. At the same time, Ankara supported and organised networks of armed opposition and local governance through the Syrian National Army (SNA) in the north, whilst managing internal security challenges (terrorism and radicalisation), migratory pressure and the risk of a direct clash with the Moscow/Tehran axis.

1 PYD (Democratic Union Party): the main Kurdish party in Syria, which dominated the political administration of the north-east during the war.

YPG (People's Protection Units): the armed wing and dominant force linked to the PYD. It formed the military core of the SDF in the campaign against ISIS/Daesh with US support.

2 The PKK is designated as a terrorist organisation by Türkiye, the US, the European Union, the UK, Canada and Australia.

Turkey considers the PYD/YPG to be organically linked to the PKK, and therefore a direct threat to border security. For Türkiye, the elimination of the PKK and the dissolution of the YPG are top priorities in its foreign policy. This is because both groups share militants and personnel trained by the PKK, and there is ideological and symbolic continuity between the two groups (International Crisis Group, 2017; Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of the Interior, 2017).

In the post-war period, following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2024, Turkey's strategic dilemma has shifted to how to translate its presence and influence in Syria by acting as a champion for the president of the transitional government, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who hails from the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This relationship is pragmatic: Ankara has sought to consolidate a central Syrian state capable of absorbing the north-eastern territory and, above all, to bring about the effective disarmament and/or controlled integration of the SDF into state structures, reducing the YPG's autonomy and avoiding governance vacuums that could reignite insurgent dynamics. However, the situation in Syria cannot be understood in isolation from the Kurdish issue in a regional context: for Ankara, the matter is not limited to the YPG/SDF, but forms part of a security continuum linking northern Syria with northern Iraq and, to a lesser extent, with the Iranian dimension of the Kurdish conflict. In this sense, Turkish policy towards Syria is also shaped by the need to contain potential strategic spillover effects, including porous borders and the movement of weapons and fighters that could contribute to a resurgence of the PKK, perceived by the Turkish state as one of its main security threats.

Thus, contrary to what has occurred in scenarios such as Ukraine or Gaza, Türkiye has deployed tools in Syria aimed at protecting and defending its immediate interests, with a predominance of hard power (direct military operations, sustained presence and support for armed actors) combined with political and coordination levers to set red lines and manage escalation. Between 2016 and 2020, Türkiye carried out four direct military operations: (1) Operation Euphrates Shield (2016), aimed at expelling the Islamic State from the border strip and halting the YPG's territorial expansion west of the Euphrates, (2) Operation Olive Branch (2018), launched against Kurdish forces in Afrin, (3) Operation Peace Spring (2019), aimed at creating a security zone in the north-east, and (4) Operation Spring Shield (2020), aimed at halting the advance of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in Idlib and reinforcing Turkey's position in the north-west. These interventions were followed by the establishment of military bases, observation posts and the sustained deployment of personnel and capabilities in northern Syria (Wei, 2019; Sever, 2020; Karaca and Köksal, 2022).

Secondly, Türkiye has relied on support and funding for armed groups. Ankara was one of the main backers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), providing weapons and training, and subsequently helped to restructure and coordinate factions under the umbrella of the SNA. Added to this is the backing of identity-based formations such as the Sultan Murad Division (created in 2014 and composed of Syrian Turkmen), which operated as an instrument of projection and local control in areas under Turkish influence (Antonopoulos, 2018; Phillips and Valbjorn, 2018; Karaca and Köksal, 2022).

All in all, Turkey's decisive projection of power into Syria has generated structural limits and contradictions in foreign policy, with strategic incompatibilities with allies and rivals, as well as domestic costs. Firstly, there has been persistent friction with the US and, by extension, within NATO: US cooperation with the SDF (dominated by the YPG) was interpreted by Ankara as a direct threat, fuelling a narrative of isolation and undermining allied cohesion in a shared theatre of operations. Secondly, the

sustainability of the Turkish presence has depended on careful management of escalation with Russia and Iran. Following the downing of a Russian aircraft in 2015, Türkiye reoriented its policy to re-establish channels of coordination with Moscow, which increased reliance on de-escalation mechanisms and ushered in a phase of asymmetric negotiation conditioned by Russian air superiority. In this context, Sever (2020) emphasises that, faced with the refusal to supply Patriots, Ankara turned to the S-400 system, a decision that exacerbated tensions with Washington and NATO. This realignment also prompted Türkiye to participate in the Astana Process alongside Russia and Iran to manage the conflict and secure its military presence; however, contradictions persisted, particularly in Idlib, where Türkiye faced the dilemma of protecting the armed opposition whilst maintaining its military deployment against SAA offensives backed by Russia and Iran (Wei, 2019). Added to these constraints is a problem of international legitimacy: the Turkish presence is justified on security grounds, but it clashes with the principle of Syrian territorial sovereignty, restricting diplomatic manoeuvre in the post-war period. Finally, the migration cost acts as a major domestic constraint: the social and political pressure linked to refugees encourages the consolidation of safe zones and returns, but heightens strategic risks if stabilisation on the ground is not sustainable.

In Syria, Türkiye does not operate according to a logic of systemic hedging aimed at keeping its options open *vis-à-vis* major powers, but rather through decisive projection in the sense defined in this article: a sustained and multifaceted presence designed to produce controllable political and security effects in a priority theatre. Ankara combines limited military interventions, permanent deployment and proxy structures with coordination and containment mechanisms (such as Astana) to set red lines and manage escalation, whilst using its territorial influence as leverage to shape the post-war settlement regarding the north-east. Thus, Turkish strategic autonomy manifests itself here proactively: it is not limited to managing external risks, but seeks to actively shape the governance and territorial balance of northern Syria, even at the cost of legitimacy and migratory pressure.

4.2 Scenario 2: Türkiye in Libya

Libya remains trapped in a stalled transition: the institutional deadlock persists between rival authorities in the west (Tripoli) and the east, with fragmented institutions and an electoral process still unresolved, despite UN attempts to steer a roadmap towards elections and institutional unification. In practice, executive power remains divided between the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli and the Government of National Stability (GNS) in the east (backed by the House of Representatives and the Haftar axis), perpetuating 'dual-centre' governance and rival claims to legitimacy. Furthermore, the deadlock over electoral laws and the constitutional framework (following the collapse of the 2021 electoral calendar) has made the paralysis chronic, whilst the UN proposal is structured around the pillars of an elect e framework, institutional unification and structured dialogue (Security Council Report, 2025).

In this context, Libya is crucial for Türkiye for three reasons: (1) maritime geopolitics and energy in the Eastern Mediterranean, anchored in the 2019 Türkiye–Libya Memorandum on maritime delimitation, which underpins Turkish claims and shapes disputes with Greece and other actors, whilst also shielding Türkiye in the event of potential claims over areas with hydrocarbon potential, (2) strategic projection in the Central Mediterranean (access, connectivity and capacity to influence regional balances), and (3) economic interests (reconstruction, contracts and business presence). Thus, Türkiye is taking risks because Libya offers a 'lever' where calibrated intervention and legal agreements can generate controllable strategic effects (maritime, political and in terms of access) *vis-à-vis* regional rivals and the volatility of the Libyan scenario.

In its relationship with Libya, Türkiye has moved from its 'zero problems' policy to an active military presence to protect its national interests. Whilst in 2011 it faced the dilemma of supporting the Gaddafi regime or supporting the rebels, with the escalation of the conflict in 2019, Türkiye decided to provide military support to the UN-backed Government of National Accord to prevent General Khalifa Haftar, backed by regional rivals such as the UAE, from taking full control of the country, which would have completely expelled Turkish influence from the region (Selján, 2020; Kardaş, 2020).

Since then, Türkiye has taken risks and sought to build closer ties with Libya to defend its strategic and economic interests. Thus, the most significant gain has been the 2019 memorandum of understanding, linking the maritime borders of Türkiye and Libya, allowing Türkiye to claim hydrocarbon exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean and serving as a counterweight to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, comprising Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt (Maalım, 2023, Süsler, 2024).

To this end, Türkiye has deployed instruments of hard power, but also of 'smart power', combining military intervention with diplomatic (such as the 2019 memorandum of understanding), economic and humanit e instruments to consolidate its influence in the Mediterranean and Africa. Among the military instruments are active hard power projection, such as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles like the Bayraktar TB2, the deployment of air defence and electronic warfare capabilities, and the dispatch of support forces (such as the transfer of Syrian fighters), as well as the direct deployment of military advisers and training units to professionalise Libyan forces or to carry out demining in civilian areas. Added to this is the control of military infrastructure, such as the al-Watiya airbase or a naval station in the port of Misrata (Seljan, 2020; Maalım, 2023; Süsler, 2024).

Economically, Türkiye is working to secure contracts from the Gaddafi era and position its companies to benefit from the future reconstruction. With the fall of the Gaddafi government, Turkish contracts and projects were worth around USD 18 billion, which Türkiye aims to recover. Similarly, in addition to taking an interest in infrastructure projects and the country's reconstruction, agreements have been established between the Central Bank of Türkiye and that of Libya to stabilise the economy and facilitate bilateral trade (Okumuş, 2021; Süsler, 2024).

Finally, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has been implementing development projects since 2012, covering health, education, social and administrative infrastructure, and, in recent years, initiatives linked to internal security, such as support for police training facilities. Similarly, Türkiye's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), together with the Turkish Red Crescent, carried out search and rescue operations and implemented humanitarian projects following the 2023 floods in Derna (Okumuş, 2021, Türk Kızılay, 2023, TIKA, 2024, TIKA, n. d., Bani Salameh, 2026).

However, Turkey's decisive involvement in Libya, whilst having positive effects for Türkiye, has entailed a series of geopolitical risks. Thus, in the Libyan context, the rivalry with the UAE is the most evident. Abu Dhabi's financial and military support for Haftar's forces in the Libyan National Army is legitimised by accusing Türkiye of supporting groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which it perceives as an existential threat, and by accusing Türkiye of using these networks to expand its hegemony, whilst Türkiye accuses the UAE of sponsoring coup-plotting and separatist regimes, as they did with the 2013 military coup in Egypt against Mohamed Morsi, a close ally of the Turkish government (Kardaş, 2020; Bani Salameh, 2026).

In this regard, there have also been tensions with Egypt, which has viewed the eastward advance of Türkiye-backed troops as a threat to its security, going so far as to threaten military intervention. However, these tensions have eased as the two countries have drawn closer diplomatically (Maalım, 2023).

Finally, Turkey's involvement in Libya has caused considerable friction with the European Union. The 2019 maritime delimitation memorandum, ideologically supported by Türkiye under the Blue Homeland doctrine, has been condemned for disregarding the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus over their Exclusive Economic Zones, which has led the EU to formally condemn the agreement and to activate a sanctions framework in response to Turkish drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the freezing of assets of certain individuals and entities involved in such activities (Özşahin and Çakmak, 2022; Maalım, 2023).

Libya constitutes a particularly clear example of decisive projection because it is a theatre where Ankara does not merely manage systemic risks through ambiguity, but seeks to produce controllable strategic effects through a package of cumulative instruments. The combination of calibrated military intervention (drones, air defence, advisory support and operational presence), high-impact legal-political agreements (2019 *Memorandum*) and economic and institutional levers (contracting, reconstruction, monetary cooperation and humanitarian presence) enables Türkiye to exert direct influence over the Libyan political-military balance and, simultaneously, to strengthen its maritime position in the Eastern Mediterranean. This architecture increases Turkish operational autonomy, but also raises costs: Libyan fragmentation limits the predictability, and rivalry with the UAE (which supports the Haftar axis as a counterweight) turns the country into a space of indirect competition where Turkish projection faces rival narratives, resources and networks. Precisely because of this tension between capacity for impact and exposure to risk, Libya illustrates the

threshold of decisive projection. In the following scenario, Somalia will demonstrate even more clearly how this competition with the UAE is shifting towards control of logistical hubs and operational soft power in the Horn of Africa.

4.3 Scenario 3: Türkiye in Somalia and the Red Sea

Somalia has become a priority theatre for Turkish foreign policy due to its value as a geostrategic pivot between the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean routes, in a regional context strained by the militarisation of the coastline and competition for port access. In this scenario, Türkiye acts not only as a development partner, but also as a provider of security and a facilitator of connectivity, relying on a sustained institutional and military presence (including its largest overseas training base in Mogadishu with TURKSOM) and on recent agreements aimed at strengthening Somali maritime capabilities. At the same time, Turkish mediation in the de-escalation between Ethiopia and Somalia following the crisis linked to Somaliland demonstrates that Ankara seeks scope for direct influence over the regional balance, maximising its operational autonomy through diplomatic and security levers. As seen in this section, Somalia offers a particularly clear case of 'decisive projection': an environment where Türkiye aims to produce controllable strategic effects (maritime security, access, political influence) rather than maintaining ambiguity *vis-à-vis* major powers.

There is a key reason for Turkey's growing interest: Somalia is central to Türkiye's economic, energy and security interests. In 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan paid a visit to Mogadishu, where an embassy would soon be opened and where Turkish Airlines flights would begin arriving shortly afterwards, formally establishing relations between the two states.

From an economic perspective, Somalia is viewed as an emerging market for mineral resources and untapped gas and oil reserves. Thus, in March 2024, both countries signed an agreement for Türkiye to explore for and produce hydrocarbons in Somali onshore and offshore blocks (Sıradağ, 2024; Telci and Yimer, 2024). From a strategic perspective, Somalia is situated near vital maritime routes such as the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Türkiye operates its largest overseas military base, Camp TURKSOM, in Mogadishu, where it trains the Somali National Army to professionalise it and combat terrorism. Furthermore, alongside Turkey's entry into Somalia came strategic investment in infrastructure based on Turkish private management of regional logistics hubs. Thus, Mogadishu Airport is managed by the Turkish company Favori and, since 2014, the firm Albayrak has been coordinating the Port of Mogadishu, the country's main port asset in the context of reconstruction. In 2020, this concession was renewed for further fourteen years, extending Türkiye's key role in the development of the Somali economy, as well as, as we have seen, its security (Rossiter and Cannon, 2019; Sıradağ, 2024).

In addition to the military and economic pillars, the third facet of Turkey's presence in Somalia is humanitarian. Türkiye bases its presence in Somalia on a strategy of

humanitarian diplomacy developed since the 2000s. Since the AKP came to power, investment in development aid in Africa rose in the early years from USD 3.84 million in 2004 to USD 249.47 million in 2012 and USD 395 million in 2015 (Hasimi, 2014: 137; Baird, 2016; Dahir, 2020).

Through TIKA, which also arrived in Mogadishu in 2011, more than five hundred humanitarian projects have been implemented in the fields of health, education, agriculture and infrastructure. Examples of these include the Digfer 'Recep Tayyip Erdoğan' Hospital, the construction of urban roads in Mogadishu, and even the construction of the parliament building (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, 2014; Yusuf, Wasuge and Sharif, 2022; TIKA, n. d.). The Turkish Red Crescent also has a significant presence, managing a camp for internally displaced persons with a capacity for twenty thousand people. Thirdly, the Turkish foundation Maarif is responsible for cultural diplomacy and university exchange and training programmes, educating a new generation of Somali ruling elites with cultural and linguistic ties to Türkiye, thereby facilitating long-term political and economic relations (Mosley *et al.*, 2021, International Somalia Maarif Schools, n.d.).

Furthermore, Türkiye's success in Somalia allows it to present itself as an emerging global power capable of offering an alternative development model to the Western one, whilst simultaneously projecting a domestic narrative of itself as a great and protective nation in the face of extractivism by Western states (Özkan, 2014; Baird, 2016).

Turkey's presence in Somalia, although presented as a model of humanitarian diplomacy and a 'win-win' approach, faces various structural constraints and contradictions that result in risks Turkey must assume in order to defend its interests. Among these risks, the strategic rivalry with the UAE turns Somalia into a theatre of external geopolitical competition.

On the one hand, we find that Turkish policy in Somalia is largely directed towards Mogadishu, centralising its aid on the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and alienating autonomous regions such as Puntland or Somaliland, reinforcing the perception that Türkiye supports Mogadishu's centralism to the detriment of federalism (Özkan, 2014; Sofos, 2023). On the other hand, the FGS appears to be becoming increasingly dependent on external support for its survival, postponing the creation of a genuine social contract with the population (Lafranchi, 2025). Furthermore, in Ankara there is a sense of what Mehmet Özkan termed 'Somali fatigue'—institutional weariness stemming from the lack of a clear long-term roadmap and in the face of security risks, such as potential attacks by Al-Shabaab (2014).

It is at the geopolitical level, however, that the greatest risks lie: whilst Türkiye and Qatar have cultivated close relations with the FGS, the UAE has decided to support the autonomous region of Somaliland as a counterweight and as a key regional partner. Through massive investment in the port of Berbera and via DP World, and the establishment of military bases in the region, the UAE has sought to counter Turkey's presence at the port and airport in Mogadishu, supporting Somaliland's

aspirations for independence—which, by late 2025, Israel had joined (Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Sıradağ, 2024; Lafranchi, 2025; Magee, 2025).

Somalia constitutes a key example of decisive projection because it allows us to observe, in a concentrated manner, how Türkiye translates an initially humanitarian presence into controllable strategic effects. Unlike hedging, in Mogadishu Ankara combines complementary and cumulative instruments: (1) social legitimacy and political access through cooperation and services, (2) functional control of logistical hubs (port and airport) that anchor connectivity and revenue streams, and (3) a calibrated security component (TURKSOM) that seeks to strengthen state capabilities whilst securing routes and manoeuvring space in the Gulf of Aden–Red Sea. This architecture reduces dependence on intermediaries and increases Turkish operational autonomy, but it also exposes Ankara to risks (Al-Shabaab, rivalry with the UAE/Israel, centre–periphery tensions). Precisely because of this balance between capacity for impact and costs incurred, Somalia clearly illustrates the threshold at which soft power becomes decisive projection.

5 Conclusion

This article has examined how Türkiye is reconfiguring its foreign policy to maximise its strategic autonomy in a highly uncertain environment, and what distinctive patterns can be observed between scenarios of systemic hedging (Ukraine and Gaza) and scenarios of decisive projection (Syria, Libya and Somalia). The scenario-based comparison confirms the central thesis: Ankara maintains a dual rationale. When uncertainty is imposed by rivalry between great powers and the costs of alignment are potentially prohibitive, Türkiye favours hedging as an operational risk management mechanism. Conversely, when it perceives that it has directly manageable instruments at its disposal and that the effects are cumulative and controllable, it deploys decisive projection aimed at actively shaping the environment. A key corollary follows from this dynamic: Türkiye projects itself, and the more it projects itself, the more risk it assumes, because sustained influence in volatile scenarios increases exposure to retaliation, maintenance costs and friction with external and domestic actors.

In the cases of Ukraine and Gaza, Turkey's behaviour follows a hedging logic characterised by selective alignment, functional compartmentalisation and the preservation of options. In Ukraine, Türkiye has managed to translate its geographical and institutional position (NATO, control of straits, economic ties with Russia) into a pro-Kyiv but not anti-Moscow stance, maximising its value as a mediator and reducing the risk of economic retaliation or regional escalation. In Gaza, by contrast, the same logic proves more fragile: the ideological weight of state identity under the AKP, regional reputational pressure and the centrality of the US–Israel link raise the cost of ambiguity and erode the stability of compartmentalisation. In both cases, hedging does not imply neutrality, but rather an active search for room for manoeuvre. However, as regional polarisation intensifies, maintaining this stance requires increasing effort: Türkiye needs simultaneously to uphold its political

credentials before regional audiences and to preserve lines of communication and controlled dependence with Western partners.

In Syria, Libya and Somalia, Türkiye exhibits characteristics consistent with decisive projection as conceptualised in this study: sustained engagement, a combination of hard and soft power instruments, and the pursuit of specific strategic objectives. In Syria, the priority has been control of the security environment and the shaping of the post-war north, where military presence and proxy structures are coordinated to influence governance and limit the scope of the YPG/SDF. In Libya, Ankara has combined calibrated intervention, high-impact legal and political agreements, and economic and institutional levers to sustain influence and strengthen its maritime position. In Somalia, decisive projection relies on an architecture of social legitimacy, control of logistical and e al hubs, and the provision of security aimed at achieving controllable effects on connectivity and maritime security. It is in this latter case that fatigue is seen as a potential constraint on projection. Among the risks taken, it is worth emphasising that the sustainability of external projection depends not only on Ankara's political will, but also on its capacity to absorb costs in a context marked by macroeconomic tensions, energy vulnerability and the need to prioritise resources. Similarly, this same logic also helps to understand the relevance of the South Caucasus for Türkiye. The Azerbaijan-Armenia axis remains a significant arena due to its logistical and energy value, towards which Ankara is articulating its structural alliance with Azerbaijan alongside its cautious rapprochement with Armenia, whilst taking advantage of opportunities for connectivity, transit and energy projection. Thus, in the three scenarios analysed, strategic autonomy manifests itself proactively: it not only manages uncertainty but also seeks to produce results. Precisely for this reason, decisive projection tends to accumulate risks: dependence on fragile local partners, exposure to asymmetric attacks, budgetary costs and, above all, competition with third parties.

Here**,** a second cross-cutting finding takes centre stage: rivalry with the United Arab Emirates and Israel tends to grow and shape part of Turkey's dilemmas, forcing Ankara to make greater efforts to sustain its hedging strategy whilst assuming greater risks in scenarios where it deploys decisive projection. In Libya and Somalia, competition with the UAE translates into a struggle for logistical hubs, influence over rival authorities and the ability to set rules for regional access. This rivalry turns every Turkish 'gain' into an incentive for Emirati counterbalance, raising the cost of holding positions. In Gaza, the confrontation with Israel, fuelled by identity-based narratives and domestic calculations, reduces the scope for stable compartmentalisation, strains ties with Washington and limits Türkiye's effectiveness as a mediator. The result is a foreign policy which, to maintain autonomy, must simultaneously avoid rigid alignments and sustain material commitments in decisive scenarios, thereby increasing exposure and cost.

Thus, Turkish strategic autonomy should not be interpreted as neutrality, but as a strategy of optimisation under constraints: hedging to avoid being caught up in great power rivalries and decisive projection to consolidate positions in scenarios where Ankara identifies immediate interests.

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Strategic coherence and democratic stability in Europe: lessons from the Spanish case for political risk assessment (2012–2020)

Abstract

The emergence of challenger parties within the European political system has raised questions as to whether these parties contribute to strengthening democratic renewal or to increasing the fragmentation of the system. The existence of this problem makes it necessary to develop predictive tools to manage it on an ongoing basis. The impact on democracy is determined by the application of the 'dual innovation strategy' (combining political innovation and anti-establishment rhetoric) and is complemented by strategic coherence (a party's ability to demonstrate consistency in its political message, its policy proposals and its actions when adverse circumstances, such as crises, arise). Coherent parties manage to channel political discontent. However, inconsistent parties run the risk of failing to do so, and of anti-democratic parties exploiting this due to political disenchantment. In this study, we employ a comparative qualitative analysis of four key cases (Podemos, UPyD, Ciudadanos and Vox) during the period 2012–2020, using manifestos and survey data such as that from the CIS as evidence. Our framework provides observable indicators of the gap between discourse and action, which can be monitored for the ongoing assessment of political risk in European democracies facing similar pressures.

Keywords

Challenger parties, Political polarisation, Party systems, European democracy, Political entrepreneurship.

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1 Assessing democratic risk in the era of challenger parties: the need for predictive frameworks

Challenger parties are those that compete against the dominant parties in the system, which have historically governed and have more experience in public administration. To this end, challenger parties seek to introduce new issues or discursive frameworks in an attempt to attract new voters, some of whom do not feel represented by the dominant parties, or to introduce new issues into the political debate. This definition is based on the work of Hobolt and De Vries (2020), who argue that these challenger parties are characterised by a lack of prior government experience and by targeting their strategy precisely at the vulnerabilities of established parties.

The proliferation of challenger parties in Europe since 2008 has significantly transformed political systems, with the emergence of Podemos and Vox in Spain, La France Insoumise and the National Rally in France, Syriza in Greece and the Five Star Movement in Italy. This shows us that this is not a temporary or country-specific trend, but rather a widespread trend in southern Europe that has persisted over time. The consequences have been significant, as several parties have managed to govern or form part of governments, changing legislation and exerting influence. These new actors have successfully capitalised on public discontent stemming from the 2008 economic crisis and the incessant cases of corruption, establishing themselves as political alternatives. However, their differing trajectories raise questions as to whether, ultimately, they have contributed to democratic renewal or to greater fragmentation, which has direct implications for European democratic resilience.

Challenger parties employ a 'dual innovation strategy' according to Hobolt and de Vries (2020). This combines two complementary mechanisms: on the one hand, political innovation, which is based on introducing controversial or alternative issues to those of the dominant parties, such as rethinking the European Union (EU), the environment or corruption. On the other hand, through rhetorical innovation, it seeks to divide society between a ruling elite perceived as corrupt, represented by the dominant parties, and a populace that the challenger party seeks to represent. Both mechanisms act in unison, as they aim to create a new political space and discredit the adversary, thereby creating new political opportunities. This combination will be explored in depth within the theoretical framework of this study.

This article argues that, whilst the use of the 'dual innovation strategy' (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020) is fundamental to understanding the initial rise of emerging parties, it is not sufficient to explain the various long-term divergences. The key variable, according to this study, is 'strategic coherence over time', defined as the sustained consistency between a party's discourse, its key strategic actions (such as pacts and vetoes) and its policy proposals. Such inconsistency erodes credibility, which is detrimental to the reputation of an emerging party. The analysis of the Spanish case, and in particular the comparison between Vox and Ciudadanos, shows us that not only is it necessary to employ a dual innovation strategy to enter the market, but that consistency is vital for maintaining it in the long term.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by addressing a comparative dimension that has been little explored in Spain. Various previous studies have focused on Spanish challenger parties, analysing Podemos and Ciudadanos (Orriols and Cordero, 2016) and Vox (Rama *et al.*, 2021); however, few studies have focused on comparing these three parties with UPyD to understand why their strategies worked or failed. Furthermore, from the perspective of the 'dual innovation strategy' (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020), we offer a more up-to-date view of emerging and dominant parties, taking into account controversial issues, anti-establishment rhetoric, control of the political market, and experience or lack thereof in public administration. These studies focused on 2014–2015 or on the emergence and growth of Vox, but not on the long-term evolution of several of these parties, including the collapse of some of them such as UPyD or Ciudadanos.

Furthermore, to understand the reasons why parties become incoherent, our article combines the theory of Hobolt and De Vries with the theory of party change (Harmel and Janda, 1994), focusing on how external crises interact with the parties' core objectives. This analysis is situated within the broader context of the crisis of representation (Mair, 2006; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008).

Furthermore, pernicious polarisation can lead to an 'us versus them' conflict, turning political adversaries into enemies, and fuels trends towards the decline of liberal democracy, benefiting radical political actors (Somer *et al.*, 2021: 877). It is precisely within this context of pernicious polarisation that the strategic incoherence of challenger parties proves most damaging to democratic stability.

This analysis contributes to the growing literature on democratic resilience (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021) and democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), by examining how the consistency of challenger parties' behaviour affects stability at the system level. Whilst structural factors, such as economic development and institutional constraints, are well-established predictors of democratic durability, less attention has been paid to how the strategic consistency of political actors mediates between opportunities for crisis and democratic outcomes. Finally, by introducing a multi-causal approach, we move beyond monocausal views that focus solely on the economy or discourse.

The article is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework is presented, culminating in two testable hypotheses. Second, the qualitative comparative methodology is outlined. Third, the empirical analysis is presented through two comparative 'battles': Podemos versus UPyD and Vox versus Ciudadanos. Finally, the European implications of the results and conclusions are analysed.

2 From dual innovation to strategic coherence: a framework for assessing long-term stability

Major transformations in Europe have created fertile ground for challenger parties. Globalisation has created 'winners and losers', generating a new structural conflict with economic, cultural and political consequences that has given rise to the 'division

through denationalisation', which emerging parties exploit effectively (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008, p. 233). Their success is explained by the structural transformations of European societies, and not merely by their experience in government.

This pressure crystallises in specific crises, such as a territorial crisis, which forces parties to act and put their model to the test (Harmel and Janda, 1994). The response to this crisis is the party's 'primary objective' (maximising votes, positions, policy or internal democracy). Inconsistency often arises when a crisis forces a party to change or to act contrary to its primary objective, as perceived by the electorate.

The key strategy that challenger parties pose to dominant parties is political entrepreneurship. The 'dual innovation strategy' operates through two complementary mechanisms. These exploit the different vulnerabilities of dominant parties. Firstly, political innovation operates by introducing controversial issues—cross-cutting or divisive matters that force dominant parties to adopt uncomfortable positions. This situation arises because they may alienate others whilst appealing to a segment of the electorate. The second part is 'anti-establishment' rhetoric, which undermines the credibility advantages of the dominant parties. Challenging parties achieve this by portraying the dominant parties as 'elites' who do not represent the 'people' and are disconnected from everyday problems. The key to this combination lies in broadening the thematic space and delegitimising their adversaries. This combination creates dual pressure on the dominant parties. This framework is fundamental to understanding how challengers actively seek to capitalise on the structural opportunities described (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020: 6).

This is linked to the crisis of representation (Mair, 2006), which reflects a more polarised society, in which challenger parties can achieve success through a strategy that goes beyond the left-right axis, introducing new divisive issues that appeal to disenchanted or unrepresented voters.

Whilst this framework emphasises strategic choice, it also recognises that success depends on favourable structural opportunities, determined by socio-economic conditions and patterns of voter loyalty. Consequently, challenger parties are more likely to succeed during periods of severe socio-economic hardship, as these conditions create fertile ground for challenging the dominant parties. Similarly, challenger parties are more likely to succeed when there is greater misalignment with the dominant parties and institutional distrust, as this creates a pool of available voters.

However, whilst this article posits that these conditions are necessary, they are not sufficient to explain the divergent trajectories of challenger parties. The crucial variable, this article argues, is the consistent and skilful application of the dual innovation strategy.

'Strategic coherence' and the 'dual innovation strategy' are not a magic formula, as their success depends on other factors. The success of controversial issues depends on whether the party achieves issue ownership (Meguid, 2005; Williams and Hunger, 2022) and on how the dominant parties react (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Therefore, one way of measuring success could be the ability to incorporate specific issues raised by challenger parties and how mainstream parties adapt or adopt them.

Several authors confirm that mainstream parties adapt their political profiles based on challenger parties (van Spanje, 2010; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2014). This example shows us that the ability to set the agenda is a key indicator for measuring the actual success of challenger parties, demonstrating that they change the terms of the political debate, even if they are not in power. Niche parties (which overlap with challenger parties) compete strategically on issues that mainstream (dominant) parties prefer to ignore or treat as secondary, forcing mainstream parties to react and take a stance on the issue raised by the challengers (Meguid, 2005).

This dynamic shows us that challenger parties can increase media attention on an issue, connecting with voters who may have unmet demands. This situation allows them to build their brand, thus linking to the theory of political entrepreneurship (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020). Finally, the dynamics of competition also play a role, as the reaction of mainstream parties is not uniform.

In an analysis of 17 Western European countries (including Spain) between 1970 and 2011, it was found that mainstream parties adopted anti-immigration policies in response to the success of right-wing parties. However, contrary to what might be expected, they tend to downplay environmental issues when green parties gain support, precisely because these parties are perceived as 'owners' of the issue (Abou-Chadi, 2016). This underscores the importance of the type of rival and the nature of the 'issue' when analysing competitive dynamics.

Beyond discursive strategy, a strong internal organisation is a key factor in understanding why some political parties achieve success, which may explain why some rivals consolidate their position whilst others disappear after initial success. Parties with strong organisations are more likely to achieve electoral success and survive as significant players, as they can attract and mobilise voters more effectively than parties with weak organisations (Tavits, 2013: 7).

Thus, a party with a strong and cohesive organisation has a greater capacity to deal with a crisis in a unified manner and maintain a strategic line. Party organisation is important for the party's cohesion, which affects its legitimacy and stability. Among the various sources of vulnerability that can lead to disintegration is the refusal to build a party organisation (Bolleyer, 2013). This organisation is essential, as it provides greater resources and the capacity to reach voters and members, which fosters greater legitimacy and stability and prevents disintegration. Thus, a party with a weak organisation or internal strife is more fragile; a crisis can fracture it, leading to erratic and incoherent situations. This can be illustrated, among other factors, by the internal rifts within UPyD or the subsequent defections within Ciudadanos, which reflect symptoms of organisational weakness rather than direct causes of their decline.

There are other factors that define the window of opportunity. According to Hellwig and Dodez (2026), as the ruling executive survives consecutive elections, this memory of the past begins to fade and voters return to the more experienced opposition parties, demonstrating the resilience of the dominant parties. This explanation shows us that rival parties have a window of opportunity: when crises occur, such as economic ones, they can make headway; once this has passed, the dominant parties can reassert their

dominance and win back lost voters. Rival parties may not succeed when they are marginalised, particularly in the case of rival communist parties such as Izquierda Unida (IU). The parrot effect only applies when a rival party is consistently and simultaneously marginalised. This type of marginalisation occurs frequently. 'Perhaps access to the media is crucial for marginalised parties' (Van Spanje and Graaf, 2017: 17–18). This explanation shows that ostracism by the parties can lead to less public attention and poorer electoral results for certain types of political parties, particularly left-wing parties. These factors help explain why 'double innovation' is not a magic formula and why some parties, despite a sound initial strategy, fail. These factors (strategic nuances, organisational capacity and contextual constraints) do not, taken together, determine the fate of a political party, but rather the high-stakes scenario in which 'strategic coherence' becomes the truly decisive variable.

2.1 The mediating role of strategic coherence

Strategic coherence is defined as the sustained consistency between a party's rhetoric, its policy proposals and its key strategic actions—such as pacts, vetoes or alliances—particularly when external circumstances, such as economic or territorial crises, demand a response that tests its founding identity. In such situations, strategic coherence shapes a party's identity in the face of various challenges, and influences how voters perceive these parties' responses to them.

This coherence is particularly important for challenger parties, as their main asset in the eyes of the electorate is presenting themselves as a genuine and reliable alternative to the dominant parties, which possess a track record and governmental experience that the challengers lack. Therefore, a breach of coherence for these new challenger parties not only constitutes a credibility error but also erodes the party's brand in the face of the dominant parties they criticise. As Hobolt and De Vries (2020: 186) point out, one way for parties to protect their brand is by ensuring that voters perceive the issues they champion as the most important.

This argument ties in directly with the concept of issue ownership proposed by Petrocik (1996). According to this author, voters form parties' reputations based on the issues they consider most important and which the parties consistently champion over time. Therefore, maintaining consistency on divisive issues reinforces not only the party's identity and brand, but also strengthens its position as the owner of these issues in the political marketplace, making it difficult for dominant parties to challenge or appropriate them.

The consequences of this variable are significant; they are not limited to the electoral sphere but are reflected in the stability of the system. A consistent challenger party can channel the aspirations of a section of the discontented public through institutional mechanisms, resulting in democratic renewal. Conversely, if an inconsistent challenger party fails to deliver on its original proposals, this can lead to system volatility, greater distrust of political parties, or create disillusionment, failing to meet the expectations of voters who were already disaffected. This distinction

forms the basis of our second hypothesis, which will be empirically tested throughout our analysis.

Based on this, we propose two hypotheses: H1 and H2 (Entry and Consolidation Hypotheses):

H1 (Entry Hypothesis): Challenging parties that effectively implement the 'dual innovation strategy' (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020) are more likely to achieve significant electoral gains.

H2 (Consolidation Hypothesis): Among rival parties that manage to break through, those demonstrating greater 'strategic consistency over time' between their rhetoric and their actions are more likely to consolidate their electoral support in the long term, whilst inconsistency is associated with collapse.

3 From theory to practice: a methodological approach to assessing strategic coherence

The emergence of several challenger parties across the ideological spectrum during periods of converging crises (economic, social and territorial) created controlled conditions for establishing how varying levels of 'strategic coherence' among emerging parties affected the stability of the system, allowing lessons to be drawn for other southern European countries facing similar challenges. Our aim in this article is not only to describe the specific case, but also to identify transferable causal mechanisms to understand how strategic coherence can affect democratic stability. Spain met several conditions that make it particularly suitable: it suffered multiple crises, both economic and social, simultaneously; it also experienced the creation of new parties across different ideological spectra, undergoing increasing polarisation, all within a previously stable political system.

Our analysis is based on pairs of contests. The comparison between Podemos and UPyD serves as a 'natural experiment' to test the importance of strategic agency. Both parties faced the same structural opportunity (economic crisis and discontent channelled by the 15-M movement). However, their ability to effectively implement 'double innovation' was completely different. Thanks to this pairing, we can isolate the impact of strategy (independent variable) on electoral success (dependent variable), whilst holding the context constant. Vox and Ciudadanos competed, albeit from different ideological positions, to attract voters disenchanted with PP in the centre-right and right of the political spectrum; however, their trajectories diverged due to strategic coherence and growing polarisation.

This study will be based on a qualitative and deductive approach and on a comparative analysis within each case. We will use a design based on more similar systems. This is because we will be comparing parties operating within the same political system and during the same period. Our longitudinal approach from 2012 to 2020 is crucial not only for analysing the emergence of challenger parties, but also their evolution, consolidation or decline, by analysing their 'strategic coherence' over time.

The utility of this framework can be replicated in other contexts and applied prospectively to assess political risks. In this way, countries facing similar challenges, such as Portugal, France, Italy or Greece, can use this framework to respond in a more informed manner.

The criteria we used to select UPyD, Ciudadanos, Podemos and Vox were several:

1. Parties founded after 2006.
2. They obtained more than 3% of the vote in at least one general election.
3. They represent different ideological positions (left, centre and right).
4. Data is available (manifestos and CIS polls).

The data we obtain from the election manifestos will be used to analyse policy proposals and identify contentious issues, examining the periods 2015 and 2019. Furthermore, we will use CIS surveys to measure institutional trust—Spain's main problem—and loyalty to political parties. We will also use public statements and debates to analyse anti-establishment rhetoric. Divisive issues were analysed by reading the pages describing each section (e.g. economy, regeneration). Furthermore, keywords such as 'PP', 'PSOE', 'established parties', etc. were searched for. We have sought to be both qualitative, for example, 'Vox' and 'impunity', and quantitative (based on the number of occurrences). We have also analysed the most important election debates, such as those on Atresmedia and RTVE, as well as statements made by leaders at crucial moments, such as Ciudadanos' veto of PSOE.

We used several indicators to implement political discourse strategies:

Emphasis on political innovation (controversial issues): Political innovation, in particular the emphasis on controversial issues (corruption or the EU), was identified through a qualitative analysis of the electoral manifestos, highlighting their presence and strategic articulation to differentiate themselves from the dominant parties. This analysis informs the political innovation component of the dual innovation strategy.

Anti-establishment rhetoric: we identified this rhetoric qualitatively through the analysis of election manifestos, public statements, debates, statements by political leaders and media coverage (CIS for perceived discourse surveys and secondary analysis of debates). We analysed key terms such as 'caste', 'elites', 'old parties' and 'the people', as well as criticisms of the system.

Application of the dual innovation strategy: this was analysed for each opposition party in each electoral period, combining the evidence from indicators 1 and 2.

To test our second hypothesis (H2), strategic coherence was measured across three dimensions over time:

1. Discursive coherence: assessed by comparing the party's central framing (reformist versus conservative, for example) and key messages across manifestos and televised debates in 2015 and 2019. We also tracked whether the central narrative had remained consistent or changed significantly.
2. Consistency of action: examined by analysing key strategic decisions, primarily through post-election pacts and vetoes. We assessed whether these actions were in line with the party's discourse and policy promises or whether they

contradicted them. For example, Ciudadanos' shift in alliances from PSOE to PP is an example of inconsistent action.

3. Programmatic consistency: assessed by tracking the evolution of key policies in the party's election manifestos. We determine whether the proposals evolve logically or whether there are sudden shifts on key issues that contradict previous positions.

To translate the theoretical concepts presented here into concrete empirical measures, we have developed a system of specific indicators which enable us to systematically assess each dimension of strategic coherence. The table below shows the operational structure of our analytical framework (see Table I), specifying how each conceptual dimension translates into measurable indicators and specific evaluation criteria.

TABLE I. OPERATIONAL INDICATORS FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIC COHERENCE

Operacionalización de conceptos clave

	CONCEPTO	DIMENSIÓN	INDICADORES / FUENTE DE DATOS
CONCEPTO 1	Estrategia de innovación dual	1. Innovación política	• Énfasis en temas divisivos (p. ej., corrupción, UE) en los manifiestos de los partidos.
		2. Innovación retórica	• Uso de términos antisistema ("casta", "élites", "viejos partidos") en manifiestos y debates televisados. • Críticas al sistema político y llamamientos al "pueblo".
CONCEPTO 2	Coherencia estratégica	1. Coherencia discursiva	• Coherencia del encuadre central y los mensajes entre los manifiestos/debates de 2015 y 2019.
		2. Coherencia de acción	• Análisis de pactos y vetos postelectorales. • Coherencia entre el discurso (p. ej., "regeneración") y las acciones (p. ej., bloquear la formación de gobierno).
		3. Coherencia programática	• Evolución lógica de las políticas centrales en los manifiestos frente a cambios repentinos y contradictorios.

4 Empirical analysis: two comparative battles

4.1 Podemos and UPyD: strategic innovation and structural opportunity

4.1.1 The crisis as a catalyst: structural conditions for the emergence of challenger parties (2012–2015)

The structure of political opportunities for challenger parties between 2012 and 2015 was characterised by a profound dual crisis. In the economic sphere, Spain was facing the serious consequences of the 2008 economic crisis, as well as a rise in institutional mistrust, with ongoing corruption scandals (Gürtel, ERE), which accounted for 50.8% of the population's main concerns according to CIS 3057. All this reveals a dramatic economic and social situation in Spain, demonstrating that the traditional parties (PP and PSOE) were unable to tackle the economic crisis. Due to this crisis and the visible rise in mistrust among citizens, the 15-M Movement (Los Indignados) was formed. Its main slogan was 'They do not represent us', which was a direct criticism of the party system.

This movement enjoyed widespread support, with over 70% of voters giving it a positive rating according to the CIS 2905 survey. This refusal to support the traditional parties created 'political opportunitieso for new parties capable of articulating citizens' demands. The crisis was not merely economic; there was also a growing partisan imbalance, with loyalty to PSOE falling below 70% according to the CIS 7715 survey, whilst Podemos reached 80.6%. This created a large pool of undecided voters for the new parties.

During this same period, Ciudadanos was establishing itself in Catalonia as a moderate, centrist alternative to the two-party system and the nationalist parties, whilst Vox still had only marginal representation, having been founded in 2014 and securing fewer than 250,000 votes and no MEPs in the 2014 European elections (Ministerio de Interior, 2014). Both cases will be analysed in detail in the following section.

4.1.2 Testing hypothesis H1: how strategic innovation determines electoral success

To understand the divergences in the trajectories of Podemos and UPyD, we must first analyse the 15-M movement, which played a crucial role in Spanish politics in the 2010s. The 15-M movement was created in the wake of the cuts imposed by the Zapatero government and public discontent with the corruption scandals facing PP and PSOE. Its slogan, 'They don't represent us', sought to convey the image that Spain's traditional political system was out of step with the concerns of citizens, who were demanding new proposals and political alternatives. Over 70% of citizens viewed it positively, although it garnered more support among left-wing voters and young people (Calvo *et al.*, 2011, CIS 2905). Furthermore, almost 80% of Spaniards believed that this social movement's demands were justified, and three out of four Spaniards believed that it was a 'source of democratic renewal' (Metroscopia, 2011). All this data shows us that this movement enjoyed broad support among the public and that there were issues on which they agreed regardless of their ideology, such as corruption, the economic crisis and democratic renewal.

Podemos employed a two-pronged approach. Firstly, it strategically mobilised key issues such as democratic renewal and corruption, whilst also connecting with the former 15-M Movement, which had rejected the traditional parties (including UPyD). Its focus on these issues was particularly effective given the context in which events such as the Púnica scandal (PP), PSOE (the ERE and Formación cases) and the Gürtel scandal (PP) were unfolding. These cases fostered a widespread perception of political corruption among the public, making its approach timely and effective against the traditional parties, presenting a fresh and alternative image. Secondly, he made strategic use of anti-establishment rhetoric; thus, his most frequently used terms were 'the caste', 'the people' and 'the elites', seeking to create an image of division between the people, whom it represented, and the elites, represented by the traditional parties. They employed a combined strategy of economic radicalism. They focused on the 'right to decide' and an 'increase in the minimum wage' (Podemos Party Manifesto, 2015: 34 and 58). Furthermore, they harshly criticised PSOE and PP.

Podemos' strategic positioning aligns with the concept of populism (Mudde, 2004), according to which the ideology divides society between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'. Furthermore, a large proportion of the electorate was familiar with the Podemos candidate (Pablo Iglesias) through his participation in televised debates, which contributed to his increased popularity. Most voters were familiar with Pablo Iglesias, highlighting the importance of leaders in the success of challenger parties (Torcal *et al.*, 2024). Podemos' voter loyalty rate stood at 80.6% (CIS 7715), a figure higher than that of PP (77.6%) and PSOE (69.4%), demonstrating that this party not only managed to attract voters but also to rapidly build a loyal and committed base, something that other left-wing parties such as IU failed to achieve (49.7%).

In Podemos's election manifesto for the 2015 general election, the term 'people' is mentioned up to fifteen times, using expressions such as 'contract with the people' and 'the audacity of a few and the pain of many', seeking to create a direct connection with the public and to divide society between the elite and the people. In this way, they sought to divide society between the elite, who did not represent the public, and Podemos, who did, in a clear allusion to populism (Mudde, 2004). Furthermore, they spoke of a 'recall referendum', thereby demonstrating their rhetoric and that power lies with the people, not with politicians.

All this linked Podemos to the ideas of the 15-M movement and its slogan 'They do not represent us'. Furthermore, their controversial issues revolve around regeneration and the fight against corruption, proposing to 'guarantee an end to impunity for the corrupt' and to change the functioning of the justice system. The timing of these proposals coincided with data from the CIS, which showed that in March 2015 corruption was the second most important issue for Spaniards (CIS Study 3057).

Podemos's discourse went beyond criticising PP and PSOE, extending to economic, media and institutional powers (Rama *et al.*, 2021). This had a strong impact on disaffected voters, who saw the political class as incapable of managing the consequences of the economic and social crisis (Torreblanca, 2015). The timing was perfect, as trust in political parties had reached critical levels between 2013 and 2014.

Podemos drew on left-wing voters with low levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions (Cordero and Montero, 2015). The extensive media presence of its leader, Pablo Iglesias, contributed to its popularity (Torreblanca, 2015).

The issues raised by Podemos (corruption and democratic renewal) were far more urgent and important to the public in 2015, making the party more attractive to disenchanted voters and successfully mobilising 16.6% of those who had not previously voted, as documented by Orriols and Cordero (2016).

Finally, and seeking to strengthen its anti-austerity stance, Podemos adopted a socio-economic focus, proposing to enshrine social rights such as housing and employment in the Spanish Constitution of 1987 (Podemos Electoral Manifesto, 2015: 9–13,). All these divisive issues sought to undermine the policy proposals and consensus of PP and PSOE and to attack their weak points, which at that time were under siege from multiple corruption scandals such as the Púnica affair, the ERE scandal and the training course scandal. Podemos's polarising and populist rhetoric created a climate of institutional mistrust, in which the public had a minimal level of trust in political parties, standing at an average of 3.19 out of 10 in 2016 (CIS Study 3126).

UPyD focused on proposals for state reform and a single fiscal framework. In doing so, it sought to establish itself as an alternative to PP and PSOE, but not as a replacement, which is why its anti-establishment rhetoric was more limited. With its liberal and progressive policies, it sought to attract moderate voters, predominantly from PP and PSOE. The case of Francisco Sosa Wagner had detrimental effects on UPyD (Arregui, 2014). When the vote was held in the European Parliament to elect Juncker as president, UPyD supported abstention, but Sosa and another MEP voted in favour. Furthermore, Sosa wrote an article in El Mundo in 2014 in which he mentioned that UpyD should free itself from the authoritarian practices that lurk within it and advocated an alliance with Ciudadanos (Sosa Wagner, 2014).

Parties with more robust organisational structures were more effective at mobilising voters and surviving over time (Tavits, 2013). Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive organisation is a vulnerability that can lead to the party's disintegration (Bolleyer, 2013). The Sosa case shows us that UPyD was experiencing serious internal organisational problems, with two MEPs refusing to follow orders from the national leadership—something that did not happen, for example, in PSOE and PP—projecting an image of division and conflict to the electorate, which could reduce its appeal.

UPyD's 2015 Election Manifesto contrasts with that of Podemos. Its tone is not one of 'rupture', but of 'reform' and 'regeneration'. The slogan on its front cover reads: 'Don't ask what will happen, but what you can do'. This appeals to individual responsibility, an approach very different from that of the 'people' in Podemos. One of its main topics of debate is State Reform, proposing: 'UpyD's territorial model is a cooperative federal state. This would involve the decentralisation of powers, the merger of municipalities, a rational funding system and the abolition of the Basque and Navarrese tax agreements' (UPyD Election Manifesto, 2015). In its section on Transparency and the Fight against Corruption, UPyD adopted an institutional and

legalistic approach, without resorting to the emotional language of the 'people' or linking its proposals to the 'pain' of citizens. They do so from an institutional and legalistic perspective, without attempting to connect it to the 'pain' of the public or to the idea that 'a few' have caused most of the problems.

Finally, on the economy, UPyD proposed''Reducing debt, a sustainable model of government. Superfluous spending will be cut at different levels of government: merging town councils, abolishing provincial councils, eliminating regional and municipal bodies' or 'Limiting official cars, representation allowances and mobile phones applicable to the State, the autonomous communities and local authorities'. This approach was intended to be much more technical and less radical than that of Podemos, which, for example, spoke of an increase in the minimum wage or a reduction in the working week. This approach by UPyD, more focused on state reform, may not have aligned with CIS data, which showed that unemployment was consistently one of the main concerns of Spaniards (over 80%) and corruption (around 50%), whilst territorial issues were mentioned less frequently (CIS Studies 2905 and 3057).

UPyD's discourse, which focused more on technical issues and moderation, was less likely to resonate with voters aligned with PP and PSOE. This agenda, centred on democratic renewal, sought to connect with the public's main concerns, as they felt they lacked satisfactory political alternatives. UPyD sought a different approach, adopting a more moderate tone in its discourse, focusing on the reform of the State. It also spoke of democratic regeneration. However, it sought to use descriptive adjectives, without referring to 'pain' or blaming a select few. They sought to reform the system with a more institutional discourse.

With this, we can confirm our H1: rival parties employing the dual strategy of innovation (the use of divisive issues and anti-establishment rhetoric) achieve greater success. UPyD introduced divisive issues such as democratic regeneration, but, as we have seen, it sought to avoid the use of anti-establishment rhetoric.

4.2 Vox and Ciudadanos: strategic coherence and polarisation (2016–2020)

4.2.1 Polarisation and external shocks: The context for the strategic coherence test (2016-2020)

In December 2017, Ciudadanos emerged victorious in the Catalan regional elections; however, this was not enough for the Catalan nationalists to secure an absolute majority. This positioned Ciudadanos as the main constitutionalist party in opposition to the independence movement. In June 2018, a motion of no confidence brought by PSOE against PP (due to the Gürtel ruling) made PSOE's general secretary, Pedro Sánchez, Prime Minister, with the support of Unidas Podemos, nationalist parties and pro-independence parties.

In February 2019, the 'Colón Photo' took place, in which the leaders of PP, Ciudadanos, Vox and UPyD demonstrated together against Pedro Sánchez's policies, particularly in Catalonia, and his policy on pardons. This cemented the image of

these parties as a 'right-wing bloc', which the left derisively referred to as the 'Colón Trio'. This led to greater polarisation and division between the two blocs. By 2019, the context had changed. The key factor was no longer just the economic crisis, but intense polarisation that divided the country into two opposing blocs (left versus right). Furthermore, the Catalan question had become a major divisive issue.

During this same period, Podemos was undergoing its first experience of providing parliamentary support to PSOE, whilst UPyD had drastically reduced its electoral support following its electoral collapse in 2015, when it went from over one million votes (Congreso de los Diputados, 2011) to just over 150,000 votes (Ministerio de Interior, 2015).

4.2.2 Testing H2: Strategic coherence as a predictor of long-term survival

Vox's 2015 election manifesto, entitled 'Your Voice in Parliament', adopts a more moderate and measured tone than that of 2019, yet it remains striking. Thus, on page 5, they state: 'The political regime of the 1978 State of the Autonomies is moribund and obsolete, and has fallen into widespread corruption due to its lack of values, whilst also demonstrating an unacceptable inability to resolve the current problems of an increasingly mature and demanding civil society'. They also state: 'It will tackle widespread corruption and the malfeasance of extractive oligarchies'. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that other measures were more general in nature, such as the references to national sovereignty. Furthermore, on page 10, they even mention the 15-M movement, speaking of a new electoral system: 'Blame for the enormous disconnect between the public and Parliament, publicly expressed through the phrase "they do not represent us" '.

Vox's manifesto for the 2019 general election, entitled '100 Measures for a Vibrant Spain', sought to convey clarity and resolve. By speaking of a 'Vibrant Spain', it sought to connect with a broad section of the public. In its section on Spain, Unity and Sovereignty, it mentions the 'Suspension of Catalan autonomy until the definitive defeat of the coup plotters and the clarification of civil and criminal liabilities' or 'Increased penalties for offences and insults against Spain and its symbols or emblems. No affront to them must go unpunished'. By using the words 'coup plotter' or 'unpunished', it seeks to connect emotionally with voters, attempting to portray a situation of state weakness that must be remedied. Furthermore, it mentions the 'transformation of the autonomous state into a unitary state governed by the rule of law that promotes equality and solidarity rather than privileges and division'.

The language used by Vox is reminiscent of that proposed by Podemos, in the sense of the elites who hold the privileges, whilst Vox defends equality and solidarity, that is to say, the majority. Finally, they propose a different vision of the EU, considering the suspension of the Schengen Area, something contrary to what the traditional parties propose, who advocate 'Suspending the Schengen Area until there is a European guarantee that criminals will not use it to evade justice (as the separatist coup plotters have done)' (Vox Election Manifesto, pages 2 and 3, 2019).

Data from the European Social Survey (González Enríquez and Rinken, 2021) confirmed that Vox had carved out a distinct niche: its voters were ideologically further to the right (an average of 7.15 on a scale of 10) than those of PP (6.58) and were the least supportive of immigration and the EU, demonstrating the effectiveness of its divisive themes. Vox's rhetoric, using words such as 'coup plotters', sought to generate an emotional impact on voters, attempting to project an image of a current system that is unaccountable and ineffective. This contrasts with the more technocratic and moderate rhetoric of the dominant parties, or even Ciudadanos, on these issues.

The divisive issues raised by Vox (the suspension of Catalan autonomy or the Schengen Area) were of vital importance, as they forced PP to reposition itself, presenting itself as a 'soft' party in comparison to Vox, given its more centrist stances on immigration. This helped Vox to attract voters who felt under-represented or disenchanted. Overall, the rhetoric ('enemies of Spain') and the proposed restrictions presented an image of strategic coherence.

Thanks to the role Vox played in relation to the leaders of the independence movement in Catalonia, the party achieved significant media coverage and managed to forge an image as a defender of Spain against the separatists. However, whilst Podemos advocated a federal state and Ciudadanos defended the autonomous regions, Vox promoted their dissolution and sought to consolidate the role of the national state as the governing authority (Rama *et al.*, 2021). Thus, according to CIS 2019a and CIS 2019b, Vox voters stated that the Catalan issue had been the most decisive factor in their voting decision (54.4% and 58.8%), whilst Ciudadanos voters ranked second (36.4% and 44.8%). In this way, the shift in Ciudadanos' rhetoric is reflected in the concerns of its electorate. In contrast, Vox had been advocating for the abolition of autonomy since 2015, so its stance had not changed. Not only that, but Vox spoke of a 'progressive dictatorship' (Ribera Payá and Díaz Martínez, 2020: 15), which helped to create an image of itself as a victim and that the system was against it. Thus, over time, Vox managed to shed its stigma and its image as an outcast, thanks to its prominence in the Catalan issue, which provided it with a 'reputational shield' (Rama *et al.*, 2021, p. 10).

Finally, in the 2018 Andalusian elections, they ended up backing PP against PSOE to ensure a government led by the Popular Party's leader, Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla. Furthermore, this investiture was backed by Vox, which managed to enter a regional parliament for the first time. This led to Ciudadanos being viewed as a right-wing party. This culminated in the 'Colón photo', where Ciudadanos, Vox and PP appeared at the same event opposing Pedro Sánchez's (PSOE) government. This demonstration in February 2019 consolidated the perception of a 'right-wing bloc' and weakened Ciudadanos' image as a key party between PP and PSOE.

The Ciudadanos 2015 Election Manifesto (pages 3–4) discusses 'The reasons why the 1978 Constitution was a success', stating that 'Spain has never made such progress in civic coexistence, social welfare and openness to the world'. These words sought moderation and understanding, not populist confrontation. 'It is not a question of changing the system, but of improving how it works'. This clashes radically with the

rhetoric of Podemos and Vox, who speak of elites oppressing citizens, which is why they are at odds with the system.

However, Ciudadanos proposes reforms, not its dismantling. Its first section was entitled 'Democratic and Institutional Regeneration', which demonstrates its centrality. In its economic section, on page 23, it states: 'It is about change, about reforms. We have suffered from corruption for too many years. But it is about doing so sensibly'. In this way, it seeks to avoid populist rhetoric, appealing to moderation and a regenerative discourse. Even so, on page 58, it uses anti-establishment rhetoric: 'Ciudadanos rejects both the defeatist immobility of the right and the dirigisme of the left'. Ciudadanos voters were closer to the centre (Rama *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, they exhibited higher levels of perceived political corruption and lower levels of trust in politics than traditional PP voters (Orriols and Cordero, 2016).

This contrasts with what happened following the April 2019 elections, when Ciudadanos imposed a cordon sanitaire on PSOE and opted to govern in a majority coalition with PP, positioning it as the preferred partner for electoral pacts. For example, in Madrid (both the city and the autonomous community), Murcia and Castile and León, this left PSOE dependent on Podemos and IU, unlike, for instance, in Andalusia in 2015, where PSOE formed a pact with Ciudadanos to avoid any alliance with those affected by its identity, a decision that proved fatal. This resulted in its transformation from a key party into one aligned with PP, a move evident at the Colón demonstration. This created an inconsistency in its rhetoric, as it criticised the 'old parties', refused to facilitate a new government and competed directly with PP. Furthermore, Ciudadanos sought to be an alternative to PP and PSOE, but PP positioned itself as a more viable alternative among voters, and Vox as a more radical platform (McGovern, 2025). Furthermore, in an increasingly polarised context, its centrist and reformist rhetoric clashed with the more inflammatory rhetoric of parties such as Vox, which used stronger terms such as 'enemies of Spain' or represented the 'Spain that gets up early'. This caused deep divisions within the party, leading to the departure of Toni Roldán, Francisco de la Torre and Javier Nart (although the latter remained as an MEP). This left the progressive wing of the party feeling marginalised, and in the repeat elections of 2019, Ciudadanos plummeted from 57 seats to 10.

In Ciudadanos' election manifesto of 28 April 2019, on the front page, Article 1 adopts an aggressive tone, stating: 'We cannot continue to tolerate Torra (former president of Catalonia) and the separatists using public institutions to sow hatred and conflict amongst Catalans. We will therefore immediately propose the application of Article 155'. And it continues in Article 2: 'We will improve the instruments to protect Spaniards from *coups d'état* in the 21st century. Not a single euro of public money will be used to fund any activity linked to the separatist process'. And it continues in Article 3: 'It is unacceptable that public money should be used to fund separatist propaganda and the expenses of Puigdemont and the other ministers who have fled abroad to evade justice'. On page 2, Article 6, they continue: 'We will put an end to nationalist indoctrination in schools'. In Article 9, they state: 'We will reform the Electoral Law to make it fairer and more equitable, so that Spain does not depend on those who wish to break it up'. These proposals stand in stark contrast to Ciudadanos in 2015, when we

saw a more moderate and technocratic tone. In 2019, with the Catalan independence crisis, we see how Ciudadanos has become more radical in its rhetoric.

In November 2019, Ciudadanos' manifesto maintained a tone similar to that of April, confirming that the most significant shift in discourse occurred between 2015 and 2019, not within the election year itself. In Article 221, they propose something similar to that of April: 'We will apply Article 155 until the restoration of the Constitution in Catalonia is guaranteed, to ensure security and peaceful coexistence among all Catalans, as well as respect for the law and court rulings. We cannot continue to tolerate Torra and the separatists using public institutions to sow hatred and confrontation amongst Catalans. We will immediately re-establish control over the Generalitat's accounts. We will ensure that not a single euro of public money is used to fund any activity linked to the separatist process'. And in Article 222, 'We will improve the instruments to protect Spaniards from coup d'états in the 21st century'. As we can see, the tone and form between April and November 2019 are similar in state measures, indicating that the most significant change occurred in comparison with 2015, not in 2019.

In Ciudadanos's election manifesto, we find proposal number 25: 'Greater police presence on the streets to combat rising insecurity', number 27: 'Repeat offenders will go to prison' and, finally, number 35: 'A single education system, not 17'. However, we observe substantial differences in tone and style between Ciudadanos and Vox. The latter party used terms that resonated emotionally with the electorate, such as 'unpunished' or 'criminals'. We see that Ciudadanos adopts a more moderate tone and puts forward more moderate proposals. These are the proposals of a traditional governing party, not of an opposition party seeking to break with the system.

Whilst Ciudadanos sent mixed signals to the electorate—such as vetoing PSOE and proclaiming itself a regenerative force, whilst simultaneously blocking the formation of a new government—Vox sent a clearer and more radical message. This message resonated with an increasingly polarised electorate that valued real alternatives to traditional parties. Thus, within the context of left- and right-wing blocs, a party that neither defined itself nor was seen as a viable option

viable option among voters was perceived as unreliable and irrelevant. This comparison highlights the importance of employing not only a dual innovation strategy, but also maintaining strategic consistency.

To test our H2, we will present our empirical evidence. In its 2015 manifesto, Vox described the '1978 autonomous regional political regime' as 'moribund and obsolete'. It pledged to tackle the 'widespread corruption and embezzlement of funds by extractive oligarchies'. In its 2019 manifesto, which it repeated in both elections, Vox proposed the 'suspension of Catalan autonomy until the coup d'état is decisively defeated'. Furthermore, as a divisive issue, it proposed the 'suspension of the Schengen Area' until it is guaranteed that it will not be used 'by criminals to evade justice (as the separatist coup plotters have done)'. Furthermore, the European Social Survey placed its voters further to the right, with an average of 7.15 out of 10, with its voters being the least supportive of immigration and the EU. In this way, they maintained

consistency between the divisive issues they raised and the demands of their voters. Not only that, but since the inauguration of PP leader in Andalusia in 2018, Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla, they have systematically supported PP and Ciudadanos governments in Madrid, Castile and León, and Murcia through pacts and alliances, demonstrating their resounding rejection of the left.

In 2015, Ciudadanos cited the 'reasons for the success of the 1978 Constitution' and sought a tone of 'moderation and understanding'. Their aim was to reform the system, not to abolish it. They therefore sought to be an alternative to PP and PSOE. In 2019, their tone changed: 'We will no longer tolerate public institutions being used to sow hatred' or 'Let's put an end to indoctrination'. This shift occurred mainly between 2015 and 2019, whilst the 2019 elections remained similar. This demonstrates an inconsistency in their actions. In 2015, Ciudadanos reached an agreement with PSOE to allow Susana Díaz to govern, but in 2019 it promoted a cordon sanitaire around PSOE and favoured PP as its preferred partner. Participation in the 'Colón demonstration' in February 2019 alongside Vox and PP cemented the perception of a right-wing bloc. This had organisational consequences, causing internal rifts and the resignations of Toni Roldán and Francisco de la Torre. Consequently, Ciudadanos went from 57 seats in April 2019 to 10 in November 2019. Vox, for its part, went from 24 to 52, achieving its best-ever result.

The difference between the trajectories of Vox and Ciudadanos between 2015 and 2019 shows how divergences in strategic coherence translate into different electoral results. To systematise this comparison and demonstrate the empirical power of our framework, we present below a structured analysis that evaluates both parties across the three dimensions of coherence (see Table II).

TABLE II: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC COHERENCE EUROPEAN IMPLICATIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL LESSONS

Análisis comparativo de la coherencia estratégica (Vox vs. Ciudadanos, 2015-2019)

Dimensión	VOX	Ciudadanos
1. Coherencia discursiva	Alta: El discurso de 2019 es una radicalización consistente de la crítica antiautonómica ya presente en 2015.	Baja: Cambio radical de un discurso centrista y reformista ("mejorar el sistema") en 2015 a un discurso de bloque de derechas y confrontación en 2019.
2. Coherencia de acción	Alta: Rechazo consistente a los pactos con la izquierda y apoyo excluzivo a gobiernos de derecha desde su aparición.	Baja: Cambio en los socios preferidos, del pacto de 2015/16 con el PSOE al "cordon sanitario" de 2019 y la "foto de Colón" con la derecha.
3. Coherencia programática	Alto: Las propuestas clave sobre la unidad nacional, la inmigración y la UE en 2019 son una evolución lógica y más dura de su plataforma original.	Bajo: El enfoque de linea dura sobre Cataluña en el programa de 2019 contradice la imagen moderada y de "búsqueda de consenso" proyectada en 2015

5 European implications and transnational lessons

The dynamics of strategic coherence identified in the Spanish case are not unique to the Iberian Peninsula, but rather reflect broader patterns of behaviour among rival parties in European democracies facing similar structural pressures. The post-2008 crisis period generated similar opportunities for political entrepreneurship in southern Europe, providing multiple testing grounds for assessing how strategic coherence affects the long-term survival of parties and democratic stability. Syriza's trajectory in Greece offers a particularly illustrative contrast to the Spanish cases. Initially coherent in its anti-austerity message and consistent in its rejection of the Troika's policies, Syriza achieved spectacular electoral success. However, the impact of government forced the party into strategic incoherence as it had to implement the very austerity measures against which it had campaigned. This shift from coherent opposition to incoherent governance illustrates how external pressures can force rival parties to abandon their identity, which ultimately leads to electoral decline and democratic fragmentation. In this way, these parties lose their identity and may be challenged by dominant parties, which can argue that their opponents make mistakes and are not superior, seeking a position of equilibrium.

The pattern of strategic incoherence observed in rival parties in southern Europe has broader implications for democratic resilience. When rival parties lack strategic coherence, they become sources of systemic volatility rather than channels for democratic renewal. This creates a paradox: the very parties that emerge to address democratic deficits may exacerbate political instability through their inconsistent behaviour. This pattern can generate deep political disaffection across various sections of the electorate. For example, in the 2015 general election, Podemos secured a fifth of the votes that had been cast as abstentions in 2011 (Orriols and Cordero, 2016). However, since 2016, its share of the vote has repeatedly declined.

This may result in these parties failing to fully address democratic deficits and creating new challenges among voters due to instability and strategic inconsistency. There are several patterns of strategic incoherence to consider: discrepancies between the party's message and its actions, sudden shifts in messaging, unexpected changes in alliances, varying electoral pacts, and internal party fractures and divisions. These indicators could help identify when rival parties are shifting from being agents of democratic renewal to sources of systemic instability. The case of Podemos in government offers a particularly clear example of how external pressures can generate strategic incoherence. The upheaval of governing in a coalition created an irreconcilable tension between the party's original aim of representing anti-establishment sentiment and its new objective of maintaining a stable governing alliance.

6 From the lessons of the Spanish case to European applications: A set of predictive tools for political risk

The pattern of Ciudadanos (high coherence → incoherence → collapse) compared to Vox (sustained coherence → consolidation) allows us to establish that strategic

coherence predicts not only electoral survival, but also its impact on the stability of the system. The case of Ciudadanos was no coincidence, but a specific process: first, it achieved initial consistency (2015–2017), during which it established itself as a pivotal party between PSOE and PP, enabling it to make electoral gains. Subsequently, the shocking motion of no confidence (June 2018) → veto by PSOE → Andalusian elections (December 2018) → PP-Ciudadanos pact → 'Colón Photo' (February 2019) → electoral collapse (November 2019) forced it to make decisions that altered its original image, resulting in systemic incoherence that led to its electoral failure in November 2019.

The case of Ciudadanos allows us to create a predictive model: when rival parties face external shocks that force them to choose between their original image and their power objectives, strategic coherence predicts whether they will survive this tension. Vox strengthened its coherence due to the Catalan crisis, and PSOE government maintained its anti-establishment rhetoric against left-wing and pro-independence parties. Ciudadanos lost its original identity when it had to abandon its centrist stance and was forced to form a pact with PP.

This predictive capacity is valuable for assessing democratic risks, as it predicts not only electoral outcomes but also the risks to the democratic stability of the system. A distinction can be made between parties' temporary tactical adjustments and actions that do not entail a significant change from their original proposals. For example, Vox's abstention in votes on PP motions sends a message to its electorate that it does not always support the party, but rather represents a temporary shift in certain circumstances.

Democratic renewal refers to when rival parties channel discontent through institutional mechanisms, maintaining strategic coherence. Systemic fragmentation occurs when incoherent parties generate electoral volatility without offering stable alternatives. In this way, we can distinguish between contending parties that contribute to democratic renewal and those that generate fragmentation of the system. For example, Podemos (2014–2016) initially represented democratic renewal, channelling the discontent of the 15-M movement towards electoral participation, maintaining consistency in its anti-austerity discourse and finally entering into a coalition with PSOE in 2020. Ciudadanos (2018–2019) represented systemic fragmentation; its strategic inconsistency caused polarisation by failing to offer a stable alternative, which led to greater electoral volatility.

A party's strategic coherence becomes more predictive depending on its life cycle. During the initial phases of growth, structural factors such as economic or social crises may be more important than strategic coherence. Thus, rival parties find ways to penetrate the system through their message during times of structural crisis such as COVID-19 or the 2008 economic crisis. However, once rival parties have secured significant representation, strategic coherence becomes one of the key factors in understanding long-term survival. This threshold is reached when parties have secured national representation in two consecutive elections, demonstrating organisational consolidation and institutional integration.

There are operational indicators and implementation criteria.

- Firstly, discursive coherence: establishing specific metrics to measure narrative coherence. For example, the frequency of references to 'elite vs. the people', the stability of key divisive issues, and consistency in the use of anti-establishment rhetoric across different electoral platforms. This can be observed with Vox between 2015 and 2019, where it systematically referred to 'coup plotters' and 'enemies of Spain', whilst Ciudadanos shifted from moderate rhetoric in 2015 to a more aggressive discourse in 2019. For example, when a party increases its anti-establishment references by more than 30% between consecutive electoral platforms, this may serve as an early warning sign. This figure indicates a significant change over a short period of time, which may signal a fundamental departure from the party's brand.
- Secondly, consistency of action: Developing criteria to assess the alignment between discourse and strategic decisions. The case of Ciudadanos offers an example of inconsistency of action. Its brand was based on maintaining an equal distance from PSOE and PP. If it took actions that contradicted this equidistance, this could constitute a potential inconsistency. The sequence veto→alliance→photo demonstrates how the accumulation of decisions can systematically undermine a party's founding identity. Changes in alliances that directly contradict founding positions are likely to carry more weight than political commitments within ideological boundaries. Furthermore, there is a timeframe of between 12 and 18 months, as observed in the case of Ciudadanos, which can be generalised as the minimum period required to suggest a contradiction.
- Thirdly, programmatic consistency: creating protocols to track the evolution of fundamental political proposals. Whilst Vox maintained consistent anti-establishment proposals between 2015 and 2019, Ciudadanos shifted from moderation to radicalisation, laying the groundwork for the creation of protocols. A right-wing party such as Vox has core issues centred on immigration or nationalism, very different from those raised by left-wing parties such as Podemos, which focuses more on economic and social discourse, such as the reduction of the working week. To distinguish between political evolution and contradictions that undermine fundamental positioning, it is established that changes to policy proposals should not exceed 25%.
- Fourthly, risk level typology: Develop a risk scale (low/moderate/high) based on the degrees of inconsistency observed. This allows for a systematic prospective assessment. Thus, for parties in a breakaway phase (0–2 national elections).

Based on the empirical analysis of the cases studied, we propose the following weightings:

- Discursive coherence: 50% (most visible to the electorate)
- Programmatic consistency: 35% (defines differentiation)
- Consistency of action: 15% (they have few opportunities to act)

For established parties (3 or more national elections):

- Consistency of action: 45% (their decisions have real consequences)

– Discursive coherence: 30% (they already have an established brand)
– Programmatic consistency: 25% (expected natural evolution)

Therefore, to calculate the final score across the three dimensions, we would use: Total strategic coherence = (Discourse coherence × weighting) + (Action coherence × weighting) + (Programmatic coherence × weighting). We present the example of Ciudadanos in July 2018: Discursive coherence: 0.7 (moderate changes), Action coherence: 0.5 (PSOE's veto contradicts the policy of neutrality), Programmatic coherence: 0.8 (few changes so far). Total score: 0.64 = Moderate risk.

The practical application of the proposed framework can be seen in the Democratic Risk Assessment Matrix (see Table III), which allows qualitative observations to be converted into quantitative scores. This matrix not only applies different weightings depending on the party's stage of development, but also establishes specific thresholds that enable crises of credibility to be anticipated with temporal precision.

TABLE III: LEVEL OF CONSISTENCY OF ACTION



Based on the patterns observed in the cases analysed, we will establish the following indicative thresholds:

Low Risk Level (Score 0.8–1.0): The party maintains consistency across all dimensions. Variations of less than 15% in discursive metrics, with no significant programmatic contradictions and consistency between discourse and actions.

Moderate Risk Level (Score 0.6–0.79): Inconsistencies appear in one dimension. For example, changes of 15–30% in anti-establishment references or initial decisions that contradict the founding discourse.

High Risk Level (Score 0.4–0.59): Systematic inconsistency across two dimensions. The case of Ciudadanos in June 2018 would be as follows: discursive shift + contradictory decisions.

Risk of Collapse (Score <0.4): Deterioration across all three dimensions simultaneously. Ciudadanos in February 2019 exemplifies this level.

Finally, we have the Operational Monitoring Protocol:

Critical assessment points: Immediately after elections, during major political crises, before forming coalitions, and every six months during periods of stability.

Trigger indicators: When a rival party changes allies, when there are significant deficiencies within the party, when positions on key issues shift, or when major external shocks occur.

The mechanisms described remain in force in various European countries. Our framework transcends European institutional differences and retains its predictive power. This is due to universal psychological and cognitive mechanisms that operate independently of the specific political context. Power is therefore based on three cognitive processes that operate regularly in European democracies.

Firstly, discursive coherence: Voters' processing of cognitive coherence. Human beings, regardless of their culture or beliefs, seek a psychological need for coherence. When a party promises a policy during a campaign but fails to deliver on it, it creates a cognitive debt with voters. This is independent of whether the electoral system is proportional or first-past-the-post, as coherence is reduced.

Secondly, consistency of action: The building of trust based on predictability. Voters develop trust in political parties based on their past actions. As Ciudadanos shifted from forming a pact with PSOE and PP to forming a pact with PP, the predictability of Ciudadanos' actions diminished. This works in the same way in other countries, as voters want to be able to predict what parties will do.

Thirdly, the perception of authenticity versus betrayal: Rival parties build their image by trying to be 'different' and 'authentic'.

When they fail to deliver on these promises, mechanisms of betrayal are triggered among voters, which may remind them that these parties are not so different from the traditional ones. This can be seen in the reaction of Syriza's Greek voters to the austerity measures imposed by their parties.

In systems with greater tolerance for political ambiguity, the thresholds are adjusted by multiplying them by a factor of 0.8.

In more confrontational cultures, the reference thresholds are maintained.

This allows threats to democratic stability to be identified and monitored in their early stages, when the capacity to prevent them is still effective. The transferability of this framework to different European institutional contexts makes it a standardised tool for comparative risk assessment, enabling a distinction to be drawn between normal electoral shifts and genuine systemic deterioration. In a European context

where rival parties are gaining increasing support and popularity, this framework provides the analytical basis necessary to distinguish agents of democratic renewal from potential sources of systemic fragmentation.

7 Conclusions

This article has analysed the different trajectories of four challenging Spanish parties between 2012 and 2020, identifying the factors that explain their divergent electoral results and their impact on democratic stability and the institutional system.

With regard to H1, the analysis of Podemos and UPyD confirms that parties which effectively apply the dual innovation strategy achieve significant electoral support. Podemos connected with citizens' main concerns, including the fight against corruption, mobilising abstentionist voters. UPyD opted for a more technical discourse, which garnered some support initially but did not resonate with the same intensity among a deeply disenchanted electorate.

Regarding H2, the comparison between Vox and Ciudadanos has shown that strategic consistency predicts long-term consolidation.

Vox maintained consistency between its discourse, proposals and alliances. Ciudadanos broke with its founding principles, shifting from centrism and political balance to an alignment closer to the right, which led to its electoral collapse between April and November 2019.

These results have implications beyond the specific Spanish case analysed. The proposed predictive framework, based on three dimensions of coherence and early warning thresholds, offers a replicable tool for assessing political risk in European democracies facing similar crises and pressures.

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Technology and armed conflict: the transformation of war in the 21st century

Abstract

In recent decades, warfare has undergone a profound transformation driven by digitalisation and rapid technological development. These advances have not only altered the operational capabilities of states, but have also changed the global dynamics of security and defence. Technology has redefined the theatre of war, giving rise to conflicts that transcend conventional means and demand a reconfiguration of military tactical and operational strategies. In this context, the concept of hybrid warfare has emerged, characterised by the combination of traditional and unconventional tactics, including cyber operations, disinformation and attacks on critical infrastructure. This new paradigm seeks to exploit systemic vulnerabilities and destabilise states without necessarily resorting to direct confrontation. As a result, cybersecurity and cyber defence have become essential pillars of contemporary defence policies. International institutions, such as the European Union, have recognised the urgency of strengthening their resilience in the face of these emerging threats, developing comprehensive strategies that integrate technology, intelligence and international cooperation to protect global stability and security. In short, the digital age has redefined the very nature of warfare and international security.

Keywords

Hybrid threats, Defence, National Security Strategy, European Union, Grey zone.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, we have witnessed a profound transformation in the way war is conceived and waged, driven mainly by digitalisation and rapid technological advancement and development. This evolution has not only altered countries' operational capabilities but has also led to a significant shift in global security and defence dynamics.

In an increasingly multipolar and competitive international context, new actors—both state and non-state—have emerged, employing novel and innovative unconventional mechanisms and tools capable of disrupting the *status quo* and destabilising the foundations of modern societies. This phenomenon undoubtedly has a direct impact on the defence and security sphere, leading to a reconfiguration of military tactical and operational strategies and generating new forms of conflict that go beyond conventional means.

One of the most obvious manifestations of this evolution and transformation in the way war is waged is the emergence of a new arena in these conflicts: cyberspace. Far from being confined to traditional battlefields, modern conflicts are now also taking place in the digital realm, with the advent of cyberspace and the use of emerging technologies. Consequently, the cyber domain has become a key element of armed conflict, with the capacity to destabilise, influence or undermine a country's critical infrastructure or information systems, as we are witnessing in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. This reality has led to the modernisation of conflict and the transformation of a country's defence strategy and organisation, characterised not only by conventional military tactics but also by the inclusion of digital mechanisms and tools.

This new paradigm of armed conflict falls within the concept of *hybrid warfare* (HW), which combines numerous techniques and methods with the aim of exploiting a country's potential systemic vulnerabilities. At the heart of this new form of warfare lies the cyberspace arena, which has taken on a prominent role in recent years, where the identification and attribution of actions is particularly challenging. In this scenario, traditional military strategies are combined with new technological mechanisms, giving rise to the modernisation of conflict and the so-called HW; consequently, the actual response capacity of international institutions, in particular the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), in the face of hybrid threats that combine military action, information warfare and cyberattacks

Therefore, this article begins with a specific research question: to what extent has the war in Ukraine altered the understanding and design of European defence against hybrid threats and cyberattacks? Based on this question, it is argued that the conflict has revealed both the strategic value of technology and the limits of the institutional responses of the EU and NATO. The significance of the Ukrainian case lies not only in its military dimension, but in its ability to demonstrate how the combination of cyberattacks, disinformation, electronic warfare and technological innovation alters the traditional logic of conflict and forces a rethinking of defence frameworks.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative documentary analysis approach based on institutional, strategic and academic sources. The corpus analysed includes EU security and cybersecurity strategies, NATO strategic documents, specialist reports and recent literature on hybrid warfare, disinformation, military innovation and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

In this vein, the study is structured as an illustrative case study centred on Ukraine, used to draw broader implications regarding the contemporary transformation of warfare and the adaptation of European defence. To this end, the analysis is organised into four main dimensions: cyberspace, disinformation, technological innovation and the institutional response. This approach allows for a comparison of the strategic discourse of the EU and NATO with the empirical evidence from the conflict and identifies gaps between normative ambition and operational capability.

The selection of documents was based on their strategic relevance, topicality and direct relationship to the subject of study.

3 Defence in cyberspace

It is important to note that, in Spain, both the 2018 National Security Strategy and the 2019 National Cybersecurity Strategy have warned of the rise of so-called hybrid threats. Based on these documents, hybrid threats should be understood as deliberate actions aimed at exploiting the systemic vulnerabilities of a democratic state and its institutions, through the use of a variety of methods, including conventional military operations, disinformation campaigns or cyberattacks.

The EU has promoted various measures and initiatives to strengthen its capabilities against cyber threats; however, the crucial issue is not merely the existence of these instruments, but their actual degree of coordination, implementation and operational effectiveness in the face of complex and persistent attacks.

Among these, it is worth highlighting the proposal for a common cybersecurity certification framework, the modernisation of the EU's Cybersecurity Agency (ENISA), as well as the promotion of cooperation between Member States and EU agencies in the event of cyberattacks. In this context, we also see the development of a specific training and education platform with the primary aim of enhancing collaboration on joint cyber defence efforts.

In fact, in 2020, the European Commission, together with the European External Action Service (EEAS), unveiled a new Cybersecurity Strategy for the EU. The main purpose of this new strategy is to strengthen Europe's resilience in the face of growing cyber threats. The proposal includes specific proposals, which are geared towards the implementation of regulatory, operational and investment measures.

Subsequently, in 2021, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on this cybersecurity strategy, emphasising that cybersecurity is an essential and indispensable element in ensuring a resilient, digital and sustainable Europe. Within this framework,

EU ministers established as a priority the achievement of strategic autonomy without compromising other aspects such as the economy, thereby enabling them to strengthen digital leadership and, consequently, increase their strategic capacity in the field of cybersecurity.

With all this in mind, we observe that the development of resilience against hostile actions in cyberspace depends to a large extent on coordination between actors, in this case between the Member States and other international organisations, with particular emphasis on cooperation with NATO.

In this context, NATO set out a strategy as early as 2015 to combat hybrid threats, focusing its efforts on both political and military adaptation. These initiatives were discussed and received a favourable response, culminating in various agreements following the 2016 Warsaw Summit, which regarded hybrid warfare as a real threat against which deterrence mechanisms must be strengthened, whilst promoting preparedness and defence (Gutiérrez, 2021). We can therefore state that it was NATO that began to lay the foundations for countering hostile actions carried out in cyberspace, which have great potential to damage and undermine the integrity of a state.

At the summit held in Madrid in 2022, the issue of hybrid threats was addressed once again, prompted by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, where the strategic potential of hybrid threats is evident even in a context of armed conflict, with the consequent Russian threat to Euro-Atlantic stability.

In short, in the face of this unstable context, the EU and NATO are charting a course towards strategic autonomy, guided by two key documents: firstly, the Strategic Compass, which is an action plan for 2030, and secondly, the Atlantic Alliance's New Strategic Concept. Both instruments address current challenges and commit to a more robust and coordinated common defence.

At this point, one of the main tensions within the European framework emerges: regulatory progress does not always translate into a uniform response capacity among Member States.

4 The grey zone strategy

Conflicts within the grey zone (GZ) represent one of the most characteristic forms of contemporary confrontation, precisely because they allow strategic objectives to be achieved without the need to unleash open warfare (Gutiérrez, 2021). This reality has numerous implications for the planning and execution of military operations at all levels of the conflict. Its analytical value lies in the fact that it effectively explains the ambiguity, gradual nature and difficulty of attribution that characterise many of today's hybrid operations.

The first consensus-based approach to this concept is framed *in the negative*, that is, as the use of attitudes and instruments that are neither 'white' like peace, nor 'black' like open warfare, whether hybrid or conventional. In other words, it is an

intermediate scenario referred to as 'grey', which can be considered a *sui generis* variant of hybrid warfare (Baqués, 2017).

We therefore speak of GZ when the scenario of hostile activities does not involve direct armed confrontation, but rather the use of mechanisms with sufficient destructive potential to destabilise a country, such as disinformation tactics, the use of hybrid threats or cyberattacks. These actions, which do not involve physical violence, are becoming increasingly frequent, although it cannot be ruled out that these hostile operations and their development over time may ultimately escalate into an armed conflict.

GZ strategies are carried out with the aim of achieving a similar objective to that of initiating an armed conflict; in short, this strategy relies on technological evolution acting as a multiplier, yet without crossing the threshold that would justify a traditional military response. The effectiveness of these tactics, therefore, lies in their capacity to cause harm, coupled with the difficulty of detection, attribution and a timely response.

In fact, the *Multinational Capability Development Campaign* (MCDC) states that actors employing these strategies do so in a coordinated manner using various instruments of power, which are tailored to exploit the specific vulnerabilities of the target country.

The purpose of GZ actions is to carry out initiatives designed to be executed without being detected, going unnoticed and/or not justifying a military reaction due to their low profile, yet which nevertheless have the potential to cause significant real-world effects. Indeed, on occasions, even when the attack is identified, it is difficult to attribute responsibility for it.

In any case, when an actor opts to employ the GZ strategy, they are aware that results will not be achieved immediately, but rather that this is a long-term goal, where the concept of 'strategic gradualism' may be invoked, even serving as a precursor to open warfare (Baqués, 2017).

For all these reasons, it is clear that among the main challenges of defence in the GZ are the lack of clarity regarding the nature of the conflict, the difficulty in precisely identifying the parties involved, as well as the uncertainty surrounding the application of relevant public policies or legal frameworks (Silva, 2022). Thus, the role of the cognitive environment is fundamental to this strategy, as social and international perceptions can influence the situation; consequently, it is necessary to control information in order to achieve superiority in this domain (Gutiérrez, 2021). It follows that, in order to respond effectively to these threats within the GZ environment, it is essential to have centralised and coordinated planning, as well as resilient structures and a strategic vision for the armed forces that enables the early and effectiv tion of and response to such attacks.

However, the concept of the GZ also has explanatory limitations when applied to high-intensity conflicts, where hybrid operations coexist with large-scale conventional attacks.

5 The new paradigm of warfare

The rapid advancement of technologies, converging with an increasingly digitalised world, has brought about profound transformations in all areas of society, as well as in the field of defence and security (Rodríguez, *et al.*, 2023). This technological evolution as a transformative factor has led to the inclusion of new digital tools such as autonomous systems, artificial intelligence (AI), predictive analytics and cybersecurity, amongst others, which directly affect the security and defence sector, redefining not only existing threats but also the strategies and capabilities required to counter them.

In this context, these emerging technologies have come to play a central role in shaping states' strategic capabilities, as well as in the conduct of warfare; examples of this include the use of cyberattacks, armed drones, or AI itself applied to intelligence analysis and military operations, which illustrate how contemporary conflicts are fought in increasingly complex and digitised scenarios, generating a paradigm shift in which technological superiority can be a decisive factor on the battlefield.

That is to say, technological advancement not only transforms the tools available to ensure a state's security and defence but, in parallel, also entails the need to rethink organisational and regulatory frameworks to ensure optimal capabilities for managing these new environments, requiring a clear multidisciplinary approach.

This rapid technological progress has substantially altered the understanding of armed conflicts, giving rise to the concept of HW, a term widely adopted by the international defence community (Franco, 2023), to describe a situation of confrontation that combines elements of conventional warfare with the new tools of the cyber domain. In other words, it helps us understand how technology expands and diversifies the instruments of coercion available to state and non-state actors.

Unlike traditional armed conflicts, which unfold primarily in a physical theatre through direct military operations, HW integrates multiple dimensions, including military, political, informational and cyber. Thus, alongside traditional actions, tactics such as cyberattacks or disinformation are deployed to destabilise the adversary without resorting exclusively to the explicit use of force.

Consequently, the use of these new technologies leads to a paradigm shift in the nature of war, where physical boundaries become blurred. HW typically unfolds in a complex environment involving actors employing more sophisticated techniques, where it can be difficult to attribute responsibility for actions, and where, as a result, more traditional legal and strategic responses are often insufficient.

This implies that contemporary warfare can no longer be analysed solely from the perspective of kinetic conflict, but also from the capacity to influence information systems, digital networks, public perception and institutional resilience.

Consequently, this transformation poses significant challenges for International Humanitarian Law, as well as for Public International Law in general. An example of this is the case of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which represents a

paradigmatic case for reflecting on the key role played by technologies in shaping and developing contemporary warfare.

Therefore, the Ukrainian case not only illustrates the technological transformation of warfare, but also the need to rethink the doctrinal, legal and strategic frameworks through which armed conflict is interpreted.

Beyond the geopolitical and humanitarian dimensions of the conflict, Ukrainian territory has become a veritable theatre of operations where new forms of warfare are being tested and refined, based on the primary—and indeed central—use of the digital tools and mechanisms provided by emerging technologies.

This conflict has highlighted how new technologies have been integrated into military strategy alongside traditional strategies, acquiring significant relevance, ranging from attacks on critical infrastructure to the dissemination of disinformation campaigns and the manipulation of public opinion on a global scale.

This reality makes Ukraine not only a theatre of armed conflict, but also a technological laboratory for innovation in security and defence, where various actors—both state and non-state—are testing emerging technologies in the real-world context of war. This situation raises numerous fundamental questions regarding the ethics and use of technologies, as well as their regulation and long-term consequences when applied to such highly hostile scenarios and, in particular, with a view to future conflicts.

In short, it is worth emphasising that, in this context—as is the case in Ukraine—it is clearly illustrated how 21st-century warfare has ceased to be a phenomenon confined exclusively to the physical battlefield, becoming instead a complex, multidimensional scenario where technological supremacy can be an indicator of effective resilience in the face of conflict.

6 Defence Innovation: A Reflection of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine

The digital transformation currently sweeping the contemporary world, as we have seen, has had a direct impact on the security and defence sectors, altering traditional ways of conceiving, planning and executing armed conflicts.

In this new scenario, war is no longer limited territorially on the physical plane, but extends into the realms of cyberspace, information and technological dominance. And the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as a concrete expression of this change, allows us to clearly observe how technology has positioned itself as a key element in the development of the armed conflict between these countries.

This confrontation reflects how armed conflicts are capable of effectively combining traditional weaponry with disruptive emerging technologies. Both countries have resorted to conventional means, such as armoured vehicles or heavy artillery, whilst simultaneously integrating innovative technologies, such as unmanned vehicles, AI systems, coordinated cyberattacks and advanced digital surveillance tools. This fusion

of tactics clearly demonstrates the hybrid nature of current conflicts and highlights the transformation of military strategy at a global level.

In this vein, the statements made at the start of the conflict by Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Digital Transformation, via his social media channels, reveal a vision that highlights the crucial role of new technologies. In these statements, he asserted that the country's future victory would depend not only on the courage of the population, but on the strategic use of new technologies. These remarks are not merely a political message, but a statement of principle regarding the role that technological advances play in modern warfare, where superiority no longer depends solely on troop numbers or conventional weaponry, but on the ability to integrate information, technology and command under conditions of high uncertainty.

Ukraine has succeeded in significantly enhancing both its defensive and offensive capabilities through the use and integration of technologies on the battlefield, making its experience a relevant case study , particularly for Europe. This conflict has highlighted the fundamental role played by technology and innovation in the defence sector, demonstrating rapid adaptation to the new landscape of modern warfare. This profound transformation in the way war is waged has therefore altered the structure and operations of armed forces. In this context, the Ukrainians' experience of the conflict offers valuable lessons on how to optimise response capabilities, including resources and means, through the integration of emerging technologies—such as drones, AI, electronic warfare, etc.—in a high-intensity conflict. This is key to strengthening national security and redefining the collective defence strategy at the European level.

Indeed, Ukraine has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for technological adaptation throughout the conflict, drawing further on direct collaboration with leading Western high-tech companies such as Palantir, Clearview AI, Delta and GIS ARTA, amongst others. Undoubtedly, these public-private partnerships have facilitated the use of advanced technology-based solutions, which have been crucial at certain moments from a military intelligence perspective, effectively contributing to tactical and operational strategy on the battlefield. This technological ecosystem has provided Ukraine with a significant adaptive advantage based on rapid response capability.

For example, Palantir is software that enables information superiority; that is, it has allowed Ukrainian forces to obtain real-time data analysis, which has facilitated a marked improvement in decision-making, acting as a force multiplier that has increased the military's effectiveness and combat potential. Meanwhile, Clearview AI has provided advanced capabilities for the reconnaissance and identification of combatants. For its part, Delta is software that enables real-time mapping of the front line's progress. Consequently, this programme has enabled the efficient coordination of military units, even in volatile environments, thanks to international support. As for GIS ARTA, it is a system that integrates AI with satellite internet, which has optimised the response of Ukrainian artillery capabilities, facilitating attacks on enemy positions with greater immediacy and effectiveness.

These tools should not be interpreted as isolated solutions, but as part of a technological adaptation ecosystem that combines intelligence, mobility, coordination and real-time responsiveness.

With regard to Europe's analysis of the conflict, it is important to note that the European Commission has launched various initiatives, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which reflect a commitment to strengthening joint military capabilities and fostering technological innovation in the field of common defence. These tools aim to consolidate a comprehensive technological foundation in the field of security and defence that is more efficient amongst the Member States, with a focus on promoting collaborative projects in key areas such as AI and cybersecurity. For all these reasons, the analysis of Russia's war of aggression takes on strategic importance, as practical lessons can be drawn from its study regarding the adaptation of European military strategy to current challenges, where technology plays a central role in operational effectiveness and resilience against hybrid and conventional threats.

However, this transformation is not without controversy. The use of these new technologies in wartime contexts raises significant ethical, legal and geostrategic challenges, including the difficulty of proving the authorship of certain cyber actions and, consequently, the complexity of establishing and attributing responsibility for them. In addition to the implications for military strategy, which span multiple dimensions, from tactical and logistical planning to intelligence, cyber defence, and the management of the territory itself.

Furthermore, this transformation also introduces strategic dependencies, particularly with regard to external technology providers, digital supply chains, and capabilities for ongoing maintenance and updating.

6.1 Disinformation

Disinformation techniques have been amplified by the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which have been employed as a vehicle to rapidly transmit and disseminate information, bypassing geographical barriers and highlighting the potential and capacity of ICT to reach an indeterminate number of people efficiently and effectively.

ICT has revolutionised the way information is created, disseminated and consumed globally. Its ability to amplify messages in real time and reach a large number of individuals has significantly increased its influence on public opinion, not only at the national level but also internationally. Consequently, this transformation in communication has given rise to a broader information landscape that is highly accessible, which also allows social perceptions to be deliberately shaped.

In this context, state and non-state actors have exploited ICTs to develop highly effective disinformation campaigns, which not only distort the facts but also seek to erode trust in institutions, delegitimise them, polarise international society and generate confusion at critical moments such as during a war (Alastuey *et al.*, 2024).

The mechanisms typically employed in these disinformation campaigns are based on the distorted dissemination of reality using false data, misrepresenting it, or directly manipulating it. The ease with which this information—which directly affects public opinion—can be manipulated poses a latent challenge, as these disinformation campaigns undermine information security and, consequently, overall security; indeed, our National Security Strategy (ESN21) identifies this tactic as a serious threat to national security.

In the Russian war of aggression, these campaigns have been used for propaganda purposes, with the aim of reaching both those affected and potential supporters of the armed conflict.

Typically, these disinformation campaigns used for propaganda are designed to undermine the adversary's morale and extol one's own strengths. Similarly, the use of multiple information sources, such as traditional media or even social media, has established itself as an ideal vehicle for carrying out these disinformation actions. Tools such as *fake news* illustrate how these channels can be exploited to delegitimise the adversary's actions and, at the same time, justify one's own, in a clear attempt to manipulate public perception and shape international opinion.

These communication tools not only seek to confuse or deceive, but their primary aim is to shape the dominant narrative of the conflict, influencing key actors in the international community and consequently generating global division. All in all, disinformation is yet another weapon in the arsenal of tactics employed by a state within the HW, with a significant impact and devastating potential on legitimacy and social cohesion, as well as the ability to potentially disrupt the decision-making processes of the international community.

The fight against disinformation is a complex challenge that requires a combined and coordinated response. In this regard, it is worth noting that Spain has developed a comprehensive and robust legal and operational framework, involving government institutions and social actors (Alastuey *et al.*, 2024). However, the effectiveness of this approach is not static but depends on the ability to adapt to the evolution of new technologies. In this regard, it is essential to emphasise that to combat disinformation effectively, civil-military engagement must be strengthened to reinforce communication systems and ensure the greatest possible transparency, particularly with the media.

At the international level, collaboration with the EU and NATO is essential to bolster states' capabilities and provide an effective response to these threats that transcend borders and undermine global stability. These alliances enable the sharing of knowledge and the coordination of efforts, whilst demonstrating a global and proactive commitment to addressing these hybrid threats. Only a comprehensive approach, based on education, transparency and collaboration, can contribute to a society that is more resilient in the face of the challenges posed by contemporary disinformation.

In this regard, disinformation should not be understood as a secondary phenomenon, but as a structural instrument of HW, whose effectiveness depends both

on the sender's capacity to produce manipulated content and on the vulnerability of the information ecosystem in which such content circulates.

6.2 Cyberspace

Cyberspace, virtually unexplored in the armed conflicts of the 20th century, has become a central strategic arena in the modern wars of the 21st century, as evidenced both in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and in other recent cyberattacks linked to the escalation in Gaza.

In the case of Ukraine, from the very first days of the invasion, Russia launched a series of cyberattacks targeting the Ukrainian state's critical infrastructure, in an attempt to destabilise its institutional and logistical capabilities. Among these cyberattacks, one stands out: the denial-of-service (DoS) attack carried out against the country's main telecommunications company, *Ukrtelecom*. Through this attack, Russia succeeded in disrupting communications, leaving large swathes of the population cut off for several hours (SSSCIPU, 2022).

This case illustrates that cyberspace does not function as a domain separate from warfare, but rather as a force multiplier capable of disrupting logistics, morale and institutional continuity.

Nevertheless, Ukraine has managed to mount a relatively effective digital defence which, despite the asymmetry of resources, has made it possible to contain, neutralise and even reverse some of the hostile operations. In other words, Ukraine responded with a combination of digital resilience, cooperation with Western allies and support from technology companies, which enabled it to maintain institutional operations and strengthen the defence of the information space.

A particularly significant fact is that this technological pressure has even forced the Russian military to make less secure decisions, such as the use of open, unencrypted radio frequencies for tactical communications, which allowed them to be intercepted. This fact highlights not only Russian operational weaknesses but also demonstrates the high level of technological competence achieved by Ukraine, even in an environment as complex and hostile as the cyber battlefield.

These developments have captured the attention of the international community, not only because of the impact of the conflict itself, but also because of the value they offer for strategic analysis and the formulation of new cooperation policies on security and defence in the digital sphere. A clear example is Ukraine's extraordinary collaboration with its Western allies and major technology companies such as Microsoft and Google, which have provided support in the areas of digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and cloud storage.

A key lesson that can be drawn from this practical experience, even though the conflict is not yet over, is therefore that, despite the complexity and multidimensional nature of cyberspace, there are real opportunities to establish effective defence mechanisms. There is no doubt that this defence is strengthened through civil-

military, public-private and international cooperation, taking shape as a new model of collective security in the cyber domain that can serve as a benchmark for future conflicts.

In other words, the main lesson is not that digital defence eliminates vulnerability, but that a resilient architecture can significantly reduce the impact of attacks and raise the strategic cost to the aggressor.

7 The challenge of modernising European defence strategy

Although the EU and NATO have strengthened their strategic framework against hybrid threats, with initiatives such as the aforementioned Strategic Compass or NATO's New Strategic Concept, the Ukrainian case highlights a persistent gap between the formulation of objectives and the actual availability of operational capabilities. The technical difficulty of attributing cyberattacks, the fragmentation of national capabilities, the diversity of doctrines and the absence of a fully integrated chain of command limit the speed and effectiveness of the European response.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has marked a turning point for European security, as, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, the European continent is directly facing a high-intensity armed conflict on its doorstep, with profound implications for both regional stability and the international order.

This scenario has highlighted the structural vulnerabilities of the European defence system and has reignited the importance of NATO's strategy, whilst driving an accelerated rethinking of digital security and common defence policies within the EU.

This urgency to modernise capabilities in the face of a new type of multidimensional and technological warfare means that Europe faces a major strategic challenge involving a rethinking of its collective defence structure, as well as its digital autonomy and capacity to respond to conventional and non-conventional threats.

Indeed, Russian aggression has not only shattered the security architecture that Europe had built following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Artola, 2023), but has also highlighted the return of a logic of competition between great powers.

In this new geopolitical landscape, both the EU and NATO have stepped up their security and defence policies, bolstering their deterrence capabilities in the face of increasingly complex threats, such as those of a hybrid nature; however, the existence of strategic instruments does not automatically equate to an integrated response capability, where three fundamental limitations persist:

1. Military fragmentation: The 27 Member States maintain divergent weapon systems, disparate national doctrines and differing geostrategic priorities, which leads to costly duplication and hinders interoperability (Segoviano, 2022).
2. Political inequality: Not all Member States perceive the same threats with equal intensity, and national interests frequently take precedence over collective action. In other words, for the EU to develop autonomous external action, Member

States must be in political agreement, enabling a robust and comprehensive strategy to tackle large-scale crises (De Castro and Borrajo, 2019).

3. Lack of integrated command: Despite institutional progress, Europe lacks a clear and effective command structure to manage military crises autonomously. The absence of a fully functional strategic decision-making process for all Member States limits the capacity for rapid reaction, thereby restricting the EU's potential as an independent military actor in the international system.

Consequently, these limitations explain why the European response has been stronger at the normative level than at the strictly operational level. These limitations hinder interoperability between national armed forces and, consequently, the EU's ability to project itself as an autonomous security actor in hostile scenarios. Thus, the challenge lies not only in designing new strategies, but in transforming them into effective, interoperable and sustainable capabilities. These challenges must be addressed urgently and in a coordinated manner so that Europe is capable of playing a significant role in this area within the new geopolitical order.

In other words, European security cannot be sustained solely through diplomatic stability; rather, an interoperable military capability is required that can adapt to a hostile environment characterised by strategic volatility and increasing unpredictability, as the main gap remains between normative ambition and effective operational capability.

To achieve this profound transformation, it is essential to heed the key lessons from the conflict involving the aggression against Ukraine, which cannot be ignored and must serve as inspiration for maintaining a credible and effective defence posture for Europe.

7.1 Lessons for Europe

The Ukrainian experience offers four main lessons for European defence. Firstly, doctrine must integrate cyberspace and disinformation as central domains of conflict. Secondly, technological capabilities must translate into real interoperability and not merely into modernisation programmes. Thirdly, public-private cooperation must cease to be the exception and become a structural component of defence. Fourthly, coordination between the EU and NATO must be geared towards faster, more integrated and sustainable responses to hybrid threats.

1. Multi-domain doctrine: Cyberspace and disinformation must be integrated as central operational domains, not as auxiliary areas. The cyberattacks against Ukrtelecom and Russian fake news campaigns demonstrate that these instruments can degrade critical infrastructure and erode social cohesion, with strategic effects equivalent to kinetic operations. Consequently, cyber defence ceases to be an auxiliary or complementary field, becoming instead a strategic priority in wartime situations. The ability to withstand, respond to

and recover from hybrid threats constitutes an essential component of national and European resilience.

2. Genuine technological interoperability: Technological capabilities, such as AI, UAVs, or real-time data analysis, must translate into systems that are interoperable between states and with NATO, rather than remaining isolated national programmes. The experience of Palantir, GIS ARTA and Delta in Ukraine demonstrates the multiplier effect of integrated platforms. In other words, the use of technology has altered the conventional tactical balance, necessitating an urgent review of defence and security culture; a clear example of this is the ease with which drones can be deployed, as well as their low cost (compared to other conventional systems), which poses an immediate challenge regarding the integration of these technologies across all European armed forces. Another example is the use of AI as an enabler of military strategy due to the ease of real-time data analysis for decision-making, as this represents a clear advance that constitutes supremacy on the battlefield and in the operations conducted there, whether at the physical or cyber level.

3. Structural public-private cooperation: Collaboration with technology companies (Microsoft, Google, Clearview AI) must move beyond *ad hoc* arrangements to become a permanent feature of European defence. Ukraine survives thanks to this hybrid civil-military-technological ecosystem. In other words, Ukraine's cooperation with private companies has harnessed the potential of emerging technologies to improve tactical warfare, providing greater assurance of the safety and integrity of troops, as well as optimising resources.

4. Accelerated EU-NATO coordination: European military mobility must be complemented by harmonised land, air and sea routes that enable rapid deployments. The current logistical fragmentation makes effective responses to high-intensity crises impossible.

In short, 21st-century security plans cannot be divorced from technological innovation; rather, they must adapt to it in order to provide an effective defence capable of minimising and mitigating the potential hybrid threats that a Member State or its allies may face, adapting in all cases to the new challenges posed by the Global Health Crisis.

It goes without saying that this strategic modernisation of common defence not only requires political will and technological advances, but must also overcome various structural obstacles that may limit its effectiveness.

In other words, this modernisation of European defence policy is not merely technological, but organisational and institutional. Europe must move from designing strategies to building effective, interoperable and sustainable capabilities. The EU has before it the opportunity to establish itself as an autonomous and resilient strategic actor in the global order. The strategic question is no longer whether it should modernise, as the answer is clear, but whether it will do so with the speed, scale and determination demanded by the new geopolitical environment.

8 Conclusions

The analysis carried out confirms that contemporary warfare has transcended the exclusively kinetic realm to become a multi-domain phenomenon in which new and potential threats capable of destabilising a country have emerged, such as cyberspace, disinformation and emerging technologies, which contain harmful elements that directly affect national and collective security and function as structural instruments of strategic coercion, not merely as operational supplements.

In response to the research question posed regarding the extent to which the war in Ukraine has altered the understanding and design of European defence against hybrid threats and cyberattacks, this study demonstrates that the Ukrainian conflict has acted as a catalyst for three fundamental transformations:

1. Conceptual: Hybrid warfare is no longer a theoretical concept, but a verifiable operational reality that combines conventional military operations with cyberattacks (e.g. Ukrtelecom), mass disinformation campaigns and disruptive technologies (AI, drones, predictive analytics). The conflict in Ukraine has clearly demonstrated that cyberspace is no longer merely a complementary arena in traditional warfare, but constitutes a central front in 21st-century armed conflicts. Far from being a domain reserved exclusively for the most resource-rich powers, the experience of Ukraine shows us how other states, with a solid, coordinated and comprehensive digital strategy—and in this case, with international support and cooperation with public and private actors—can combat attacks in cyberspace and build a resilient and effective digital defence. For the use of cyberspace does not entail solely attacks on a country's critical infrastructure, but also encompasses other operations such as disinformation or digital sabotage, which determines the need for a comprehensive, agile and multidisciplinary response. Ukraine demonstrates that technological superiority depends less on the volume of resources than on the capacity for real-time integration and adaptation.
2. Doctrinal: Cyberspace has established itself as a central operational domain, where institutional resilience is as decisive as offensive capabilities. Ukrainian digital defence, supported by public-private cooperation (such as with Palantir, Microsoft and Google), demonstrates that medium-sized states can counter superior cyber powers through hybrid civil-military architectures.
3. Institutional: Europe faces a persistent gap between strategic ambition (Strategic Compass, NATO's New Concept) and actual operational capability, constrained by military fragmentation, political divergences and the absence of integrated command. The Ukrainian experience reveals that EU-NATO cooperation must be accelerated towards effective, interoperable and sustainable responses.

In this context, the fight against hybrid threats cannot be conducted in isolation, but requires a comprehensive cooperation strategy structured across various levels, yet in all cases based on rigorous knowledge and the coordination of national and

international experts. Indeed, this evidence imposes four unavoidable strategic imperatives on Europe:

- Multi-domain doctrine: Integrating cyberspace and disinformation as central domains of planning and operations.
- Real interoperability: Converting technological programmes into shared and effectively deployable capabilities.
- Hybrid ecosystem: Structuring civil-military, public-private and international cooperation and collaboration as essential pillars.
- Enhanced coordination: Harmonising EU-NATO efforts for rapid responses to high-intensity crises.

In light of the above, we can state that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has not only unleashed a devastating humanitarian crisis, but has also acted as a catalyst for profound transformations regarding the conceptualisation and nature of armed conflict today. Indeed, it is clear that this conflict has accelerated the transition from traditional warfare towards the model of hybrid warfare we are experiencing in the 21st century, in which conventional military operations are combined with tools and methods from cyberspace, disinformation and the use of emerging technologies such as AI or drones.

In this context, we can conclude that technology has not only established itself as an enabler of military capabilities, but has also become a structural component of security and defence strategy itself. It is clear that Ukraine's experience offers valuable lessons today, even though the conflict is not yet over, as it highlights the need to adapt digital capabilities, invest in resilience, and foster technological cooperation in high-intensity scenarios such as armed conflict. This conflict highlights the urgent need for Europe and its allies to strengthen their digital and technological policies with the aim of enhancing their defensive capabilities and response mechanisms to hybrid threats.

The reshaping of the European geopolitical balance resulting from this conflict also highlights the fact that security cannot be understood solely in military terms, but requires a broader perspective that also incorporates technological innovation and cyber defence, as well as the strengthening of strategic alliances and greater integration between state and non-state actors. All in all, analysis of this conflict to date suggests that the future of warfare has already begun and that preparation, cooperation and technological adaptation are required to face the challenges of the new international order with greater confidence.

In short, the Ukrainian case not only illustrates the new 21st-century paradigm of warfare but also poses a concrete challenge: to modernise European defence not through declarations of intent, but through real, interoperable and deployable capabilities that enable hybrid threats to be countered with the speed and effectiveness demanded by the new geopolitical environment.

The main contribution of this article is not merely to describe the transformation of warfare, but to demonstrate that this transformation requires Europe to undertake a profound review of its doctrinal, industrial and organisational frameworks. The

decisive question is no longer whether technology changes warfare, but what kind of political and strategic architecture enables this transformation to be turned into a real defensive advantage.

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Russian cognitive warfare in Africa: from the Sahel to the European Union

Abstract

The expansion of Russian influence operations in Africa, initially coordinated through the Wagner Group and subsequently under Africa Corps, has established itself as a significant factor in the transformation of the information and political landscape in the Sahel, with indirect implications for the European Union. Russia has exploited structural vulnerabilities in local information ecosystems to disseminate anti-Western narratives, contributing, in conjunction with internal dynamics, to reshaping social perceptions in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The study argues that the impact of this strategy cannot be explained solely in terms of military capabilities, but must be understood as part of an architecture of influence based on disinformation and control of the information space. This network has contributed to creating environments less receptive to the European presence, eroding its capacity for dialogue and hindering its strategic projection on the southern flank.

Faced with this hybrid challenge, the EU has begun to formulate a response that combines coercive instruments with initiatives aimed at strengthening information resilience. The article concludes that only a comprehensive, sustained strategy, coordinated with African partners, will make it possible to counter these dynamics of influence and mitigate their effects on Euro-African security and stability.

Keywords

Russia, Sahel, Wagner, Africa Corps, Cognitive warfare

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1 Introduction and conceptual framework

The purpose of this article is to analyse the role of cognitive influence operations deployed by the Russian Federation on the African continent—with particular attention to the Sahel region—and to assess their potential implications for public opinion and democratic resilience in the European Union (EU). From a methodological perspective, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on the analysis of case studies, a critical review of academic and institutional sources, and a comparative examination of political, security and information dynamics in the Sahel. This approach allows for the identification of patterns of behaviour, significant correlations and emerging trends, although it does not seek to establish unambiguous causal relationships, given the complexity of the environment under analysis and the interplay of multiple endogenous and exogenous factors.

Building on this approach, the article is structured around two main hypotheses. The first argues that the activities of Wagner/Africa Corps in the Sahel can be interpreted as a key instrument within Russia's strategy for projecting power in hybrid environments, contributing to destabilising dynamics that indirectly affect European interests. The second posits that the growing Russian presence in the region is part of a broader process of reconfiguring the geopolitical balance in Africa, characterised by the relative decline of Western influence and the emergence of a more competitive and multipolar international environment.

The paper is structured as follows: following this conceptual framework, the operational evolution of the Wagner Group in Africa is examined, contextualising its activities through an analysis of the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Next, the architecture of Russian influence in the African theatre is described, its strategic implications for the European Union and Spain are assessed, and the European institutional response is analysed, before presenting the conclusions.

1.1 The strategic framework: hybrid warfare and Russian projection in Africa

As discussed in the article 'Moscow stirs up the African hornet's nest: Russian disinformation operations in the Sahel', the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West has found in Africa one of its main arenas for indirect confrontation (Bello, 2024: 13). This confrontation can generally be analysed under the paradigm of hybrid warfare (Hoffman, 2007: 11–16), a term referring to the combined and coordinated use of conventional and unconventional means—military, economic, cyber, informational, etc.—to achieve strategic objectives without direct confrontation between states. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian military doctrine has reinforced its commitment to non-linear warfare or 'new-generation warfare', in which the boundaries between war and peace are blurred and non-state actors are exploited to weaken rival powers.

The Wagner Group (De la Corte, 2022: 3–14) has repeatedly been interpreted as a functional instrument within this logic since 2017: formally it was a private

paramilitary company, but in practice its actions suggested the existence of structural links with the Russian state apparatus. This led to it becoming an instrument at the service of Moscow's geopolitical interests, benefiting from the logistical support of the Russian state and providing the Kremlin with a cloak of plausible deniability (Kofman, 2016) to intervene in distant conflicts. However, the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in August 2023, marked the beginning of a new phase: Vladimir Putin initiated a reorganisation process aimed at restructuring the mercenary apparatus and bringing a new entity called 'Africa Corps' under his direct control (Mehra and Demuynck, 2025: 5–20).

The transition was completed in June 2025, when Wagner announced its definitive withdrawal from Mali and the Africa Corps assumed full control of Russian operations on the continent. Unlike Wagner, the Africa Corps is not an autonomous entity but a paramilitary force directly subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Defence, composed of elite commanders from the Russian army and former Wagner fighters. This reorganisation sought to prevent any autonomous force from challenging Moscow again, whilst ensuring the continuity of Russian operations in Africa following Prigozhin's demise.

As will be discussed in this analysis, the expansion of the Africa Corps has accelerated significantly in the period between 2024 and 2025. In April 2024, the Africa Corps deployed an air defence system in Niger and, in September 2025, Russia and Niger began negotiations on the development of the country's uranium deposits. In July 2025, a high-level delegation from the Russian Ministry of Defence visited Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to discuss the expansion of the Africa Corps' presence in the three countries. That same month, the Russian Duma ratified a military cooperation agreement with Togo providing for joint exercises, training of local soldiers and intelligence sharing, whilst the Russian ambassador to Benin announced similar plans for that country.

In parallel, the Alliance of Sahel States—formed by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso following their respective *coups d'état*—has consolidated itself as a new framework for regional cooperation. Although this bloc has been interpreted as a space for strategic convergence with Russia, it is more accurate to understand it as a structure driven by internal dynamics of the pursuit of strategic sovereignty, which in practice has facilitated greater political, military and economic rapprochement with Moscow.

In the realm of cognitive warfare, the transformation has been equally significant. Following Prigozhin's death, the Russian Ministry of Defence launched the African Initiative (African Initiative, 2026) in September 2023, a media platform that has maintained websites and Telegram channels promoting pro-Russian government content, and has been highly active in organising cultural events in the Sahel. This new structure replaces and expands the operations of the so-called 'troll factory' (SWI, 2023) associated with Prigozhin, now operating under a more direct degree of state control. Thus, following the *coups d'état* in Mali (2020–2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), demonstrations and popular mobilisations have continued to be organised, featuring a proliferation of Russian flags and anti-

Western slogans, amplified through social media and local media aligned with Moscow. These expressions of rejection of Western influence have been widely linked, in various analyses, to disinformation campaigns and coordinated influence operations; however, their impact must be interpreted within a broader framework in which internal factors—such as the deterioration of security, the perceived ineffectiveness of international missions, governance crises or the persistence of postcolonial narratives—converge with external dynamics linked to geopolitical competition. In this sense, influence operations do not constitute an exclusive explanatory factor, but rather a catalytic element that helps to amplify pre-existing perceptions and reconfigure the interpretative frameworks through which certain sectors of the population assess the Western presence, potentially favouring—in combination with other factors—processes of social legitimisation of political decisions such as the withdrawal of French troops, the closure of European bases or a strategic reorientation towards Russia as an alternative partner. Thus, rather than replacing material reality, cognitive warfare appears to act by reconfiguring the frames of perception through which reality is interpreted, so that the transformation of public opinion responds not only to objective changes in the security situation, but also to a progressive reprogramming of interpretative frameworks through systematic influence techniques, which requires a more precise conceptual analysis.

1.2 From the information domain to the cognitive domain: conceptual clarifications

Within the spectrum of hybrid warfare, it is essential to distinguish between information warfare (Rid, 2020: 423–430) and cognitive warfare (Du Cluzel, 2022: 1–12), terms that are frequently confused but which imply qualitatively different levels of confrontation. The 21st century has witnessed a radical transformation in the forms of confrontation. The traditional dimensions of conflict—physical, maritime, aerial, space and cyber—no longer operate in isolation but overlap and interconnect. Cutting across all these dimensions is the information domain and, beyond this, the cognitive domain, which has progressively become the new strategic terrain par excellence (Hammes, 2006: 207–223). Unlike information warfare (Department of the Army, 2018: 1-4), which seeks control of channels and a monopoly on operational truth, and cyber warfare, which attacks the vulnerabilities of digital infrastructure, cognitive warfare targets the very processes of meaning-making. It is not content with the adversary being unaware of the truth; it seeks to make them distrust the very possibility of knowing it.

Thus, whilst information warfare manipulates the content—that is, what is known—cognitive warfare manipulates the container—that is, how one thinks. This distinction reinforces Du Cluzel's observation that traditional psychological operations seek to change 'what the target audience thinks', but cognitive warfare aims to shape 'how they reason and, consequently, how they behave' (2022: 1–12). Whereas the former seeks to make the adversary adopt our version of reality, the latter seeks to make the adversary lose faith in any stable version of reality and thus be

able to manipulate them from the very source of thought in a far more decisive and profound manner.

In this regard, it is worth noting that NATO understands the cognitive dimension as the realm in which the human mind becomes an operational theatre where actors confront one another strategically, and includes activities synchronised with other instruments of power to 'influence, protect or alter the cognition of individuals, groups or populations in order to gain an advantage over the adversary' (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023: 3). As Claverie, Prébot, Buchler and Du Cluzel point out, 'in cognitive warfare, all elements of information warfare, including psychological operations (PSYOPS), are integrated into military action and, at the same time, converge with influence operations (soft power) and cyber capabilities, which until then had been managed separately' (2022: 4).

Cognitive warfare is, in this sense, the militarisation of public opinion taken to its logical extreme: it does not simply seek to shape preferences, but to reconfigure the mental frameworks that make those preferences possible in the first place. This conceptual specificity—which distinguishes cognitive warfare from both traditional propaganda and cyberwarfare or information warfare—calls for a new operational definition that allows for a precise analysis of its application in the case of the Sahel.

1.3 Cognitive warfare: operational definition and dual temporality

Based on the above clarifications, the following operational definition is proposed to guide the analysis in this article: Cognitive warfare constitutes a specific form of non-kinetic strategic confrontation aimed at influencing a population's processes of perception, interpretation and decision-making, through the systematic manipulation of the human, informational and digital environment, with the aim of eroding their critical reasoning and reducing their political and social resilience.

And taking this definition as a starting point, it is worth noting that a critical dimension distinguishing cognitive warfare is its operation across two simultaneous and interdependent temporal registers: The first register is the slow one, that of erosion. In this phase, alternative narratives, seeds of doubt and conspiracy theories take root over months or years within the social fabric, fracturing community cohesion and eroding institutional trust. The 'society of transparency' is eroded in favour of a 'society of suspicion' (Han, 2015: 48). This register is preparatory and underground, invisible to traditional conflict warning indicators.

The second phase is the rapid one, that of detonation. Once the conditions of erosion have matured, an algorithmically amplified information crisis can destabilise and crack institutions within hours. Cognitive warfare exploits the viral spread of social media, algorithmic personalisation and generative artificial intelligence to create disruptive events. This phase is decisive and explosive, and its effectiveness depends entirely on the prior work of erosion.

The first paves the way for the second. Without the slow erosion of epistemic trust—without the population having internalised that 'everyone lies' or that 'truth is

relative'—the rapid detonation produces no lasting strategic effects. This temporal duality explains why cognitive warfare is particularly difficult to detect for traditional intelligence structures, designed for imminent kinetic threats, but not for processes of slow ecosystem contamination operating at a multidimensional level and in the medium to long term. The case of Mali clearly illustrates both these dimensions : the erosion took place between 2017 and 2022 through the gradual infiltration of anti-French narratives on social media, the systematic delegitimisation of the Barkhane mission through accusations of complicity with terrorists, and the normalisation of suspicion towards any information coming from Western sources. The tipping point came with the coup in August 2020 and the formal expulsion of French troops in 2022, events that found massive social support because the cognitive groundwork had been laid over many years.

As Colonel Fuente Cobo (2025: 1–17) points out, the transformation of Malian public opinion—from support for the French presence in 2019 to the acclaim for its expulsion in 2022—cannot be explained solely by an objective change in the security situation, but also responds to a 'reprogramming of perceptual frameworks' through techniques of systematic cognitive warfare (2025: 12). This interpretation is consistent with the specialist literature on disinformation and influence operations. Firstly, Thomas Rid, in his work *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, demonstrates, through a thorough historical analysis, that cognitive warfare techniques do not seek so much to fabricate entirely new realities as to intervene in existing perceptions, manipulating the interpretation of facts through the selective distortion of information (2020: 377–380). In a complementary vein, Bradshaw and Howard (2018: 2–9) provide empirical evidence that contemporary disinformation campaigns in digital environments are structured around the algorithmic amplification of emotionally resonant content, which fosters polarisation and reinforces pre-existing beliefs among target audiences. In the African context, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) has documented how external influence operations tend to operate in environments characterised by institutional fragility, mistrust of international actors and lingering historical grievances, acting as multipliers of existing social dynamics (ACSS, 2024: 5). Taken together, these contributions support the argument that the evolution of public opinion in Mali does not respond to a single explanatory vector, but rather to the interaction between internal structural factors and external influence strategies which, rather than generating new perceptions, reconfigure and reinforce pre-existing interpretative frameworks.

Bearing in mind this conceptual framework and its dual temporality, if we consider the case of Russia in Africa , Moscow has combined paramilitary support for coup regimes with cognitive warfare operations based on disinformation, propaganda and cultural manipulation, shaping a model of hybrid intervention in which both dimensions—kinetic and informational—operate synergistically. Within this framework, strategies of influence do not operate in isolation, but are embedded in contexts characterised by institutional fragility, crises of legitimacy and the persistence of postcolonial narratives, where they help to amplify pre-existing perceptions, grievances and interpretative frameworks, thereby reinforcing their effectiveness without the need to generate entirely new social dynamics.

2 The Wagner Group's operational activities in Africa

As highlighted in the article 'Across Africa, Russia is growing in influence. What might Moscow want?' (Princewill, 2025) and the analysis 'Wagner in the Sahel: a paramilitary, demographic and informational threat to European security in Africa' (Gazapo, 2025), the expansion of the paramilitary group in the Sahel has become a key factor in understanding the complex relationship between African and European security, as the paramilitary dimension—marked by the training of local troops and active participation in combat operations—is intertwined with strategies of disinformation, cognitive warfare and social control that contribute to weakening Western actors and reinforcing Russian influence. It is worth noting that Wagner's arrival in Africa occurred at a time of Western withdrawal and the rise of new alliances on the continent. Whilst Milosevich (2023: 59–84) has noted in his analyses that Moscow has been increasing its presence in Africa through synchronous actions combining the reactivation of networks established during the Cold War, political diplomacy, influence campaigns and the involvement of the paramilitary group Wagner, this description must be supplemented with a crucial clarification: the paramilitary group can hardly be understood as a fully autonomous actor, but rather as a functional instrument linked to the Russian state apparatus, even though it is formally presented as a private initiative.

The transition from Wagner to Africa Corps represents, as Garrido Guijarro has pointed out in his analysis of the reorganisation of the mercenary apparatus, 'a turning point in Russian-African relations' (2024: 1), given that 'the leader of Wagner was Russia's key man in Africa since the group began operating on the continent in 2017' (2024: 1). The Kremlin's objective, as the same author states, is 'to take control of Wagner's personnel operating in Africa and place them under the direct command of the Russian Ministry of Defence, thereby preventing another private military company or a post-Prigozhin Wagner from accumulating sufficient power and autonomy to once again become a threat to the Kremlin' (2024: 2).

However, this transition does not alter the essential nature of the instrument. As demonstrated by the analysis of the Ukrainian NGO Come Back Alive, 'Wagner was designed to serve as a smokescreen concealing the activities of the Russian Federation as a state; the practice of referring to the Wagner Group as a private military company with roots in the media is entirely incorrect' (Kucherenko *et al.*, 2024: 3). This conceptual clarification is fundamental insofar as Wagner can hardly be considered an autonomous actor in the strict sense, but rather 'a tool that diverted the attention of law enforcement investigators away from crimes committed directly by the Russian Federation or its violations of existing norms' (Kucherenko *et al.*, 2024: 3).

Its first known operations took place in Libya and Sudan (2017–2018), followed by the Central African Republic (2018) and Mozambique (2019). However, it was in the Sahel region that Wagner would find its main area of expansion. The strategic importance of this region for Spain and the EU cannot be underestimated: as Milosevich-Juaristi has warned in his analysis of the implications for Spain, 'Russia's penetration of the Sahel is highly detrimental', as Moscow exploits 'the lack of

legitimacy, institutional weakness and international isolation of some governments in the region to extend its influence, with three pernicious effects: as well as improving its geostrategic position, it helps to perpetuate authoritarian regimes and prevent the consolidation of legitimate institutions' (2023: 8). This warning takes on greater urgency if we consider that, in the words of the same author, 'if the Sahel is handed over to Russia, it will be very difficult to return to the region' (2023: 9).

2.1 Mali

Wagner's presence in Mali was formalised following the coup d'état in May 2021 led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. Invoking the defence of sovereignty and espousing an anti-Western narrative that was reinforced and amplified across various news channels, including those aligned with Moscow, the military leader severed counter-terrorism cooperation with France and the EU. In December 2021, some one thousand Wagner mercenaries arrived in the country with the stated aim of training the Malian Army (FAMA) and supporting the fight against Salafist-jihadist terrorist groups operating in the north and centre of the country.

In the early months, with operational advice from Wagner, Malian forces launched offensives that enabled them to regain control of a significant proportion of the territory that had fallen into the hands of terrorist organisations and transnational criminal groups. The Bamako government presented these advances as a military success, but the darker side of the alliance soon emerged: numerous international organisations denounced brutal human rights violations in the joint FAMA-Wagner operations. A tragic example was the Moura massacre in March 2022, where Malian soldiers and foreign troops attributed to Wagner summarily executed hundreds of innocent civilians accused of collaborating with Islamist extremists. The escalation of violence coincided with a rapid deterioration in Mali's relations with France, the European Union and the UN. Throughout 2022, Goïta's *junta* gradually expelled unwelcome international actors: first it forced the withdrawal of French troops from the Operation Barkhane, and then launched a campaign of harassment against the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), accusing it of espionage and pro-Western bias. In June 2023, the Malian government demanded the immediate withdrawal of the peacekeepers, thereby completing the expulsion of all Western contingents from the country. This vacuum was gradually filled by Russia, not only through Wagner, but also through growing official diplomatic and military support from Moscow.

In 2025, Wagner's transition to the Africa Corps was consolidated, causing a major stir on local social media. In June of that year, Wagner officially announced its definitive withdrawal from Mali, completing the rebranding demanded by Putin and the transfer of operations to the Africa Corps, an organisation that was already under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defence following its creation in July 2023 as a result of the Russia-Africa summit held in St. Petersburg. As researcher Hanna Notte of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies has noted, 'Africa Corps has taken over most of the Wagner Group's former operations in Africa, elevating them to the level of official state-to-state relations' (2025: 4). However, the

transfer of functions and personnel from Wagner to Africa Corps did not result in improved security in Mali; the reality on the ground in 2025 calls into question the Russian narrative of effective security regarding the terrorist threat: In August 2025, the strategic town of Farabougou fell into the hands of the jihadists of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), marking a turning point in the conflict. Supply routes to Bamako are blocked, fuel prices have skyrocketed, and hundreds of thousands of Malian refugees have fled to neighbouring countries. This situation stands in stark contrast to the years prior to the Russian intervention; indeed, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), jihadist attacks in Mali increased dramatically in 2024–2025 despite the presence of Wagner/Africa Corps (Nsaibia, 2024).

On the domestic political front, Wagner's patronage strengthened the military junta's position; Mali repeatedly postponed the promised elections and in 2023 adopted a new electoral and constitutional law that consolidated the military regime, all with Moscow's approval. In summary, between 2021 and 2025, Mali transitioned from being a key Western ally in the fight against terrorism to becoming a state increasingly aligned with Russia, closed to Western presence and dependent on Wagner/Africa Corps both for its immediate security and for its legitimising narrative.

2.2 Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's trajectory has run parallel to that of Mali in many respects, albeit with its own particularities. After years of fragility in the face of the jihadist insurgency, the country suffered two *coups d'état* in 2022: the first in January, led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, and the second in September, which brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power. Both usurpers justified their actions by citing a lack of results in the fight against terrorism and a loss of trust in traditional Western partners, notably France. From the outset, pro-Russian elements emerged within the coup circles. At the street demonstrations celebrating the September 2022 *coup*, Russian flags were waved and anti-French slogans chanted, a sign that public sentiment had already been cultivated beforehand by Russian teams dedicated to waging cognitive warfare. Following the same modus operandi as in Mali, various Facebook pages of dubious origin spread rumours that France was protecting the deposed president or even supporting the jihadists, whilst presenting Putin's government as the sole saviour. These campaigns helped shape public opinion to such an extent that the Traoré regime expelled the French ambassador and closed the French cultural centre, only to immediately invite Russia as a new partner country and strategic ally.

In early 2023, Burkina Faso called for the withdrawal of French special forces stationed in Ouagadougou and cancelled military cooperation agreements with Paris, severing ties of cooperation and collaboration that had been in place for decades. Although the Burkinabe government officially denied having signed a contract with Wagner, the local press itself has reported on the presence of Russian instructors, mercenaries and agents in the country. Furthermore, Moscow actively promoted

the heroic image of Ibrahim Traoré as a young pan-Africanist leader: traditional and digital Russian media, as well as fake profiles on various social media platforms, drew comparisons between Traoré and the iconic revolutionary former president Thomas Sankara. Moscow sought to present him as part of a new generation of sovereigntist leaders distancing themselves from Europe and aligning with Russia. In the same vein, in April 2023, the Burkinabe government announced a cooperation agreement with Russia on mining and hydrocarbons, opening the door to Russian investment in strategic sectors previously dominated by Western companies. Since the start of 2025, the Africa Corps' presence in Burkina Faso has been consolidated through the deployment of new air defence systems, infrastructure and contingents. A case in point is how the Dori airbase has become the Africa Corps' main operational hub in the region.

The security implications of all this have been significantly negative. On the one hand, Traoré, advised by Russian instructors on counter-insurgency tactics, launched an ineffective popular defence strategy by recruiting tens of thousands of civilian volunteers to fight the jihadists, who continue to carry out frequent attacks. On the other hand, there have been extremely serious massacres of civilians attributed to the armed forces, notably the one in Karma, where Burkinabe soldiers executed more than a hundred civilians from the Fulani ethnic group on suspicion of colluding with terrorists.

The persistence of these 'scorched earth' tactics (González-Ruibal, 2023: 379–408), despite their proven ineffectiveness against terrorism, illustrates a distinctive feature of Russian cognitive warfare highlighted by Pujol: 'the objective of influencing the way people and groups think, react and make decisions has shifted from tactical to strategic—an end in itself—and is increasingly easy to achieve' (2024: 48). In this case, the objective is not so much to defeat the armed enemy as to consolidate an authoritarian regime by delegitimising Western alternatives and normalising extreme violence as a method of governance. Despite the persistence of terrorism, the official narrative—amplified by pro-Russian spokespeople—maintains that France's expulsion was necessary and that tangible results will be seen in the long term thanks to unconditional cooperation with Moscow. In short, Burkina Faso has followed the script played out in Mali: military coups legitimised by anti-Western rhetoric, geopolitical realignment towards Russia and internal authoritarian consolidation, all accompanied by a propaganda and cognitive apparatus that helps to justify, entrench and reinforce each of these processes.

2.3 Niger

The case of Niger is of strategic importance as it was the last major Western ally in the Sahel until 2023 and is a critical supplier of uranium to Europe. On 26 July 2023, a coup d'état overthrew the elected, pro-Western President Mohamed Bazoum and installed a military junta led by General Abdourahamane Tiani. As in Mali and Burkina Faso, popular celebrations of the coup in Niamey featured Russian flags and attacks on French symbols, suggesting prior efforts at cognitive contamination

and pro-Russian agitation within Nigerien society. Indeed, in the months leading up to the coup, messages circulated on social media accusing France of exploiting local uranium (Bello, 2024: 1–19) and, as noted by the Robert Lansing Institute for Global Threats and Democracies Studies (RLI), fake news was also circulated alleging Western plans to divide the country, in contrast to implicit promises that an alliance with Moscow would safeguard national sovereignty (RLI, 2025).

The international reaction to the coup in Niger was particularly firm: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed severe sanctions and threatened regional military intervention to restore Bazoum. Against this tense backdrop, Russia sought to position itself as a strategic supporter of the coup-leading military junta. The Wagner Group publicly offered its services to the new rulers in Niamey to guarantee their security in the face of a possible ECOWAS intervention. At the same time, Russian propaganda stepped up its activity: the state-run media outlets RT and Sputnik defended the *junta*'s position and accused France of planning an invasion, whilst messages of support from the Russian people for Niger went viral on social media and any attempt by ECOWAS to reverse the coup was branded as neo-colonial. Ultimately, military pressure from ECOWAS did not materialise, and the Nigerien junta consolidated its power. In this new status quo, Niger shifted towards Moscow's orbit: in September 2023, it signed agreements to allow the stationing of Russian military instructors presented as technical co-operators, and in April 2024, local sources reported the arrival of Russian contingents under bilateral agreements.

Russia's consolidation of its presence continued in the years that followed. In April 2024, the Africa Corps deployed a form of air defence system in Niger, and in September 2025, Russia and Niger began negotiations on the development and exploitation of the country's uranium deposits. As noted by analysts at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Moscow seeks to secure access to Niger's uranium deposits as part of its broader strategy to control critical mineral resources in Africa (Bugayova *et al.*, 2019). In July 2025, a high-level delegation from the Russian Ministry of Defence visited Niamey to discuss the expansion of the Africa Corps' presence and the signing of new military cooperation agreements.

The French presence, by contrast, was completely dismantled: the French ambassador was expelled, French troops stationed in Niamey were withdrawn, and French military flights over Niger were banned. As for the crucial uranium sector—Niger has historically been a major supplier of uranium to France, giving this resource a strategic dimension in the context of European energy security (World Nuclear Association, 2024; Euratom Supply Agency, 2025: 7–15)—Russian interest in these assets has been explicitly highlighted in specific analyses. In particular, the report entitled *Russia Is Said to Seek French-Held Uranium Assets in Niger* states that Moscow has reportedly sought to gain a foothold in uranium assets previously linked to French interests in the country (Bloomberg, 2024). This move is also part of a broader strategy documented by analysts at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in the report *Power Plays: Developments in Russian Enriched Uranium Trade*, which analyses how Russia has increased its presence in African extractive sectors—including critical energy and mineral resources—as part of its geo-economic projection (Dolzikova,

2024). In a related vein, Mykhailo Kucherenko, Oleksandr Burlaka and Oleksandr Demchenko, researchers at the Ukrainian foundation Come Back Alive, produced the report *Wagner Deconstruction* in 2024, in which they argue that Wagner's presence in Africa is part of a strategic design in which military, intelligence and economic dimensions are integrated, including access to high-value natural resources. Thus, rather than homogeneous global control, what is observed is a strategy of selective positioning in resource-rich enclaves which, taken together, expand Moscow's capacity to influence critical supply chains and have direct implications for European energy security (Kucherenko *et al.*, 2024: 38–67).

In short, Niger represents the consolidation of Russia's rise in the Sahel: the last pro-Western stronghold has fallen, and with it the EU has lost its main regional partner in the fight against terrorism and irregular migration. Conversely, Moscow has gained a key geostrategic ally and expanded its leverage over Europe by controlling critical resources and opening up a continuous corridor of pro-Russian regimes across the Sahel-Saharan belt.

3 The complex architecture of Russian cognitive influence in Africa

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russian cognitive influence operations in Africa are not isolated initiatives, but rather a coherent strategic architecture that integrates multiple instruments. This architecture is structured around four interrelated operational vectors: the construction of anti-Western and anti-imperialist narratives tailored to local perceptions; the diversification and proliferation of dissemination channels, including state-run media such as RT or Sputnik; the intensive exploitation of the digital ecosystem through social media and messaging platforms, particularly following the creation of the *African Initiative*; and, finally, the implementation of cultural and social initiatives aimed at consolidating cognitive penetration within the community fabric. The interaction of these elements enables Russia not only to influence African public opinion, but also to generate indirect effects on European interests, by facilitating the displacement of Western actors, the reconfiguration of strategic alliances and the creation of geopolitical environments less favourable to the European Union.

At the heart of Russian propaganda in Africa lies a narrative—the first vector—of a purportedly emancipatory nature, according to which the continent is said to be immersed in a new struggle for liberation against European neo-colonialism, whilst Russia presents itself as a partner that respects African sovereignty and is free from the conditional practices associated with the West. Its strategic effectiveness lies in the fact that it not only reinterprets the colonial past and the geopolitical present, but also helps to erode the legitimacy of the European presence and, in certain contexts, makes its replacement by actors linked to Moscow more acceptable.

As for the diversification of traditional media channels—the second vector—it should be noted that Russia has drawn on a wide range of communication tools aimed at expanding, amplifying and normalising its narrative in the African public sphere.

In the realm of state media, RT and Sputnik launched services targeting Francophone Africa from the mid-2010s, bolstering their international reach following their ban in the European Union in 2022. Alongside these high-profile channels, local media outlets aligned with pro-Russian positions have also come to the fore, such as *Afrique Média*, a pan-African channel based in Cameroon that has served as a regional mouthpiece for anti-Western arguments and messages consistent with Russia's influence on the continent. Taken together, this diversification of channels not only increases the reach of pro-Kremlin narratives in Africa but also facilitates their transnational circulation, thereby fostering the creation of information environments hostile to European interests.

With regard to social media—the third vector—it is worth emphasising that cyberspace has become one of the main arenas for the deployment of contemporary cognitive warfare. An examination of reports by Freedom House, MLSA, NetBlocks, Access Now, Top10VPN or ProtonMail reveals that, between 2010 and 2026, millions of Africans joined social media: 'According to the latest available data, social media users in Africa have increased steadily, reaching over 384 million' (Adika, 2023). The African digital space offers particularly favourable conditions for the rapid circulation of emotionally mobilising content, coordinated disinformation campaigns and narrative amplification operations with the potential to impact both the African sphere and, indirectly, European strategic interests.

In this digital context, the launch of the *African Initiative* in September 2023 marks a turning point in the institutionalisation of Russia's media outreach in Africa. According to the African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO), this organisation was spearheaded by figures such as Sergey Anatolevich Volkov and Artyom Kureyev with the aim of establishing a platform specifically geared towards disseminating Kremlin-friendly content in the African digital sphere (ADDO, 2024). The *African Initiative* operates through domains such as afrinz.ru, maintains a high level of activity on social media, works in several languages and has established an operational presence in cities such as Ouagadougou and Bamako to adapt its campaigns to local contexts. Its significance has been highlighted in the report *African Initiative: From Public Diplomacy to Covert Influence Operations*, produced by France's Foreign Digital Interference Monitoring Service (VIGINUM), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In this strategic document, it is defined as 'the main vehicle for Russian activities of manipulation and information interference in the region and one of the main tools for the renewal of its information influence strategy in Africa' (VIGINUM *et al.*, 2025: 3). From this perspective, the *African Initiative* acts not merely as a platform for the dissemination of propaganda, but as an infrastructure designed to expand, coordinate and adapt narratives favourable to Moscow, discredit Western actors in African public discourse, and amplify operations of information manipulation and , the effects of which ultimately also impact European interests.

In line with this digital dimension of cognitive warfare, it is worth noting that Russia's influence in Africa has not been limited to institutional or semi-official platforms, but has also relied on operators specialising in propaganda amplification, disinformation and the building of networks of influence. One of the most notorious

was Prigozhin, who, in addition to leading the Wagner Group until his death in 2023, financed digital propaganda structures associated with the so-called 'troll factory' of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and various misleading news portals (Kofman, 2016). In the African context, these dynamics included the use of front organisations, communications consultancies and informal influence mechanisms aimed at intervening in political and electoral processes.

Alongside this dimension more directly linked to the Prigozhin ecosystem, another key figure was Luc Michel, a far-right Belgian ideologue and promoter of the self-styled 'African Russosphere'. Before his death in 2025, Michel coordinated networks of websites, Facebook groups and pro-Russian associations active in the French-speaking African sphere, including platforms such as *Centrafrique Libre* in the Central African Republic and *Mali Web* in Mali. According to investigations published by the BBC, Libération, Le Monde and NPR, as well as the *Wagner Deconstruction* report produced by Ukrainian analysts at the Come Back Alive Foundation in 2024, his role was particularly significant in amplifying pro-Wagner messages in Mali and Burkina Faso between 2021 and 2022, as well as in establishing collaborative networks with local elites capable of replicating and legitimising the pro-Russian line in the media, political circles and spheres of social influence.

In terms of cultural and community outreach initiatives—the fourth vector—Wagner/Africa Corps has expanded the scope of its influence operations through actions targeting groups with the potential to reach wider communities. These include football tournaments sponsored by the Russian community, food donations with Cyrillic labels distributed in villages, and TikTok accounts where Russian mercenaries appear interacting with local cultural codes with the aim of humanising their public image. Beyond their apparent banality, these practices serve a strategic function: they seek to positively embed the 'Russia' brand in the collective imagination, counteract the reputation for violence associated with Wagner, and generate emotional bonds of symbolic closeness with the recipient communities (Bond, 2023). Added to this logic of social penetration are formats specifically aimed at young audiences, such as the video game *African Dawn*, promoted by *African Initiative* as an African adaptation of the popular *Hearts of Iron IV* and centred on contemporary events in the Sahel (African Initiative, 2024). Its appeal lies not only in its recreational nature, but in its ability to project pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives through an immersive format that is particularly appealing to younger generations, helping to reinforce the delegitimisation of European partners in the regional political imagination.

The combined effect of these four vectors—ideological narratives, multi-platform media, specialised operators and social penetration tactics—has significantly eroded the Western position across large swathes of the Sahel. As Michael J. Kelley (2024) noted in his analysis for the US Army War College, just as the Kremlin exploited political and social divisions in Western contexts such as the 2016 US elections, Russia has subsequently extended those same strategies of influence to African settings characterised by high institutional fragility, with the aim of capitalising on existing grievances, winning over support and shaping collective perceptions in favour of its geopolitical interests.

4 Strategic implications for the European Union and Spain

The expansion of Russian influence in Africa through Wagner/Africa Corps raises strategic implications of considerable scope for the European Union and, in a particularly sensitive manner, for Spain. These implications extend to the security, geopolitical, economic and cognitive spheres, insofar as the reconfiguration of the Sahelian environment alters security balances, triggers migration flows, modifies frameworks for regional and inter n cooperation, and creates less favourable conditions for the European presence and engagement on the southern flank.

In the security sphere, instability in the Sahel constitutes a significant risk factor for the EU, as it affects two critical areas: terrorism and irregular migration. The region has established itself as one of the main global epicentres of jihadism, with organisations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State expanding their activities towards the Gulf of Guinea. In this context, the withdrawal of Western forces and the limited effectiveness of Wagner against insurgencies deeply rooted in the social fabric contribute to prolonging scenarios of violence with the potential for indirect spillover into Europe, whether through the movement of fighters, the expansion of affiliated networks or the worsening of conditions of regional destabilisation. At the same time, the deterioration in security and humanitarian crises are intensifying migratory pressure towards the Mediterranean and the Atlantic route, creating an environment in which these flows could be exploited, in certain contexts, as a vector of pressure or hybrid coercion on the EU.

On the geopolitical front, the loss of European influence in the Sahel represents a major strategic setback. As outlined in the previous sections, the expulsion of European missions and the gradual rapprochement of several governments in the region with Moscow are shaping a political environment that is less cooperative with the West and more receptive to Russian influence. Consequently, the expansion of Moscow's influence in Africa not only improves its geostrategic position on Europe's southern flank, but also contributes to eroding the EU's capacity for dialogue, weakening its institutional legitimacy as a security actor, and reducing its operational scope in the Sahel-Saharan region (Gazapo, 2025: 1–37).

On the economic front, a particularly sensitive area is that of strategic resources. Africa supplies Europe with critical raw materials—including uranium, gold, diamonds, cobalt and rare earths—so that the expansion of Russian influence over producing countries introduces added risks of dependency, interference and the political exploitation of these resources. This dynamic is particularly relevant in a European context still marked by the lessons drawn from its recent energy vulnerabilities. At the same time, the replacement of European firms by Russian or Chinese companies in extractive sectors reduces the EU's economic presence, weakens its capacity for influence and favours less transparent exploitation structures that better serve geopolitical interests outside Europe.

On a cognitive level, these external dynamics also have a feedback effect on European democratic resilience itself, insofar as they fuel narratives of Western decline, European ineffectiveness and the apparent effectiveness of the Russian

authoritarian model. This is not merely a loss of presence on the African ground, but also a contest over the strategic narrative concerning the southern flank. In this regard, Josep Borrell, former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and current president of CIDOB, has warned that Europe cannot afford to neglect the Sahel, precisely because the European withdrawal has been accompanied by a replacement—not only material but also narrative—by Russia: 'When I arrived in Brussels, we Europeans were present in all the Sahel countries […] now we are in none, and in our place is Russia […] the Africa Corps is throughout the Sahel and we are not' (Borrell, 2025: 1–15).

For Spain, given its geographical proximity, its ties with West Africa and its particularly high exposure to developments on the southern flank, these implications are especially significant. This translates into greater risks of indirect destabilisation, migratory pressure on the Canary Islands and Andalusia, potential impacts on economic and energy interests, and exposure to disinformation campaigns linked to the deterioration of the regional environment. In this context, General Víctor Bados has warned that 'Spain cannot remain a mere spectator of what is happening in Africa; it is essential to treat our partners as equals' (COPE Jaca, 2025). Overall, the loss of European influence in Africa increases the strategic vulnerability of the EU and Spain both externally and internally, consolidating the Sahel as a genuine forward frontier of European security.

5 The European response: from sanctions to cognitive resilience

Faced with the multidimensional challenge posed by Russian influence in the Sahel—in its informational, cognitive, security and geopolitical dimensions—the European response has gradually taken shape along two main lines. On the one hand, through coercive and punitive measures aimed at weakening the Wagner/Africa Corps networks and hindering their operations. On the other, through initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against disinformation and improving the communicative response capacity of both the EU itself and its African partners. Although these responses remain partial and uneven in their development, they demonstrate that the EU has begun to recognise that the Russian threat cannot be addressed solely in military terms, but requires a comprehensive strategy of a political, informational and cognitive nature.

5.1 Sanctions and coercive measures

The European Union has resorted to the sanctions regime as its primary coercive instrument against Wagner/Africa Corps and their support networks. Since late 2021, the EU has begun sanctioning Yevgeny Prigozhin and senior Wagner commanders for their involvement in human rights violations and destabilising activities in Africa and Ukraine. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these measures were significantly expanded and, in 2023, Brussels formally included the Wagner Group and its associated media outlet RIA FAN on the sanctions list. This decision carried

significant political weight, as it conveyed the idea that Wagner should not be viewed merely as a local irregular actor, but as part of a destabilisation network with an international reach (Council of the EU, 2023).

The European legal framework has also been expanding. In October 2024, the Council established a specific regime of restrictive measures against hybrid activities linked to the Kremlin, including cyberattacks, disinformation, sabotage and the manipulation of migration flows (Council of the EU, 2024). Subsequently, in 2025, the EU adopted the 17th and 18th sanctions packages, which tightened the financial and logistical noose through restrictions on exports of dual-use technology and measures targeting mining companies associated with Russian networks in Africa (Council of the EU, 2025a; 2025b).

In addition, the EU has made part of its support for African organisations—such as ECOWAS and the African Union—conditional on the rejection of the use of mercenaries, and has suspended cooperation with governments that collaborate with Wagner/Africa Corps, as was the case with Mali. The European Parliament has reinforced this stance through resolutions condemning the group's atrocities and calling for its inclusion on the European list of terrorist organisations, thus reflecting a growing political consensus on the multifaceted nature of the threat (Gazapo, 2025: 1–37). However, sanctions have clear operational limitations: they hinder financing, raise costs and restrict room for manoeuvre, but are not sufficient on their own to dismantle ecosystems of influence that operate in a flexible, adaptive manner and are supported by local networks.

5.2 Strengthening cognitive resilience and cooperation in communication

Alongside coercive measures, the EU has progressively come to recognise that the response to Russian influence in the Sahel cannot be limited to sanctioning actors, but must include capabilities for prevention, resilience and narrative countering. This requires action both externally—in cooperation with African partners—and internally, by strengthening the resilience of European societies against information manipulation.

Firstly, the EU has begun to incorporate the fight against disinformation into its development cooperation programmes. In 2023, in coordination with the African Union (AU), a pilot scheme was launched to strengthen independent local media in the Sahel through grants, training for journalists and the promotion of local fact-checkers. At the same time, media literacy has been promoted through community workshops in countries such as Niger and Chad, aimed at young people and community leaders to improve their ability to identify hoaxes and critically analyse the digital environment. These initiatives are part of the concept of societal resilience (NATO, 2023), and their strategic importance lies in the fact that they seek to address not only the effects of cognitive manipulation, but also the structural vulnerabilities that make it possible.

Complementarily, the EU has collaborated with African governments that request it to improve their public communication capabilities, providing technical advice to

institutional spokespersons in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana in order to counter extremist or manipulated narratives on social media. In the same vein, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) emphasised in 2024 the need to 'map the wave of disinformation in Africa' and invest in information transparency as a prerequisite for reducing the penetration of external campaigns (ACSS, 2024: 1–8). The EU-AU Summit in November 2025 reinforced this approach by reiterating the political commitment of both parties to initiatives aimed at combating disinformation, strengthening cybersecurity and responding to hybrid threats (Council of the European Union, 2025c).

Secondly, following an initial phase of inadequate communication, European institutions and several Member States have begun to develop a counter-narrative aimed at challenging the narrative in the African media landscape. In this context, France adapted its *France 24* channel and *RFI* with special programmes dedicated to debunking myths such as the false claim of French support for terrorists in Mali. In 2022, the EU, through the European External Action Service, reactivated its *StratCom Task Force* , which focuses on Africa and is tasked with identifying disinformation campaigns and responding with factual information. One concrete achievement was the public exposure on the EU's official social media channels of the identities of some of the Russian 'trolls' operating in Africa and the techniques they used: by ending their anonymity and exposing their fallacies, their credibility was successfully undermined.

Similarly, European public diplomacy has stepped up its presence in African debates and communication forums. The EEAS itself has noted that specific communication campaigns were carried out in sub-Saharan Africa to reinforce European messages and highlight the limitations of Russian support for the continent (EEAS, 2024b). In the same vein, initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo have begun to incorporate the analysis of unconventional formats of propaganda, including digital entertainment products such as *African Dawn*, understood not so much as anecdotal elements, but as narrative vehicles aimed at discrediting Western partners and projecting narratives favourable to Moscow among young audiences (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). Given that reversing adverse perceptions is a slow and structural task, this proactive public diplomacy should not be interpreted as a minor complement, but as an indispensable dimension of cognitive competition.

Thirdly, the EU has strengthened its mechanisms for early detection and rapid response to disinformation campaigns. The Rapid Alert System, established in 2019 among Member States, continues to function as a platform for real-time exchange on active information manipulation campaigns (EEAS, 2019). Added to this is the evolution of the Code of Practice on Disinformation, updated in 2022, which obliges large-scale digital platforms to improve their systems for identifying and mitigating fake accounts, coordinated networks and opaque amplification dynamics. In parallel, several European countries—including Spain—have incorporated media literacy measures into their education systems and are developing fact-checking campaigns aimed at strengthening citizens' resilience against manipulated content. The aim of these initiatives is not to eliminate disinformation entirely, but to make it more

difficult for narratives fabricated or amplified from places such as St. Petersburg, Bamako or Ouagadougou to penetrate the European public sphere without scrutiny.

Fourthly, the European response has tended to become increasingly integrated into broader cooperation frameworks with NATO and G7 partners. NATO, for its part, has developed the concept of 'Cognitive Defence' within its doctrinal framework and structures dedicated to countering hybrid threats, promoting the exchange of best practices to protect allied societies from information manipulation (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023). In parallel, several European states involved in the International Coalition for the Sahel—such as France, Italy and Spain—have coordinated with the United States and Canada strategic communication initiatives aimed at countering Russian influence in Africa. This multi-level dimension is essential because cognitive warfare does not unfold in silos: it simultaneously affects African security, the stability of the European neighbourhood and global geopolitical competition.

This analysis suggests that the European response is gradually shifting towards a more comprehensive approach, combining sanctions, social resilience, counter-narratives and cooperation with African partners. During its presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2023, Spain also promoted the idea of an EU-Africa alliance against disinformation and to counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), implicitly recognising that the information battle cannot be won from Europe and for Africa, but only with African actors and on the social ground where the legitimacy of the narrative is contested. However, this approach remains insufficient unless accompanied by a greater on-the-ground presence, sustained investment in the media and media literacy, and better coordination between external action, security and strategic communication as Borrell warned in his Speech on Disinformation and Foreign Interference (2024). Precisely for this reason, European response measures should not be limited to what has already been deployed, but should move towards a more ambitious framework for structural reinforcement.

5.3 Strategic reinforcement measures for the European response

In light of the limitations identified in the current response, the EU should move towards a reinforcement strategy structured around four complementary lines:

The first line concerns counter-narratives and communication outreach with a physical presence. The EEAS StratCom *Task Force* and the Rapid Alert System should not operate solely from Brussels, but should develop permanent or semi-permanent capabilities at key points in the Sahel region, particularly where the legitimacy of the Western presence is most fiercely contested. It is not enough to debunk hoaxes from a distance: it is necessary to fund independent local media, fact-checking in widely spoken regional languages, and community-legitimate information platforms capable of competing with structures such as the *African Initiative* in terms of social credibility. In strategic terms, the EU needs to invest in narrative capacity with an intensity comparable to that which Russia devotes to its influence mechanisms.

The second strand concerns economic security and the diversification of critical supplies. Given Russia's interest in extractive enclaves in countries such as Niger, as well as the structural importance of certain African resources to the European economy, the EU must strengthen its strategy for diversifying critical raw materials and reduce its vulnerability to potential geo-economic capture dynamics. This involves not only seeking alternative suppliers, but also offering Sahelian states more transparent and sustainable models of economic cooperation than those proposed by networks linked to Moscow or front companies associated with Wagner/Africa Corps. Resource traceability, contractual governance and transparency in the extractive sectors should become central to European foreign policy towards the region.

The third line concerns the preventive management of migration as a potential vector of hybrid coercion. The deterioration of security in the Sahel, exacerbated by the limited effectiveness of new military support and the persistence of jihadism, increases migratory pressure on the Canary Islands and the western Mediterranean. Although not all migration can or should be interpreted in instrumental terms, recent experience in other contexts has shown that migratory flows can be used, in certain contexts, as a tool for political pressure. Consequently, the EU should reduce its reliance on unreliable regimes for migration management, strengthen the capacities of African regional organisations such as ECOWAS, and design cooperation mechanisms that distinguish between the humanitarian dimension of migration flows and their potential geopolitical exploitation.

The fourth strand concerns endogenous and exogenous cognitive resilience. Internally, the EU should deepen the transition from voluntary codes of conduct towards more stringent regulatory frameworks for digital platforms , improving the capacity to detect and remove coordinated bot networks and manipulation campaigns operated from environments linked to the Kremlin. Externally, media literacy cannot remain a peripheral component of cooperation: it should be firmly integrated into educational, community and communication programmes developed with African partners. If cognitive warfare exploits structural vulnerabilities in perception, the European response must aim to create genuine 'cognitive vaccines' against information manipulation, both within its own societies and in those with which it shares an extended security space.

Taken together, these areas for strengthening do not replace current policy, but they do complement it. The European response will only be effective if it combines sanctions, resilience, narrative presence, economic security and structural cooperation with African actors. Without such integration, the EU will continue to react to the effects of Russian cognitive warfare when what it needs is to intervene earlier on the conditions that make it possible.

6 Conclusions

The expansion of Russian influence in the Sahel through the Wagner Group and, since 2024, the Africa Corps, suggests that the cognitive dimension has

become a central component of Moscow's hybrid projection in Africa. The analysis presented shows that the effectiveness of this strategy cannot be explained solely by military capabilities—indeed, its results on the ground have been limited or even counterproductive, as evidenced by the advances of JNIM in Mali despite the Russian presence—but rather by the articulation of an architecture of influence capable of influencing social perceptions, interpretative frameworks and narratives of legitimacy in contexts of high institutional fragility.

The cases of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger demonstrate that Russian penetration has operated on pre-existing grievances, anti-Western sentiments and crises of internal legitimacy that were not created *ex novo* by Moscow, but were amplified and reordered in its favour through disinformation campaigns, propaganda, symbolic mobilisation and a sustained media presence. In this sense, cognitive warfare does not act by replacing material reality, but by reinterpreting it and endowing it with political coherence through discursive frameworks that serve Russian interests. Consequently, its impact should not be measured solely by the truth or falsity of the content disseminated, but by its capacity to alter the social reception of events and influence far-reaching political decisions.

The study also confirms the analytical utility of the dual temporality of cognitive warfare. In the Sahel, one observes, on the one hand, a phase of slow erosion, characterised by the gradual consolidation of anti-French, anti-Western and sovereigntist narratives, as well as by the systematic delegitimisation of international actors present on the ground, including MINUSMA; and, on the other hand, a phase of rapid detonation, in which political crises, *coups d'état* and strategic reorientations find a social base that is already primed to accept or legitimise them. The sequence observed in Mali, and to a lesser extent in Burkina Faso and Niger, suggests that the effectiveness of these operations depends less on immediate military victories than on their ability to influence the criteria by which societies interpret security, sovereignty and legitimacy. Europe, consequently, reacted late to prolonged processes of informational and cognitive erosion, detecting the visible effects of destabilisation more clearly than the enabling conditions that made it viable.

From a European perspective, the article argues that the effects of this Russian projection are indirect but strategically significant. It is not merely a matter of the loss of Western presence on the ground, but of the creation of political, informational and social environments that are less receptive to European engagement and more favourable to alternative geopolitical frameworks. This affects the EU on several levels: it weakens its capacity for projection on the southern flank, reduces its operational margins in security matters, increases its exposure to dynamics of instability with repercussions on migration and terrorism, and heightens its vulnerability to disputes over strategic resources and narrative hegemony in the Euro-African space.

In this context, the consolidation of the Africa Corps is of particular importance, as it marks the transition from a parastatal structure with some scope for plausible deniability to a paramilitary force directly subordinate to the Russian state. This transformation reinforces the argument that Russia's projection of power in the Sahel

cannot be understood as a marginal or informal phenomenon, but rather as a power policy with an integrated military, economic and information dimension. Hence, the European response cannot be limited to individual sanctions or ad hoc reactions, but must be articulated on the basis of a broader strategy of cognitive counteraction, structured around four complementary vectors: narrative and communicative presence on the ground, economic diversification and security of critical supplies, preventive management of migration vulnerabilities, and strengthening of cognitive resilience both within the EU and among its African partners.

The main contribution of the Sahelian case, therefore, lies not merely in demonstrating Russian expansion in Africa, but in highlighting that contemporary geopolitical competition is also waged in the cognitive domain, that is, in the capacity to influence how societies perceive, interpret and prioritise reality. From this perspective, Russian cognitive warfare has shown that it is possible to erode the Western presence and alter strategic balances without the need for decisive military victories, simply by colonising the information space until the replacement of some actors by others becomes more acceptable.

Hence, the European challenge is not merely one of security or communication, but of strategic credibility. Only by offering a credible narrative based on tangible results will Europe be able to reduce the appeal of the Kremlin's narratives.

For Spain, given its geographical proximity and its indirect link to stability in the Sahel, this issue also takes on a unique dimension. Its position on the southern flank gives it a particular responsibility in shaping and sustaining this response, ensuring that Europe's forward frontier in Africa remains—to paraphrase Borrell (2025: 1–15)—*our* frontier and not a space progressively ceded to actors who seek to undermine the EU's security, legitimacy and capacity for influence. Ultimately, the cognitive battle will not be won merely by refuting disinformation, but by demonstrating through concrete evidence that the partnership between Europe and Africa can translate into prosperity, mutual respect and shared stability. Europe must not only aim to contain Russian influence, but must also seek to build a democratic resilience that is genuinely capable of withstanding prolonged hybrid pressures.

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An uncomfortable triangle: China, Taiwan and the United States An analysis using Game Theory

Abstract

This paper analyses the strategic interaction between China, Taiwan and the United States regarding Taiwan's status, paying particular attention to the possibility of armed conflict and the role played by the United States' policy of strategic ambiguity.

Game theory and its dynamic extension (motion theory) are used to analyse this trilateral relationship. A sequential model is proposed, and the robustness of the results is examined by using alternative parameters for Taiwan and the United States. Various issues relating to asymmetric information are also examined.

The main findings focus on Taiwan's role as a linchpin of global interaction, the long-term significance of China's more assertive stance, and the difficulties that the United States' strategic ambiguity may eventually pose. From the perspective of a potential armed conflict, the combination of 'nationalist' and 'hawkish' tendencies on the part of Taiwan and the United States, respectively, is particularly significant.

In the medium to long term, China will continue to act assertively; Taiwan will come under intense pressure to negotiate its integration with China and will seek to broaden its room for manoeuvre by raising the prospect of an asymmetric conflict in the event of an attack; and the United States will maintain its limited support for Taiwan, whilst upholding a strategic ambiguity that leans in that direction.

Keywords

China, Taiwan, United States, Game theory, Geopolitics.

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1 Introduction

Since 2022, two major conflicts (Ukraine-Russia and the Middle East) have overshadowed the one unfolding between China and the United States[1] regarding Taiwan. The visit to Taiwan in August 2022 by Nancy Pelosi—at that time Speaker of the US House of Representatives—marked a shift in China's stance towards Taiwan[2] and, indirectly, towards the United States (Scobell *et al.*, 2025).

This shift in stance, characterised by increased military and economic pressure from China on Taiwan, necessitates a different approach to analysing the relationship between China and the United States, as a purely diplomatic solution now appears to be off the table and maintaining the current *status quo* has become less plausible.

It cannot be entirely ruled out that the conflict in Ukraine has contributed to this shift in stance, as the United States has been forced to focus its resources on supporting that country, whilst Russia has drawn closer to China, both economically and militarily. The combination of these two developments has strengthened China's strategic capabilities, which may have boosted its confidence in its own capabilities.

Historically, China and the United States have had a contentious relationship regarding the status of Taiwan. On the one hand, China has always regarded Taiwan as an integral and inseparable part of itself, shaping both its foreign policy (under the 'One China' principle) and its domestic policy (under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle). Various reasons underpin China's stance: territorial integrity, the closure of a period its leaders view as one of foreign abuse and interference (the so-called 'Century of Humiliation', 1839–1949), economic and military projection, and, more controversially but plausibly, containing a social and political experiment (Taiwan as a liberal democracy) which could eventually undermine China's political system, centred on the Communist Party and its version of the Marxist-inspired dictatorship of the proletariat.

For its part, the United States has always viewed Taiwan as a means of containing China, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the overall tone of its relationship with that country. This tone, which began on a highly confrontational note in the wake of the Korean War (1950–1953), gradually softened as the United States moved closer to China during the 1970s, seeking a counterweight to the expansion of the Soviet Union and hoping, in the long term, to draw China into the Western sphere through trade (Cliff and Shlapak, 2007; Mearsheimer, 2014; Kuntić, 2015; Scobell *et al.*, 2020; Lin, 2021; Pérez Expósito, 2023; Melián Negrín, 2024; Mazarr *et al.*, 2025).

1 Hereinafter, China will be referred to as the People's Republic of China and Taiwan as the Republic of China, with their origins dating back to 1949.

2 The map shown in Melián Negrín (2024), Figure 7, illustrates this shift in stance very well. Similarly, the number of violations of Taiwan's air defence identification zone by China has risen from an average of 458 in the period 2019–2021 to 2,570 between 2022 and 2025 (CSIS, 2026).

China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 is conventionally regarded as the consolidation of the Chinese capitalist system and the start of its major economic, technological and military expansion. Paradoxically, the success of China's integration into the West has ultimately led to renewed tensions in its relationship with the United States, particularly in the commercial and technological spheres, but also in the financial and geostrategic domains. Naturally, as part of the latter, Taiwan has increasingly become a point of friction between the two superpowers to the extent that various analysts consider an armed conflict between them to be highly likely and even inevitable, with such a conflict likely to arise precisely over the status of Taiwan (Allison, 2015; Castelltort Claramunt, 2021; O'Hanlon, 2022; Cancian *et al.*, 2023; Pérez Expósito, 2023).

In this context, it is particularly important to consider the possibility of direct armed conflict between China and the United States, the consequences of which in terms of human suffering could be enormous. Furthermore, such a conflict scenario would lead to a reduction in economic activity and trade across the three countries. Given the weight of China and the United States, this would have an immediate negative impact on global levels of production, demand and employment. Moreover, given the geographical significance of this region and its importance in global trade, bottlenecks would arise in supply chains, with consequent disruptions to production processes in the rest of the world, as well as general inflationary pressures. The more intense and protracted this conflict is, the greater and more persistent the adverse effects described above will be.

Finally, Taiwan has gradually lost international standing as the United States has drawn closer to China, leading to an increase in the number of countries that recognise only the People's Republic of China. Nevertheless, the United States has always maintained its support, as evidenced by the *Taiwan Relations Act* of 1979 and the *Six Assurances* of 1982. These assurances, together with adherence to the 'One China' principle, have given rise to a stance known as 'strategic ambiguity'. According to this stance, China cannot be certain of US passivity should it invade Taiwan, but neither can Taiwan be certain of US support should it unilaterally declare its independence from China. This approach is geared towards maintaining the *status quo*, whereby peace is preserved, the 'One China' principle is not violated, and Taiwan effectively retains a status very similar to that of a sovereign and independent state (Wolfinger, 1984; Benson, 2000; Chang, 2000; Niou, 2004; Feldman, 2007; Kan and Morrison, 2014; Wang, 2025)

From a methodological perspective, this study employs Game Theory (Bonnano, 2018) and its dynamic extension provided by Movement Theory (Brams, 1994). Since Schelling's (1960) initial contribution, this theory has been systematically applied to the study of international relations (Snidal, 1985; Morrow, 1994; Gates and Humes, 1997), enabling the analysis of strategic interactions between rational actors (such as countries) in situations of interdependence. As a result of this analysis, stable outcomes can be identified through equilibrium concepts, which allow the most plausible states to be characterised based on the interaction of the players. Furthermore, it provides

a framework for understanding how the lack of complete information affects actors' decisions, bringing its application closer to real-world conditions.

Finally, by making explicit the initial assumptions regarding players' preferences and available actions, game theory allows us to examine the robustness of the results in the face of changes to those assumptions, thereby providing a framework for rational discussion in the difficult and controversial field of international relations.

The text is structured as follows. Firstly, it reviews the literature analysing the Taiwan conflict through the lens of game theory. Section 3, which is of a formal nature, presents a sequential model based on two basic two-player games that constitute the first two stages of the model: China–Taiwan and Taiwan–United States, respectively. The model includes a third stage that combines the results of both games, concluding the interaction between the three countries. Section 4, which is analytical in nature, examines certain informational aspects related to strategic ambiguity as well as the potential behaviours of China, Taiwan and the United States. The paper includes three appendices: a brief overview of Game Theory, the detailed results of the interaction between Taiwan and the United States, taking into account all the stances that both countries may adopt, and the extreme case of a game between China and an independent Taiwan.

2 Literature review

Various authors have used Game Theory to analyse the strategic relationship between China and the United States regarding Taiwan; see Franck and Melese (2003), Wu (2003), Chang (2007) and Zietek *et al.* (2025).

Generally speaking, models tend to consider three players (China, Taiwan and the United States), thereby assigning Taiwan a specific role in the interaction between the two superpowers. The sequential approach is clearly dominant and, to a lesser extent, an ordinal (qualitative) characterisation of the players' preferences.

All models take full account of the information available and, when they combine various temperaments[3], they generate a multitude of equilibria, which is an indication of the indeterminacy of the overall system. This indeterminacy reflects the complexity of the relationship between these countries and the multitude of factors that influence it.

A very common feature is the use of multiple temperaments or attitudes to characterise different countries, reflecting their varying internal attitudes towards the game. In particular, all models agree on attributing two temperaments to the United States, designed to capture the principle of strategic ambiguity followed by that country[4]. The following table summarises their main characteristics.

3 In the case of Wu (2003), probabilistic elements are also present, as the study explicitly considers the probability of success of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, both with and without US assistance to the latter.

4 The exception is Franck and Melese (2003), who characterise the United States' stance in terms of factors relating to its military capability.

TABLE I: MODELS BASED ON GAME THEORY

Modelo	Jugadores	Temperamentos	Equilibrio
Franck y Melese (2003)	CH, US	CH: Confiado / Paciente / Impaciente / Desesperado US: (DAM alta/baja) X (Acceso garantizado/disputado)	Nash perfecto en subjuegos
Wu (2003)	CH, US, TW	TW: Independentista / Continuista US: Intervencionista / No intervencionista	Nash perfecto en subjuegos
Chang (2007)	CH, US, TW	US: Claridad estratégica / Ambigüedad estratégica CH: Paciente / Impaciente	Nash perfecto en subjuegos
Zietek et al. (2025)	CH, US		Nash (simultáneo)
Este trabajo (2026)	CH, US, TW	TW: Conciliador / Nacionalista US: Moderado / Belicoso	Nash No Miope (Tª de Movimientos)

Nota: DAM denota la capacidad de la defensa antimisiles de Estados Unidos y "Acceso" indica la facilidad del acceso, principalmente aeronaval, de este país al estrecho de Taiwán.
El símbolo "X" indica que se consideran la cuatro combinaciones posibles de DAM y "Acceso".

From a technical perspective, the main contribution of this work compared to that of Franck and Melese (2003), Wu (2003) and Chang (2007) lies in combining their sequential approach with an in-depth analysis of each stage using Movement Theory. In this way, a dynamic extension is provided that significantly enriches the classical analysis, offering ENMs a long-term perspective that complements very well the short-term perspective provided by Nash equilibrium.

A comparison of the model proposed in this paper with that of Wu (2003) is highly informative. As can be seen in Table I, the two models are very similar, both in terms of the number of players, their sequential structure, and the definition of the temperaments for Taiwan and the United States. However, the greater integration of his model, together with the use of a cardinal and probabilistic framework, makes the analysis particularly complex and hardly operational[5], since those cardinal elements (the utilities derived by the countries in the various states of the model) are, in practice, extremely difficult to calculate.

By contrast, this study has adopted an ordinal approach and avoided the use of probabilistic elements, replacing them with a qualitative calculation based on alternative scenarios, the analysis of which is highly intuitive.

Finally, the sequential approach adopted—which, as will be seen later, includes a possible review of the results from the first stage—provides with a high degree of modularity, simplifying the analysis by allowing each stage to be studied in depth, using Movement Theory.

3 A sequential game theory model

This paper examines this relationship using Game Theory, formulating a model of three players (China, Taiwan and the United States) who interact with one another sequentially, as shown in the following figure:



Figure 1: Model structure

5 See, for example, the diagrams on pages 40 and 46 (Wu, 2023).

In the model, an initial China-Taiwan game is played out. This is followed by a second Taiwan-United States game which 'validates' the first if Taiwan repeats the balancing strategy it adopted in the first game; if not, it leads to a revision of that strategy, with the process repeating itself and yielding a new outcome.

Although in the real world both sets of relations operate in parallel, this sequence seeks to reflect the asymmetry between them, as the relationship between China and Taiwan is considered far more binding and decisive than that between Taiwan and the United States.

Taiwan is the only country involved in both games, acting as an intermediary between China and the United States. In this way, the two the powers interact indirectly, with Taiwan acting as the 'mediating factor' in this interaction.

Both Taiwan and the United States articulate their preferences through two distinct 'temperaments': conciliatory or nationalist for the former, and *dovish* or *hawkish* for the latter.

These attitudes can feed into one another, so that the more nationalistic Taiwan becomes, the more belligerent the United States may become, and vice versa. Thus, the attitudes of the two countries that interact with China—either directly (Taiwan) or indirectly (the United States)—are not necessarily independent of one another.

The use of alternative temperaments is an analytically useful way of qualifying the single-actor hypothesis, reflecting the fact that in both countries there are very different strategic perspectives and assessments regarding the evaluation of the possible outcomes of the games in which they are involved. Furthermore, as already noted, the United States adopts a stance of strategic ambiguity that fits well with a dual temperament.

3.1 First stage: the China–Taiwan game

China has two strategies at its disposal: assertive diplomacy and military intervention. The first involves a combination of diplomatic and economic measures aimed at convincing Taiwan of the benefits of integration with China, alongside demonstrations of military strength and capability, though without resorting to direct confrontation with Taiwan. These demonstrations include, amongst other actions, *de facto* blockades through the conduct of large-scale air and naval exercises around Taiwan. Formally, these are not blockades, but as live fire is used and the island is completely surrounded, they are blockades in practice. They also include smaller-scale but more frequent and unpredictable operations, such as the deployment of fighter jets and bombers east of the median line of the Taiwan Strait, aggressive naval patrols around the Taiwanese islands close to the mainland, etc. See Martin *et al.* (2022) and CSIS (2026) for a quantification and analysis of these threats. Additionally, this strategy of assertive diplomacy also includes measures aimed at integrating the economies of both countries more effectively, with the aim of emphasising the economic and financial benefits of a potential reunification.

By contrast, military intervention, whilst disregarding the diplomatic and economic aspects, involves a series of essentially 'kinetic' actions, the intensity of which can vary considerably:

- Blockade of the island: selective, partial or complete.
- Attack: limited (e.g. on the small islands controlled by Taiwan), comprehensive but limited to military targets, or comprehensive without restrictions.
- Invasion with landing: limited (e.g. occupation of Tainan, the main port) or complete.

For its part, Taiwan has two strategies at its disposal:

- Negotiated integration with China.
- Unilateral independence from China.

Integration can take many forms and offer a wide range of possibilities, ranging from China's complete absorption of Taiwan (e.g. Taiwan would be like Hainan, a Chinese island of similar size) to a status as a Commonwealth of Taiwan, including various degrees of autonomy, a federation or a confederation.

Under any form of integration, two areas would no longer be under Taiwan's control: defence (military affairs in general) and foreign policy (including its economic dimension).

Independence, rather than a separation from China that already exists *de facto*, is a rejection of the integration process. Independence is a unilateral decision by Taiwan with very few nuances, whereas integration is a clearly bilateral and very open-ended process.

The combination of China's and Taiwan's strategies gives rise to four possible scenarios, with both countries stating their preferences. Those of China are structured around two axes, reflecting the official stance of the Chinese Communist Party as expressed at its October 2022 congress[6].

- Primary: integration is preferred to independence
- Secondary: contingent on Taiwan's decision; if it opts for integration, China prefers assertive action, but if it opts for independence, it prefers military action.

Unlike China, Taiwan organises its preferences according to two alternative structures or temperaments. As already indicated, this is a way of qualifying the single-actor hypothesis, reflecting the fact that there are significant differences within Taiwan's population regarding its relationship with China and a potential armed conflict with that country.

6 Xi Jinping (2022): 'Taiwan belongs to China. The resolution of the Taiwan issue is a matter for the Chinese people, and it is for the Chinese people to decide. We will continue to work with the utmost sincerity and make every effort to achieve peaceful reunification, but we will never rule out the use of military force and reserve the right to take all necessary measures'.

3.1.2 Variant 1: Conciliatory China-Taiwan game solution

Firstly, it is seen as a conciliatory stance, characterised by a clear preference for an 'assertive' China over a 'military' one, and subsequently placing greater value on integration than on independence. This approach is particularly associated with the Kuomintang party and the business sector, which have very close commercial and economic ties with China (Herrero Martínez, 2025; Wolfenstein, 2025).

The combination of actions and preferences results in the game solution shown in the table below.

TABLE II: CHINA-TAIWAN CONCILIATORY GAME

Taiwán / China	Independencia	Integración
Acción militar	(2 1) [4 4]	(3 2) [4 4]
Diplomacia asertiva	(1 3) [4 4]	***(4 4)*** [4 4]

Notes: (x, y) = (China's preference, Taiwan's preference) in the original game, 4 = Best; 3 = Next best; 2 = Next worst; 1 = Worst.
[x, y] = [China's preference, Taiwan's preference] in the anticipatory game, described by a payoff matrix whose entries, defined in square brackets, are the non-myopic equilibria (NME) of the original game starting from that outcome.
The Nash equilibria of the original game and the anticipatory game are underlined.
The arrows indicate the transitions between game states leading to a Nash equilibrium. Non-myopic equilibria (NME) are highlighted in grey. The cooperative states of the basic game {(4,4), (4,3), (3,4) and (3,3)} are shown in bold and italics.

A conciliatory Taiwan is characterised by a dominant strategy (Integration), so China will opt to use an assertive strategy. Thus, the Nash equilibrium of the game turns out to be [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration]=(4,4), characterised by being:

- The only cooperative outcome and the best that both players can achieve.
- Coinciding with the game's ENM, which is also unique.
- It also coincides with the Nash equilibrium of the anticipatory game.

The fact that the short-run equilibrium (Nash), the long-run equilibrium (ENM) and the equilibrium in the anticipatory game all coincide indicates the robustness of the solution obtained, a point reinforced by the fact that both players assign the maximum value to it. Although the game is largely determined from a technical perspective, it is worth remembering that the concept of integration is very open-ended and that assertive diplomacy allows for a wide variety of combinations of coercion and compulsion.

Assuming a conciliatory stance towards Taiwan, the model predicts the following:

- Taiwan will integrate into China, relinquishing its own foreign and defence policies.

– Although the process has no precise timetable, it must be consistent with China's use of a non-military strategy. In principle, a date around 2050 seems reasonable, close to the centenary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.
– As the timing and forms of integration remain open, direct military confrontation is ruled out; however, whilst the process is ongoing and as part of China's assertive diplomacy, large-scale military activities may be carried out by China.

3.1.3 Scenario 2: China-Nationalist Taiwan outcome

Taiwan also has an alternative stance, more inclined towards independence and the general maintenance of its sovereignty *vis-à-vis* China. These preferences have been gaining traction, particularly since the election of President Tsai in 2016 and the consolidation of the progressive democratic party.

The nationalist mindset views China's strategy of military action in the same way as the conciliatory one, but reverses the positions regarding China's assertive diplomacy. Consequently, integration ceases to be the dominant strategy and behaviour becomes contingent: if China adheres to a strategy of assertive diplomacy, it prefers independence. Conversely, if China resorts to military action, it prefers integration in order to avoid military confrontation. In this situation, a more radical temperament would prefer independence in this case[7]. The game analysis is shown in the following table:

TABLE III: CHINA-NATIONALIST TAIWAN GAME

Taiwán / China	Independencia	Integración
Acción militar	(2 1) [4 3]	(3 2) [4 3]
Diplomacia asertiva	(1 4) [3 2]	(4 3) [4 3]

Notes: (x, y) = (China's preference, Taiwan's preference) in the original game, 4 = Best; 3 = Next best; 2 = Next worst; 1 = Worst.
[x, y] = [China's preference, Taiwan's preference] in the anticipatory game, described by a payoff matrix whose entries, defined in square brackets, are the non-myopic equilibria (NME) of the original game starting from that outcome.
The Nash equilibria of the original and anticipatory games are underlined.
The arrows indicate the transitions between game states leading to a Nash equilibrium. Non-myopic equilibria (NME) are highlighted in grey. The cooperative states of the basic game {(4,4), (4,3), (3,4) and (3,3)} are shown in bold and italics.

7 This case is analysed in Appendix C.

Taiwan's shift from a conciliatory to a nationalist stance has significant implications for the game's solution:

- There is no Nash equilibrium using deterministic strategies[8]. The game is now strongly cyclical: the players successively alternate their strategies, without reaching a stable point.
- The cycle of integration→assertive diplomacy→independence→integration should be taken as an approximation of actual behaviour that would oscillate around these points, without settling clearly on any specific combination. Furthermore, the transition through the state [Military action, Independence] could be terminal under certain circumstances.
- Although the short-term situation appears unstable, in the long term two Nash equilibria can be identified, both linked to Taiwan's integration strategy. One of them, [Assertive diplomacy, Integration], coincides with that of the previous game.
- The anticipatory game does possess a Nash equilibrium, making the NME associated with [Assertive diplomacy, Integration] more plausible than that of [Military action, Integration].
- A further argument in favour of this NGE is that it is a cooperative state, albeit less unanimously so than when Taiwan adopts a conciliatory stance.
- This NME dominates the other NME in the Pareto sense; therefore, in a rational long-term calculation, it is more likely to prevail.

Taking all of the above into account, Taiwan's integration into China appears to be one of the most plausible options in the long term, as it is a NPM for both of Taiwan's temperaments. It is also the most plausible option in the short term (Nash) if Taiwan adopts a conciliatory stance.

From the point of view of fairness, the state [Assertive Action, Integration] is a cooperative state for both of Taiwan's temperaments, thereby avoiding the perception that one player is 'taking advantage' of the other.

With certain caveats, it can be considered that, from July 2022, the state [Assertive Action, Integration] is the initial state of the game, which reinforces its NME character due to the path dependency it introduces.

Finally, the scenario of a nationalist Taiwan raises certain concerns regarding instability, particularly in the short term, owing mainly to the absence of a deterministic Nash equilibrium and the cyclical nature of the interaction between the two countries.

8 Technically, there is no Nash equilibrium using only pure (deterministic) strategies. Finding such an equilibrium requires the use of random strategies, which, in the context of this paper and given the use of ordinal preferences, is not appropriate.

3.2 Second stage: the Taiwan–United States game

In this second stage, Taiwan—acting as a 'mediating particle' between China and the United States—interacts with the latter. As a result of this interaction, Taiwan may choose the same strategy as in the first stage, bringing the entire game between the three countries to a close. Conversely, if it does not repeat its choice, a third game begins which determines the final interaction between the three nations.

Taiwan will be characterised in the same way as in the previous game, with two strategies available (independence and integration) and its preferences able to align with two alternative temperaments (conciliatory and nationalist).

For its part, the United States has two strategies for supporting Taiwan:

– Limited: arms, intelligence, diplomatic and economic support.

– Extended: additionally, military intervention in the event of Chinese aggression. This intervention would focus on the defence of the island, without considering an attack on China[9].

The United States' relationship with Taiwan, which is shaped by the aforementioned strategic ambiguity, will be characterised on the assumption that the United States itself possesses two temperaments: moderate (dovish) and bellicose (hawkish).

The dovish stance is characterised by a dominant strategy: limited support, and, subject to this, a preference for independence over integration (maximising the return on the investment that support represents).

A bellicose stance alters previous preferences, shifting the balance of power when Taiwan opts for independence. Consequently, the United States favours full alignment with Taiwan when the latter chooses secession.

The two approaches Taiwan adopts in its dealings with China are mirrored in its dealings with the United States. A conciliatory Taiwan maintains a dominant strategy based on integration and, subject to this, prefers full US support to limited support. As in the game with China, Taiwan's nationalist temperament is reactive, with no dominant strategy, and involves a trade-off in the valuation of extended US support compared to the conciliatory temperament.

The combination of the two temperaments of the United States and Taiwan gives rise to four possible games. The following table shows the corresponding Nash equilibria[10].

9 O'Hanlon (2022) and Cancian *et al.* (2023) examine the possible development of this conflict in great detail, primarily through war games.

10 Appendix B presents the detailed results of the four games.

TABLE IV: NASH EQUILIBRIA OF THE TAIWAN-US GAME

		Estados Unidos	
		Moderado	Belicoso
Taiwán	Conciliador	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)
	Nacionalista	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2) [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (4,4)

In all cases, the outcome [Limited support, Integration] emerges as a Nash equilibrium of the four games, with the same payoff, (2,2). Only when the United States has a bellicose disposition and Taiwan a nationalist one is the outcome [Extended support, Independence] also a Nash equilibrium.

Movement Theory provides a very informative refinement of the previous results. The following table shows the corresponding NMEs, as well as their correspondence with Nash's.

TABLE V: NON-MYOPIC EQUILIBRIA OF THE TAIWAN-UNITED STATES GAME

		Estados Unidos	
		Moderado	Belicoso
Taiwán	Conciliador	**[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)** [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (3,3)	**[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)** [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (4,3)
	Nacionalista	**[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)** [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (3,4)	**[Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (4,4)**

Clave: en negrita los ENM que también son equilibrios de Nash.

Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos.

If Taiwan's stance is conciliatory, the Nash equilibrium and the NME revolve around integration and limited support from the United States, regardless of the United States' stance.

If Taiwan's stance is nationalist and that of the United States is moderate, this characterisation holds true: the United States' position 'curb's' Taiwan's aspirations for independence.

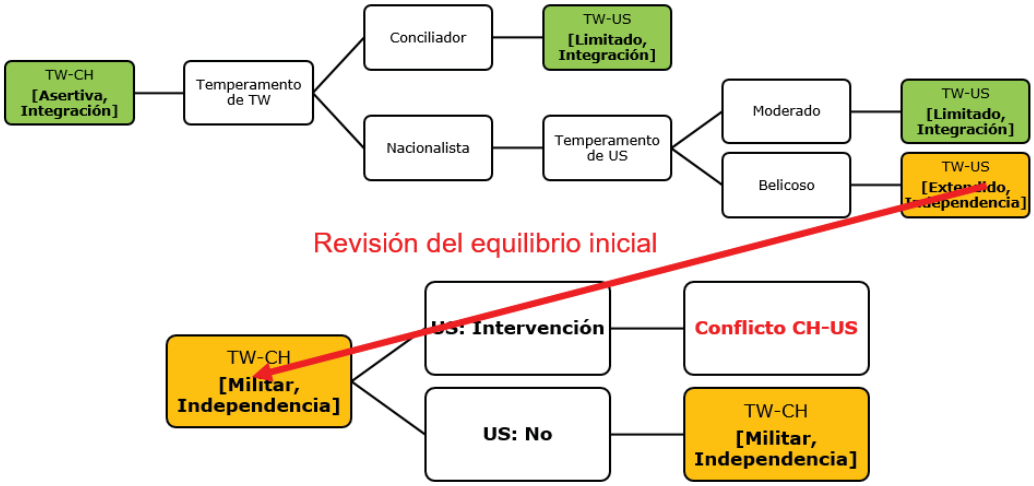
The major shift occurs when a Taiwan with a nationalist temperament is combined with a bellicose United States. In this case, short-term uncertainty arises, as there are two Nash equilibria:

– The most robust: [Limited support, Integration].
– A new one: [Extended support, Independence].

In the long term, the uncertainty is resolved with the emergence of a single NME: [Extended Support, Independence], which is also the cooperative outcome of the game. Consequently, this combination of temperaments, which are likely to reinforce one another, causes Taiwan to pivot towards independence.

3.3 Third stage: validation of the initial China-Taiwan game

Taiwan, as the only player present in both games, must display the same temperament in both games at the end of the sequence. This brings us to the third stage of the game: the validation of the solutions obtained in the two preceding stages. The following figure illustrates this validation process.



Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos.

Figure 2: Complete sequence of the games

The starting point for this sequence is the most plausible outcome[11] of the interaction between Taiwan and China: assertive Chinese diplomacy and a willingness to negotiate Taiwan's integration. Even if Taiwan adopts a conciliatory stance, its interaction with the United States does not alter the above outcome. This outcome is robust with respect to the United States' stance.

If, on the other hand, Taiwan's temperament is nationalist and that of the United States is bellicose, this creates an inconsistency with the previous scenario, as Taiwan now opts for independence and the United States provides extensive support to the country. This inconsistency leads to a revision of the first scenario, with China opting for military intervention. This revision does not occur if the United States has a moderate temperament, even if Taiwan's is nationalist.

The United States is the player making the final move. If it effectively backs Taiwan, the conflict will escalate, with China and the United States entering into direct confrontation. If, on the other hand, the United States renounces its extended support and provides only limited support, the conflict will not escalate, but it will have already begun, unfolding solely between China and Taiwan. At this point, one way or another, the strategic ambiguity would come to an end.

11 By this we mean equilibria that are both Nash equilibria and non-myopic.

4 Analysis

The analysis presented in the previous section is expanded upon below by examining certain relevant information aspects and combining the results of all scenarios for each of the three countries involved separately, presenting their potential evolution. This section concludes with some technical considerations.

4.1 Informative aspects

Both Taiwan and the United States have two distinct approaches, so determining which ones define their preferences is no easy task. The actual approach is difficult to pinpoint, particularly in the case of the United States, which is officially characterised by the concept of strategic ambiguity mentioned earlier.

In particular, the United States can influence the perceptions of the other two players, especially Taiwan, by leading them to believe that its dominant strategy is one of full support when, in reality, its dominant strategy is one of limited support. This distortion of perception could lead to military conflict, as illustrated in the figure below.

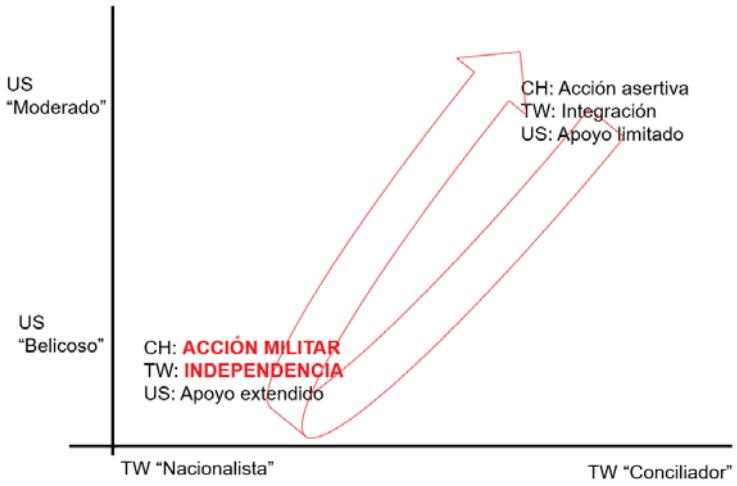


Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos

Figure 3: Actual and simulated alternative equilibria

However, it is unlikely that this scenario will unfold within the context of the flexible containment strategy that China may implement as part of its assertive approach: at some point, the United States will have to move beyond mere rhetoric to an effective demonstration of support (e.g. by supplying Taiwan with long-range offensive weapons). At that point, it would have to reveal its true intentions, as China's assertive strategy would make it impossible to conceal such a move.

It seems more plausible that this shift in perception was intended to gauge the resolve of both Taiwan and, in particular, China. In this way, the course of action would involve a 'journey through Hell', eventually returning to the starting point. This alternative trajectory is shown in Figure 4.



Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos

Figure 4: Real and simulated equilibria, 'Journey through Hell' variant

The 'journey through Hell', represented by the bottom-left corner, is the least favoured option for both China and Taiwan, which would prompt them to abandon it. As noted, if Taiwan were to abandon the path towards independence, the United States could withdraw from the conflict without losing credibility, as it would not be forced to become militarily involved.

4.2 Potential developments in each country

The relationship between China, Taiwan and the United States is a triangular one, but from the players' perspective, it is an uncomfortable one. China would prefer the United States not to play a significant role in its relationship with Taiwan as, in that case, it could impose its preference for reunification, even with a Nationalist government in Taiwan acting as a mediator. This is a fairly robust outcome, though certainly open-ended, as reunification may allow for a considerable degree of autonomy. To what extent this degree of autonomy would be maintained over time is one of the great unknowns, as the temptation for China to renege on its promises is high and Taiwan, once it has ceded control of its armed forces, would be in a very weak position to reverse the process.

The United States would also like to break up the triangle by persuading China to accept Taiwan's independence—ideally by respecting any future referendum leading to Taiwan's formal independence—or, as a second option, by getting China to accept the *de facto* independence that Taiwan currently enjoys.

For its part, Taiwan would also seek to break free from this triangle, on the one hand treating China as a trading partner and eventually easing military tensions, and on the other hand engaging with the United States in the commercial sphere and seeking its protection to counterbalance China.

Taiwan and the United States would prefer to maintain the current *status quo*, which amounts, in practice, to an incomplete triangle. Taiwan because it enjoys effective independence from China in almost every respect and maintains a mutually

beneficial trade relationship with that country. The United States because, in this way, it maintains trade relations with both countries, ensures regional stability and remains Taiwan's ultimate protector, a fact that reinforces its reputation as a guarantor of the security of other countries (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, etc.). China, whose economic and military capabilities have increased significantly over the last two decades, is not satisfied with this *status quo* and is seeking to assert its power by 'breaking the triangle', thereby distancing the United States from the resolution of the territorial dispute it has with Taiwan.

Finally, in light of these conclusions, how are the three countries involved likely to act?

Firstly, China will maintain its assertive stance, using varying degrees of coercion, with the aim of:

- Narrow Taiwan's range of options, thereby eliminating the possibility of a negotiation process without deadlines or commitments.
- Prevent the United States from supplying Taiwan with heavy weaponry, particularly long-range missiles.
- Force the United States to take a stand, revealing its most likely stance (moderate[12]).

Consequently, without full support from the United States, Taiwan's bargaining power is diminished. In this way, China seeks to reduce the issue to a strictly bilateral matter. Paradoxically, the possibility of a blockade has a stabilising effect, allowing China to calibrate its level of coercion, control escalation and force other players—particularly the United States—to reveal their true preferences.

For its part, Taiwan, whose room for manoeuvre is limited by China's assertive behaviour—which includes flexible, undeclared blockades—is under considerable pressure to negotiate its integration with China. Nevertheless, it will seek to maximise its bargaining power since, as has already been noted, integration can encompass very different degrees of autonomy and may, in turn, be a very gradual process. Some options are:

- Feigning a nationalist stance.
- To seek to secure as much support as possible from the United States.
- Threaten to put up a fierce resistance in the event of an invasion, preparing for an asymmetric confrontation.

However, of the three actions mentioned above, only the third is credible:

- Pretending to be independent as a dominant strategy would lead China to opt for military action, driving Taiwan into its least preferred position.
- Eventually, the United States will have to reveal its most likely strategy (limited support), leaving Taiwan in a very precarious position (e.g. in the midst of a

12 Zietek *et al*. (2025) put it very well: 'unification represents [for China] a strategic imperative, whilst the United States prioritises regional stability and its credibility with its allies. These differing levels of urgency and risk tolerance shape their strategic decisions'.

process of independence, yet lacking any real support from the United States and thereby encouraging China to invade it).
– Stubborn resistance is the only factor over which Taiwan has genuine control, and it is the one that can most effectively enhance its bargaining power.

Finally, the principle of strategic ambiguity pursued by the United States is being put to a severe test. China's assertive actions will eventually force a shift towards more decisive support, with the risk of a direct military confrontation with China (e.g. if China uses force to prevent the shipment of heavy military equipment to Taiwan).

The same applies to a distortion of perception, where a hawkish stance is feigned when the reality is a dovish one. Predictably, the United States will seek to support Taiwan as much as possible, with a view to strengthening its negotiating position and maintaining a beneficial economic relationship in the new situation.

The possibility of a direct confrontation between the United States and China is remote, although it cannot be ruled out entirely. It would require both countries to adopt a belligerent stance, whilst Taiwan maintains a nationalist one. Consequently, the more intense these stances become, the more likely such a confrontation is to occur.

Historically, the US principle of strategic ambiguity has served a stabilising function, deterring the other two countries from pursuing radical courses of action: it deters China from invading Taiwan because it cannot be certain that the United States will not intervene, and it also deters Tai from declaring independence because it has no certainty that the United States would support such a move (Wang, 2025).

China's emergence as a superpower and its use of an assertive diplomatic strategy have caused this principle to come under strain, leaving the United States facing an extremely difficult decision. The considerations examined here suggest that this principle is open to misinterpretation by Taiwan, making a confrontation between Taiwan and China a plausible scenario. In this context, the scenario of a limited war centred on Taiwan in which the United States would be forced to participate, albeit in a limited capacity, cannot be ruled out[13]. This scenario is particularly worrying because the likelihood of it escalating horizontally once it begins (spreading to mainland China) and vertically (with the use of long-range missiles and tactical nuclear weapons) is not negligible (O'Hanlon, 2022; Cancian *et al.*, 2023).

4.3 Some technical considerations

The sequential model considered in this study seeks to balance two important substantive considerations. On the one hand, it aims to maintain the relative autonomy of the two direct interactions; on the other, it seeks to integrate them into

13 What is known as 'passing through Hell': transitional states, dominated in the Pareto sense, which are chosen in order to demonstrate resolve and gain credibility, and, eventually, to achieve more satisfactory outcomes once they have been overcome.

a globally consistent framework. In this way, it has been possible to examine each of them in depth, including the use of Movement Theory and the incorporation of alternative temperaments for Taiwan and the United States. Each of these interactions corresponds to a stage of the game: (1) China–Taiwan and (2) Taiwan–United States.

Overall consistency is ensured by requiring Taiwan to repeat in the second stage the decision it adopted in the first. This consistency is examined in the third stage in a relatively *ad hoc* manner, as it does not arise directly from an equilibrium concept and is not an endogenous element of the model.

Ideally, a more comprehensive solution from a theoretical perspective involves solving the entire sequential game by applying the concept of subgame perfection: first solving the second game (Taiwan–United States) and then applying this solution to the first game (China–Taiwan) via backward induction. However, this formally more comprehensive approach is also more complex, and is therefore reserved for a future extension of this work.

Another interesting technical issue that warrants detailed future consideration is the extent to which the information provided by the war games currently being conducted on a potential armed conflict in Taiwan[14] can be integrated into strategic models such as the one considered in this paper. This integration could help to better specify the players' preferences and, furthermore, to determine the probability of the conflict itself.

Appendix A: Movement Theory

Movement Theory (TM) combines the normal and extensive forms of representing a game. The normal form, usually represented in matrix form, is used for the strategic and simultaneous analysis of a game. The extensive form, on the other hand, usually represented as a graph (decision tree), is used for the sequential and dynamic analysis of a game.

Combining the two forms significantly enriches the analysis, introducing dynamic elements (extensive form) into a static representation (normal form) in a simple and intuitive way. In this way, MT can address path-dependencies, misperceptions, power asymmetries and other advanced features without the need to introduce probabilistic elements. For a detailed exposition of MT, see Brams (1993, 1994). Willson (1998) expanded and refined the basic framework. A discussion of MT can be found in Gilboa (1995) and Stone (2001), and applications to real-world conflicts in Brams (2001), Zagare (2014) and Ericson and Zeager (2015), amongst others.

The basic idea behind MT is that both players make their moves by projecting them into the future, in conjunction with the other player's counter-moves. To make

14 War games typically start from one of the general outcomes of strategic games (e.g. conflict) and provide a highly granular view of it, both geographically and militarily (Cancian *et al.*, 2023; 2025).

their decision, each player considers these moves and uses backward induction to determine whether moving will be beneficial or not.

MT players alternate their moves: they either stick to their current decision (to stay or pass) or change it (to move). They consider not only the immediate consequences of their moves, but also the consequences of counter-moves, counter-counter-moves, and so on.

The basic model of game theory assumes 2×2 ordinal games with complete information regarding the payoff structure and the rules of the game. Therefore, the basic starting point of game theory is a pair of 2×2 matrices (one for each player) that reflect the players' ordinal preferences regarding the four possible outcomes, resulting from the implementation of their two basic actions.

To identify the non-myopic equilibria (NME) of the game, the TM considers six rules. Rules 1–4 define the evolution of the game, and rules 5–6 define the optimality conditions that ensure the final outcome constitutes an equilibrium.

- Rule 1: the game begins with a given outcome, that is, a fixed element of the payoff matrix (ordinals).
- Rule 2: either player may unilaterally change their strategy (i.e. make a move). The player who changes first is called player 1 (P1).
- Rule 3: the other player, Player 2 (P2), responds by unilaterally changing their strategy, thereby bringing the game to a new state.
- Rule 4: alternating responses continue until the player (P1 or P2) whose turn it is decides not to change their strategy. When this happens, the game ends in a final state, which is the outcome of the game.

Note that rules 2 and 3 imply a sequential implementation of the MT and that payments are settled only at the final outcome. Note also that rule 1 is a simple but effective way of introducing path dependencies into game-theoretic analysis.

The following two rules implement rationality (optimisation) in the search for the NMP:

- Rule 5: termination rule: if the players return to the initial state, this becomes the final outcome.
- Rule 6: the rule of reciprocity: Each player considers the consequences of the other player's rational decisions when deciding whether or not to move from the initial state or any subsequent state. Each player uses backward induction to decide whether it is in their interest to move or not. If it is rational for one player to move and the other not to, then the player who moves prevails over the one who remains.

Applying the six rules of MT to all possible opening positions, whilst also taking into account which player goes first, generates the set of NME. Indeterminacy may arise when both players wish to move but differ in their preferred final outcome. In this case, additional information is required to resolve the game (e.g. move order, asymmetric power, etc.).

In order to illustrate the mechanics of the MT, the game between Taiwan and the United States is analysed, assuming a nationalist stance for the former and a bellicose one for the latter, as discussed in the main text and in Appendix B, cases (B.4). It is assumed that the initial state is the Nash equilibrium of this game: [Limited Support, Integration] and that the United States makes the first move.

The game in its expanded form is shown in the following figure:

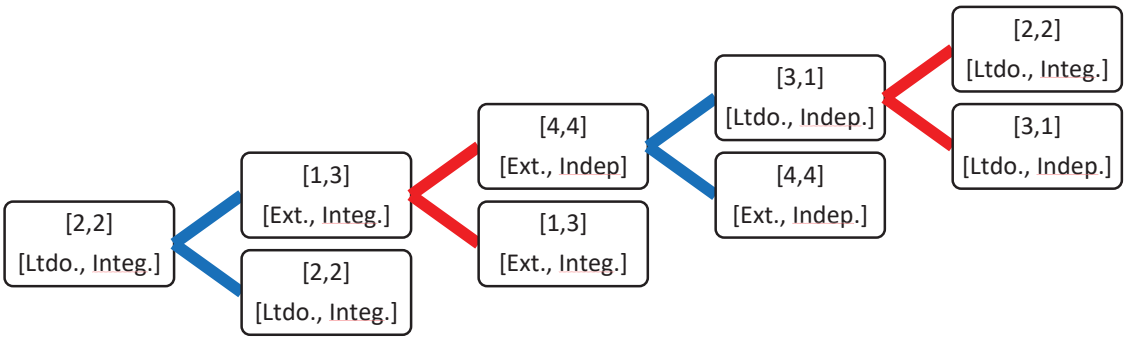


Figure A.1: Nationalist Taiwan–United States game in expanded form

Note: [x,y] represents the ordinal rating of [United States, Taiwan]. In blue (red) are the moves available to the United States (Taiwan). In abbreviated form, 'Ext.' ('Ltd.') indicates 'Extended support' ('Limited support') on the part of the United States and 'Integ.' ('Indep.') indicates 'Integration' ('Independence') on the part of Taiwan.

The United States must decide whether to remain at [Limited Support, Integration] or move to [Extended Support, Integration]. To do this, it examines the entire game tree and begins by looking at what happens at the final node. At that node, Taiwan must decide whether to remain in [Limited Support, Independence] or move to [Limited Support, Integration].

Given its preference structure, it chooses to move. At the previous decision node, the United States must decide whether to remain at [Extended Support, Independence] or move to [Limited Support, Independence], aware that, if it does the latter, Taiwan will choose to move to [Limited Support, Integration] when it is its turn. Given the US's preferences, it prefers to remain in [Extended Support, Independence], blocking the game's progression at that point.

Once again, the third decision node concerns Taiwan. Starting from [Extended Support, Integration], they must decide whether to remain there or move to [Extended Support, Independence], bearing in mind the sequence described in the two previous paragraphs, which leads to the United States blocking the game in the latter state. Given Taiwan's preferences, they choose to move.

Finally, the United States compares the initial state [Limited Support, Integration] with the state resulting from the entire sequence of moves described in the three preceding paragraphs, which leads the game to the state [Extended Support, Independence]. Its assessment of both states leads it to prefer the move. The following figure shows the sequence of the game in terms of the rules of Game Theory:

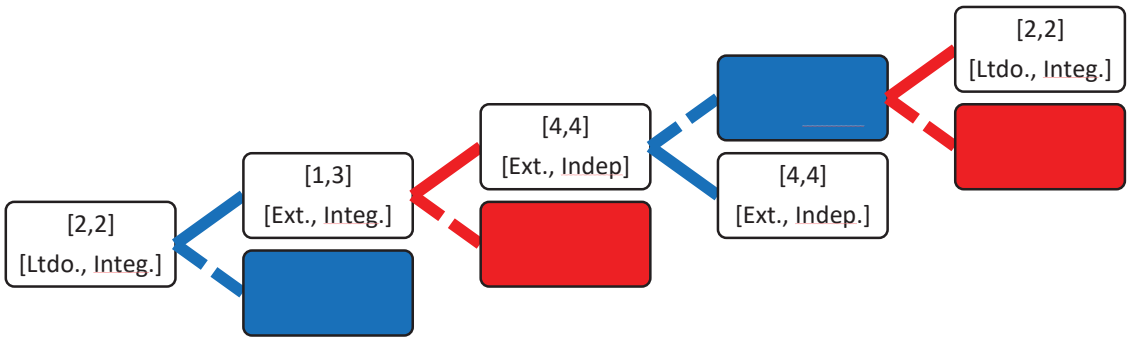


Figure A.2: Nationalist Taiwan–United States game according to MT
Note: [x,y] represents the ordinal rating for [United States, Taiwan]. The moves available to the United States (Taiwan) are shown in blue (red). If a move is shown as a dotted line, it is a rejected move that results in a blocked state (solid colour). In abbreviated form, 'Ext.' ('Ltd.') indicates 'Extended support' ('Limited support') from the United States, and 'Integ.' ('Indep.') indicates 'Integration' ('Independence') on the part of Taiwan.

In this scenario, we can see how the United States enters a period of short-term disadvantage by shifting from limited to extensive support, whilst Taiwan remains committed to its path of integration. However, this decision ultimately proves favourable once Taiwan opts for independence, having the extended support of the United States at its disposal. Upon reaching that point, which is the maximum outcome for both countries, the United States maintains that decision, blocking further development of the game.

The same result is obtained if Taiwan initiates the moves instead of the United States. This convergence allows the state [Extended Support, Independence] to be classified as an NME, in accordance with Rule 6.

The NME in this game does not coincide with the Nash equilibrium [Limited Support, Integration], leading to the conclusion that a combination of a bellicose stance on the part of the United States and a nationalist stance on the part of Taiwan could relatively easily lead to Taiwan's independence, provided that one of them takes a step in that direction: by increasing its support (the United States) or by declaring independence (Taiwan). Although the model formally treats both countries symmetrically, the clearly asymmetrical characteristics of capability and size make it more plausible in practice that the United States would have to be the initiator of this move.

TM requires this analysis to be performed eight times using backward induction: four sequential games, taking as initial states the four cells of the payoff matrix corresponding to the two players who can initiate the sequence. It is therefore advisable to implement this algorithm using a computer programme (Quilis, 2017).

Finally, the MT allows us to develop the concept of an anticipatory game, described by a payoff matrix whose entries are the NMEs of the original game starting from that outcome. The Nash equilibria of that matrix allow us to characterise the 'strength' of the various NMPs. In the case of the game analysed here, the Nash equilibrium of the anticipatory game is [Extended Support, Independence]. Furthermore, it is a cooperative state and Pareto-dominates all other possible outcomes.

Appendix B: Analysis of the scenarios between Taiwan and the United States

Below is an analysis of the four possible scenarios between Taiwan and the United States based on their two possible temperaments: conciliatory/nationalist (Taiwan) and moderate/belligerent (United States)[15].

Starting from the top-left corner and proceeding downwards, the following is presented:

- Normal initial game.
- Cooperative states: those with a payoff of (3,3), (3,4), (4,3) or (4,4).
- Dominant strategies.

Starting from the top right-hand corner and moving downwards, the following are presented:

- Nash equilibria of the initial game.
- Non-myopic equilibria of the initial game, according to the basic algorithm of Game Theory.
- Nash equilibria of the anticipatory game.

B.1 Conciliatory Taiwan and moderate United States



Figure B.1: Conciliatory Taiwan and Moderate United States

B.2 Conciliatory Taiwan and belligerent United States



Figure B.2: Conciliatory Taiwan and belligerent United States

15 All calculations were performed using the MATLAB *Theory of Moves Calculator* library (Quilis, 2017).

B.3 Nationalist Taiwan and a moderate United States



Figure B.3: Nationalist Taiwan and a moderate United States

B.4 Nationalist Taiwan and a belligerent United States



Figure B.4

Appendix C: Analysis of the game between China and an independent Taiwan

A game between China and a Taiwan characterised by a greater inclination towards independence than in the Nationalist case is examined. This scenario is analysed to test the robustness of the results, although it is not considered relevant in the current context. The game analysis is presented in the same way as in Appendix B.

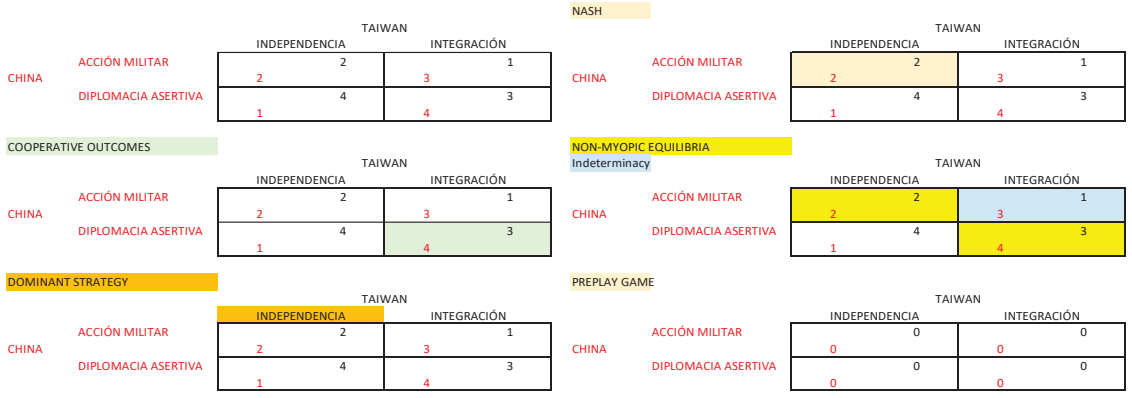


Figure C.1: China and an independent Taiwan

Taiwan's adoption of a dominant strategy (independence) causes China to opt for military action, leading the Nash equilibrium towards conflict. However, from a longer-term perspective, the MT identifies two non-military outcomes: conflict, and the combination of a Chinese strategy of assertive diplomacy with Taiwan's acceptance of integration.

This indeterminacy regarding the two NMEs can be resolved in two non-mutually exclusive ways:

- The state [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration] dominates, in the Pareto sense, the state [Military Action, Independence], and is therefore highly likely to be chosen as the outcome of a negotiation process. It is also worth noting that this is the only cooperative state in the game.
- As China possesses a rational and deterrent threat[16] (military action) that uses conflict as its point of threat, it is plausible that Taiwan would not opt for independence in order to avoid it. By choosing integration, China would opt for assertive diplomacy, leading both players to the NME [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration].

However, although the outcome [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration] remains a plausible outcome, it is now less likely than with the conciliatory and nationalist temperaments, since conflict is highly plausible (as it is a Nash equilibrium) and because this outcome requires a threat of military action that is unattractive to Taiwan.

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16 See Brams (1994), pp. 147–48, for a formalisation of the concept of a rational deterrent threat.

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The (un)just war of the United States against Venezuela: hegemony, oil and geopolitics in the 21st century[1]

Abstract

This paper analyses 'US military actions in Venezuela'—as described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres—based on a critical re-examination of the notion of 'just war' developed by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in *Demócrates II*. The article is situated within the context of US foreign policy towards Venezuela during the Donald Trump administrations and the shift from the 'maximum pressure' strategy towards the direct use of force. From a critical geopolitical perspective, it examines the legitimising narratives constructed around democracy, drug trafficking and security, as well as their relationship with the control of strategic resources and the crisis of US hegemony.

Based on an analysis of the just causes of war, legitimate authority, right intention and the right way of waging war, it is argued that US military action does not meet any of the criteria that would allow it to be considered just. On the contrary, it is an unjust war aimed at the expansion of power and the reaffirmation of geopolitical dominance in Latin America, with profound implications for international law and regional stability.

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Keywords

International Law; Political realism; Venezuela; Global power; United States

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1 Introduction

Since 2014—and even before—talking about Venezuela has become, in numerous political and media discourses, an almost automatic way of talking about crisis. This immediate association is not unique to the Venezuelan case, but forms part of a political use of language that can also be observed in other contexts. Names such as Vietnam[2], Iraq[3] or Ukraine[4] almost instinctively evoke war, understood from a Clausewitzian perspective as an act of applying military force aimed at imposing the will of one state upon another (Jenkins, 1970). Whether it be the will of the United States over Vietnam or Iraq, or the will of Russia over Ukraine.

War, understood in this research from a sociological perspective inspired by the work of Nievas (2009), is conceived as the social activity through which states, as political-administrative-territorial entities, seek to subdue the will of others through the systematic and potentially rational use of violence. In this sense, war constitutes a central analytical axis of this study, insofar as it manifests itself in the semantic and political spheres through disputes surrounding the designation of the Venezuelan crisis and US foreign policy towards Venezuela during the administrations of Donald Trump (2017–2021 and 2025–present).

The analytical focus is on the two Donald Trump administrations, grouped under the category of 'Trumpism'. However, it is worth noting, as Juárez (2026) points out, that the attack on Venezuela and the capture of its president do not constitute an isolated event nor one exclusively attributable to these administrations, but rather the result of a long-term process, built up over more than twenty-five years on the basis of lies and manipulated truths. In this regard, Juárez argues that the administrations of George W. Bush (2001–2009), Barack Obama (2009–2017) and Joe Biden (2021–2025) laid the foundations for a strategy that Donald Trump ultimately brought to fruition in 2026.

As regards the political framing of the Venezuelan crisis, for critics of the Venezuelan government, journalists and various non-governmental organisations, what is happening in the country constitutes a 'humanitarian crisis' attributed to a

2 The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, and referred to in Vietnam as the War of Resistance against the United States, was a military conflict fought between 1955 and 1975 to reunify Vietnam. This local conflict intensified due to the Cold War, under the US policy of containing communism (the Domino Theory) and the division of the country following independence from France in 1954.

3 The Iraq War was a military conflict consisting of two phases. The first was a brief war, fought conventionally in March–April 2003, in which a combined force of US and UK troops invaded Iraq and quickly defeated the Iraqi military and paramilitary forces. This was followed by a second, more protracted phase in which the US-led occupation of Iraq faced an insurgency.

4 The war in Ukraine is a large-scale armed conflict that began with Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022. It represents the largest military conflict in Europe since the Second World War, with roots dating back to 2014, and has led to a severe humanitarian crisis, thousands of deaths and geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West

Venezuelan political project which, according to Reid (2019: 208), embodies 'the most direct challenge to liberal democracy in Latin America so far in the 21st century'. For supporters of Chavismo, on the other hand, the situation in Venezuela is the result of an 'economic war' forming part of a hybrid war waged by the United States and its regional allies with the aim of destabilising and, eventually, overthrowing 'the most original attempt at alternative political and social construction that Latin America and the Caribbean have produced in the 21st century' (Tirado, 2019: 15).

Tirado Sánchez conceptualises hybrid warfare as:

> 'a type of conflict characterised by a combination of regular and irregular actions, carried out by traditional armed forces—that is, those linked to a state—which may operate alongside various delegated actors (private contractors, terrorists or organised crime) to confront forces of an irregular or regular nature' (Tirado Sánchez, 2020: 96).

Although both perspectives are contrasting and politically motivated—the first aimed at justifying a humanitarian intervention to bring about regime change, and the second focused on attributing to the United States sole responsibility for the profound difficulties facing the country—they ultimately complement each other in shaping a discursive scenario of confrontation and war within the framework of a geopolitics of security characterised by the dissemination of 'the idea of a necessary order, of a world that must be constantly intervened in and safeguarded' (Montoya-Arango, 2010: 107).

The events that took place in the early hours of 3 January this year—namely, the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro (2013–2026) and his wife, Cilia Flores, as part of an armed intervention accompanied by air operations and military actions that affected both the civilian population and strategic infrastructure—reignited the debate surrounding wars of conquest and imperialism. In this regard, the concept of imperialism remains central to understanding how, in the Venezuelan case, economic and security policies respond to external interests to the detriment of the needs and rights of the population. President Donald Trump's actions demonstrate that his priorities are directed neither towards the defence of democracy nor the fight against drug trafficking, but rather towards control of Venezuela's vast oil reserves.

In this context, US military action in Venezuela not only reshapes the regional geopolitical landscape, but also raises fundamental questions about the criteria that allow the use of force to be justified—or challenged—in the contemporary international system.

2 Statement of the problem

Viewed by various states—notably Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay and Spain—as a serious unilateral military action with regional implications, the events of 3 January 2026 in Venezuela have called into question not so much the limits of international law, as set out in Article 2 of the United Nations Charter and in Resolutions A/RES/2625 (XXV) and A/RES/37/10, but rather its effectiveness. This is

because compliance ultimately depends on the will of states, which in practice allows the great powers to use force with impunity, with repercussions for peace and stability both in Latin America and the Caribbean and on a global scale.

In this context, a fundamental analytical tension emerges between contemporary justifications for military intervention—rooted in narratives such as the defence of democracy, the fight against drug trafficking, or the instrumental interpretation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle adopted by all Heads of State and Government, as articulated in the Final Document of the 2005 World Summit (A/RES/60/1)—and the classical criteria for the legitimisation of war. This tension is particularly relevant in the case of Venezuela, where US military action has been presented within various discursive frameworks seeking to confer legitimacy upon it.

Based on the characterisation of US military action in Venezuela as an act of aggression, according to the definition set out in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX) of 1974, which states in Article 1 that 'aggression is the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, the territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations' (United Nations General Assembly, 1974: 151), this paper links this notion with the definition of war presented in the introduction. On this basis, the aim is to identify the elements which, following Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in *Demócrates II*, could be considered sufficient to justify the initiation of large-scale armed action.

According to Amaya Palacios, the cultural significance of Sepúlveda's treatise 'lies in the defence of specific interests of the Crown of Castile in the Americas at a crucial moment in Spain's consolidation on the continent' (2015: 6). In this regard, a review of the treatise is relevant for analysing the current geopolitical context, marked by the US attempt to 'reclaim' and reaffirm its dominance over the American continent and its strategic resources.

In light of the above, the guiding question of this research is: can US military action in Venezuela be considered a just war in the light of the criteria established by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda? The research hypothesis holds that US military action in Venezuela cannot be considered a just war under the terms established by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, insofar as it does not meet the criteria of just cause, legitimate authority, right intention and proportionality in the use of force. On the contrary, such action responds primarily to geopolitical and geo-economic interests linked to the control of strategic resources and the reconfiguration of the regional order, which places it closer to a logic of domination than to a normative justification for war.

From a methodological perspective, the study adopts a qualitative approach of a critical-interpretative nature. Within this framework, the analysis is structured around a dependent variable—the legitimacy of war—which is assessed on the basis of an independent variable—US military action in Venezuela—operationalised through Sepúlveda's classical criteria for just war: just cause, legitimate authority, right intention and proportionality in the use of force.

The study draws, on the one hand, on a historical-conceptual analysis of the notion of just war in Sepúlveda, and, on the other, on a discursive and geopolitical analysis of US policy towards Venezuela during the two administrations of Donald Trump. Drawing on specialised secondary sources and official political discourses, a comparison is made between the classical criteria for the legitimisation of war and contemporary justifications for intervention, with the aim of assessing their normative and political coherence.

The argument is divided into two parts. The first contextualises the 'maximum pressure' policy deployed by Donald Trump's first administration against Venezuela, focusing on its diplomatic-political and economic dimensions. It also examines the strategy of Trump's second administration, characterised by a shift from maximum pressure towards direct military intervention, as well as a shift in the narrative from 'democratic transition' to a 'war on drug trafficking' and the supposed 'recovery' of Venezuelan oil. Finally, the second part offers a reflection on the U.S. military action against Venezuela from the perspective of, drawing on Sepúlveda's (1987) contributions regarding the just causes of war. The paper concludes with a series of final reflections.

3 From maximum pressure to military intervention: US policy towards Venezuela

3.1 The 'maximum pressure' strategy in the first Trump administration (2017–2021)

During his first administration (2017–2021), Donald Trump's government adopted a 'maximum pressure' policy towards Venezuela along two tracks (Piña, 2021), inspired by the traditional *two-track policy* applied during the 20th century. This policy combined diplomatic pressure exerted within multilateral organisations with military interventions preceded by destabilisation operations aimed at preparing and justifying a supposed political 'transition' (Tirado, 2019). This strategy was historically employed by Washington to overthrow governments considered contrary to its geopolitical interests. Among the paradigmatic cases are those of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala (1951–1954), João Goulart in Brazil (1961–1964) and Salvador Allende in Chile (1970–1973).

Firstly, the Trump administration pursued a strategy of economic pressure based on the imposition of unilateral coercive measures (hereinafter UCMs) and, subsequently, on the establishment of an embargo against the Venezuelan oil industry, directly affecting the country's main source of revenue (Piña, 2021). Executive Order[5] 13808, issued on 24 August 2017, is an example of this, as it imposed new financial sanctions against the Venezuelan state by cutting off its access to US financial markets, thereby

5 An executive order signed by the president instructing federal agencies on how to conduct operations or enforce laws, without requiring congressional approval.

limiting its refinancing capacity and liquidity (US Department of State, n. d.). These measures fall within the framework of the 'national emergency' previously declared by the US on 8 March 2015, through Executive Order 13692 (Flores, 2025).

In Piña's words:

> 'this action was intended to deprive the Maduro government of resources in order to exacerbate the socio-economic crisis that had been dragging the country down for more than five years; furthermore, it sought to financially strangle a government that needed access to new loans to keep its social welfare programmes afloat, programmes which were partly based on the popular support it still enjoys' (Piña, 2021).

Describing this 'maximum pressure' strategy as an 'economic war'—in which, according to Kent (1994), the tensions experienced in the diplomatic and political spheres are transferred to the economic arena, within the context of a hybrid war involving both coercive diplomacy and the threat of military intervention—makes sense when one considers its effects in terms of human lives. In their report 'Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela', Weisbrot and Sachs (2019) estimate that US sanctions caused the deaths of approximately 40,000 Venezuelan civilians between 2017 and 2018.

Executive Order 13808 restricted the Venezuelan state's access to international financial markets, limiting its ability to raise funds. Executive Order 13827 prohibited transactions involving cryptocurrencies issued by the Venezuelan government, including the Petro. Executive Order 13835 blocked the purchase and trading of Venezuelan and PDVSA debt, further restricting the state's sources of liquidity. Finally, Executive Order 13850 expanded the sanctions regime by authorising blocking measures against actors linked to strategic sectors—subsequently including the oil sector—and against individuals associated with corrupt practices or the Venezuelan government (US Department of State, n. d.).

Based on the National Survey of Living Conditions (ENCOVI), a 31% increase in overall mortality was identified during that period (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019). Furthermore, it is estimated that more than 300,000 people were at risk due to a lack of access to medicines or medical treatment. These include around 80,000 people living with HIV who have been without antiretroviral treatment since 2017; 16,000 people requiring dialysis; a further 16,000 with cancer; and nearly four million suffering from diabetes and hypertension, many of whom cannot access insulin or cardiovascular medicines. As a historical reference, it is estimated that following Hiroshima—the first use of nuclear weapons against a civilian population—around 70,000 people died immediately (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019)

It is in light of these figures that speaking of a 'humanitarian crisis' is no longer an exaggeration. However, the same data suggest that the MCUs constitute, *de facto*, a 'death sentence' for tens of thousands of Venezuelans. Therefore, narratives about an 'economic war' against Venezuela and the existence of a 'humanitarian crisis' complement one another, despite being employed by sectors with contrasting political agendas.

Secondly, and in parallel, an analysis of the data indicates that the Trump administration put pressure on the Venezuelan government through diplomatic channels, which resulted in a series of concrete actions. These include the recognition of Juan Guaidó as acting president in 2019, following his self-proclamation based on the National Assembly's decision not to recognise Nicolás Maduro's second term after presidential elections deemed fraudulent by large sections of the population and by the international community (Flores, 2023); the so-called Operation Cúcuta, aimed at delivering humanitarian aid from a Colombian city on the border with Venezuela and organised jointly by the Colombian government, sectors of the Venezuelan opposition and the US government; the designation of the Maduro government as 'narco-terrorist'; and, subsequently, the conduct of military operations off the Venezuelan coast (Busso, 2021)

However, despite the maximum pressure strategy, the expected political change was not achieved. The MCUs, which became the Trump administration's main focus after ruling out the military option, had a primarily domestic effect, as they were used as a means to boost the Hispanic vote in Florida during the 2020 presidential election (Flores, 2025). As for the socio-political effects, according to Flores (2025), the MCUs did not produce the expected effect of promoting the democratisation of the regime or driving a political transition, but rather led to greater reliance on more rigorous internal control mechanisms, aimed at sustaining political stability against a backdrop of growing economic instability.

The election of Democrat Joseph Biden in 2021 did not bring about any substantive changes in the US stance towards Venezuela. Diplomatic pressure was maintained through the recognition of Juan Guaidó until January 2023, as were the MCUs. Although in October 2023 the United States announced the temporary suspension of sanctions on oil, gas and gold in return for the agreement reached between the Venezuelan government and the opposition, in January 2024 the Biden administration (2021–2025) announced the reimposition of these sanctions following the disqualification of the then opposition candidate María Corina Machado from the presidential elections of 28 July, an election which, in a non-transparent manner, awarded victory to Nicolás Maduro.

In the so-called Trump 2.0 era—an analytical category used by Montoya (2025) to distinguish Donald Trump's second administration from his first—the US government appears to have shifted from a strategy centred on diplomatic pressure and economic warfare towards a logic of direct military intervention, as will be analysed below.

3.2 From economic and diplomatic pressure to direct military intervention: the Trump 2.0 era (2025–2026)

Between 2025 and 2026, realist geopolitics, characteristic of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century—and considered obsolete in the context of contemporary international relations following the signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945 and the consolidation of international law—, regains centrality as

an analytical key to understanding the current dynamics of power, conflict and war in 21st-century geopolitics. In this context, the so-called 'Trump corollary' applied to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, and reflected in the 2025 National Security Strategy,[6] constitutes a paradigmatic expression of this return: a re-semantisation of the principle 'America for the Americans'[7] in the spirit of 'America First',[8] which explicitly translates into 'America for the United States'.[9]

Within this framework, the Caribbean—historically configured as a central geostrategic space for the United States since its rise as an international power in the late 19th century, following the Spanish-American War of 1898, and its subsequent consolidation of hegemony after the Second World War—takes on renewed significance. Between August and October 2025, the Caribbean Sea and the entrance to the eastern Pacific became the scene of a large-scale US military build-up, which included the deployment of guided-missile destroyers, F-35 fighter jets, a nuclear submarine and thousands of troops, as well as the presence of the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier. This deployment not only highlights the resurgence of power projection strategies in the hemisphere, but also reinforces the centrality of the Caribbean as a strategic control zone within the contemporary geopolitical architecture.

Under the guise of a supposed 'war on drug trafficking' and the Venezuelan government's alleged links to the so-called 'Cartel de los Soles', Washington sought to legitimise both the military deployment and the lethal use of force in maritime operations, presenting them as part of a campaign aimed at curbing the trafficking of fentanyl and cocaine to the United States. In this context, President Trump maintained that his country was engaged in a 'non-international armed conflict'—that is, a war against a non-state aggressor—with the Caribbean cartels, and instructed his administration to send a notification to Congress classifying the alleged traffickers as 'non-state armed combatants', in an attempt to provide legal justification for possible extrajudicial killings (Woodward, 2025).

However, according to a *New York Times* article, Venezuela is not a drug-producing country nor does it play a known role in the fentanyl trade (Glatsky, 2025). Furthermore, according to data compiled by Merino (2025), in 2020 only 8% of the cocaine reaching the United States passed through Venezuela, whilst the Pacific route

6 Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf

7 On 2 December 1823, US President James Monroe unveiled, in his annual address to Congress, the doctrine that would later bear his name and which became established as one of the historical pillars of US foreign policy, encapsulated in the slogan 'America for Americans'.

8 On 20 January 2017, during his inaugural address as President of the United States, Donald Trump stated that his administration would be guided by a new vision of government, encapsulated in the principle of 'America First'.

9 Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/12/america-250-presidential-message-on-the-anniversary-of-the-monroe-doctrine/

accounted for up to three-quarters of the cocaine flow from the main cultivation centres in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. In this regard, empirical evidence suggests that Venezuela's role in international drug trafficking is, comparatively speaking, secondary to other predominant routes.

It is worth noting that, unlike during the first Trump administration, democracy took a back seat in US geopolitical discourse regarding Venezuela, whilst the emphasis shifted towards the fight against drug trafficking. This highlights that, in reality, democracy was never a priority for the Trump administration, unlike control over Venezuela and its natural resources.

Since early September, the US military has attacked vessels in the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean which, according to the Trump administration, were involved in drug trafficking activities, resulting in 34 boats destroyed and at least 110 deaths as of 31 December 2025 (Zegarra *et al.*, 2025). According to Daniel Maurer, a retired Army general and current associate professor at the University of Northern Ohio, the killing of people stranded on a vessel, regardless of whether they are narco-terrorists designated by the president or not, or whether they are war criminals or not, could constitute a crime under the laws of war, international law or US legislation (Wolf, 2025).

These actions formed part of the so-called 'Operation Southern Spear', a military campaign led by US Southern Command and the Joint Task Force Southern Spear, whose stated aim was to expel so-called 'narco-terrorists' from the Western Hemisphere (France 24, 2025). Whilst the Trump administration justified these actions as part of an anti-drug operation, Chavismo maintained that the US siege was ultimately aimed at paving the way for armed intervention and regime change.

In December, the Trump administration began to focus its pressure on the Venezuelan oil sector, explicitly aiming to disrupt crude oil exports as part of its strategy against the Maduro government. This logic suggests that the so-called fight against drug trafficking functions, in practice, as a pretext for intervening in Venezuela's strategic resources. In this vein, Trump ordered a total blockade of sanctioned oil tankers entering or leaving the country and authorised the seizure of vessels in waters near Venezuela, under the public justification of cutting off revenues which, according to Washington, 'would finance narco-terrorism and other criminal activities' (Glatsky, 2025). Furthermore, speaking to journalists from an air base in Delaware, Trump stated that the naval blockade would remain in place until the United States managed to take control of Venezuelan oil (Carson and Brooks, 2025).

In the early hours of 3 January, as mentioned in the introduction, the US military bombed Caracas and various locations across Venezuela, resulting in the deaths of over a hundred people, including both military personnel and civilians, and the abduction of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Congresswoman Cilia Flores (García Fernández, 2025). This event cannot be understood as an isolated incident, but rather as a deeply worrying turning point for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as for the rules-based international order.

According to Márquez de la Rubia (2026), unlike the two-track policy applied during the first Trump administration—limited to economic and diplomatic pressure—this intervention combines three unprecedented elements: 1) the direct and unilateral use of force; 2) the extraterritorial prosecution of political leadership; and 3) intervention aimed at the administration of strategic resources. This triad, the author argues, breaks with the normative assumptions of liberal multilateralism and heralds a new strategic framework based on the primacy of the sovereign decision of the great powers, the exercise of material power, and geo-economics.

Muñoz (2025), in an analysis published in *El País* months before US military action in Venezuela, identified five reasons which, in his view, explained why the conflict between the two countries had entered one of its most critical and dangerous phases. Beyond their descriptive value, these reasons can be reinterpreted analytically through the concept of just war, insofar as they highlight the arguments, justifications and rationales that seek to legitimise the use of force on the international stage.

In this sense, these reasons can be problematised in the light of what Sepúlveda (1987) conceptualises as just war, particularly with regard to the criteria of legitimacy, necessity and proportionality in the use of violence. This theoretical-empirical framework will be developed in the following section, dedicated to the theoretical-analytical framework of the research, where we will examine the extent to which the justifications for the conflict fall—or do not fall—within a logic of normative legitimisation of war.

4 Theoretical-analytical framework: the just causes of war in Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda

4.1 Critical application of the just causes of war to the Venezuelan case

For a war to be just, according to Sepúlveda's (1987) approach, it is necessary, first and foremost, that the use of arms be the only viable means of achieving peace. This premise, formulated in the context of 16th-century scholasticism, proves insufficient for understanding the contemporary logical of the exercise of power and inter-state coercion. In the 21st century, wars are no longer waged solely through the direct use of arms or military force, and their objective is often far from being peace.

In the case of US military actions in Venezuela, in addition to resorting to the use of force in terms typical of a conventional war, this action violates a fundamental principle of contemporary international law, established in the wake of the horrors of the two world wars and the Holocaust, and aimed at preserving international peace and security: the prohibition on the use of force to impose territorial claims or political demands (Türk, 2026). This principle is enshrined in Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, which establishes the obligation of States to refrain from resorting to the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State.

Far from meeting the criteria of international peace and security, US military actions in Venezuela are primarily driven by a geopolitical agenda centred on the control of

strategic resources and the display of power within a context of structural decline as a hegemonic power. In the absence of international consensus and legitimacy, this strategy increasingly resorts to coercion, marking a shift from a hegemony based on consent towards a form of domination underpinned by the direct use of force.

Therefore, this first prerequisite of a just war is not met in the case of the US aggression against Venezuela. According to Muñoz (2025), rather than peace, Washington's real objective is control of what some interpret as its 'backyard', referring to its supposed 'sphere of influence' or Hinterland in geopolitical terms. As evidence of this, following the events of 3 January, President Trump stated that one of the main objectives of the military operation in Venezuela was to place the country's oil sector under US control and to allow US oil companies to participate in its reconstruction (Goldman, 2026).

However, García-Pelayo (1987), in his analysis of Sepúlveda's work, points out that this author does not offer an explicit and systematic conceptualisation of the just cause, but rather an enumeration of the circumstances in which it manifests itself: repelling force with force, recovering what has been unjustly taken, punishing wrongdoers, and cultural superiority. In this sense, rather than a closed definition, what is observed is a typology of justifications for the use of force. Building on this framework, each of these elements is then examined as applied to the case of US military actions in Venezuela from a critical perspective.

4.1.1 Repelling force with force (self-defence)

The first element of the just cause of war identified by García-Pelayo (1987) is the need to repel force with force or, in contemporary terms, self-defence. At the international level, Article 51 of the United Nations Charter recognises the inherent right of States to self-defence, whether individual or collective, against an armed attack by another State.

In the final months of 2025, and particularly since the start of the US military deployment, the justification put forward by the United States centred on allegations linking the Venezuelan government to large-scale drug trafficking and to the so-called 'Cartel de los Soles', allegedly led by Nicolás Maduro. However, in the legal proceedings against Maduro in New York following his capture—or abduction—the prosecution partially reformulated the case to focus on the alleged existence of a state corruption network linked to drug trafficking, rather than on the operation of a formal, structured cartel. According to Savage (2026), this shift in argument called into question the legitimacy of the Trump administration's designation of the Cartel de los Soles as a foreign terrorist organisation that same year.

Despite this, and under the guise of this premise—which was closer to an excuse than a cause—the US government carried out military strikes against alleged drug traffickers and, on 3 January 2026, launched a direct military operation on Venezuelan territory with the aim of capturing President Nicolás Maduro. Far from being an immediate response to an armed attack, this operation constituted a unilateral

incursion aimed at neutralising a political adversary, based on a logic that blurs the lines between criminal prosecution and military intervention.

In this scenario, the issue is not the use of force to repel a prior attack in the context of self-defence, but rather the exploitation of the rhetoric of the war on drugs as a mechanism to justify the unilateral use of force, in direct conflict with the criteria defining self-defence under international law.

4.1.2 Recovering what has been unjustly taken

The second element identified by García-Pelayo in Sepúlveda's work consists of 'recovering what has been unjustly taken, not only one's own possessions, but also those of one's allies' (García-Pelayo, 1987: 19). This criterion is open to various interpretations. Strictly speaking, Venezuelan oil belongs to the nation-state and, therefore, its protection and administration fall to the Venezuelan government.

However, in a context where the legitimacy of the Venezuelan government is being questioned—especially following the elections of 28 July 2024—and where the opposition led by María Corina Machado is regarded as an ally of the United States, it could be argued, from this narrative, that the aim is to 'recover' Venezuelan oil for the opposition and, consequently, for the 'people of Venezuela', presented as victims of the 'Maduro dictatorship'. As evidence of this, the opposition leader herself expressed her support for the seizure of an oil tanker off the Venezuelan coast by the United States in December 2025 (The Guardian, 2025).

Nevertheless, the US government's behaviour suggests that its actions are guided not by allies but by interests, in line with the tenets of *Realpolitik* and the realist school of international relations (Velázquez Flores and González Cruz, 2016; Kissinger, 2015). As for expendable allies, despite having recognised Edmundo González Urrutia's electoral victory in 2024 and highlighting the opposition leadership of María Corina Machado—winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025—President Trump chose to negotiate directly with the Chavismo regime still in power, led by acting President Delcy Rodríguez. It is worth noting that, after failing to receive the expected backing—as she was deemed to lack sufficient support or legitimacy to govern—Machado attempted to appeal to Trump's goodwill by offering him her Nobel Peace Prize, which she had previously dedicated to him (Pager *et al.*, 2026).

With regard to interests deemed essential, the Trump administration went so far as to refer to the Venezuelan oil industry in terms that likened it to an extension of US interests. Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves, with approximately 298 billion barrels in 2014, as well as significant deposits of natural gas, iron ore and bauxite, the latter being a key mineral for aluminium production (Crooker, 2025).

Prior to the intervention, Trump himself publicly demanded that Venezuela return 'all the oil, land and other assets' which, according to his narrative, had been seized from the United States (Olmo, 2025). This logic intensified following the military actions. The US government not only promoted mechanisms for direct access to Venezuelan crude oil, but also sought to influence its control and marketing. In this

regard, it was announced that between thirty and fifty million barrels of oil would be shipped to the United States, with the proceeds to be administered directly by the US presidency, on the grounds that they would be used for the benefit of both the Venezuelan people and Washington's own interests (BBC Mundo, 2025).

Thus, the idea of 'reclaiming what was unjustly taken' is reframed not as an act of restitution, but as a mechanism of appropriation underpinned by a narrative of political legitimisation. Consequently, the criterion ceases to operate as a normative principle aimed at redressing grievances and becomes a rhetorical device that enables intervention and reconfigures power relations in accordance with geopolitical interests.

4.1.3 Punishing wrongdoers

The third element is that of 'punishing wrongdoers whose crimes have gone unpunished in the state to which they belong, or those who, having a duty to punish them, have failed to do so' (García-Pelayo, 1987: 19). At this point, two discourses promoted from Washington throughout Donald Trump's administrations come into play.

The first, characteristic of his first term, portrays Nicolás Maduro as a dictator and justifies US intervention as a means of supporting the Venezuelan people in their quest for freedom against a repressive government incapable of guaranteeing their well-being in the context of the humanitarian crisis. This narrative omits, however, the role played by US sanctions both in the regime's drift towards authoritarianism and in the deterioration of the population's living conditions (Flores, 2025).

The second, more recent narrative links Maduro to narco-terrorism, to the extent of offering a reward for his capture. However, as Muñoz (2025) points out, this narrative is undermined by contradictory decisions within US policy itself. In particular, the pardon granted to Juan Orlando Hernández—the former president of Honduras sentenced to 45 years in prison for facilitating the shipment of large quantities of cocaine to the United States—introduces an element of tension that highlights the double standards in the application of the anti-drug discourse.

Taken together, both discourses—that of defending democracy and that of combating narco-terrorism—form a framework of legitimisation that seeks to present the intervention as a necessary action in the face of the Venezuelan state's alleged inability or unwillingness to punish those responsible for serious crimes. However, the internal inconsistencies and tensions within these narratives, as well as their selective nature, call into question their claim to universality and undermine their normative foundation.

A telling example of this selectivity can be seen in the field of international criminal justice: whilst the International Criminal Court has moved forward with issuing or requesting arrest warrants against the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza (UN News, 2025), in the case of Venezuela the Court itself is keeping the situation at the investigation stage without having issued an arrest warrant against Nicolás Maduro.

Thus, rather than strictly adhering to the criteria of a just war, these arguments appear to be part of a logic of the political instrumentalisation of law and morality, aimed at justifying the use of force in the service of geopolitical interests.

4.1.4 Cultural superiority

Finally, the fourth element of a just cause is the notion of cultural superiority. The foreign policy promoted by Donald Trump aligns with the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny. Both ideological frameworks have historically served as a justification for US expansion on the continent, by promoting the idea of a civilising mission based on the presumed cultural superiority of the Anglo-Saxon world and on the duty to spread democracy according to Washington's parameters.

In this sense, both the rhetoric and the actions of the Trump administration are rooted in this same historical framework, reinforcing US primacy under the slogan 'America for Americans', now reconfigured, in a context of hegemonic crisis, into slogans such as 'Make America Great Again'. Thus, the appeal to a supposed cultural superiority—albeit not explicitly—not only serves as the symbolic foundation of US foreign policy but also as a mechanism of legitimisation that normalises intervention and subordination within the Western Hemisphere.

4.2 Additional requirements of just war: authority, right intention and right manner of waging war

According to Sepúlveda (1987: 69), 'just war requires not only just causes for its undertaking, but also legitimate authority and right intention on the part of the belligerent, as well as a right manner of conducting it'. In this sense, the notion of just war is not limited to the existence of justified causes, but also implies the fulfilment of three fundamental requirements: legitimate authority, right intention and the right manner of conducting it, as detailed below.

4.2.1 Legitimate authority

The Charter of the United Nations establishes in Chapter VII (Articles 39 and 42) that the Security Council is the body empowered to authorise the use of force for the purpose of maintaining international peace and security. In this regard, no State—including the United States—has, in principle, the authority or power to unilaterally undertake military action against another. However, in the 2003 war against Iraq, the US government invoked a broad interpretation of previous Security Council resolutions, particularly Resolution 1441 of 2002, as well as the argument of preventive self-defence, in order to justify an intervention without express authorisation (Hein, 2023).

This course of action not only strains the limits of the international legal order, but also demonstrates how the law can be instrumentalised to enable actions which,

strictly speaking, lack a clear basis of legality within the international system. Consequently, the absence of explicit authorisation by the Security Council calls into question compliance with the requirement of legitimate authority as set out in the principles of just war.

4.2.2 Right intention

Righteous intent implies acting in 'good faith' in the use of armed force, that is, on the basis of moral and ethical considerations. According to Muñoz (2025), the purpose of US military actions off the Venezuelan coast, in the period leading up to 3 January, was to bring about a regime change aligned with its interests and to reposition itself geopolitically through control of Latin America and its strategic resources.

In this sense, the events of 3 January do not constitute a break, but rather the realisation of that previously outlined logic, by translating those objectives into direct military action in which, although there was no regime change in the strict sense, the Venezuelan government ended up assuming a sort of US tutelage following the military action and the capture of Maduro. From the realist school of international relations, this objective may be considered rational; however, from the Sepulvedan criterion according to which 'waging war for the sake of plunder is a sin' (Sepúlveda, 1987: 71), the military action responds more to the logic of *Realpolitik* than to the pursuit of a higher good.

This logic is embodied in the ambition regarding Venezuela's strategic resources—the country possesses the world's largest proven oil reserves (303.221 million barrels)—and in the aforementioned official statements which, days after the US military actions, suggested the direct administration by Washington of up to 50 million barrels of oil (OPEC, 2025; BBC Mundo, 2025). Consequently, the use of force can hardly be interpreted as guided by a righteous spirit, insofar as the aims driving it appear to respond to strategic interests rather than universal ethical principles.

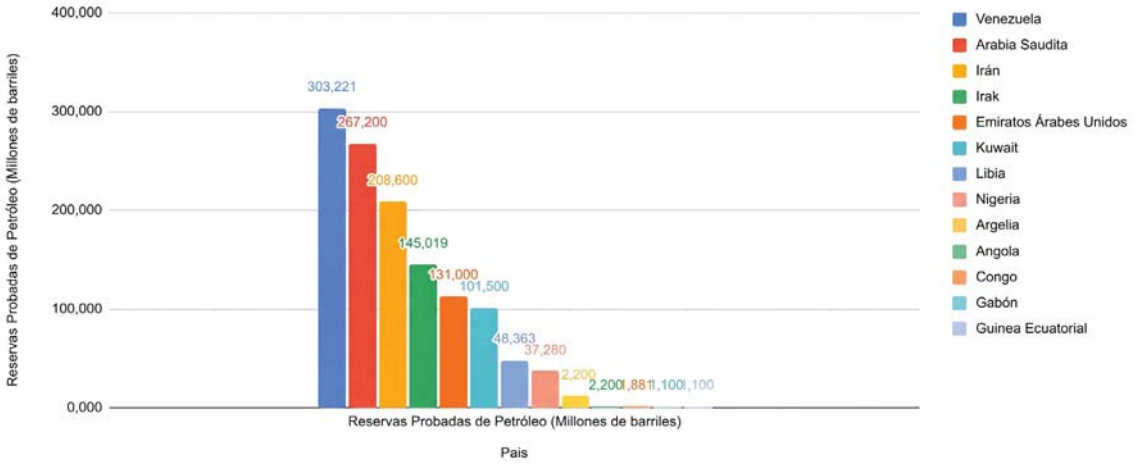

Gráfico 1. Reservas probadas de petróleo en países miembros de la OPEP (Millones de barriles)
Fuente: Elaboración propia con datos de la OPEC (2025)

In this vein, from the perspective of the 'war for the spoils' referred to by Sepúlveda (1987), Venezuela's vast natural resources and the US government's overt interest in securing strategic control over these assets blur the narrative of humanitarian intervention to reveal, at its core, a logic of appropriation aimed at dominating energy resources that are fundamental to the material reproduction of US global power.

4.2.3 The Right Way

Sepúlveda (1987: 3) argues that, in war, harm to innocents must be avoided and that its conduct requires moderation and virtue. This approach is consistent with the principles of international humanitarian law, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which establishes the protection of the civilian population in contexts of armed conflict and occupation.

Within this framework, the criterion of 'just war' can also be problematised in relation to the distinction between stratagems of war and acts of perfidy. Whilst the initial justification for intervention on humanitarian grounds during Trump's first administration does not, strictly speaking, constitute an act of perfidy—as it does not necessarily involve the betrayal of legal protection in the immediate course of hostilities—it does highlight a n instrumentalisation of humanitarian discourse that strains the principles of good faith and humanity that should govern the conduct of war.

In the case of US military action in Venezuela during Trump's second term, this requirement is not met. United Nations experts have condemned the US military action as constituting a serious violation of international law and the right to life, as well as a dangerous precedent for regional peace and stability (OHCHR, 2026).

Therefore, based on a critical review of the elements constituting a just war according to Sepúlveda (1987), it can be concluded that US military action in Venezuela constitutes an unjust war. Far from being directed towards the achievement of peace—the ultimate goal which, according to the tradition of just war, should guide the use of violence—this intervention responds to a logic of power expansion and domination.

There is no just cause to legitimise it beyond discourses serving political expediency: whether from those who celebrate the intervention because it implies the fall of the 'Maduro regime', or from those who seek to 'whitewash' the Venezuelan government's mistakes through anti-imperialist slogans. The 'righteous intent', for its part, is rooted in the logic of *Realpolitik* rather than in the pursuit of ethically justifiable ends, whilst the manner in which military action is conducted departs from the criteria of moderation and virtue that Sepúlveda himself considers indispensable.

Taken together, these elements not only allow the intervention to be characterised as an unjust war, but also highlight a broader tension between the normative frameworks seeking to regulate war and the actual practices of power in the contemporary international system, where the legitimisation of the use of force appears to be increasingly subordinated to strategic imperatives.

5 Conclusions

The events of 3 January 2025 demonstrate that the policy of maximum diplomatic and economic pressure, combined with operations of destabilisation and military threat—such as airspace blockades, large-scale military deployments and persistent bellicose rhetoric—,has pushed the traditional US two-track policy towards a new qualitative threshold: direct armed intervention as the preferred instrument of foreign policy.

Unlike previous phases, this transformation of the policy of maximum pressure into open military action is taking place against a backdrop of a crisis of US hegemony, which Wallerstein (2007) traces back to the 1970s and which finds one of its most visible political expressions in Donald Trump's rise to the presidency under the slogans 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again'. In this scenario, the exercise of power tends to shift from forms of leadership based on consensus and international legitimacy towards increasingly coercive methods aimed at preserving domination even in the absence of such consensus. In terms of international relations, this represents the abandonment of soft power and the return of hard power as a foreign policy strategy.

Within this framework, the two-track policy ceases to rely on indirect legitimisation through internal opposition actors to bring about regime change and is reconfigured as a strategy of direct and disproportionate use of force against a sovereign state, with the aim of imposing, from Washington, the fundamental guidelines of its domestic and foreign policy. This shift reflects not only a tactical change, but a more profound transformation in the way the regional and international order is conceived, and the role of force in its maintenance.

Drawing on a critical reading of Sepúlveda (1987), this study has argued that such unilateral military action—which is not limited to armed intervention but also involves economic coercion, extraterritorial prosecution and control of strategic resources—constitutes an unjust war. In this regard, the analysis carried out confirms the research hypothesis: the intervention does not meet the criteria of just cause, legitimate authority, right intention or proportionality in the use of force, and responds, rather, to geopolitical and geo-economic interests linked to the control of strategic resources and, , the reconfiguration of the regional order. Far from being oriented towards peace as its ultimate goal, it is part of a logic of domination that goes beyond the normative frameworks of the tradition of just war.

In a context in which the United States seeks to reaffirm its global position amidst its hegemonic decline, Venezuela re-emerges as a strategic geopolitical space to ensure, at least within the Latin American and Caribbean sphere, the continuity of its dominance. This is explained both by the control of energy resources and by the symbolic value the country holds as a paradigmatic case of political defiance against the regional order promoted by Washington.

What is happening in Venezuela today—regardless of the political stance one takes towards the current government—must be the subject of critical reflection and unequivocal condemnation. Not only because it jeopardises peace and security in

Latin America and the Caribbean, but also because it sets a precedent that empowers the United States to wage this kind of unjust war against other countries, resorting to shifting—yet equally problematic—arguments such as democracy, drug trafficking or security. In this way, a practice is being consolidated that stands in open contradiction to the principles of international law and to the commitments made after the Second World War to prevent the normalisation of the unilateral use of force as a mechanism for conflict resolution.

Finally, from a European perspective, and particularly with regard to Spain, this scenario poses significant challenges in terms of foreign policy, security and strategic positioning. The pressure to align with US directives—evident in Washington's recent criticisms of Spain for failing to support military operations against Iran, as well as in its refusal to allow the use of military infrastructure and airspace—together with the impact of these dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, compels a reconsideration of the scope for strategic autonomy and the costs of potential involvement. In this regard, both the Armed Forces and Spanish institutions are faced with the need to balance their international commitments with respect for the rule of law and the preservation of a foreign policy consistent with the principles that have historically guided their actions within the international system.

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REVIEW

National Armies and NATO, 1949–1991.

Jan Hoffenaar & Brian McAllister Linn (eds.)

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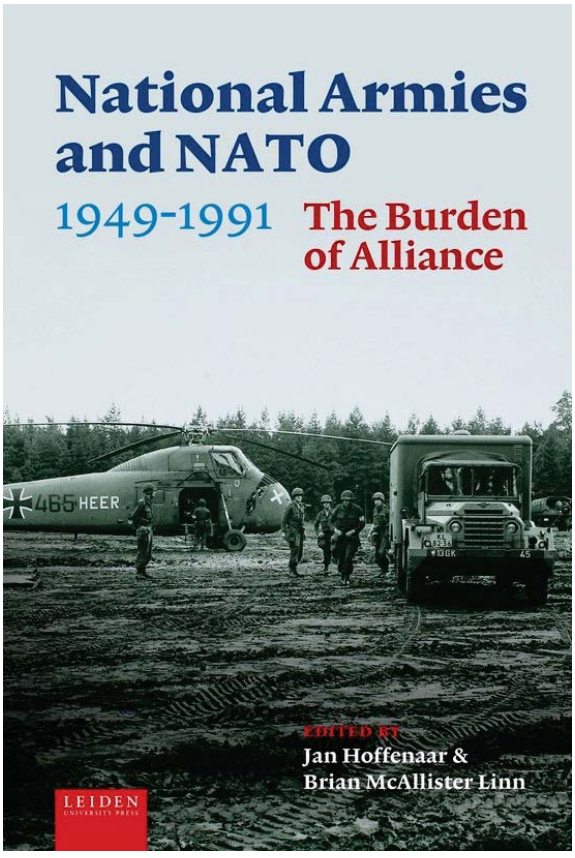

This is an academic work bringing together contributions from various specialists on the relationship between different national armies and NATO during the Cold War period. To this end, the book adopts a comparative approach, structured around country-specific case studies within the framework of NATO and participation in the Atlantic Alliance during the period under review, which leads the reader to an inevitable comparative analysis combining military history, defence policy decisions and, in a broader context, international relations.

The volume brings together specialists in military history and strategic studies, mostly affiliated with European and North American universities, defence studies institutes, and research centres in contemporary history and international security. For example, the editors are Jan Hoffenaar, a Dutch historian and military officer, and Brian McAllister Linn, an American military historian, professor at Texas A&M University and a leading authority on the history of the US Army.

Thus, each NATO country is the subject of a chapter analysed by an expert from that country, providing archival knowledge and primary sources, direct experience within the organisation, and political, doctrinal and strategic contextualisation in relation to national defence policies, alongside a diversity of historiographical approaches inherent in the authors' varied backgrounds. There is also a civil-military balance, combining university academics, historians linked to military archives and defence analysts, with a wide geographical diversity that allows for the inclusion of NATO's core powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany), the middle powers (Canada, the Netherlands), the southern flank (Spain, Turkey, Greece, Portugal) and the Nordic countries.

The book features the aforementioned Hoffenaar and McAllister Linn, who provide a solid historiographical foundation in a comprehensive introduction, before moving on to examine the cases by country in relation to their NATO membership. In order of chapters: John Keess on Canada, Iben Bjørnsson on Denmark, Olivier Schmitt on France, Dieter Krüger on Germany, Dionysios Chourchoulis on Greece, Jan Hoffenaar again on the Netherlands, Jorge Silva Rocha on Portugal, Ignacio Fuente Cobo on Spain, Ayşe Ömür Atmaca and Zerrin Torun on Turkey, Huw Bennett on the United Kingdom, with the second editor, Brian McAllister, concluding the volume by examining the US case.

The central thesis of the work, clearly formulated in the introduction, is that NATO should be understood not as a homogeneous structure, but as an alliance deeply marked by tensions between national interests and collective commitments, where the concept of the 'burden of alliance' is key—that is, the difficult balance between the distribution of responsibilities and their political, military and economic costs at the national level.

Another of the book's strongest arguments is that NATO functioned—and to a large extent continues to function—as a transactional agreement, where states weigh up the costs and benefits of their participation. This is reflected in US leadership based on pure strategic calculation, European dependence on US nuclear deterrence, and constant negotiation over military contributions.

Derived from these premises are others such as the structural asymmetry within the alliance, national interests that never disappeared, the profound transformation of national armies through their NATO membership, and the tensions between commitments made and specific needs; in this case, the analysis of the impact of colonial wars (France, Portugal, United Kingdom) and US foreign policy (Vietnam) is particularly relevant.

This is a very solid book, although it has some limitations, such as its focus on an almost exclusively analytical approach to government positions and the impact on military structures; however, one might wish for greater attention to public opinion and its reactions, as well as a broader view of the impact on social and economic factors, particularly regarding defence budgetary policies.

The absence of some relevant cases, particularly Italy, is also striking. Furthermore, the focus is centred on land forces, leaving naval forces, the air dimension and the alliance's nuclear strategy in the background.

The chapter on Spain is particularly thought-provoking and is authored by Colonel and IEEE analyst Ignacio Fuente Cobo. It offers a comprehensive and well-documented overview, putting forward a clear thesis: Spain played an essential strategic role in Euro-Atlantic security long before its formal accession to the alliance, and its integration was the result of a complex evolution, marked by political asymmetries, bilateral dependence and progressive military adaptation.

Initially, Spain was excluded from NATO, although it was always militarily indispensable in a theoretical response to a Soviet attack on Europe, going on to establish a bilateral link with the United States through the 1953 agreement, under which the Americans, in exchange for defence aid, secured the use of the bases at Rota, Torrejón, Zaragoza and Morón, although certain equipment could not be utilised; for example, during the Ifni War (1957–58), when Spain was unable to operate certain aircraft due to US restrictions.

Fuente Cobo notes a shift in the 1960s and 1970s, the period when actual accession negotiations began, with another agreement, this one from 1970, which brought greater Spanish control over US bases and the partial end of certain opaque clauses. Franco's death and the Transition paved the way for Spain to join the alliance, with a clear commitment leading up to its definitive accession in 1982, where the author highlights how Spain contributed significant capabilities—for example, more than 300,000 soldiers serving in key land, naval and air forces—but in exchange for a restriction that now seems significant, namely that Ceuta and Melilla remained outside the NATO umbrella.

Following PSOE's change of stance in 1986, then the ruling party, pragmatically accepting Spain's membership of NATO—a decision ratified in that year's referendum, although the 'yes' vote won by a narrow margin of 52.5%—certain conditions were imposed, such as non-integration into the military structure, a ban on the introduction of nuclear weapons, and a reduction in the US military presence. In Fuente Cobo's view, NATO also led to the transformation of the Spanish Armed Forces through the standardisation of procedures, equipment and operational

culture, certain key reforms (the 1983 META Plan, the 1990 RETO Plan and the 1994 NORTE Plan, which reduced and restructured units) and the consolidation of a unique model in which Spain retained control of its armed forces but participated in NATO through coordination agreements and the temporary transfer of operational control. A highly autonomous model.

As was the case with other member countries of the alliance, the end of the Cold War rendered this model obsolete, as the Soviet threat no longer existed and NATO was undertaking new missions. In 1999, Spain finally integrated into the military structure, with the consequences of full standardisation to NATO standards, the end of the asymmetrical bilateral relationship with the United States, and the gradual but certain full integration into the transatlantic architecture. In short, according to the author, who offers a mature interpretation based on first-hand knowledge, Spain did not join NATO abruptly, but rather after decades of functional integration and a long preceding period under asymmetrical conditions.

Beyond this chapter on Spain, in conclusion the work pursues a clear objective, namely to analyse how national armies integrated, adapted to, or resisted NATO's demands during the Cold War (1949–1991), thereby examining the difficult balance—if not tensions—between national sovereignty and allied commitments, but it also allows us to analyse military planning within NATO during this crucial formative period, which was undoubtedly different from its current objectives and needs, and where it is evident that NATO was not a homogeneous bloc, but a system of constant negotiation between national interests and collective strategy.

This is a work of particular use to those wishing to explore the history of NATO, the comparative analysis of defence policies, and an understanding of the origins of current debates surrounding the transatlantic collective security organisation, for in a post-Cold War bipolar context, many of the structural tensions remain and have even intensified.

In short, this is a significant contribution both to the history of the Cold War and to the analysis of contemporary NATO, particularly in a context of renewed geopolitical tension. The book also has the advantage—much appreciated by the reader—of explanatory sections at the end detailing the abbreviations used, which are inherent to the NATO environment and the military sphere, as well as a comprehensive index.

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REVIEW

Ocean Governance and Conflict in the East and South China Sea.

Christian Schultheiss

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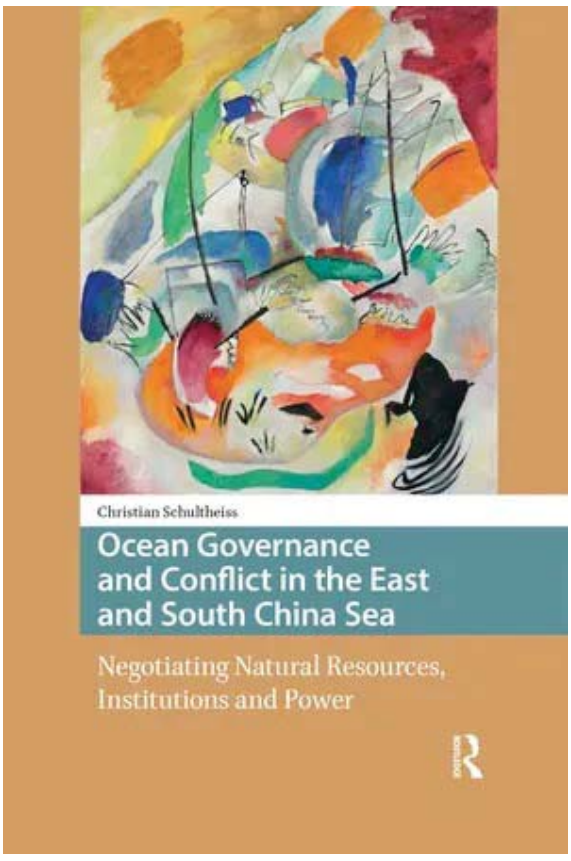

The rise of Asia, and in particular China, India and Southeast Asia, has sparked a significant increase in interest in these countries' domestic policies, as well as their conduct in foreign affairs and the impact on international politics. This interest is reinforced by two factors of global significance. On the one hand, Asia has become the global supplier of manufactured goods, which are transported mainly by sea; and, on the other hand, a giant is emerging—China—which is already competing with the United States for global hegemony.

It is within this context of regional changes with global implications that Christian Schultheiss's book, the subject of this review, finds its precise place, focusing on how these changes influence relations between the countries of the South China Sea and the East China Sea. In this work, Dr Schultheiss explains why the coastal states embroiled in disputes and claims in both seas reach agreements on controversies concerning oil and gas, fishing, crisis communication and conflictual behaviour in some cases, but not in others.

Negotiations on cooperation institutions centred on the region's marine natural resources are almost as old as the disputes themselves, the author states, adding that 'in order to cooperate, state actors must be confident that a cooperation institution will not enhance the negotiating capacity of opponents in disputes' (p. 17).

This is a comprehensive and theoretically sound study analysing how the middle powers of Southeast and East Asia negotiate with China on dispute resolution and ocean governance in Asia's maritime disputes. Dr Schultheiss rigorously analyses the negotiation processes and transactions observed over three decades, up to the present day, and how maritime law and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) affect the negotiations.

Written in a lively and accessible style, the structure is well defined, divided into six chapters in a logical narrative sequence. Chapters III, IV and V focus on case studies.

We found Chapter I particularly interesting for the way it previews the content and key aspects of the work (*This book in a nutshell*, p. 17). Chapter II conceptualises the types of agreements that the parties in conflict negotiate, ranging from fisheries agreements and joint development agreements for offshore oil and gas fields, to cooperation on maritime policing, codes of conduct, and mechanisms for incident prevention and crisis communication. Furthermore, it provides an analysis of the influence of power dynamics between countries with territorial claims. This chapter also considers alternative variables (in Subchapter 3) that shape negotiations, including nationalism and national policies, the existence (or absence) of legal rights, international arbitration, and the characteristics of multilateral negotiations.

Chapter III offers an analysis of negotiations on joint initiatives and fisheries agreements in the South China Sea, covering bilateral interactions between China and the Philippines, China and Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan, and Brunei and Malaysia. The last two agreements mentioned exclude China, which is relevant

for determining whether this country is a determining factor in the dynamics sought regarding why agreements are reached on some issues and not on others.

Chapter IV focuses on the East China Sea, beginning with an overview of the legal claims, followed by an analysis of the twenty-five years of negotiations between China and Japan on various models for sharing oil and gas exploitation in different parts of the East China Sea. Schultheiss then analyses the negotiations leading to a set of partly overlapping fisheries agreements: namely, the fisheries agreements between China and Japan, South Korea and Japan, South Korea and China, and Japan and Taiwan. He concludes this chapter with a highly interesting comparison of the role played by fishing incidents and fisheries agreements in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Chapter V focuses on negotiations regarding codes of conduct, incident prevention and communication mechanisms, beginning with an analysis of the last thirty years of negotiations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea. The chapter concludes with an examination of attempts by China and Japan to reach agreements on crisis management procedures, including communication mechanisms, and an analysis of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea.

In his conclusions, Dr Schultheiss illustrates how disputing states manage the shared governance of marine natural resources even within a geographical area characterised by disputes and territorial boundary claims and by being the scene of competition between major powers. Furthermore, he demonstrates that cooperative institutions and conflicts do not constitute closed spheres of action, but are part of the same structure of interactions. Finally, he identifies the initiatives facing difficulties in making progress regarding ocean governance in the South China Sea and East China Sea regions, and explores some implications for the confrontation and cooperation of major powers, beyond maritime disputes in Asia.

Undoubtedly, Dr Schultheiss's book makes a significant scholarly contribution to understanding how states with maritime territorial claims seek to establish institutions to manage marine natural resources and conflict behaviour within complex environments of interaction between legal frameworks, power dynamics and diplomacy. And, crucially, without relinquishing their territorial claims.

We find the comparative approach particularly interesting, as it allows the reader to identify patterns in negotiations between different actors, whilst excluding China from some of the cases studied. This avoids the oversimplification of reducing these disputes solely to the actions of that country. The time period considered—three decades—certainly provides a broad perspective on how these maritime disputes have evolved, whilst offering a valuable framework for understanding the current situation and potential outcomes.

Finally, in an international scenario such as the current one, which appears to be moving towards the dismantling of the rules-based order, the scientific study

of collaborative institutions, and how dynamics operate in complex environments such as the South China Sea and the East China Sea, may prove to be of the utmost interest, both to the academic community and to the diplomatic sphere and specialist actors.

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REVIEW

A Fallacious World. The New Global Order in the Age of Algorithms and Manipulation.

Ángel Gómez de Ágreda

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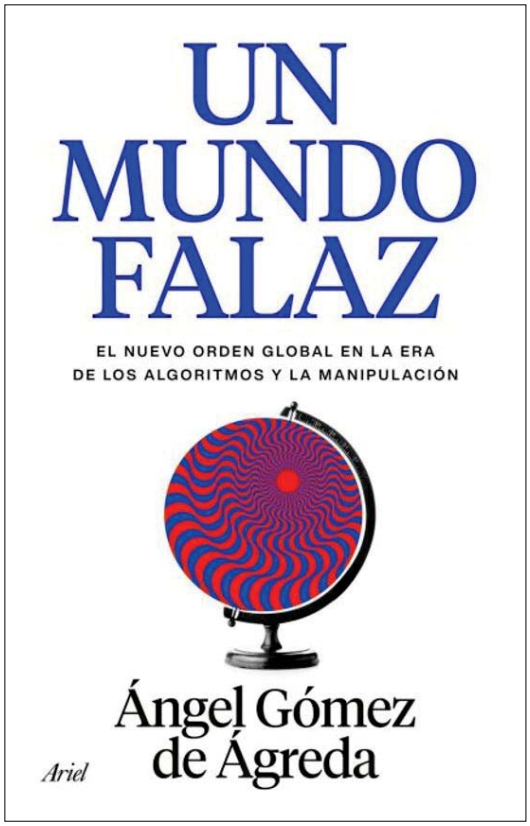

Artificial intelligence, disinformation, post-truth, technological rivalry between the United States and China, the power of major digital platforms, and cognitive warfare are some of the most recurring concepts in contemporary strategic debate. In recent years, they have generated a wealth of literature on the impact of the digital revolution on the economy, security, competition between powers and the very autonomy of the individual. This is hardly surprising, as with growing technological dependence, uncertainty also increases regarding who controls technical infrastructure, data, algorithms, the frameworks through which we interpret reality, and so on.

A recent contribution to these reflections can be found in *A Fallacious World. The New Global Order in the Age of Algorithms and Manipulation* (Ariel, 2026). Its author, Ángel Gómez de Ágreda, is a colonel in the Air and Space Force (in the reserves) and a recognised Spanish voice in debates on the relationship between digital technologies, security and conflict. He demonstrated this in his previous book, *Mundo Orwell. A Survival Guide for a Hyperconnected World*, published to great acclaim in 2019, where he elegantly and rigorously examined the social and cultural effects of digitalisation, from a humanist perspective that once again permeates this new book, in which the focus shifts to the current boom in artificial intelligence and its geo-economic, geopolitical and strategic implications. In fact, almost simultaneously, Gómez de Ágreda has published 2026, together with Enrique Martín Romero, another book of a more academic tone on *Inteligencia artificial y defensa* (published by Libros de la Catarata).

The author of *Un mundo falaz* makes a double nod to Aldous Huxley's celebrated novel, *Brave New World* (*Un mundo feliz*, as it was translated into spanish). The first nod is evident in the play on words that inspired the book's title, based on the paronymy between 'happy' [*feliz*] and 'fallacious' [*falaz*]. The second is reflected in the text's structure, with its contents organised into five sections titled respectively with the categories α, β, γ, δ and ε, in direct reference to the caste system Aldous Huxley described in his novel. Gómez de Ágreda thus draws on this dystopian imagery as a formal device. The aim? To show how the digital revolution is altering the mechanisms by which societies distinguish (and mix up and confuse) the true from the false, the material foundations of wealth and the balances of power between states.

The book begins with the contemporary crisis of truth, although the perspective is considerably broader and more ambitious than that found in the deluge of recent works on issues such as disinformation and fake news. The focus turns to digital ecosystems capable of tailoring messages, reinforcing pre-existing biases and exploiting individual emotions on a massive scale. According to the author's analysis, the isolated lie loses its centrality in the face of fragmented information environments where emotional narratives often take precedence over fact-checking.

The second major transformation described in the book concerns artificial intelligence. Gómez de Ágreda inevitably points out that this is not just another sector-specific innovation, but a cross-cutting technology with simultaneous effects on productivity, employment, scientific innovation, decision-making and international

competition. The battle over algorithms matters, but the author quickly moves on to consider other, more decisive factors: advanced semiconductors, computing power, cloud infrastructure and massive data accumulation. The geoeconomics of artificial intelligence—who produces, who designs, who stores and who processes—emerges as one of the main axes of the rivalry between the United States and China. The book emphasises that this competition is not fought solely in laboratories or software companies. It also cuts across global supply chains that are extraordinarily vulnerable and concentrated. The West's dependence on Asian production of advanced semiconductors, Taiwan's strategic importance, US restrictions on chip exports to China, and the race to secure critical minerals all demonstrate that artificial intelligence is reviving old concerns about industrial autonomy, technological dependence and strategic vulnerability.

Un mundo falaz ties in with one of the most significant strategic debates of recent years, raised by Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt and Daniel Huttenlocher in *The Age of AI*, published in 2021. The authors of that work posited that artificial intelligence would not only transform specific economic or military sectors and capabilities, but would also alter the very relationship between knowledge, decision-making and power. Kissinger also raised a question of particular relevance to strategic studies: what happens when decision-making systems begin to rely on tools whose inner workings are not even fully understood by the operators themselves. The possibility of delegating critical decisions to opaque technologies, the acceleration of decision-making cycles and the risk of errors amplified by automation were central to that reflection. Gómez de Ágreda takes this into account, but chooses to shift the perspective from decision-making elites towards societies exposed to new mechanisms of influence and states increasingly dependent on private technological actors.

Gómez de Ágreda is concerned by the process of power redistribution between public and private actors, explaining how Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Meta or their Chinese equivalents have acquired a strategic significance that is difficult to overstate: they control critical infrastructure, concentrate data on an unprecedented scale and are increasingly involved in spheres traditionally linked to state power. In line with this concern, the book examines the relationship of cooperation, dependence and friction between governments and large technology corporations in a context where classical sovereignty is showing clear signs of fragmentation.

The military dimension also features prominently in the book. The war in Ukraine is presented as a testing ground for accelerated technological adaptation, and the Middle East as a theatre where artificial intelligence tools have begun to be deployed in the field for surveillance, target identification and decision support. This transformation is leading to the use of autonomous drones, logistical automation and the relentless development of new electronic and cyber warfare capabilities. It is suggested that future conflicts will likely be defined less by isolated platforms than by the ability to integrate data, processing speed and real-time operational adaptation. On this point, it engages indirectly with works such as Paul Scharre's *Army of None* or *Four Battlegrounds*, though it maintains a broader and less specialised focus.

Much of the recent literature on artificial intelligence and the digital revolution tends to remain confined within watertight—or nearly so—compartments. I am exaggerating slightly, but some works focus almost exclusively on its effects on productivity and innovation; others reduce the debate to its impact on the rivalry between Washington and Beijing; others drift into normative discussions on liberal democracy, privacy or digital rights. Gómez de Ágreda moves quite freely between these registers without getting trapped in any of them. This ability is particularly valuable in Spanish, where highly specialised texts or popular essays that oversimplify complex debates continue to predominate.

Although Gómez de Ágreda's professional career is linked to the field of defence and security, the book avoids the jargon of technical literature and the frenetic tone of journalistic commentary on innovation. It seamlessly alternates between strategic issues, historical references, philosophical debates and economic transformations, without compromising readability. In contrast to certain almost messianic discourses on artificial intelligence, he reminds us of something fundamental: technology profoundly alters the strategic environment, but it continues to operate within geographical, economic, political and human constraints that no innovation can eliminate on its own.

The most interesting discussion raised by *Un mundo faliz* concerns not so much the phenomena it describes and anticipates (all plausible) as the lens through which it observes them. Gómez de Ágreda focuses his analysis on the strategic, political and anthropological costs of the digital revolution: concentration of power, erosion of individual autonomy, cognitive manipulation, technological rivalry between major powers and the fragmentation of sovereignty. This choice is understandable and ties in with a school of thought that has been highly visible in recent years, one that is acutely aware of the destabilising effects of artificial intelligence and major tech platforms. The book issues this warning with solid arguments and convincing examples, but devotes far less attention to the capabilities that these same technologies are generating in fields such as productivity, scientific research, medicine, logistics, public administration, or certain security and defence applications. The choice of perspective reinforces the power of the warning articulated in the book, but also places it within a body of contemporary literature inclined to project the bleakest scenarios of every major technological leap. The history of innovation shows that the most dystopian predictions rarely accurately anticipate all the effects of a technological transformation. Gómez de Ágreda's text, it must be clarified, does not quite reach the level of dystopia, but it comes close—or at least that is the impression many of its readers are likely to take away.

Of course, none of this detracts from the value of *Un mundo falaz*. On the contrary: its main merit lies in formulating, with clarity and ambition, one of the central strategic questions of our age. For centuries, international power was measured primarily in terms of territory, population, natural resources or military capability. These factors remain decisive, but today they coexist with new sources of technological power. Gómez de Ágreda frequently leans towards the most unsettling scenarios of this transformation, but he accurately identifies the central problem:

artificial intelligence is altering how we make decisions, how we compete and how we understand the world. And that makes this book essential reading for anyone attempting to think about the future of strategy. Essential and thought-provoking.

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