Geopolitical overview of conflicts 2025

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MINISTERIO
DE DEFENSA

Catálogo de Publicaciones de Defensa
publicaciones.defensa.gob.es

Catálogo de Publicaciones de la Administración General del Estado
cpage.mpr.gob.es

Edita:

MINISTERIO DE DEFENSA
SUBSECRETARÍA DE DEFENSA
SECRETARÍA GENERAL TÉCNICA

Paseo de la Castellana 109, 28046 Madrid

NIPO 083-16-308-8 (edición impresa)
ISSN 2530-3678 (edición impresa)

NIPO 083-21-231-5 (edición el línea)

Depósito legal M 5363-2026
Fecha de edición: marzo de 2026
Maqueta e imprime: Imprenta Ministerio de Defensa

publicaciones.defensa.gob.es
cpage.mpr.gob.es

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Introduction

Víctor Mario Bados Nieto

This Strategic Notebook on the Conflict Outlook for 2025 confirms the trend already warned about in last year's report, which turned out to be the most violent and conflict-ridden since the end of the Second World War. Along these lines, and in the absence of academic confirmation, 2025 points to a sustained increase in global violence and conflict, supported by figures collected by leading think tanks and specialised academic analysis centres. Data from major international observatories underscore a clear reality: organised violence at the global level is not only not decreasing but continues to rise.

Thus, according to the data available at the time of writing this Notebook, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) showed a total of sixty-one conflicts involving state participation in 2024, a record number since 1946, and eleven wars with a threshold of more than a thousand deaths per year, the highest number since 2016. For its part, the *SIPRI Yearbook 2025* reported 239,000 conflict-related deaths in 2024, the highest number for the period 2018-2024, highlighting an escalation in the lethality of these confrontations, despite relative stability in the number of countries affected. Most analysts agree with this upward trend in global conflict, concurring that 2025 saw high levels of violence and confrontation.

Focusing on the main milestones that marked 2025, it could be said that it was punctuated by multiple attempts at ceasefires and fragile negotiations in the two main conflicts: Ukraine and Gaza. In the former, Zelensky's government accepted a 30-day ceasefire proposed by the United States in March, conditional on Russian adherence; however, despite direct contacts and talks in Istanbul, a lasting peace process was not consolidated, and, at the end of October, Moscow rejected an immediate cessation of hostilities, leaving future negotiation summits in limbo. In this context, it is also worth noting the failure of the negotiations held in Anchorage (Alaska) in August between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, without the presence of Volodymyr Zelensky, who aspired to move towards a peace agreement in Ukraine. Despite the expectations generated, the talks ended without concrete results, without a ceasefire or effective commitment to stop the conflict, and with Putin maintaining his intransigent positions and less international isolation, following Trump's legitimisation through the applause he gave him from the steps of the presidential plane. This failure not only called into question Trump's negotiating skills but also left Ukraine in a situation of prolonged uncertainty and without a clear horizon for peace.

In the case of Gaza, the truce brokered by Egypt, Qatar, Turkey and the United States in October has been continually strained by recurring violations and debates over the deployment of an international verification force. Today, the ceasefire remains precarious and vulnerable, and the number of deaths and casualties continues to rise due to numerous violations of the agreement by both sides.

Beyond these two epicentres, high-intensity civil wars persist, such as in Sudan and Myanmar, as well as intra-state internal security conflicts associated with organised crime, such as those occurring in Latin America, which highlight the structural resilience of organised violence. Added to these are sporadic outbreaks of violence in dormant conflicts that are reawakening, such as those that occurred this year between Pakistan and India or between Malaysia and Cambodia. Consequently, the backdrop is an international order strained by arms races and weakened arms control regimes, in the context of geopolitical competition between China and the US. This volume not only addresses the complex reality of inter-state conflicts and internal security in some of the countries mentioned above. It also seeks to incor-

porate other factors that have contributed to the deterioration of the security situation in the region.

This volume not only addresses this complex reality of inter-state conflicts and internal security in some of the countries mentioned above. It also seeks to incorporate other areas of latent or structural conflict which, although less kinetic and lethal, are no less important, such as economic coercion, the Arctic as an area of geopolitical competition and regional reconfigurations.

In the first chapter, Francisco Márquez de la Rubia addresses the tariff conflict between the United States and China, which has gone from being a simple fiscal instrument to becoming a geopolitical weapon of the first order. Under Donald Trump, it was transformed into a language of power used against both rivals and allies, based on national security, domestic policy and trade negotiations. The change marked a break with the tradition of liberalisation that had characterised the international economic order since 1945, and administrative protectionism based on access rules, verifications and conditional clauses was established.

The tariff war with China was the most visible front. Washington imposed exorbitant tariffs, while Beijing responded with mirror measures and, above all, with the strategic use of critical minerals. Although US consumers had to bear much of the cost, there was no collapse in trade, but rather a reconfiguration towards third countries such as Mexico and Vietnam. The rivalry is also shifting to the technological arena, with restrictions on semiconductors and the emergence of alternative standards.

In the second chapter, Ignacio Fuente Cobo analyses the war in Ukraine in the period between October 2024 and September 2025, just before it enters its fourth winter. This conflict is transforming the nature of modern warfare, and its effects at the strategic, operational and tactical levels will profoundly affect future conflicts. At the time of writing—September 2025—the war remains politically and militarily deadlocked, marked by a lack of progress in the peace process, the transformation of the morphology of the front due to the use of new technologies, the difficulty of carrying out decisive offensive actions, and the difficulty of reconciling the positions of combatants who seem to have concluded that they can achieve better results on the battlefield than at the negotiating table.

The behaviour of a revisionist power such as Russia, which believes that the only adequate level of security is to be dom-

inant in the geographical areas surrounding it, leads Europe to believe in the possibility that the war will spread and end up spilling over Ukraine's borders. The negative outlook for the conflict reinforces the tendency towards pessimism about its outcome and increases the fear of being involved in the war on the part of European societies accustomed to living in an environment of peace for generations. It is to be hoped that, in the end, all the actors involved in the conflict will adopt a pragmatic position and accept that prevention is always better than cure and negotiation better than combat. We must trust that, in a Europe that seems headed for war, sanity will prevail over recklessness.

In the next chapter, José Ignacio Castro Torres addresses the fall of the Iranian resistance axis in the Middle East, a that for almost forty years has established a structure of alliances to extend its power and influence in the region. However, in less than two years, this structure has been severely damaged, mainly by the situation in the Gaza Strip, the dismantling of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the fall of the Syrian regime of al-Assad. The fact that the Axis of Resistance has been defeated does not mean that it has been destroyed. The former ruling groups may become insurgent groups, while Iran attempts to regain control over them. In the meantime, the Iranians will have to seek negotiations at the international level to sustain their regime.

In the fourth chapter, Blanca Palacián de Inza dissects the reality of Sudan and the conflict that has ravaged it for decades, and which is now experiencing a new devastating civil war. What began as a power struggle between two military leaders has triggered a humanitarian crisis ignored by much of the world. While foreign powers fan the flames for strategic interests, millions of civilians suffer. This text analyses the roots, evolution and consequences of a complex conflict with regional and international implications.

Subsequently, in the fifth chapter, Pedro Sánchez Herráez will examine how Turkey has increased its presence in Africa, given that this continent is becoming a key area, for various reasons, in the struggle between old and new powers to create a new balance, a new world order.

In this context, Turkey, largely heir to the Ottoman Empire, has skilfully manoeuvred, initially using its soft power tools, to position itself significantly on the African continent without, so far, arousing the suspicions of other powers. A brief presentation of

these issues and a brief final reflection form the basis of this chapter.

In chapter six, Rocío de los Reyes Ramírez examines the crisis and challenge to national security in Ecuador as a political and social problem. Ecuador faces an unprecedented security crisis as a result of the expansion of organised crime, institutional corruption and the collapse of the prison system. The state's response, marked by militarisation and the declaration of an 'internal armed conflict', has redefined the relationship between security, power and democratic legitimacy. Under the leadership of Daniel Noboa, the country has adopted coercive policies and legal reforms that seek to restore state control, but which also pose risks of authoritarianism and the erosion of rights. Citizens live between fear and hope, in a constant tension between order and freedom. In this context, national security is revealed as a political, social and structural challenge that requires a balance between operational effectiveness, institutional strengthening and respect for the rule of law.

In the following chapter, analyst Javier Fernández Aparicio examines the key factors in a latent conflict, such as that between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, which the author refers to as the scar where the border never sleeps. This Indo-Pakistani conflict remains a critical source of global instability, reignited after the Pahalgam attack in April 2025 and the subsequent Operation Sindoor launched by India on Pakistani territory. Islamabad's response, with Operation Unbreakable Wall, shifted the confrontation to the air, cyber and diplomatic arenas, until the US-brokered ceasefire. This episode highlighted a certain Indian operational vulnerability, as well as Pakistan's ability to capitalise on the narrative surrounding Kashmir. For India, despite its global economic rise, the conflict has meant diplomatic attrition, adding to the impact of subsequent US tariffs. Pakistan, on the other hand, despite its internal fragilities and dependence on China, has strengthened its visibility. Nuclear deterrence continues to contain the escalation towards open war, while Kashmir remains caught between militarisation, insurgent violence and the economic impact of insecurity.

In chapter eight, María del Mar Hidalgo García analyses the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia on a border in constant friction. In 2025, relations between Thailand and Cambodia have been marked by historical tensions related to the border dispute over several points on the border that are very important from a religious and cultural point of view for both nations.

Throughout the year, there have been several situations of conflict in these border areas. The most serious clashes took place between 24 and 28 July, resulting in more than forty deaths and over three hundred thousand displaced persons. With the aim of reducing tensions, ASEAN, China and the US have intensified their mediating role, which led to a ceasefire. However, despite attempts at negotiation by external actors, nationalism and historical claims remain obstacles to a definitive solution between Thailand and Cambodia. The conflict continues to be a source of friction in bilateral relations, with both countries seeking recognition of their territorial rights, while the international community presses for a peaceful resolution.

Finally, in the ninth and final chapter, analysts Abel Romero Junquera, Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos and Luis V. Pérez Gil delve into the Arctic as an area of conflict, a geographical zone that was, for a long time, a remote, inhospitable and difficult territory for human life. Historically, it has been a final frontier and became a zone of separation between the superpowers during the Cold War. During this period, large-scale exploitation began, which gradually increased due to the discovery of new hydrocarbon, mineral and fishery deposits. With the end of the bipolar confrontation, it lost its strategic interest, and the expression 'Arctic exceptionalism' was coined to highlight its limited weight in global geopolitics. However, after recovering from a deep internal crisis, Russia began to regain its position in the region. The exploitation of resources, new maritime routes and control of the seas and air routes are shaping the Arctic as an area of cooperation, but also of conflict, between major powers in their struggle for global hegemony.

Chapter One

Tariff conflict in the Trump era: from fiscal instrument to geopolitical weapon against China

Francisco Márquez de la Rubia

Abstract

Tariffs have gone from being simple fiscal instruments to becoming geopolitical weapons of the first order. Under Donald Trump, they were transformed into a language of power used against both rivals and allies, based on national security, domestic policy and trade negotiations. The change marked a break with the tradition of liberalisation that had characterised the international economic order since 1945, and administrative protectionism based on access rules, verifications and conditional clauses took hold.

The tariff war with China was the most visible front. Washington imposed exorbitant tariffs, while Beijing responded with mirror measures and, above all, with the strategic use of critical minerals. Although US consumers had to bear much of the cost, there was no collapse in trade, but rather a reconfiguration towards third countries such as Mexico and Vietnam. The rivalry is also shifting to the technological arena, with restrictions on semiconductors and the emergence of alternative standards.

Europe is taking a pragmatic approach: it has moved from litigation at the WTO to managing the relationship with technical

economic policy instruments (detailed below). The Union seeks to reduce vulnerabilities, project power through standards and forge regulatory alliances with third parties, while maintaining the transatlantic relationship. At the same time, emerging players such as India, ASEAN, Latin America and Africa have positioned themselves as alternative platforms.

In the medium term, tariffs have introduced inflationary frictions, reconfiguring value chains and altering investment incentives. Their effectiveness depends less on the rate applied and more on the design of the trade-off: clear exits, robust verification and automatic return mechanisms. The debate no longer revolves around supporting free trade or not, but rather around who controls the regulatory grammar that accompanies tariffs. That grammar—based on data, standards, and administration—is now the new frontier of trade geopolitics.

Key words

Tariffs, Trump, Protectionism, Free trade, Trade war.

Introduction: the importance of tariffs

Tariffs are one of the oldest instruments of economic policy. Their nature is simple: they are, in fact, taxes applied to imported goods, with the main objective of raising funds for the state or protecting domestic industry from foreign competition. However, their apparent simplicity hides great geopolitical complexity. In an interdependent world, where global value chains cross multiple borders, tariffs can alter not only market prices, but also international alliances, the stability of multilateral institutions and the very architecture of world trade. It is happening.

In the 19th century and much of the 20th, tariffs were used for fiscal reasons and to protect nascent industries. With the creation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947 and, later, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995, a trend towards the progressive reduction of trade barriers was consolidated. Trade liberalisation became one of the pillars of incipient globalisation and a symbol of the international order led by the United States after the Second World War.

The arrival of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2017 marked a break with that tradition. With the slogan 'tariffs are the greatest'[1], Trump has transformed tariffs from economic instruments into veritable political weapons. He uses them not only against strategic adversaries such as China, but also against historical allies such as Canada, Mexico and the European Union. Tariffs have become a tool for pressure, negotiation and punishment, linked to national security and domestic policy objectives. Hence, we can begin to talk about the 'militarisation of trade policy' in the 21st century.

1 Tariffs in US trade policy

1.1 From fiscal wall to architecture of order

US trade policy has swung like a pendulum between protectionism and openness. In the 19th century, when the country was still building its industrial muscle, tariffs acted as a protective wall:

[1] 'Tariffs are the greatest' was the political slogan Trump used to try to normalise and legitimise the systematic use of tariffs, transforming them from a technical instrument into a symbol of nationalist power.

they made European goods more expensive and gave breathing space to industries that were just starting out. The climax of this tradition came with the Smoot-Hawley Act (1930) (Irwin, 2017), an abrupt jump in import taxes in the midst of the Great Depression that sparked global retaliation and left a lasting scar. After 1945, the pendulum swung back: the United States went from being the guardian of its borders to the architect of openness—first GATT, then WTO—with successive rounds that reduced tariffs and consolidated global leadership based on international rules. American openness, however, never completely eliminated defensive reflexes in sensitive sectors such as steel, agriculture and automobiles.

1.2 From Reagan to 'reciprocity'[2]

The discourse on opening barriers, dominant in the Reagan and Bush eras, was rewritten with the arrival of Donald Trump in 2017. Making extensive (and controversial) use of an old clarifying provision in the constitutional text[3], tariffs ceased to be a technical instrument and returned as a political symbol: they were a promise to 'restore greatness' to industry, curb practices considered unfair and force allies and rivals to renegotiate. The legal basis existed—Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act[4] of 1962, which allows national security to be invoked, and Section 301 of the Trade Act 1974[5], designed to respond to unfair trade practices—but their use was expanded extraordinarily, turning tariffs into a visible (and measurable) gesture of authority. If this were

[2] Meyer, T. and Sitaraman, G. (2020).

[3] 'Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution gives Congress power to impose duties and regulate foreign commerce. Congress has delegated some of these authorities to the President through statutes. Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 (19 U.S.C. §1862, as amended) allows the President to impose restrictions on goods imports or enter negotiations with trading partners if the U.S. Secretary of Commerce determines, following an investigation, that the quantity or other circumstance of those imports "threaten to impair" U.S. national security.'

[4] See: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjm4LrV3NyPAxUhVKQEHQuNIiQQFnoECBcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.congress.gov%2Fcrs-product%2FIF13006&usg=AOvVaw07b5xwbNA9n6QwawUiSoWG&opi=89978449

[5] See: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj4y_W23NyPAxX1K_sDHVwVPGYQFnoECB4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.congress.gov%2Fcrs-product%2FIF11346&usg=AOvVaw29I8va2OC1K8blM37zJ0ON&opi=89978449

not enough, the IEEPA[6] would be activated, allowing presidents to declare a national emergency to address an international trade issue. The lexicon changed: from 'free trade' to 'reciprocal/fair trade', with ideas such as a universal base tariff and selective surcharges by country or sector (Fajgelbaum *et al*., 2020).

1.3 Electoral coalition and ideological shift

The shift was not merely tactical: it crystallised into a reconfiguration of identity within the Republican Party. The conservative coalition—less dependent on suburban business leaders in favour of opening trade borders and more anchored in the industrial belt of the Midwest—adopted tariffs as a social shield and a tool for external negotiation. At the same time, the intellectual ecosystem of the economic right mutated: classic liberal voices opposed to tariffs remain, but those who defend a conservative industrial policy that accepts the state as a lever to sustain industrial employment, rebuild productive capacities and 'take advantage of the dominant position' in relations with strategic rivals are gaining ground. The success of the country's economy is no longer measured solely by low consumer prices, but is reoriented towards industrial capacity, employment and reduced external dependence.

1.4 How the tariff mechanism works

For decades, tariffs were understood as a fiscal instrument or, at best, as a lever of industrial policy with limited scope. Today, however, they have taken on a qualitatively different dimension: they constitute a regulatory language that translates the struggle for economic power into rules.

The logic is simple but powerful: tariffs no longer measure only how much is paid at the border, but also what conditions must be met in order to cross it. In this sense, they function as a filter that organises incentives, selects suppliers and establishes

[6] The International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), Title II of Pub. L. 95-223, 91 Stat. 1626, enacted 28 December 1977, is a United States federal law authorising the president to regulate international commerce after declaring a national emergency in response to any unusual and extraordinary threat to the United States which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States.[1] The act was signed by President Jimmy Carter on 28 December 1977.

access hierarchies. The key lies not so much in the percentage applied as in the accompanying framework of quotas, rules of origin, technical verifications, and environmental or labour clauses.

It is the implementation that makes the tariff a method and not just a tax. The United States has demonstrated this with sections 232 and 301: reviewable lists, discretionary exemptions and threats of escalation. The European Union, on the other hand, administers it through tariff quotas, carbon border adjustments or anti-coercion instruments. In both cases, the pattern is the same: the tariff opens or closes the door, but it is the regulatory ecosystem that determines who can enter and under what conditions.

The effects go beyond prices and quantities. The tariff method redefines competitiveness: it is no longer enough to produce cheaply and efficiently; it is necessary to demonstrate this through digital traceability, sustainability certifications, or labour compliance. Large companies, with legal and logistical teams, turn this toll into a competitive advantage; small companies, on the other hand, run the risk of being excluded.

In short, tariffs have gone from being a fiscal wall to becoming a geo-economic grammar. It is a system that disciplines, filters and reconfigures global value chains. Its strength lies not in the number that appears in the customs tariff, but in its ability to generate incentives, condition investment and build—or block—strategic alliances.

2 Trump's tariff war (2018-2025)

The so-called 'tariff war' has not been a series of improvised increases and rollbacks, but rather the staging of a new way of exercising economic power. Between 2018 and 2025, Washington turned tariffs into the political arena in which everything else is negotiated. It was not just a matter of taxing imports: access to the US market was redesigned as an 'administered regime', with relief conditional on changes verifiable by the other party. This is the key to understanding the period without repeating what has already been explained in previous sections: rather than recalling the measures or detailing reactions country by country, it is essential to understand the logic established by the White House and the structural effects it leaves behind.

Figure 1. Trump presents his tariff schedule

2.1 From episode to paradigm: three historical moments

Act I (2018-2019): the White House, in the first part of the Trump era, opens the tariff front with China under Section 301 and, almost in parallel, invokes 'national security' to tax metals (Section 232). The message that resonates with partners and rivals alike is less legal than political: tariffs are part of the global negotiation. The partial 'truce' (targeted purchases and promises of reform) reached with Beijing foreshadowed a constant in the cycle: public commitments, uneven compliance and a willingness to reactivate pressure if convenient.

Act II (2020-2023): a new administration, Biden in power, without abandoning the hard line, begins to manage the tension: more product exclusions, more tariff quotas (TRQs) with Europe in the metals sector, more coordination with technological controls in critical sectors (IRA[7]). The tariff is no longer a wall, it is a turnstile: it opens or closes depending on quotas, standards and verification.

Act III (2024-2025): the new and current second Trump era; rivalry with China moves into the 'green' arena (electric vehi-

[7] *Inflation Reduction Act* passed in the United States in August 2022 under the Biden administration, the IRA combines climate, industrial and technological policy, becoming the centrepiece of the US economic security strategy: it seeks not only to decarbonise, but also to attract investment, protect jobs and win the technological race against China and the EU.

cles, batteries, solar energy, critical minerals) and, with Trump's return, the idea of a base tariff as an anchor on which to stack selective surcharges is enshrined (Bown and Irwin, 2019-2020). The novelty of 2025 is not the aggressiveness, but the normalisation of the format: tariffs as state policy that is then 'managed' with lists, quotas and exceptions.

2.2 Pressure architecture: from figures to design

To understand why this policy punishes everyone, we must look beyond the nominal percentage and examine how it is being applied. The White House initially sets a high non-agreement price (the current or threatened tariff) and offers conditional solutions: relief within quotas (TRQ)[8], product/sector exclusions when domestic damage is excessive, stricter rules of origin to relocate value and, where relevant, mutual technical recognition to reduce the cost of double certification. This menu makes it possible to reward certain behaviours—traceability, standards, regulatory cooperation—without giving up coercive leverage.

The result is regulated international trade. Access to the US market is no longer automatic (pure MFN) but has become a series of periodic administrative decisions: who gets into the quota? Which exclusions remain in force? Which parts are considered critical? Data diplomacy—installed capacity, origin, footprint—now carries as much weight as classical diplomacy.

2.3 An analysis of the open fronts

2.3.1 China: from tariffs to targeted decoupling[9]

The front with Beijing made it clear that the objective was not just the trade balance. The combination of tariffs and export controls redesigned the rivalry as a battle for technology, standards and supply chains. In the absence of deglobalisation, there was a reblockade: more purchases from third parties in ASEAN and Mexico, more Chinese investment abroad to maintain access via friendly platforms, and more US surveillance to cut off the transhipment of goods in an attempt to circumvent the rule. What

[8] A tariff rate quota (TRQ) allows a lower tariff to be applied to imports of a given product within a specific quantity and requires a higher tariff on imports exceeding that quantity.

[9] See: Antràs, 2020: 12.

remains structurally is a functional bifurcation: two constellations of rules and verification that force companies and governments to choose (and demonstrate that it was beneficial).

2.3.2 Europe: from clash to conditional access

With the EU, the journey went from initial clash in the metal sector to managed peace: quarterly quotas, 'armoured' lists with no surcharges for sensitive sectors and, when convenient, conditional reductions (as in the automotive sector if there is a change in European legislation). This is not a return to classic free trade; it is coexisting with a base tariff and the (already mentioned) reinforced Section 232, while the costs of compliance with technical agreements are reduced. The relationship works if there is predictability: if there is not, it reverts to the full tariff and possible retaliation.

2.3.3 North America (Canada, Mexico) and the rest of the world

Under the USMCA[10], tariff pressure was combined with new regulations on rules of origin and wage restrictions with the aim of anchoring production in the US. In India and other emerging economies, the effect was more indirect: an opportunity for substitution (China-plus-one) if they could offer reliable compliance in addition to competitive prices. The common thread is that tariffs act as a bargaining chip to negotiate specific changes, not just as a threat.

2.3.4 What changed (and will not return)

A method has been established. The main legacy of the period is not so much the specific percentages applied as the method: tariffs as a starting point, relief as verifiable compensation, and the possibility of retaliation in the event of non-compliance. This method is fuelled by three capabilities controlled by the United States: the administration of quotas and exclusions, coordination with technological controls and sanctions, and measurement (origin, content, emissions) to legitimise its decisions.

[10] USMCA (United States–Mexico–Canada agreement) is the free trade agreement that replaced NAFTA and entered into force on 1 July 2020. This agreement seeks to modernise and improve trade between the three countries by implementing more precise rules in areas such as the automotive industry, agriculture, intellectual property, digital trade, labour and the environment.

The frontier of trade power has been radically altered. The focus is no longer on 'lowering tariffs' but on defining the rules. Whoever sets the standards and compliance certifications decides the playing field. That is why the battle over standards for electric vehicles, batteries, and cybersecurity matters more than a point up or down in the tariff.

Uncertainty has increased. Continuous announcements, changing stages and rectifications generate an invisible tariff: regulatory risk that irreversibly slows investment and forces spending on compliance[11]. Companies with muscle—capable of integrating traceability, a powerful legal department and purchasing volume—gain margin; SMEs and the rest pay the toll.

In short, the 2018-2025 period should not be seen as an anomaly, but as the codification of a new language of commercial power. A new non-military 'hard power'. Tariffs are no longer a number but a procedure: they establish a benchmark, define the outcome, verify compliance and reserve the right to take further action. That procedure—rather than any particular figure—is what will continue to shape US economic policy, specifically tariff policy, and therefore the strategic decisions of those who trade with the US.

3 Tariffs as a tool for political pressure

Under Trump, tariffs ceased to be a simple import tax and became an *instrument of geo-economic coercion*. Their use combined three vectors: a) national security as a legal and narrative basis (Section 232, IEEPA and, in the case of China, Section 301); b) domestic policy, translated into visible benefits for industrial sectors and regions; and c) barter-style negotiation, where tariffs are raised or relaxed to obtain specific concessions.

Since 2025, the tactic has been extended to more sectors and partners, and judicial limits have also been encountered. Tariffs are now understood as a *language of power*, with a subject (the White House), predicates (security, reciprocity, employment) and punctuation (deadlines, quotas, exceptions). Externally, it puts pressure on rivals to extract concessions; internally, it sends signals of protection to key sectors.

[11] A business function that ensures compliance with a set of laws, regulations, and ethical standards applicable to an organisation in order to avoid risks, prevent fraud and corruption, and protect its reputation. It implements internal procedures, controls, and processes to identify, prevent, and manage operational and legal risks, thereby improving corporate integrity and decision-making.

Recent history can be narrated in three scenes. The first extends the concept of security from hard defence to supply chain resilience. Under Section 301, it is deployed against China's 'unfair' practices and, on occasion, even attempted in economic emergencies, although the courts set limits. The second scene is the *domestic dimension*: tariffs benefit a few concentrated sectors, while dispersing costs among millions of consumers. This political asymmetry explains their appeal. The third is the *negotiating table*: tariffs set the price of non-agreement and allow for exchanges—quotas, stricter rules of origin, targeted purchases, or even cooperation on non-trade issues—always under a security narrative.

The mechanics of coercion combine credible signals (tariffs in force or announced), gradual escalations, pressure on transnational sectors, internal divisions through selective exclusions, and the linking of issues. It is often integrated with other levers—export controls, financial sanctions—that reinforce its impact.

The results vary: they work when they translate into regulatory changes or managed arrangements (TRQs with verification)[12], but they fail when they are limited to promises of massive purchases without control mechanisms. The legal element is key: invoking national security or unfair practices is more effective than using general economic emergencies. Partners, in turn, have learned to respond with surgical retaliation, supplier diversification, and litigation in international forums.

In short, 21st century tariffs have moved from classic protectionism to *administrative protectionism*: they do not erect absolute walls but rather filters and access rules verified with data. Their strength lies not in the rate, but in the design of the accompanying mechanism: what is required, how it is verified, and what is granted in return. The debate is no longer whether to support free trade or not, but who controls the grammar of market access.

4 International reactions and the geopolitics of tariffs

4.1 China: counterattack, resilience and normalisation of selective decoupling[13]

The tariff war between the United States and China did not break out suddenly but was the result of discontent that had been brew-

[12] See reference 11.

[13] Readers are advised to read the following IEEE document beforehand: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/la_batalla_por_la_supremacia_tecnologica _2025_dieeea23

ing for years in Washington. In 2018, the White House invoked Section 301 of the Trade Act to sanction what it considered to be systematic practices of intellectual property misappropriation and forced technology transfer by Beijing. What followed was a cascade of measures: tariffs ranging from 7.5% to 25% on more than $350 billion worth of Chinese goods. Beijing responded with equivalent levies, albeit on a smaller volume of imports. As Bown and Irwin point out, this marked 'the first major break in US trade policy since 1930' (Bown and Irwin, 2019).

An attempt at a truce came in 2020 with the so-called 'Phase One' agreement, in which China committed to purchasing an additional $200 billion worth of US goods, but in practice fulfilled only 58% of the agreement. As Evenett and Baldwin point out, the agreement was 'more of a ceasefire than a peace treaty' (Evenett and Baldwin, 2020: 1017-1035).

The arrival of the Biden administration did not mark a return to free trade. In 2024, the Section 301 review further increased the pressure: Chinese electric vehicles were taxed at 100%, along with new tariffs on batteries and solar panels. The logic had changed radically. As Naughton warns, the trade relationship is no longer explained by comparative advantages, but by the 'centrality of national security in the definition of economic policy' (Naughton, 2021).

Figure 2. AP/Susan Walsh

China, for its part, deployed a strategy of intelligent retaliation. In addition to tariffs, it resorted to regulatory measures, blacklists of foreign companies and, above all, its most powerful card: critical minerals. Germanium, gallium and graphite were subject to export controls. As Storz points out, 'the power of strategic raw materials is emerging as an instrument of pressure equivalent to that of missiles or currencies' (Storz, 2023: 557-573).

The economic costs were tangible. Empirical studies show that US consumers absorbed most of the impact, paying higher prices for consumer products and intermediate goods (Amiti *et al*., 2019b: 1793-1849). However, there was no collapse in trade, but rather a diversion of flows: Vietnam, Mexico and the European Union gained market share, with Mexico even overtaking China as the United States' largest trading partner. This was an apparent victory, as a large part of these exports are relabelled Chinese goods.

The war soon went beyond tariffs. Washington restricted China's access to advanced semiconductors, while Beijing threatened to cut off the supply of rare earths. As Baldwin summarises, 'we have moved from the era of globalisation to the era of geo-economic rivalry' (Baldwin, 2020).

In this context, China's response has been twofold: to retaliate when appropriate—with mirror tariffs, anti-dumping investigations, and measures on subsidies—and, above all, to absorb the shock by reconfiguring its development strategy to reduce vulnerabilities. This second move, less visible but more profound, is articulated along three axes:

a) Import substitution and 'dual circulation'. Beijing has accelerated its technological autonomy agenda through tax incentives, preferential financing, public procurement and the development of its own standards in mid-range semiconductors, industrial equipment, batteries and renewable energies. The aim is not to isolate itself, but to exchange dependencies: giving up part of its access to the US market in exchange for dominating critical links and expanding its presence in ASEAN, Africa, MENA and Latin America. The discourse of 'dual circulation'—simultaneously stimulating domestic demand and non-Western external chains—is the conceptual framework for this shift.
b) Geopolitics of diversion and legal triangulation. In the short term, part of the affected trade is migrating to bridge

platforms such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Mexico, where Chinese companies are investing to assemble and relabel with greater local added value. The risk of 'transhipment'—reshipping with minimal processing—has forced the US to strengthen origin verification (melted & poured rules for metals[14]; traceability for solar panels and batteries) and to strengthen customs cooperation with third countries. China, for its part, legalises this triangulation through foreign investment, which allows it to formally comply with the rules and maintain access, even with narrower margins.

c) Counterweight levers outside tariffs. Where tariffs can cause the most damage, Beijing is exploring alternative tools: restrictions on exports of materials and precursors, stricter regulatory inspections of foreign subsidiaries, cybersecurity requirements, and financial incentives to retain industries with sensitive know-how. At the same time, it is promoting alternative standards in fields such as connected vehicles, 5G/6G and the industrial Internet of Things (IoT) and seeks to institutionalise them through regional forums and bilateral agreements, thereby building structural power without direct confrontation.

4.2 Geopolitical implications

The tariff standoff is accelerating a functional bifurcation: it is not 'deglobalisation', but rather a reblocking around two major constellations of standards and verification. Interdependence remains (many Western firms are still in China), but in a different way: more licences, more traceability, more compliance. In this context, China prioritises continuing to produce a lot and cheaply, controlling certain products (critical minerals, chemical precursors) and its own standards, and accepts lower margins in markets with barriers. A pragmatic approach.

But the capacity to absorb sanctions and tariffs is not infinite: simultaneous pressure on technology, finance and logistics can strangle sectors; leverage via third countries reaches its limits if

[14] A specific criterion of origin in the metal trade, widely used in the US and in trade agreements. For steel (or other metals) to be considered as originating in a country, it is not enough for it to have been rolled, cut or processed there. It must have been melted and poured into ingots or primary forms in that territory.

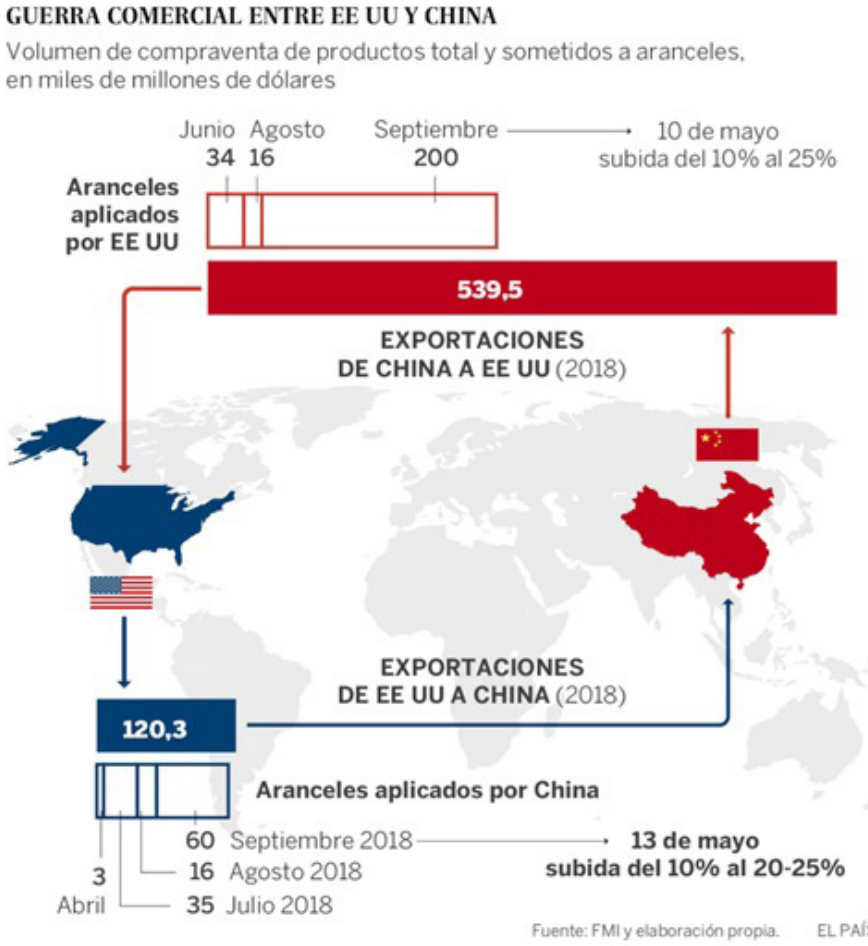

Figure 3. Trade and tariffs between the U.S. and China

the US and the EU tighten verification, and Chinese domestic policy does not always reward visible concessions on sensitive issues (e.g., data, chemical precursors), making 'clean' exits difficult in the short term. Even so, industrial inertia and scale remain decisive advantages.

4.3 European Union: from litigation to management with 'open strategic autonomy'

Europe moved from challenging US tariffs at the WTO to managing them pragmatically, using instruments that now define its trade policy. The guiding principle is open strategic autonomy:

protecting critical capabilities and ensuring resilience without giving up openness (European Commission, 2021).

The first step was to transform the clash into a bilateral agreement. After the 25% and 10% tariffs applied to steel and aluminium under Section 232, Brussels accepted a tariff rate quota (TRQ) system: free access within historical quotas and full tariffs outside them. In 2025, when Washington raised tariffs on metals to 50% and extended their scope to copper, parts and even cars, the EU negotiated a 'conditional peace': flat tariffs of 15% for most goods, reinforced TRQs on metals, a transatlantic alliance against Chinese overcapacity, 'armoured' MFN product lists—aeronautics, generic pharmaceuticals, cork—and more mutual technical recognition in sensitive sectors. The message was clear: less litigation, more shared and verifiable rules.

The projection of power via regulations became the second lever. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)[15] forced the internalisation of the price of CO_2 in carbon-intensive imports; the Net-Zero Industry Act[16] and the Critical Raw Materials Act[17] underpinned strategic chains and reduced dependencies—on China for renewables and rare earths, and on Russia for fossil fuels. The triad transformed climate policy into industrial policy and erected a light defence against third parties: complying with the standard opens the door, ignoring it means paying (Mehling *et al*., 2019).

In parallel, Brussels developed its own geo-economic toolbox. The Anti-Coercion Instrument[18] allows it to respond to economic pressure from states, while investment control and technology screening add security in sensitive sectors. These mechanisms are not as eye-catching as those of the United States, but they gain capacity and effectiveness as they are applied (Leino-Sandberg and Niemann, 2023).

The fourth dimension is the strategy with third countries. With Latin America and Africa, the EU offers regulatory access con-

[15] The CBAM addresses the risk of carbon leakage that occurs when, due to costs arising from climate policies, companies in certain industrial sectors or subsectors relocate their production to other countries, or when imports from these countries replace equivalent products that are less intensive in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

[16] See: Net-Zero Industry Act - European Commission

[17] See: European Critical Raw Materials Act - European Commission

[18] See: Anti-coercion instrument: the EU's new weapon to protect trade | Topics | European Parliament

ditional on compliance with European standards, together with investment packages through the Global Gateway, in competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, it is reopening modernised agreements with Mercosur, Chile and Mexico, which incorporate environmental chapters and commitments on critical minerals (Ayuso and Gratius, 2023).

Overall, the Union is moving towards operational rather than judicial multilateralism: executive arrangements such as TRQs, exporting standards via CBAM, calibrated trade defence and increasing technical cooperation. The aim is not to replicate the United States' 'base tariff' policy, but to reduce vulnerabilities and make compliance cheaper wherever possible, maintaining the transatlantic relationship without giving up its autonomy (Tocci, 2021).

4.4 India, Latin America and other emerging economies: substitution platforms and the race for compliance

This diverse group shares a strategic opportunity: to become substitution platforms under the China-plus-one logic[19]. The challenge is not only labour costs, but also regulatory compliance capacity, logistics and institutional stability.

India has used high internal tariffs and production-linked incentives (PLI) to support sectors such as electronics and pharmaceuticals. The global shift has positioned it as an alternative to China, especially for the US and the EU. Its challenge is to demonstrate reliability in traceability, rules of origin and overcoming digital customs. If it succeeds, it will move from assembler to structural supplier.

ASEAN (Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand) is already attracting investment diverted from China, but its future will depend on certifying origin and avoiding transhipments. The first to invest in interoperable traceability will be the winners.

Mexico and Canada are taking advantage of the USMCA as a highway to the US, albeit with tolls: strict rules of origin, labour clauses and customs controls. Mexico must improve in terms of added value; Canada must capitalise on its niches in critical minerals and aerospace.

[19] The supply chain management strategy of maintaining a productive presence in China, but at the same time diversifying some production or sourcing to at least one additional country.

Andean and southern Latin America offers lithium and copper, with the potential to advance in refining and domestic production if it secures regulatory frameworks and technology transfer. The European CBAM will force countries to anticipate carbon footprints.

The Middle East and Africa are seeking long-term contracts in green metals, hydrogen and advanced petrochemicals. The AfCFTA[20] could convert resources into industrial implementation if it improves governance and the opening of logistics corridors.

Japan, Korea and the United Kingdom adopt derisking strategies[21] alongside Washington, maintaining ties with China. Japan and Korea control intermediate technologies but are under price pressure; the United Kingdom is exploring bilateral agreements and specialisation in services, with the scope still uncertain.

5 Medium-term economic and strategic impacts

Tariff policy turned into a geo-economic weapon not only alters prices and quantities: it redefines the incentives of companies and governments. Its impact is projected on three levels: the real economy—prices, investment, employment —; the architecture of value chains—traceability, rules of origin, standards—; and the configuration of power—who dictates and verifies the rules.

In terms of prices, tariffs on critical inputs act as a wedge: they make imported goods more expensive, raise the price of local substitutes, and put pressure on intermediate users. Demand tends to be inelastic in the short term, which increases price transmission. Over time, companies redesign suppliers and components, but at the cost of new certifications and compliance systems that reduce regulatory risks, even if they do not increase productivity. The aggregate balance is negative, although it can be masked by temporary revenue or income from protected sectors.

Investment depends less on the size of the tariff than on its credibility. Where protection is perceived as stable and administered with clear rules, expansion or traceability projects emerge. In uncertain environments— discretionary exclusions,

[20] African Continental Free Trade Area.

[21] The economic and geopolitical strategy of reducing exposure to a country, sector or supplier considered risky, without necessarily cutting ties. Unlike decoupling, which involves breaking ties, *derisking* seeks to manage dependencies selectively.

escalating threats—capital retreats or migrates to 'friendly' jurisdictions. Hence the rise of 'friendshoring' and 'nearshoring': not deglobalisation, but a reblocking of trade around trusted administrations.

Compliance becomes a factor of competitiveness. Material passports, audits, rules of origin and recognition agreements favour large companies with strong legal teams and penalise SMEs. Competing is no longer just about producing cheaply and well, but about proving it in real time with documentation.

At the macro level, tariffs add selective inflationary friction. They do not trigger the general index, but they do make durable goods and equipment more expensive. Combined with industrial subsidies, they raise costs and delay projects. In terms of business margins, firms with sufficient resources absorb or pass on the cost; those less capable of stockpiling see their profitability squeezed. In terms of employment, jobs are created in protected sectors and lost in those dependent on more expensive products.

The technological dimension amplifies these trends. Tariffs coexist with export controls and sanctions that fragment ecosystems in semiconductors, batteries and renewables. Power is concentrated in those who impose standards and verify compliance. Without a standardisation strategy, tariffs become a punishment that encourages tax evasion; with it, they become a belt that forces alignment.

Enforcement is crucial: very high differentials encourage transhipment and relabelling; those affected respond with content rules, customs cooperation and digitalisation. Investing in smart customs and traceability provides an advantage not through protectionism, but through regulatory reputation.

Regionally, the US capitalises on its status as an anchor market, albeit at the cost of higher prices and additional subsidies. Europe manages a 'conditional peace': base tariffs, quotas and new instruments such as carbon border adjustment. China compensates with diversification towards Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, promoting alternative standards. India is establishing itself as a replacement platform if it achieves administrative stability. Latin America is gaining ground in green raw materials and light manufacturing, although it risks being left with assembly without demanding technology transfer.

The institutional framework has shifted: the blockade of the WTO Appellate Body has not emptied the system, but it has shifted its focus to lists, quotas and technical panels. Whoever controls data on capacity, subsidies or origin and shares it credibly will shape governance.

Looking ahead, the risks are clear: legal disputes, energy shocks, logistical bottlenecks or electoral cycles that alter the appetite for concessions or retaliation. For governments, the rational approach is to convert coercion into predictable rules, make protection conditional on productivity and reinforce standards diplomacy. For companies, it is to diversify suppliers, shield contracts and adapt rules of origin.

In short, tariffs are here to stay, but their real impact lies not in the percentage applied, but in the quality of the regulatory grammar that accompanies them. That grammar—made up of data, verification, and administration—is today the frontier where competitiveness is defined and, with it, the geopolitics of trade.

Conclusions

Between 2018 and 2025, tariffs went from being a fiscal or protectionist instrument to becoming a *central geo-economic* lever, integrated into a broader set of security narratives, technological controls, sanctions and technical agreements. As a result, international trade ceased to be governed by automatic multilateralism and moved to a *managed and political* model based on clauses, metrics and verifications.

Tariffs are effective not because of their magnitude, but because of the *quality of the exchange*: they work when there are clear exit conditions, verifiable relief and automatic return mechanisms. Where they generate stricter rules of origin or operational tariff quotas, they produce tangible results; on the other hand, promises of massive purchases offer limited effects.

Legally, Section 232 (national security) has established itself as the most solid basis; Section 301 continues to focus on China, while the use of the IEEPA faces complicated legal challenges. This concentrates coercion on 'securitised' sectors such as metals, automotive and critical technologies.

Economically, the costs of tariffs are spread among consumers, while the benefits are concentrated in strategic sectors with

political profitability. This asymmetry sustains the instrument, although it generates *regulatory rents* (exclusions, quotas) and requires compensatory policies for the sectors affected.

In terms of value chains, there is no evidence of deglobalisation, but rather a reblocking around friendshoring[22] and nearshoring[23] strategies. Competitiveness increasingly depends on *compliance and traceability*, which favours large integrators over SMEs. The technological dimension reinforces this logic, with the *standardisation of standards* created as a true axis of power.

In practice, Europe has moved from litigation to *technical management* of pressure (TRQs, armoured lists, CBAM, technical agreements), while China diversifies markets and creates its own standards; India emerges as a replacement platform and Latin America faces the dilemma of creating *added value or focusing on being the assembly platform for others*.

The governance of the system has shifted from the WTO to *executive arrangements and technical verification*: quotas, lists, panels and material certifications. Power is concentrated in those who control data, standards and verification capacity.

In short, the debate is no longer about how much tariffs will rise, but *who controls the regulatory grammar that accompanies them*. That governance—based on data, verification, and administration—is now the new frontier of trade geopolitics.

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[22] The practice of moving or redirecting supply chains to countries considered political allies or strategic partners, with which values or geopolitical interests are shared, in order to reduce the risks of dependence on rivals.

[23] The business and political strategy of relocating part of production or supply chains to countries geographically close to the end consumer market.

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Chapter Two

The war in Ukraine (October 2024 – September 2025). Attrition, resistance and stalemate on the threshold of its fourth winter

Ignacio Fuente Cobo

Executive summary

The war in Ukraine is transforming the nature of modern warfare, and its effects at the strategic, operational and tactical levels will profoundly affect future conflicts. At the time of writing, in September 2025, the war remains politically and militarily deadlocked, marked by a lack of progress in the peace process, the transformation of the front line due to the use of new technologies, the difficulty of carrying out decisive offensive actions, and the difficulty of reconciling the positions of combatants who seem to have concluded that they can achieve better results on the battlefield than at the negotiating table.

As it enters its fifth year, the unresolved military situation and irreconcilable positions mean that there is no real willingness for dialogue to end a war in Ukraine that is in danger of becoming, contrary to Clausewitz, an end in itself rather than a means to achieve a political objective. At this point, it is unclear how the conflict in Ukraine will end and whether Moscow will ultimately achieve its objectives, but there is concern that Europe has not experienced such dangerous times since the end of the Cold War.

The behaviour of a revisionist power such as Russia, which believes that the only adequate level of security is to be dominant in the geographical areas surrounding it, leads Europe to believe that the war could spread and end up spilling over Ukraine's borders. The negative outlook for the conflict reinforces the tendency towards pessimism about its outcome and increases the fear of being involved in the war among European societies that have been accustomed to living in peace for generations. It is to be hoped that, in the end, all the actors involved in the conflict will adopt a pragmatic position and accept that prevention is always better than cure, and negotiation better than combat. We must trust that, in a Europe that seems headed for war, sanity will prevail over recklessness.

Key words

War, Ukraine, Stagnation, Wear and tear, Drones.

Introduction

At the end of 2024, the war in Ukraine was coming to the end of its third year since the Russian invasion began in February 2022, with no sign of it ending soon. The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation had remained on the offensive throughout the year, but with limited objectives and a cautious approach to minimise their losses. The Russians seemed to have adapted to the demands of modern warfare and, with the fall of Avdiivka in February, achieved their fifth victory in just two years (after Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Lyssytchansk and Bajmut).

The offensive sequence that began with the conquest of Avdiivka in February 2024 had not reached its climax but continued unabated, although the advances of their troops in the Donbas region were marginal due to the growing drone warfare that had become the differentiating factor on the battlefields.

Despite its slow progress, Russia was, at that time, in a favourable military position. Using a 'salami' tactic, with minimal but cumulative advances by its troops, the Russians had been able to maintain their offensive potential, and even increase it as the war progressed, despite the enormous losses suffered. The Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, was confident of maintaining the initiative as his troops carried out offensives along the entire front, despite the considerable Western military aid received by Ukraine from more than thirty countries, with the most significant contributions coming from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, France and Denmark (EFE, 2024).

This confidence was based on the fact that the Russian army had been strengthened in terms of troop numbers and weaponry, so that while in March 2022 it had 130,000 soldiers and 1,800 tanks in the area of operations, by early 2025 this number had increased to 650,000 soldiers and 3,400 tanks[1]. In addition, supplies of artillery ammunition, loitering munitions and ballistic missiles from Iran and North Korea were enabling it to reinforce its combat capability, despite human and material losses, thereby accentuating its military advantage.

Russian military successes in the Battle of Bakhmut in 2023 and the capture of Avdiivka in March 2024, achieved at a huge cost

[1] Data provided to the author during his visit to Ukraine in February 2025.

in human lives, placed Russian President Vladimir Putin in an advantageous position in any peace negotiations, which meant that Russia was only willing to accept ceasefire terms that were close to capitulation. The military strategy of attrition, which consisted of maximising enemy casualties, even at the cost of even greater losses on its own side, was something that Russia, with its larger population and economic and military resources, could afford, but Ukraine could not.

Similarly, Moscow had adapted its economy to the war effort in previous years, so it could limit the sacrifices demanded of its population. With total military spending accounting for a third of its national budget, GDP growth of 4.1% in 2024 and inflation contained at less than 10%, Russia seemed capable of meeting the needs of its population while simultaneously supplying its armed forces with personnel and equipment. Under these conditions, Moscow understood that it could rely on its greater human and material potential to bleed Ukraine dry until it surrendered. The Russian president did not seem to be in any hurry to negotiate, at least as long as he could maintain the pace of operations and survive the embargo and Western support for Kiev.

This position of 'strategic comfort' was evident in the peace negotiations in Istanbul in May 2025, when Russian negotiator Vladimir Medinski addressed his Ukrainian counterparts in a manner as pragmatic as it was cynical, saying: 'We do not want war, but we are ready to fight for one, two, three years, as long as necessary. We fought Sweden for twenty-one years between 1700 and 1721, under Peter the Great. How long are you prepared to fight?' (Dupont, 2025).

1 Ukraine in a difficult but not tragic situation

But not everything was favourable to Moscow. Russian optimism about rapid progress, especially in the central sector of the broad front stretching over 1,200 kilometres from the Belarusian border to the Black Sea, was exaggerated. Ukraine was tenaciously resisting military pressure and, although its armed forces had serious mobilisation difficulties and, consequently, few reserves, it had been able to minimise the Russian advance with Western military aid and an exponential increase in advanced weapons such as drones. Despite the difficulty, Ukraine remained committed to total resistance and sought opportunities to shift the bal-

ance through surprise incursions that would allow it to maximise international support.

The most significant of these Ukrainian incursions took place in the Russian oblast of Kursk in early August 2024. The capture of territory in a Russian region introduced a new dynamic to the conflict, as, for the first time, the war had moved into territory internationally recognised as Russian. Although the Ukrainian authorities claimed that the operation in Kursk was launched primarily to prevent a Russian incursion into the Sumy Oblast, the reason was more political than military and was more likely to be the need to give Kiev leverage to negotiate with Moscow during future diplomatic talks.

However, taking advantage of the situation in Kursk proved much more complicated for Ukraine than it had initially thought. Despite efforts to prevent it, by the end of 2024, Russia had been able to recover almost half of the territory taken by the Ukrainians, and everything suggested that the rest of the Kursk territory would soon fall into Russian hands. In addition, in order to carry out this operation, the Ukrainian army had to withdraw a considerable number of troops from Donetsk, where Russian forces were advancing, leading to a deterioration of the situation in this sector in the weeks and months following the start of the Ukrainian operation in Kursk (Martínez, 2025).

Thus, by the end of 2024, the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia was approximately 18.14% of the country's total area, equivalent to some 109,000 km². This meant that, despite the fierce fighting that had taken place that year, Russia had conquered 3,200 km² of Ukrainian territory, a negligible increase of only 0.54% compared to the beginning of 2024, with the pace of advance slowing to a near standstill in December. This control was mainly concentrated in the eastern regions of Ukraine, such as Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia (Le Grand Continent, 2025a). At this rate, it would take Russia more than two years (around twenty-six months) to completely occupy the rest of the territory still controlled by Ukraine in this region (Le Grand Continent, 2025b).

But Ukraine's biggest problem lay in the difficulties in recruiting, retaining and rotating its troops, as well as in the poor coordination between the General Staff and the operational army. If it wanted to recover the territory in Russian hands, Ukraine needed more soldiers, better training for its troops and a more

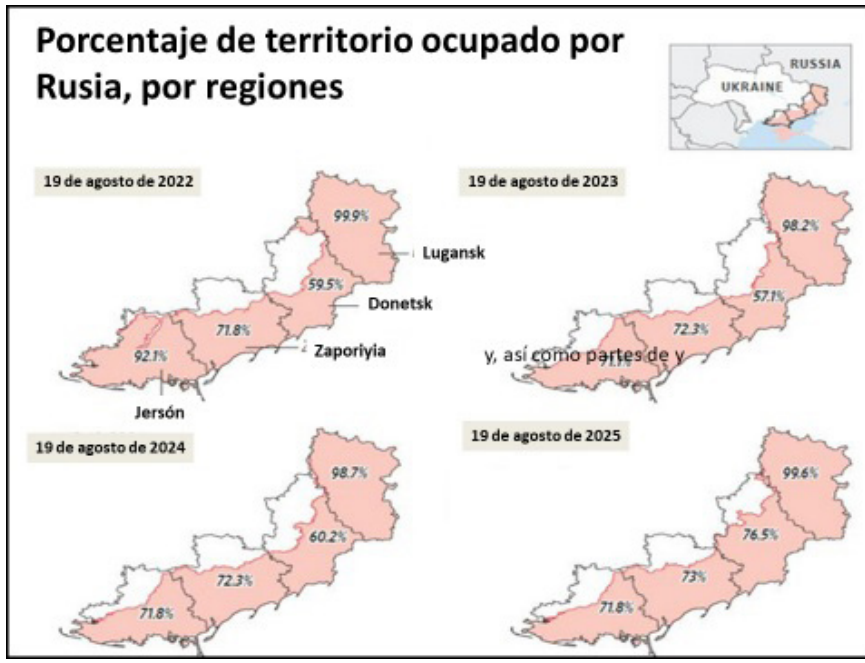

Figure 1. Source: Prepared by the author based on Le Grand Continent. (January 9, 2025)

realistic expectation of its operational capabilities on the part of its General Staff. The most credible estimates indicated that Kiev needed to recruit 160,000 soldiers to staff its approximately 110 brigades, organised into 18 army corps, in order to achieve an 85% personnel coverage rate (Independent, 2025).

Although the United States had tried to convince Zelensky to lower the recruitment age from twenty-five to eighteen, the Ukrainian president resisted this measure in the hope of preserving future generations in a country undergoing a tragic demographic decline. But beyond political considerations, the reality was more complicated. d conditions at the front had become extremely difficult, with soldiers fighting for years without rotation, having to endure a slow but steady advance by Russian forces and suffering enormous losses, which acted as a significant disincentive to enlist.

Weariness with the war and the population's despair at the lack of positive results on the battlefronts had made military recruiters very unpopular figures. Videos on social media, showing men screaming as they were dragged through the streets by officers who had raided restaurants and bars in search of those who had

not enlisted, only made the situation worse. Even Ukraine's former military commander-in-chief, the popular General Valery Zaluzhnyi, had publicly denounced this in December 2023, which led to his resignation under suspicious circumstances (El Mundo, 2024).

2 The new American presidency. A change in the rules of the game?

At the beginning of the year, European foreign ministries pinned their hopes for ending the war on the new US president, Republican Donald Trump, who had just won the November elections by a landslide and had repeatedly promised in 2023 and 2024 a new diplomatic effort that would end the war in Ukraine in 'a matter of 24 hours'. (BBC Mundo, 2025).

The arrival of President Trump's new administration meant that the United States faced several major challenges in relation to Ukraine, which, according to Michael Kofman of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, could be summarised as follows. 'First, they will inherit a war with a very negative trajectory, without much time to stabilise the situation'. 'Second, they will inherit it without a clear theory of success' (Kofman and Evans, 2024).

Without a clear vision of how the United States could force an end to the war, US President Trump's attitude towards Russia and his position on the war in Ukraine has always been controversial. Although he has always been critical of it and has even stated that, if he had been president, this war would never have happened, Trump has shown an ambivalent view of the Russian president. During the presidential campaign, he repeatedly praised Putin, even calling him a 'genius' when he was preparing to invade Ukraine in 2022, for positioning himself militarily in a situation where Russia could seize large swathes of territory by taking a hard line (Travis and Sexton, 2025).

American ambiguity about the continuation of the war and the support that the United States should provide to Ukraine favoured Russian positions on what the final outcome of the war should be. These had been set out in a speech delivered on 14 June 2024 (Seddon and Schwartz, 2025) by Russian President Vladimir Putin, when he expressed his willingness to consider a ceasefire, but only if a series of tough conditions for Ukraine

were met. These were basically: first, the recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia—in addition to Crimea—which included the total withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from these territories annexed by Russia after 2022. Moscow demanded that Ukraine accept the 'new territorial realities', i.e. the annexation of these regions by Russia.

Secondly, Moscow demanded Ukraine's permanent neutrality, with an explicit renunciation of NATO membership, which was to be accompanied by guarantees that Ukraine would never join the Western political-military alliance. Thirdly, an end to foreign military aid and a significant reduction in the Ukrainian army. In addition, Russia rejected any European military deployment on Ukrainian territory, even under the label of 'peacekeeping forces'. Finally, the lifting of economic sanctions imposed since 2022, many of them from Europe, before considering any possibility of achieving a lasting peace.

As for the provinces of Kharkiv and Odessa, also the object of Russian aspirations, President Putin suggested that their status should be decided in the future by referendum and trusted that their Russian-speaking majority populations would opt for incorporation into Russia. In any case, the immediate core of the conditions for a ceasefire centred on Ukraine's acceptance of the incorporation into Russia of the territories already occupied and annexed (Le Grand Continent, 2024a).

From the outset, both Ukraine and its European allies considered Russia's demands for a possible ceasefire unacceptable, as the formal transfer of sovereignty would imply acceptance of Russia's *de facto* victory, as well as a serious violation of international law and Ukrainian territorial integrity. Kyiv and most Western governments understood that such Russian proposals amounted to an ultimatum—not real negotiations—and perpetuated the logic of force over international law. As Ukrainian presidential adviser Mikhailo Podoliak indicated on his social media account, the Kremlin leader's offer was not a 'peace proposal' but 'the standard package (of demands) from the aggressor that we have heard many times before' (Huffington Post Spain, 2024).

But the Americans had a different view. The Trump administration's position on the need to negotiate an 'early resolution' to the war in Ukraine involved the 'incorporation of Donbas into Russia' and 'international recognition of Crimea as Russian territory'

(Castaño, 2025), very much in line with the approaches advocated by Putin, who did not hesitate to support the Republican's election campaign using all the resources at his disposal. More than personal or ideological affinity, the Russian leader's attitude was simply pragmatic, as Putin saw Trump as pursuing a US policy more favourable to Russian interests (Le Grand Continent, 2024b).

3 Zelensky, an uncomfortable president for the Trump administration

Trump had always been very critical of the aid granted by the Biden administration to Ukraine, and ironically described Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelensky as 'a great businessman', to whom 'we have given hundreds of billions of dollars; every time he comes to Washington, he takes money' (Newtral.es, 2025). This critical attitude of the new administration towards the Ukrainian leadership resulted in the temporary suspension of all military aid to Ukraine until the Kiev government 'demonstrates a commitment to peace in good faith'. The blockade affected US military equipment outside Ukraine, including weapons being transported by plane and ship, or waiting in transit zones in Poland, which, for Ukraine, was equivalent to the collapse of a vital artery for keeping its army alive (BBC News, 2025b).

But the climax of the disagreement between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky took place during a tense conversation between the two leaders at the White House in February 2025, when the US president reproached the Ukrainian for 'playing with the lives of millions of people right now. You are playing with World War III. What you are doing is disrespectful to this country, the country that has supported you much more than many said it should'. On this occasion, Trump reminded the Ukrainian that 'if you didn't have our weapons, this war would have been over in two weeks' (Davies, 2025).

After this harsh encounter, it seemed that relations between the two sides were broken. However, the US administration's position changed as its inability to stop the war became apparent. In a post on his social media platform, Truth Social, Trump said that Putin has 'love' for the Russian people and claimed to have a 'good relationship' with him, before issuing a serious warning: 'stop this ridiculous war! It's only going to get worse. If we don't reach an "agreement", and soon, I have no choice but to impose

high taxes, tariffs and sanctions on anything sold by Russia to the United States and several other participating countries' (BBC News, 2025a).

This threat was primarily aimed at public opinion and the foreign ministries of his Western allies to convince them that the United States was taking action. But these were rhetorical statements with little chance of becoming effective measures. In reality, it was unclear what further restrictions Trump could impose on Russia, already the most sanctioned country in the world with very few key entities or sectors not subject to US and European restrictions. Furthermore, there were serious doubts about the effectiveness of the sanctions regime and the need to tighten it or complement it with other measures. Russia had managed to sustain its economy by relying on oil and gas sales in international markets, while Russian banks and military industry companies had adapted quite well to existing sanctions and developed ingenious solutions to circumvent them (Semple, 2025).

This was understood by the Russian authorities, and it was Russia's deputy ambassador to the UN, Dimitri Polyanskiy, who responded to the US president by saying that the Kremlin would need to know what agreement Trump would want to end the war before Moscow could accept it. For Russia,

'it is not simply a question of ending the war. First and foremost, it is a question of addressing the root causes of the Ukrainian crisis. We have to see what "agreement" means in President Trump's reasoning. He is not responsible for what the United States has been doing in Ukraine since 2014, turning it into an anti-Russian country and arming it for war with us, but it is now in his power to stop this perverse policy' (Reuters, 2025).

The ambassador was referring to the billions of dollars in economic and military aid that the United States had been providing to Volodymyr Zelensky's government.

The lack of practical results from the US's verbal pressure led the White House to announce what appeared to be a strategic shift in the war in Ukraine. On 14 July 2025, Trump hardened his stance with the threat of new economic sanctions and a package of advanced weapons for Kiev if Moscow did not agree to negotiate within fifty days. This $10 billion military aid package included Patriot missiles, air defence systems and artillery. The delivery would be made through sales to NATO member countries, which would in turn transfer the military equipment to Kiev.

The package could also include authorisation for Ukraine to use its eighteen ATACMS missiles with a range of three hundred kilometres against targets inside Russia. The possibility of sending Tomahawk cruise missiles capable of reaching Moscow and St Petersburg was also considered, which, if it were to happen, would definitively settle the political and military debate on the supply of advanced weaponry to Ukraine in previous years. Until then, every time the permitted range of these missiles was extended, Russian forces moved their aircraft and equipment beyond Ukraine's range, limiting the effectiveness of the attacks. With the possible authorisation to use ATACMS at their maximum range, this evasion strategy by Russia would be limited, allowing Ukraine to carry out deeper strikes into Russian territory (Defence News, 2024).

This highlighted the growing American frustration with the Russian president, a result of the US president's illness, who initially thought it would be easy to convince Putin to end the war. The conclusion reached was that the only way to achieve peace was to significantly increase the cost to Russia of continuing the conflict. As Ignatius stated in the *Washington Post*, 'Trump is playing hardball with Putin. He is angry' (Ignatius, 2025).

But beyond emotional issues, this change in the US position was based on a clear strategic logic based on the principle of 'escalate to de-escalate', which consisted of increasing military and economic pressure on Russia to force a negotiation. According to this logic, Trump's decision to intensify pressure on Russia sought to address three main issues: first, to force Putin to take him seriously by ceasing to feign his willingness to negotiate peace while ignoring Washington's calls for a ceasefire. Secondly, Trump had become convinced of the usefulness of force as a deterrent after the experience in Iran, where the effectiveness of US military power and military was demonstrated with the use of B-2 bombers and Tomahawk missiles against its territory. Finally, there was the conviction that Putin would only agree to negotiate if he faced a credible threat of having to confront greater military force (Infobae, 2025).

This new high-risk strategy by the Trump administration was initially successful in August 2025, bringing Russia to the negotiating table in Alaska, but it also highlighted the possibility of further escalation in the conflict. Proof of the risks taken by the US administration is the fact that Dmitry Medvedev, the bellicose deputy chairman of the Security Council and former presi-

dent of Russia, warned of an escalation towards nuclear war with the United States in response to President Trump's ultimatum to 'end the war in 50 days' or face severe sanctions. Medvedev's description of this threat as a 'step towards war' seemed to refer, within a dangerous 'dialectical game of ultimatums', to Russia's semi-automatic nuclear retaliation system 'Dead Hand', which guarantees Russia the ability to launch a nuclear retaliatory strike if its submarines and other strategic centres—including its political and military leadership—were to be destroyed (Lowther and McGiffin, 2024).

The risks of escalation of this strategy based on incremental tension management became apparent when Trump ordered the deployment of two nuclear submarines in areas close to Russia on 1 August 2025 as a preventive measure against what he considered to be Medvedev's 'reckless and inflammatory statements' (El País, 2025). In short, tensions between Russia and the United States materialised in a series of tit-for-tat responses, with the United States deploying strategic nuclear forces and Russia warning of the gravity of the nuclear situation, raising the risk of nuclear war if the confrontation continued to escalate. When Trump was asked at a meeting in the Oval Office how far he would be willing to go if Putin decided to intensify the confrontation, his response was, 'Don't ask me a question like that, "how far?" I just want the war to be resolved' (Infobae, 2025).

4 Is peace possible? A political decision

Clausewitz said that politics is the guiding intelligence and war is only its instrument. Any solution to the Ukrainian conflict will always be at the political level, so that the more intense the war, the more intense the negotiations for its conclusion will be. On 15 August 2025, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump met at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska, a former US military surveillance facility from the Cold War. It was the first face-to-face meeting between the two leaders since Trump's return to the US presidency.

The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the war in Ukraine and seek progress towards peace. But the two leaders differed on how to achieve this. While Trump aspired to achieve a ceasefire, Putin sought to break Russia's diplomatic isolation and bring Moscow and Washington closer together on trade issues. The meeting, described as 'cordial but distant' (Segura, 2025),

reflected the structural mistrust between Moscow and Washington and ended in complete failure. No concrete agreement or significant progress was achieved, nor was any ceasefire in Ukraine announced.

But for Putin, it was a clear political and diplomatic victory, as he not only regained lost legitimacy, but also controlled the agenda, set the timing and limits of the discussion, and resisted pressure from an American president whom the press described as 'frustrated', 'less dominant' and 'bewildered' by his behaviour during the meeting (Bilazi, 2025). By refusing to give ground on sensitive issues such as Ukraine (Latorre, 2025), Russia reappeared on the international stage as a major power, which was exactly what it wanted.

In short, the summit was symbolic and media-oriented and ended without a substantial agreement on Ukraine, beyond a declaration of goodwill to continue talks in the future. It is not surprising that Ukrainian sources claimed that Russia had used the Alaska Summit on 15 August to, among other things, 'play for time' before a potential Russian offensive in the autumn of 2025, which would allow them to take control of the rest of the Donetsk province that they did not control before 31 December 2025 (Slattery *et al*., 2025).

On the Monday following the Alaska summit, an urgent and unusual meeting took place at the White House between Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky, and European leaders—Keir Starmer (United Kingdom), Emmanuel Macron (France), Friedrich Merz (Germany), Giorgia Meloni (Italy), and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, as well as NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte.

Although many European leaders publicly praised Trump to encourage his involvement, they all wanted to ensure that no peace agreement would jeopardise Europe's future or Ukraine's security (Gómez, 2025). Accompanying Zelensky at the meeting with Trump, they sought to present a united front of support for Ukraine with which to directly influence negotiations on the future of the conflict and the achievement of security guarantees similar to NATO's Article 5, as well as to try to contain possible territorial concessions demanded by Moscow (RTVE, 2025). The Europeans' fear was that the peace process would be limited to an agreement between the United States and Russia, without taking into account Ukraine's demands and security or European interests.

It was therefore essential to make it clear that Ukraine was not negotiating in isolation and that European stability depended on the guarantees given to Kyiv.

Beyond appearances, the tour was a lifeline for Kyiv at a particularly difficult time in the military operations, when, amid heavy Ukrainian casualties and a scenario marked by war fatigue with winter just around the corner, Ukraine's resilience could be seriously compromised (Scarpellini, 2025). Sensitive issues such as Russia's territorial demands (Donbas) and Ukraine's non-membership of NATO, which was the fundamental objective of Russia's claims, were addressed.

But before addressing this thorny issue, other aspects had to be resolved, such as security guarantees for Ukraine, progress towards a possible trilateral meeting with Putin, and the conditions for an eventual ceasefire or peace agreement. Trump expressed his intention to organise a meeting between Putin and Zelensky in the near future to discuss these issues, followed by a possible trilateral summit, which would also be attended by Zelensky. The Ukrainian president expressed his willingness to participate in these talks, while European leaders emphasised the need to guarantee security and stability for Ukraine and the region (Colas, 2025).

For Kiev, the visit to Washington came as a relief amid an increasingly unfavourable military and politically hopeless situation, in which Putin had made it clear that he did not intend to back down from his strategic objectives, even if the conflict dragged on for years (Knight, 2025). However, although the meeting raised certain expectations in the search for a negotiated solution that seemed to involve 'territory for peace with guarantees', numerous questions remained unresolved.

5 The 'Coalition of Volunteers'. A solution for Ukraine?

The negotiations between the United States and Russia were not the only political and diplomatic response to the war in the face of possible peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. To prevent Ukraine from being left alone, on 17 February 2025, following an initial meeting, French President Emmanuel Macron took the initiative to create the so-called 'Coalition of Volunteers for Ukraine'. Shortly afterwards, on 2 March 2025, a second meeting was held in London, organised by British Prime Minister

Keir Starmer, where the formation of this coalition was publicly announced. The 'Coalition of Volunteers for Ukraine' was finally established as a flexible and operational international alliance of some thirty-five countries, mainly European, but also including nations such as Canada, Australia, Japan and Turkey.

The aim was to prevent Ukraine from being excluded from a possible peace process or ceasefire with Russia, which prompted several European countries to join forces to provide concrete security guarantees to Ukraine, in a manner that was independent of NATO and the European Union (Huffington Post Spain, 2025). Its objective was therefore both political and military, as it involved an explicit commitment by some twenty-six countries to provide support beyond the usual military aid, including the deployment of troops and assistance on land, sea and air to secure peace and prevent future Russian aggression.

This deployment would not involve direct confrontation with Russia but was intended to act as a deterrent to ensure Ukraine's lasting security and strengthen its army with more troops, training and weaponry. The initiative also seeks to respond to the perception of a certain distancing of the United States from Europe in the conflict, acting as a mechanism independent of NATO and other bodies to take an active role in the defence of Ukraine.

Once consolidated, on 18 August 2025, the thirty members of the 'coalition of the willing', mostly European, under the supervision of the NATO Secretary General, addressed by videoconference the issue of security guarantees for Ukraine in the context of a possible peace agreement with Russia. The aim was to see how NATO's Article 5 protection (the quasi-automatic mutual assistance clause between allied countries) could be extended to Ukraine. This clause could even be more precise than Article 5, which does not constitute an obligation to intervene militarily.

Protection inspired by NATO, but without NATO, would somehow overcome Russia's reluctance, as it has always opposed the Alliance's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. In reality, this proposal for a substitute 'for NATO, but without NATO' was highly ambiguous, since the presence of European Alliance troops in Ukraine through a clause similar to Article 5 and with the protection, albeit indirect, of the United States, was too similar to the Atlantic Alliance. In the end, 'a NATO without NATO is NATO' (Ricard and Vallet, 2025). In the case of Russia, it seems unlikely, as Jamie Shea, former Deputy Secretary General of

NATO, believes, that 'Putin will accept security guarantees similar to Article 5, as this would be equivalent to NATO membership or, at least, would inevitably lead to it' (Rzheutska and Vlasenko, 2025).

In any case, the big question for Europeans was, above all, to what extent the United States would be willing to get involved if European or Ukrainian forces were attacked by the Russians. A positive response could overcome the reluctance of many European states to participate in a coalition of willing countries, knowing that, if things got tough, they would have the Americans' backing.

Since then, Europeans have been trying to find the most appropriate form for a commitment with the Americans, which should take the form of the concerted deployment of a credible military '*reassurance* force', estimated by the military high command to require a minimum of fifteen thousand to twenty thousand troops. This force would be constituted on the basis of individual commitments from the countries forming the 'Coalition of Volunteers', which would be deployed far from the front line—to avoid direct confrontation with the Russians—and would do so once hostilities had ended (Le Monde, 2025).

Given that it seems unlikely that the Americans will be willing to become overly involved in Ukraine, the final deployment of forces in Ukraine, in the event of a ceasefire, could be similar to the following: Ukrainian troops would defend behind a demilitarised zone patrolled by neutral peacekeeping troops (the composition of which remains to be seen, but it is unlikely to be European if we are to believe Russian statements). European countries, for their part, would deploy 'tens of thousands' of soldiers who would act as a 'deterrent force' and operate deeper into Ukraine as a 'third line of defence', with US forces operating further behind the lines.

What seems certain is that, under no circumstances, will the United States send troops to Ukrainian soil, although it would be willing to provide 'strategic enablers' such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and command and control (C2). It could also provide air defence capabilities to support a future European-led deployment on the ground in post-war Ukraine as part of security guarantees (Olmsted, Harward *et al*., 2025). Ultimately, with its strategic concerns increasingly focused on China, the United States' main interest would be to sell military equip-

ment to the Europeans, who would then transfer it to Ukraine (Le Monde, 2025).

The Gordian knot of the Ukrainian question in reaching a ceasefire or peace agreement would lie in security guarantees, where the Russian, American and European missions differ significantly. Perhaps the greatest advantage of these discrepancies is that they force all the forces involved to reveal their true intentions. In this regard, Moscow would probably reject a proposal for security guarantees for Ukraine such as the one being discussed by US and European officials, based on the presence of NATO troops in Ukraine as part of such guarantees (Mappes *et al*., 2025). The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, stated on 18 August that Russia rejected 'any scenario that envisages the appearance in Ukraine of a military contingent with the participation of NATO countries' (Sobieski et al., 2025).

Sergey Lavrov, Russia's all-powerful Foreign Minister, has also warned that its 'security interests' must be taken into account in the negotiations (Le Grand Continent, 2025c) and that, if this is not the case, Russia will achieve its war aims by force, which consist of eliminating threats to its security 'arising from Ukrainian territory', protecting the rights of 'Russian-speaking people who believe they belong to Russian culture and Russian history', and Ukrainian neutrality (Mappes *et al*., 2025).

What Lavrov acknowledges is that Russia continues to believe that the supposed 'root causes' of the war are NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine's discrimination against Russian speakers (Gibson *et al*., 2025). This narrative is based on the ideological and geographical conception of Ukraine as part of the Russian world ('Russkiy Mir'). NATO's eastward expansion was the 'root cause' that broke this historical continuity and gave rise to the war. Until this root cause is resolved, Russia's objectives will not change (Olmsted, Gibson *et al*., 2025) and the war will continue. Ultimately, the Kremlin's ultimate goal in Ukraine would be to control the whole of Ukraine politically, rather than simply seizing certain Ukrainian territories such as the Donetsk Oblast (Harward *et al*., 2025).

Convinced that he could win the war of attrition by prolonging the conflict while waiting for Western support to weaken, Putin rejected, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on 4 July 2025, any Russian participation in meaningful negotiations for a ceasefire agreement and instead demanded that

Ukraine accept 'irreversible demilitarisation' as a precondition for any ceasefire. This implies Ukraine's surrender before any agreement can be reached (Daily Sabah, 2025).

6 On the threshold of the fourth winter. Attrition, resistance and stalemate

At the time of writing, the war in Ukraine is politically and militarily at a standstill. From a military point of view, during 2025, especially since August, the morphology of the front line has changed significantly. This is due, firstly, to the use of drones, which has profoundly changed the way reconnaissance, surveillance, defence and even troop supply are conceived, hindering the freedom of action essential for decisive offensive operations. Secondly, it is due to the Ukrainians' human resource problems, which mean that many positions are not physically defended but are covered by drones. They can therefore be occupied without the Ukrainians having enough time to react, or simply be overrun to establish positions behind what is considered the front line.

This means that surprise is still possible, even on a partially transparent battlefield where the adversary can observe concentrations of forces but cannot reliably discern the intention behind those concentrations (Kagan *et al*., 2024). Surprise is the result of exploiting the temporary advantages provided by technological innovations incorporated at key moments in successive battles and coordinated with ground operations. The result has been the emergence of certain particularly mobile parts of the front, especially in its central sector, with positions that are not permanently defended, giving rise to the creation of a large grey area where it is difficult to discern who has territorial control and even more difficult to predict in which direction operations will evolve.

In general, given the difficulty of taking major cities, the Russian strategy seems to be geared more towards weakening Ukrainian defences, wearing down its forces and expanding the front line through encirclement operations that seek to cut supply lines and cause collapses in Ukrainian areas under continuous pressure, rather than directly assaulting cities. The centre of gravity of the Russian military effort, rather than territory, would be the Ukrainian army, in line with the logic of the war of attrition that Ukraine has become.

For its part, Ukraine's strategy would focus primarily on exploiting the opportunities arising from its superior technological and doctrinal innovation cycle to achieve surprise. It can also benefit from the fact that Russian forces have been attacking almost the entire front line for months, rather than building extensive fortifications in depth. Supported by its defences, Ukraine would be carrying out limited offensive manoeuvres, given the resources available to its armed forces, planning and executing small-scale counterattacks in response to Russian advances, with the aim of regaining lost ground and stabilising the front line as far forward as possible. It remains to be seen in the coming months which of these strategies will ultimately prevail and produce decisive results, or whether, on the contrary, they will only serve to exhaust the combatants.

For Ukraine, the military challenge is enormous, and the big question is whether its echeloned defences and reserves will be able to contain the Russian offensive in the autumn without losing the urban belt of fortified cities stretching from Pokrovsk to Slovyansk. The critical factor is not the concentration of Russian troops, but Ukraine's ability to halt the advance. If the defences hold, at least until the arrival of the 'rasputitsa'—and Ukraine has proven itself capable of doing so in the past—the narrative of inevitable Russian victory would be undermined, the front would stabilise, and the confidence of Western donors and the Ukrainian population itself would be restored that a more favourable outcome than the simple capitulation demanded by Putin could be achieved. Ukraine could continue to sustain the war effort.

If, on the other hand, the breakthrough occurs and Russian forces manage to overcome the belt of Ukrainian defensive cities, Russia would have achieved its first operational breakthrough since 2022, forcing Kyiv to use reserves prematurely and allies to accelerate the delivery of aid. The western part of Donetsk, still under Ukrainian control, would be exposed to Russian advances, making Ukraine's military situation very complicated.

At the time of writing, the military initiative is in Russian hands, which are carrying out the largest concentration of troops on a single axis since 2022, directed mainly against Pokrovsk. Between 100,000 and 112,000 soldiers are reportedly positioning themselves for a decisive push against Ukraine's eastern defences, which the Russian command hopes to have taken by the end of 2025. It will therefore be the outcome of the Russian autumn offensive that will set the pace for the next phase of the con-

flict and, in light of the results, redefine the risk exposure that all actors involved in the war are willing to take. In the end, the former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, may be right when he stated in April 2022 that 'the war in Ukraine will have to be decided on the battlefield' (El País, 2022).

After almost three and a half years of devastating conflict, hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, relentless bombing and no hope in the short term of seeing Russian troops pushed out of national soil, the armies continue to fight with no end to the war in sight. While the Ukrainian army continues to reinforce its military positions to prolong the defence and Europeans continue with sanctions to put pressure on Russia, the morale of the Ukrainian population is being severely affected by the war effort. According to a poll published on 7 August by the American polling firm Gallup, support for victory in the war is collapsing among the Ukrainian population (only 24%, compared to 73% in 2022), while the desire for negotiations to end the war as soon as possible is growing strongly (69% from 22% in 2022) (Gagnepain, 2025).

For its part, Russia remains committed to a military solution to the conflict and shows no clear intention of yielding in any peace negotiations. It is also experiencing significant economic and social strain as a result of the impact of sanctions. Although it maintains its offensive momentum, with numerous fronts open, it has not achieved any significant progress to date. If the autumn offensive fails and the Ukrainian army manages to hold its positions, Moscow will surely be more willing to engage in peace talks, offering more favourable terms to Ukraine. Otherwise, if the situation on the ground is favourable, Moscow will have no real desire for peace beyond Ukraine's capitulation.

As long as the military situation remains unresolved and the positions remain irreconcilable, there is little room for political talks to end the war in Ukraine (September 2025). At the time of writing, both sides believe they can achieve better results on the battlefield than at the negotiating table, and there is no willingness for genuine constructive dialogue. Nearing its fifth year, the war in Ukraine is in danger of becoming, contrary to Clausewitz, an end in itself rather than a means to achieve a political objective. Both sides seem to have reached the conclusion of that by making war an end in itself, they are more likely to win than by moderating its nature and allowing the instruments of politics to take effect.

Unfortunately, it is still unclear how the war in Ukraine will end and whether Moscow will achieve its objectives, but there is concern that Europe has not experienced such dangerous times since the end of the Cold War. The behaviour of a revisionist power such as Russia, which believes that the only adequate level of security is to be dominant in the geographical areas surrounding it, explains its reluctance to engage in a political process leading to peace, at least as long as it believes it can achieve its objectives by force. The negative outlook for the conflict reinforces the natural tendency towards pessimism and fear of war among European societies accustomed to living in peace for several generations. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that human nature is biologically programmed to survive at all costs by imagining the worst in order to avoid it. It is to be hoped that, in the end, all those involved in the conflict will realise that prevention is always better than cure and that negotiation is better than combat, thus keeping alive the hope that, in a Europe that seems headed for war, sanity will prevail over recklessness.

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Chapter Three

The Fall of the Axis of Resistance. The Loss of Iranian Influence in the Middle East

José Ignacio Castro Torres

Abstract

For almost forty years, Iran has established a structure of alliances to extend its power and influence in the Middle East. However, in less than two years, this structure has been severely damaged, mainly by the situation in the Gaza Strip, the dismantling of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the fall of the Syrian regime of al-Assad. The fact that the Axis of Resistance has been defeated does not mean that it has been destroyed. The former ruling groups may become insurgent groups, while Iran attempts to regain control over them. In the meantime, the Iranians will have to seek negotiations at the international level to sustain their regime.

Key words

Axis of Resistance, Iran, Middle East, Proxies.

Introduction. The concept of the Axis of Resistance

Zbigniew Brzezinski defined Iran as a geopolitical pivot with the capacity to become a geopolitically active element. The American political scientist was not wrong, and history shows that the political entity that has inhabited Iranian territory has always played an important international role throughout time.

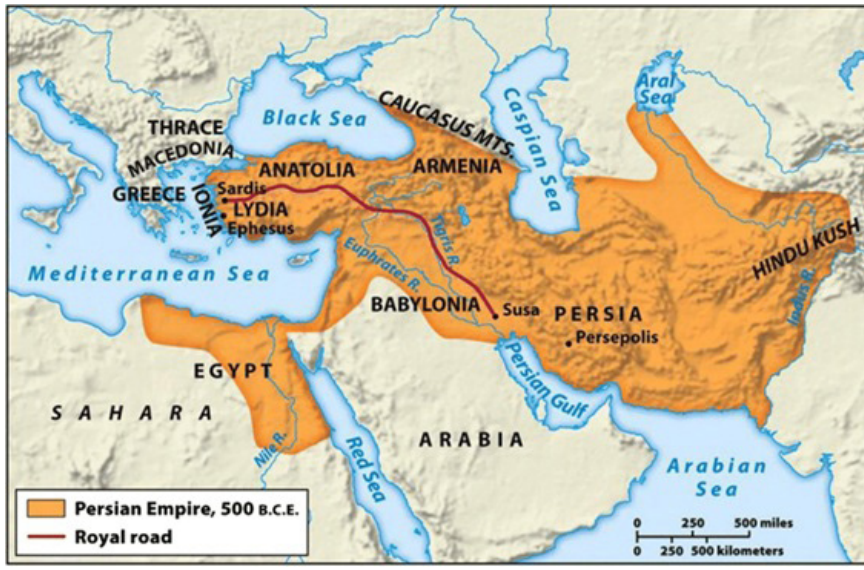

Figure 1. Map of the Persian Empire in 500 BCE (Fleck and Hassen, 2018: 373)

Leaving aside Iran's influence in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent and focusing on the Middle East, the various historical waves of the Persian Empire have left a series of related populations throughout the region. However, within Iran itself, there are divisive forces, as it is not completely unified on the basis of a homogeneous population. For this reason, the Persian majority is joined by other large minorities, notably the Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs, among many others.

Contemporary Iran has attempted to re-establish ties with its kindred peoples in the Middle East who formerly constituted the 'domain of Iran' or *Iranshar*, but with a project of 'empire of the mind' that seeks unity through culture and religion rather than concepts of race and territory (Axworthy, 2016: 3).

In this regard, it is important to consider the unifying factor that the Iran of the ayatollahs has exerted on the Shiite populations

of the region, not all of whom follow the Iranian Twelver rite, but who have gradually been drawn into its sphere of religious, cultural, economic, political and security influence. In a more pragmatic explanation, Iran has systematically taken advantage of the weakness of the states in the region, exploited their vulnerabilities and filled the power vacuums with militias and affiliated organisations.

Iran's partnerships are not only regional. Aware of its position, it has maintained an alliance of convenience with the formerly exploitative Russia, which is interested in finding a partner that will allow it to move south to the open waters of the Indian Ocean (Aleksei, 2023: 222). The Russians were also looking for an ally to maintain their bases in Syria in order to continue their presence in the Mediterranean (Ulusoy, 2021: 192-194).

For its part, China is interested in establishing an east-west bridge to secure communications. Despite the good relations between the Chinese and the Iranians, the former have long perceived the weakness of the 'Axis of Resistance' and have therefore sought to engage with all actors in the region in order to maintain connectivity (康欣; 雷婧莹/ Kang and Lei, 2024: 124 and 154).

To put this in a temporal context, after the 2001 attacks in the US, President George W. Bush demonised several countries, including Iran, and labelled them the 'Axis of Evil' for their possible links to terrorism or possession of weapons of mass destruction. In response to this concept, the Libyan newspaper *Al-Zahf Al-Akhdar* coined the term 'Axis of Resistance' for the first time in opposition to the American classification (Soage, 2020: 95).

However, the first description of Iran and its allies was made in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan, who described them as the 'Shiite Axis or Shiite Crescent'. Subsequently, the Iranians adapted the term 'Axis of Resistance' to describe all like-minded regimes in the region. The term *mehvar-e moqavvamat* was used in 2006 in Damascus by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who proclaimed a link between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other organisations (Polat, 2016: 480). This demonstrated that the Axis of Resistance was not monolithic but rather represented an entire political alliance against the interests of those considered oppressors.

Iran was aware that Syria was the cornerstone of its axis, as acknowledged by Ali Akbar Velayati, international affairs adviser

to leader Khamenei. The loss of influence in Syria would cause such significant destabilisation that it could have a domino effect, severing the chain to Palestine and affecting first Iraq and then Iran itself[1]. The Iranians viewed any association against their alliance with pathological fear, as it could jeopardise their vision for the Middle East, while also excluding them from participation in a new configuration of the region[2].

Iran's fears were soon confirmed with the formation of the so-called 'group of friends of the Syrian people', which, with the US, Israel, Turkey and many European and Arab states, formed an association of more than ninety countries[3]. Although the initiative gradually lost momentum, the concept itself remained and would endure over time.

Given the global and regional rivalries, it was clear that two opposing blocs would emerge, one in favour of and one against the Axis of Resistance. Therefore, this document will examine the constitution and current status of the concept of Iranian expansion towards the Mediterranean, which is going through one of its worst moments.

1 Background to the conflict

In its early years, the Islamic Republic regime suffered Western sanctions and Saddam Hussein's Iraqi offensive. The Iran-Iraq conflict brought about the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or Pasdaran and the creation of Shiite militias in Iraq, which would lay the foundations for the extension of Iranian power in the Middle East.

Iranian influence was already evident in Lebanon, where Shiites professed the same branch of religious worship. In 1982, this union was sealed when an AMAL commission, composed of Abbas

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1 خبرگزاری میزان/Mizan News Agency. 'سوریه حلقه طلایی زنجیره مقاومت در مقابل اب اسرائیل است' /Syria is the golden link in the chain of resistance against Israel. [Accessed: 8 February 2015]. Available at: https://www.mizanonline.ir/fa/news/127672/سوریه-حلقه-طلایی-زنجیره-مقاومت-در-مقابل-اب-اسرائیل-است

2 For a more detailed view of Iran's ambitions to establish a network of connectivity to the west, we recommend reading the document: The importance of land corridors (II): Iran's race to the Mediterranean Sea. Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran.pdf

3 UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. 'Group of Friends of the Syrian People'. Available at: https://unterm.un.org/unterm2/en/view/eca50d06-0bdb-4f87-a660-406f9139a91f

al-Musawi, Sheikh Naim Qassem and the young Hassan Nasrallah, travelled to Tehran (Majidyar, 2014: 3). This led to the founding of Hezbollah in 1985, which was promoted from Iran (Lucic, 2009: 81).

Paradoxically, the US intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) left Iran free of the Taliban and Saddam's regime. Under these conditions, the Iranians began to expand their networks and link territories under their control. Iranian influence in Iraq would soon become apparent through its support for Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who would rule the country from 2006 to 2014 (Sari, 2021: 434). This influence has continued in parliamentary life through the Dawa Party.

Iran had also set its sights on Yemen, located at one end of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which one of the most important maritime routes on the planet runs. Yemeni Shiites are originally Zaidi Quintimans, another branch of this religious denomination, but in one of its tribes the Ayatollah regime found the possibility of exerting its influence. To this end, they recruited Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi who, after a stay at the Iranian seminary in Qom, founded the Houthi movement and identified himself with the Lebanese postulates of Hassan Nashrallah (MEMRI, 2009). Despite the fact that the moderate Zaidis considered this an act of treason and despite Hussein's death in 2004, the links with Iran were continued by his brother Abdulmalik (Ortiz de Zárate, 2024).

The so-called Arab Spring of 2011 spread throughout the region, affecting many regimes and, to a large extent, Bashar al-Assad's Syria. Although Syrians and Iranians had common interests, Syrian independence was based on greater secularisation and the fact that the ruling minority was Alawite, albeit also Shiite, belonging to another religious branch. The mismanagement of the crisis forced Assad to place himself in the hands of the Iranians, who would then use Syria as a platform from which to operate in the region (Kaderli and Işyar, 2025: 59)[4].

[4] Iranian General Qassem Soleimani had advised Assad to use the police to quell the rebellion. Ignoring this advice, Assad deployed the army. This caused the protests to turn into an insurrection. For a more detailed look at Iran's influence in Syria and the entire Middle East, we recommend reading the article: 'Leadership from the other side of the hill'. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA33_2019CASTRO_Soleimani.pdf

The consolidation of Iran's presence in the Levant would come after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Maliki's sectarian behaviour against Sunnis sparked an uprising among them, many of whom joined the ranks of Al Qaeda. Daesh, or Islamic State, emerged as a splinter group of this organisation, whose leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, proclaimed an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Although the Americans returned to overthrow Daesh, General Qassem Soleimani's intervention in support of both state regimes consolidated Iranian influence throughout Mesopotamia and the Levant (Jahanbani, 2020).

UN sanctions against several Houthi leaders and former Yemeni President Saleh left the latter in a weak position, as he had economic interests abroad. In 2017, the Houthis assassinated Saleh, thereby gaining a privileged position among the other Zaidi tribes, which benefited Iranian interests (Zimmt, 2018: 2).

Hezbollah's subsequent control of the Lebanese parliament from 2018 onwards further strengthened Iran's position in the region, with a strong influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, through which it established a corridor to reach the Mediterranean and harass Israel (Dolatabadi, Beigi and Choul, 2020: 123). Meanwhile, it also controlled the Strait of Hormuz, due to its proximity to its territory, and the Bab el-Mandeb, which was monitored by its Houthi allies in Yemen.

Meanwhile, the Arabs saw that the situation was increasingly tilting in Iran's favour due to the progressive defeat of Daesh in Mesopotamia, where, in many cases, it was being replaced by groups affiliated with Iran. The area was becoming more dangerous for them than just a corridor between Beirut and Tehran because it could become the *Wilayat Imam Ali* or province of Imam Ali (Jones, 2019: 5).

Although the concept of the Axis of Resistance existed beforehand, in 2018, the conditions were right for it to be put into action. It is more than likely that there was some kind of long-term plan to implement it and that its architect was General Soleimani. In this way, a land communications bridge was established that would link Shiite communities to the west. At the same time, it provided a safer and cheaper communications route than air transport for sending weapons to its *proxies* in the region and for harassing Israel from Lebanon (Chulov, 2016).

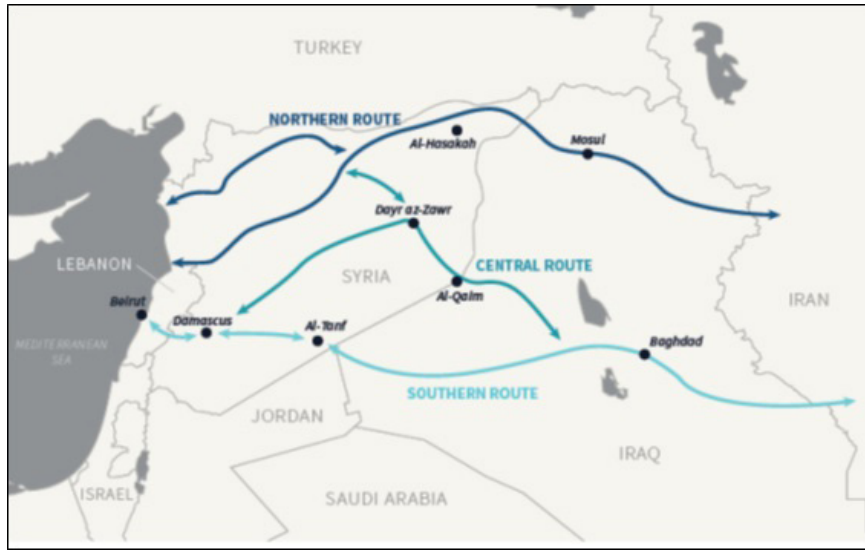

Figure 2. Land bridge established westward by Iran. (Jones, 2019: 5)

Meanwhile, Israel sought to keep the threat as far away from its territory as possible, so it decided to intervene after the 2020 meeting between Hezbollah leader Hajj Hashem in the Golan Heights and Syrian General Ali Amad Assad (Truzman, 2020).

Despite Israeli actions, the bridge to its territory continued to be consolidated and, within it, the Sunni terrorist group Hamas began to hatch a plan that would end in tragedy. In 2022, Yahya Sinwar, leader of this organisation in the Gaza Strip, wrote a letter to Ismail Haniyah, president of the organisation's political structure, who was in Qatar. In this document, several possible options for the eradication of Israel were presented, all of which sought, to a greater or lesser extent, to degrade the 'occupying state' with the help of its partners in the Resistance Axis (Benson, 2025).

Although it cannot be proven that Iran was aware of the preparations for the attack on Israel, several meetings were held in Beirut, notably in April 2023, when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah received Hamas leaders Haniyeh and Saleh Arouri (Truzman, 2023). In September, Nasrallah met again with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders Saleh Arouri and Ziyad al-Nakhalah (Frantzman, 2023).

2 Current status of the conflict

2.1 The dismantling of Hamas

The 2023 terrorist attacks against Israeli territories near the Gaza Strip were a real wake-up call for the Israelis, whose Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, declared that he was fighting on seven fronts, linking Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and, of course, Iran (I24News, 2025).

Israel's mobilisation was swift, and within its own territory, it began a series of operations to eliminate the operational capacity of Hamas and its affiliated groups, systematically eliminating their leaders on the ground, notably the deaths of Yahya Sinwar, Mohamed Deif and Marwan Issa in 2024 (NDTV World, 2024). Similarly, the leader of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, was assassinated in Tehran, where he was present to attend the inauguration of the new Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian (Bergman *et al*., 2024).

In May 2025, Israel would once again eliminate the new leader on the ground, Mohamed Sinwar, Yahya's brother. With his death, not only had the quintet that had planned the terrorist attack been eliminated, but a power vacuum had been created in the organisation at a critical moment, which could lead to the disappearance of Hamas due to a lack of leadership and support (Abualouf, 2025). In early September, Israel carried out a bombing raid in Doha against members of the Hamas leadership and its negotiating team. The fact that the attack took place in the Qatari capital constituted a shift in perceptions in the Arab world (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2025).

2.2 The decline of Hezbollah

Hezbollah was the Shiite stronghold that harassed Israel from southern Lebanon. Its position in Lebanese public life gave it a role that, on many occasions, was superior to that of the state itself. In 2006, it had shown Israel that it could not be eliminated by conventional means, so the Israelis subsequently the Israelis engaged in a selective campaign to eliminate its most important leaders and weapons systems, decapitating much of the organisation's leadership, as well as the Radwan Force, the unit responsible for infiltrating Israeli territory (Wechsler, 2024).

The organisation's structure was severely damaged in an operation carried out by the Israeli secret services. They were aware that Hezbollah's command and control network relied on radiotelephones and pagers to avoid detection or interference. The Israelis therefore managed to modify the devices so that they would explode when a pre-set signal was given, which occurred in mid-September 2024 (Various authors, 2024). The *coup de grâce* against the organisation would be the elimination of its leader, Hassan Nashrallah, along with its headquarters (Young, 2024).

In the absence of leadership in Hezbollah, the elderly Naim Qassem (previously referred to as the former leader of AMAL) has had to take charge. During the summer of 2025, he made desperate appeals to his acolytes not to lay down their arms in the face of pressure from the Lebanese government, the peace proposal from the US envoy, Tom Barrack, and attacks by Israel (Al Jazeera, 2025). Hezbollah's delicate position not only removed the threat from the north for Israel but also provided it with the opportunity to launch operations deep into the Resistance Axis.

2.3 Syria: the fall of the central link in the chain

The Assad regime remained in place thanks to the support provided by Iran since Soleimani and Nasrallah convinced leader Khamenei to maintain the Alawite government after the Arab Spring. Both argued that the fall of the Syrian regime would also mean the fall of the Axis of Resistance (Grajewski, 2024).

For more than thirteen years, Iran invested huge amounts in sustaining the Syrian regime and its security, creating militias through the Quds Force, sending Afghan Hazaras to swell the ranks of the Fatemiyoun brigades, and supporting certain units of the regular army (Semenov, 2017).

Assad controlled about two-thirds of the territory, while in the north, the Kurds of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) held the northeast of Rojava; the Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) group occupied the Iblib region, and the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) was in the areas where Turkey had deployed in previous military operations[5]. At the end of November 2024,

[5] For a more detailed account of the events surrounding the fall of the Assad regime, we recommend reading the document: 'The third partition of the Middle East and the Syrian question'. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320762/

with the support of the SNA and other Islamist factions, HTS launched a rapid offensive that culminated in Assad's flight to Russia and the establishment of a provisional HTS government headed by its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, who softened his name to Ahmed al-Sharaa (Gebeily and Azhari, 2024).

As his regime collapsed, Assad saw his Russian and Iranian supporters retreat to their bases in Tartus and Lakatia, respectively, and towards Iraq. For the Russians, embroiled in Ukraine and concerned about Turkey's reaction, Assad had become too intolerant to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict in Idlib. Meanwhile, the Iranians' movements were increasingly restricted in Syria, while Assad had prevented them from using the Golan Heights to harass Israel. It is possible that the Syrians had leaked information about the whereabouts of senior Iranian commanders on their territory, which led to the attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus in April 2024 (Grajewski, 2024).

2.4 The links in Iraq and Yemen

Iran still maintains a significant presence in Iraq, where its influence on public life is evident through political activity, allied militias and economic relations. At the time of writing, the results of the 2025 elections are not yet available, but the contest is between the more independent Prime Minister Sudani and the more pro-Iranian former Prime Minister Maliki. However, it is after the elections that lengthy negotiations between political groups, including Sunni and Kurdish counterweights, will take place, which will sway Iraqis to one side or the other (Rudolf, 2025).

The Houthis of Yemen are geographically a loose link in the current small chain of the Axis of Resistance. The fall of their allies in Mesopotamia and the Levant leads them to consider the very continuity of their regime6. The exchange of missiles and drones led Israel to launch an attack on the Houthi leadership at the end of

la_tercera_particion_del_oriente_proximo_y_la_cuestion_siria_2025_dieeea03.pdf/07f0fbbf-ca0e-6722-2d4a-a105510ddce2?t=1736514718145

[6] For a more detailed reading, we recommend the article: 'The Twelve-Day War: The Lion of Judah Against the Lion of the Sun'. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/la_guerra_de_los_doce_dias_2025_dieeea51

August 2025, killing their prime minister, Ahmed Ghalib al-Rahwi, along with several members of the government (Al-Goidi, 2025). If the deterioration of Iranian capabilities prevents continued support for the Houthis, they will have to seek another source of support. Faced with this uncertain future, one possible option could be to establish direct relations with global powers such as Russia or China, which are eager to establish bases in the region (Ali, 2025).

3 Role of external actors in the region

The Axis of Resistance had been formed as a loose alliance that had taken uncoordinated steps, provoking a reaction that was too forceful to withstand the pressure exerted. According to the theory of alliance equilibrium (Walt, 1990: 5), another alliance had been created to counterbalance the Axis of Resistance, regardless of ideology or foreign aid received. It is therefore understandable that the Sunni countries in the area have collaborated with Israel and the US to neutralise the power of Iran and its allies.

Israel seems to have benefited the most, having drastically reduced the threat from the seven fronts it faced after the attacks of September 2023. The chain of links leading to its territory from Iran has lost its continuity, so the threat from the growing Shiite arc has been so degraded that it no longer poses an existential problem.

The Americans, regardless of which administration occupies the White House, have also benefited greatly. President Trump is not interested in devoting too many resources or getting involved on the ground in a theatre of operations that is secondary to his global vision. With the break-up of the Axis of Resistance, this problem would be solved, allowing him to focus on his real concern, namely China, which should take good note of US capabilities (盧政鋒/Cheng-fung Lu, 2025; Sobolik, 2025).

The Sunni countries in the region also appear to benefit, as Saudi Arabia and its Emirati partners see an opportunity to do good business with Israel and, as far as possible, can return to the path of the Abraham Accords, which led to Bahrain and the Emirates recognising Israel. It is possible that the support in weapons and technology from Israel and the US will provide these states with the possibility of shaking off the nightmare of harassment by

the Houthis in Yemen (Engelsberg Ideas, 2025). However, Doha's attacks on the Hamas leadership may have had an unintended effect in the Arab world.

Turkey and its Qatari partner also see great opportunities in the breakdown of the East-West bridge that constituted the Axis of Resistance. Turkey is strengthening its influence towards the south, while becoming the logistical hub for hydrocarbons travelling from the Gulf and Central Asia basins to Europe. Qatar sees the possibility of exporting its gas to Turkey by pipeline via Syria, saving significant costs (Daily Sabah, 2025; Khatatneh, 2025; Matoi, 2025).

Russia appears to be a possible loser. However, Assad's drift was not in its interests either. It is therefore in the process of reconfiguring its presence, in which relations with the new Syrian government are not entirely bad. Even so, the Russians have withdrawn from their bases in Syrian territory and have maintained only an uncertain presence in Tartus and Latakia (Times of Israel, 2025; Giustozzi, 2025). Furthermore, the Russians have always been interested in Iran depending on them and not the other way around. If the lack of support for the Houthis continues, Russia may regain the former presence that the USSR had in the southern Arabian Peninsula.

China is a truly pragmatic player. Eager for the region's hydrocarbons, it is interested in ensuring that the commercial transit of these products through the Strait of Hormuz never stops. The mere threat of a blockade of the strait is a great fear for the Chinese, who have very good business relations with the Saudis and Emiratis. Furthermore, any Iranian nuclear adventure could drag the countries in the region into an arms race. Nothing could be further from China's intentions, whose interest is to continue buying oil at competitive prices (Calabrese, 2025).

Conclusions and outlook

The Axis of Resistance took more than forty years to consolidate, but in less than two years it has suffered such setbacks and reversals that it is now seriously damaged. One of its possible critical vulnerabilities may lie in its very conception, as the establishment of an alliance with expansionist aims is extremely unstable due to the disparate interests of its members.

In this sense, it is easy to see how there was a hard core around Iran, made up of Hezbollah and the Houthis of Yemen. Now that the chain is broken, these actors are left with the arduous task of fighting for local power. Hezbollah is in a significant state of decline and its specific weight within Lebanese political life has diminished along with its *de facto* power. For their part, the Houthis are just another Zaidi tribe within Yemen, and any show of weakness in front of other tribes could lead them into a ruthless struggle for internal power.

The rest of the actors belonged to alliances of convenience. Hamas and its affiliated groups are Sunni in origin and close to the Muslim Brotherhood, so the link that unites them to the Ayatollah regime is their hatred of Israel. Assad was a partner of convenience who sought to regain the autonomy he had before the Arab Spring. Iraq is a conglomerate of powers in which the Iranians have supporters but do not have absolute control.

However, it is more than likely that the efforts of Iran and its partners will continue, albeit with less intensity, following the concept of 'Down but Not Out' (Ali-Khan and Cambanis, 2025). In those areas where they have lost the ability to impose themselves, they may form groups that resort to insurgency to maintain their presence from underground. However, since Soleimani's death, the senior commanders of the Pasdaran, who had experience in managing tribal groups in the Middle East, have also been eliminated, so control of these groups may be even more difficult, not only because of the lack of support, but also because of the absence of effective command and control over their activities.

Another important aspect is the internal dynamics within Iran. Although everything points to the authorities seeking some kind of negotiation to shore up the regime, the approach of the various factions in power may be very different. The fundamentalism of the Pasdaran could resist major changes, while the reformists would be more open-minded. In any case, Iran will have to ensure that the US and Israel do not inflict further physical and economic damage on it, while at the same time shoring up relations with Russia and securing China's support. At the regional level, it needs greater understanding with the Gulf monarchies and Turkey to ensure the stability of hydrocarbon prices and facilitate their transport.

APPENDIX

Chronology of the conflict and geopolitical indicators

TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	**EVENTS**
1982	A Lebanese AMAL commission travels to Tehran, beginning the future Hezbollah's ties with Iran.
1993	Mohamed Houthi returns from Iran indoctrinated in Twelver Shiism.
2001	US President George W. Bush designates Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the Axis of Evil
2003	The US-led coalition overthrows Saddam Hussein's regime, allowing Shiite militias to expand.
2011	The 'Arab Spring' in Syria forces Assad to seek support from Iran
2014	Daesh occupies areas of Iraq and Syria. A 'land bridge' linking Iran with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is created.
2020	Death of Qassem Soleimani
2023	Terrorist attack by Hamas against the Israeli civilian population near the Gaza Strip. Intervention by Hezbollah from Lebanon and the Houthis from Yemen. Netanyahu launches his seven-front war campaign against the entire Axis of Resistance.
2024. April	Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus. IRGC senior commanders in the Levant killed.
2024. July	Death of Ismail Haniyah in Tehran.
2024. September	Death of Hasan Nashrallah in Beirut
2024. December	HTS overthrows the Assad regime in Syria
2025. June	Israel executes Operation Rising Lion against Iran's infrastructure, command and control network, and nuclear programme
2025. June	The US carries out Operation Midnight Hammer against Iranian nuclear facilities

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Chapter Four

Sudan: Life Sentence of War?

Blanca Palacián de Inza

Abstract

Sudan, a country marked by decades of conflict, is currently experiencing a devastating new civil war. What began as a power struggle between two military leaders has triggered a humanitarian crisis that has been ignored by much of the world. While foreign powers fan the flames for strategic interests, millions of civilians suffer. This text analyses the roots, evolution and consequences of a complex conflict with regional and international implications.

Key words

Sudan, South Sudan, Internationalised civil war, Multipolarity, Darfur.

Introduction

In 2010, there was only one Sudan. A year later, after more than two decades of bloody war, part of the country became independent as South Sudan. In 2025, there are three Sudans, as, in the heat of the war in Sudan, the paramilitaries of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have established a government parallel to the Sovereign Council in Darfur[1], and South Kordofan.

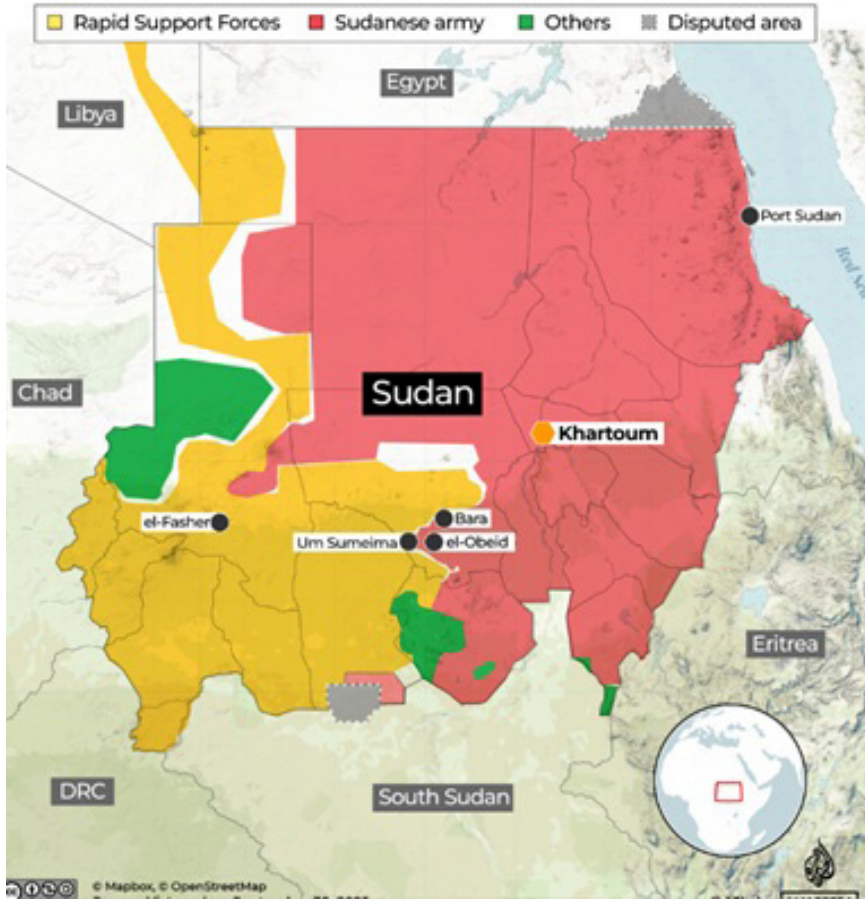

Figure 1. Situation of the war in Sudan in September 2025. Source: Al Jazeera

Before the secession on 9 July 2011, Sudan was a country with an area twice the size of the Iberian Peninsula and was the largest

[1] Except for the city of El Fasher, at the time of writing.

country on the African continent. Its ethnic and religious diversity practically divided the country in half: with an Arab and Islamic north and a largely Christian and animist south. Its situation is reminiscent of that of Nigeria, with the notable exception that the chances of it splitting are practically non-existent, as it has a stronger central government and there is no significant separatist movement.

For its part, Sudan, like South Sudan, does not have a stable government, so the conflict is tied to the role of two opposing leaders. Neither of them has a healthy economy either, since, although Sudan's was more favourable than that of its southern neighbour, after more than three years of civil war, it is now in a state of collapse. This has a huge impact on South Sudan, as it needs its neighbour's infrastructure to export oil, on which it is 90% dependent (Energynews, 2024).

Back in 2004, long before the division of Africa's largest country, journalist Deborah Scroggins explained that she had always thought that to understand the 2003 war in Sudan, one needed a map with different layers (Scroggins, 2004). The layer with the political conflict, that of religious division, that of ethnic groups, that of clans and tribes, languages, economic differences and resources, colonial divisions, and so on, until it became clear at a glance that this is not one war but many.

In the current war that is bleeding Sudan dry, this complexity, expressed by the image of a map with multiple overlapping layers, remains perfectly valid. This chapter is not structured according to this separation, which follows the structure of this collection of the Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts, but, as it could not be otherwise, the elements to which it refers are taken into account and considered.

This work analyses the situation in Sudan, with the necessary references to its southern neighbour, given its immense influence on it. The armed conflict in Sudan is considered in terms of its form and substance. It also considers, on the one hand, the international community's lack of attention to this war, but also the opposite attitude on the other.

1 Background to the conflict

Sudan gained independence from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in 1956, but since then it has found neither peace nor free-

dom. In almost seventy years of independence, it has suffered a long list of armed conflicts, with only ten years of peace. It has suffered twenty coup attempts (seven of them successful) and has been the African country with the most incidents of this type; it has experienced three civil wars and at least one genocide. The country was split in two with the independence of South Sudan and is currently also divided by the ravages of war. With so many armed conflicts, it is natural to find a very high number of peace agreements, with up to forty-six having been signed, although these can be considered unsuccessful given the almost incessant presence of war.

A prime example of this is the First Civil War, which shook the country from before its independence, from 1955 to 1972. Its end did not bring peace, but rather a continuation with the Second Civil War between 1983 and 2005. This second armed conflict resulted in the independence of South Sudan in 2011. The new country has not been blessed with peace either.

While the eyes of the world are on Gaza and, increasingly less so, on Ukraine, Sudan is bleeding in another civil war, its third, which entered its third year last April and for which peace is not in sight. The spectre of Sudan's tendency to wage two-decade-long civil wars has been revived. Furthermore, the danger of the war spreading to its southern neighbour and even to the region is high, as will be analysed in this paper.

In April 2019, a military coup ended al-Bashir's long rule. A military dictatorship then began, with the goal of holding free elections in 2024. The country was, supposedly, at the beginning of the current civil war, in a period of transition until the elections.

This coup was followed by an agreement between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) to form a government. Abdalla Hamdok was appointed prime minister on a temporary basis, as the aim was to hold democratic elections at the end of 2022. These elections never took place because, in 2021, the army overthrew Hamdok and established a Sovereign Council. This coup was orchestrated by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), together with Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as 'Hemedti', commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Allies then, enemies now in the current conflict that is bleeding the country dry.The RSF is an offshoot of the Janjaweed militia, or at least many of its members joined the RSF. The so-called Jan-

jaweed are a mercenary group composed of members of nomadic Arab tribes who fought sedentary population groups over land and resources in Darfur. During the conflict in that region, which took place from 2003 to 2020, the Janjaweed became a powerful militia under al-Bashir's command. This militia is accused of having been responsible then, and again now, for many of the deaths in Darfur.

In April 2023, differences of opinion over how to integrate the RSF into the SAF chain of command escalated into civil war. The background to this is the power struggle between the two leaders, and the way in which their forces were to be integrated had a huge influence on which faction would control the country. Their deep mistrust and ambition quickly led the country into open armed conflict in the form of civil war.

Although the spark that ignited the conflict was the power struggle, in the background we can find the layers referred to by Deborah Scroggins and mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: politically and economically marginalised communities, religious division, previous wars that ended in stalemate, and other differences in a country with extreme polarisation.

2 Current situation of the conflict

Before the war began, much of the country was ravaged by poverty and constant famine. Three years into the war, things have worsened dramatically. Currently, the World Food Programme estimates that a total of 24.6 million people (approximately half the population) suffer from severe food insecurity[2]. Nearly 650,000 people face catastrophic levels of hunger. This is the highest figure in the world.

The United Nations (Speakman Cordall, 2025) estimated in mid-September that approximately forty thousand people have died in the fighting since the start of the war. Nearly thirteen million have fled the country.

If Sudan enjoyed peace, it would certainly not be one of the poorest countries in the world. Its oil reserves make it the 54th largest exporter of this fossil fuel in the world[3]. The war has brought

[2] Data available on the website: Sudan | World Food Programme.

[3] Data taken from The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Available at: https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/crude-petroleum/reporter/sdn

crude oil exports to a screeching halt, not only in Sudan but also in South Sudan. Its southern neighbour depends on Sudan for its crude oil exports, which are transported to the Red Sea via Khartoum. Other products on which the Sudanese economy depended for exports, such as cotton, Arabic gum and sugar, have also suffered the setbacks of war.

Three years after the war began, it continues to be ignored by international opinion despite the high risk of genocide, the thousands of deaths, and the fact that it is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The violence continues to escalate with indiscriminate attacks on civilians, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and famine affecting millions of people. The regions of Darfur and Kordofan are the epicentres of the conflict.

Figure 2. Displaced woman refugee in the city of Tawila, in North Darfur. Source: Reuters

If one had to define the type of armed conflict ravaging Sudan, it would be an internationalised civil war, as has become common in this century. Internationalised civil wars are a recent categorisation. This refers to a conflict involving organised violence by two or more sides within a sovereign state, in which foreign elements play a role in instigating, prolonging or exacerbating the fighting (Jenne and Popovic, 2017). In this case, there are countries that have so many interests in this war that, for this reason, neither side is exhausted and neither defeat nor victory is achieved.

When thinking about two sides and talking about civil war, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking about a population divided and pitted against each other by two political options. The reality, however, is a population trapped and powerless, marginalised, so that what we see is violence between two political leaders and their soldiers. This violence is sometimes deliberately and directly directed against the population, as is the case in Darfur. According to Human Rights Watch, the United States Government declared last January (Human Rights Watch, 2025) that the RSF had committed genocide in this region[4]. This would be the second genocide in Darfur in just two decades and, once again, another chapter that has been largely ignored by the international community (Palacián de Inza, 2024).

In addition to this, United Nations agencies certify that war crimes and all kinds of atrocities against the population are taking place in the country, including rape, executions, the use of hunger as a weapon of war and the persecution of minority groups. Children are not spared from these atrocities and also suffer from being used as combatants and sexual violence (United Nations, 2024).

Sudan is an example or archetype of the new regional conflicts where local and international dynamics increasingly intersect, and humanitarian crises are exacerbated and aggravated by geopolitical rivalries and tensions (Shea, 2024).

External countries are involved in civil war either directly or indirectly, which is more common. The shipment of weapons, troops and even intelligence gathering, for example, are some forms of support. The evidence seems clear. One example is Amnesty International's report entitled *New Weapons Fuelling the Sudan Conflict* (Amnesty International, 2025), which documented the transfer of newly manufactured weapons to Sudan and its surroundings from countries such as China, Russia, Turkey and the UAE.

It should be noted that while both neighbouring and distant countries have their eyes—and sometimes their weapons or money—focused on Sudan, European and North American public opinion, if not global opinion, remains detached from this war and from so many others beyond Gaza and Ukraine. Some go even further, such as *The Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland, who states

[4] 'Genocide': the systematic extermination or elimination of a human group on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, politics or nationality. Genocide | Definition | Dictionary of the Spanish Language | RAE - ASALE.

emphatically: 'Remember when we said Black Lives Matter? We didn't mean it'[5].

In line with this exclusion of other races, religions or ethnic-linguistic groups from our attention, Yemeni-Swedish journalist Luai Ahmed spoke at the United Nations Human Rights Council earlier this year:

'[...] I ask the UN, the Arab League and all those who have been raising the Palestinian flag since 7 October: Where is the flag of Yemen? [...] And Sudan? In less than two years, more than 150,000 people have died. Where is the flag of Sudan? [...] Where is the Syrian flag?'[6].

Another explanation for the deadly neglect of the war in Sudan may be that, when reality cannot be divided into good and bad, victims and perpetrators, it is preferable to ignore it (Freedland, 2024).

Be that as it may, this negligence in not paying attention to certain armed conflicts will have a price to pay, first and foremost with thousands of irregular migrants in search of peace (Shea, 2024). Or it could lead to the overthrow of other regimes in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa; or Sudan could become another sanctuary for terrorists or exacerbate the crisis in the Red Sea (The Economist, 2024).

At the time of writing, Sudan is divided as shown in Figure 1. The division of the country corresponds to the territories controlled by one general or another. According to Marc Lavergne7, a specialist in the Horn of Africa, this is a battle between two elites embodied by General al-Burhan and General Hemedti. According to this author, it is a conflict between the political-military elite established in the centre of the country and the emerging militarised elite in Darfur. The object of the conflict is control of the state (Corbeta, 2023).

In this regard, steps are being taken to establish a parallel administration independent of the Sudanese government. To this end,

[5] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/11/world-humanitarian-disaster-sudan

[6] Statement by Luai Ahmed, Yemeni and Swedish journalist, at the 58th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. 27 February 2025. Full statement available at: When Arabs kill millions of Arabs, no one bats an eye: Yemeni activist slams UN - UN Watch.

[7] Prof. Marc Lavergne, Emeritus Senior Researcher, National Centre for Scientific Research, Department of Arab and Mediterranean Studies, University of Tours (France).

Hemedti has appointed a prime minister and a presidential council headed by himself, with SPLM-N leader Abdelaziz al-Hilu as his deputy (Sudan Tribune, 2025). The SPLM-N (Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North) allied itself with the RSF in February (López Martín, 2025).

In return, the Sudanese army has sought the support of South Sudanese militias to fight the SPLM-N and the RSF along their shared border (Nashed, 2025).

Figure 3. Drawing by Nairobi artist Galagoly. Source: Instagram

3 Role of external actors

Sudan, due to its location between Africa and the Middle East and its rich natural resources (fertile land and a variety of livestock, oil, gas, gold and water), is a strategic point of interest for regional and global powers.

Unsurprisingly, these interests are reflected in the current conflict. This makes Sudan an exceptional example of the form that new regional conflicts are taking. It is a kind of local and international dynamic that mixes and feeds back into itself (Shea, 2024).

Sudan thus becomes essential to the interests of third countries such as Russia, China and, in particular, the United Arab Emirates. Without a doubt, the involvement of international forces contributes to the prolongation of the conflict and delays the chances of reaching a ceasefire agreement.

Saudi Arabia also has an interest in Sudan's strategic location on international trade routes. This is established in Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030*[8].

Russia appears to be supporting both sides in the conflict (Sánchez-Rey Navarro, 2024). However, this dynamic may change, as it was al-Burhan who granted permission to build the naval base in Port Sudan (Sanjurjo, 2024). Putin had been coveting this enclave since 2017 (Sánchez-Rey Navarro, 2024). It will be Russia's first base in the Red Sea and will allow it to position warships and nuclear submarines in this strategic sea. This will strengthen its military presence in Africa and its regional influence. There is no doubt that Russia now has a clear idea of which side in Sudan needs to win the Sudanese conflict.

The United Arab Emirates has long collaborated with the RSF both militarily and commercially. Alongside them, the Libyan National Army and Chad also support Hemedti.

On the opposing side, supporting the SAF, are Egypt, Eritrea, Ukraine, Turkey, Qatar and Iran.

The United States and Europe are focused on other wars, so their involvement in the Sudanese conflict is almost non-exist-

[8] In this document, the Red Sea Project is a Saudi Arabian megaproject that aims to diversify its sources of wealth by reducing its dependence on oil through the development of other sectors, notably tourism. Saudi Vision 2030.

ent, except for President Trump's recent peace-making efforts. Together with Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Egypt (which form a group known as 'The Quad'), he is pushing for peace proposals for Sudan. However, the latest peace proposal has come from the Muslim Brotherhood (Speakman, 2025), key players in the conflict who support the Sudanese army with the help of Iran. A future Sudan influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood would be a possibility that North African and Gulf countries, which have labelled them as terrorists, fear, but which the West seems to ignore.

The armed conflict in Sudan has had a particular impact on its southern neighbour and will continue to do so. As in Sudan, the visible faces of the conflict in South Sudan, which is not yet armed, are those of two opposing leaders: President Kiir and Vice-President Machar. According to Alan Boswell, these two politicians are responsible for the situation in the country, but there is a third party, if another actor can be considered: the war in Sudan (South Sudan Voices, 2025). Over the last two years, there have been several moments of tension between the two leaders, but the difference now is the pressure of the war in the neighbouring country. In this sense, 'Sudan and South Sudan, despite their separation, remain closely linked'9 socially, politically and economically. Therefore, if the war in Sudan cannot be stopped, the pressure for it to break out in South Sudan will be greater. And if that happens, it will be very difficult to separate the two conflicts.

Conclusions

The armed conflict in Sudan has been going on for three and a half years. The number of dead, displaced or facing severe food insecurity are very high. However, this armed conflict is being ignored by many, while others have too much interest in it. Both positions are contrary to peace and will affect not only neighbouring countries in vulnerable situations, but also those further afield.

The underlying problems fuelling the armed conflict in Sudan are obscured by the apparent struggle between two leaders with their own agendas. For fifty years, peace processes have been followed by further war in Sudan, suggesting that the causes behind the fighting are not being addressed. In the era of disorderly

9 Rome Nyagoah Tut Pur: in South Sudan Voices, 2025.

multipolarity in which we find ourselves, other national actors are an indispensable part of multipolarity. Peace is more sustainable with greater participation. It is essential that other actors from civil society across the country, such as women, young people and religious leaders, participate in the peace processes.

In any case, none of this seems possible when wars are internationalised, as those who support one side or the other prevent the conflict from running its course and coming to an end. Worse still, it could spread, as the war in Sudan could destabilise Chad, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Sahel and countries further afield in the Horn of Africa and East Africa, as it is in fact happening.

It is possible, however, that among the countries that fuel the conflict because they have interests in it, there may be one that can help bring it to an end. Russia, after signing the agreement to have a base in Port Sudan, may now have an interest in the country achieving peace and in the victory of General al-Burhan, with whom it has signed the agreement.

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Chapter Five

Turkey in Africa: the growing presence of the Sublime Porte

Pedro Sánchez Herráez

Abstract

On a planet undergoing geopolitical reconfiguration, Africa is emerging as a key player, for various reasons, in the struggle between old and new powers to create a new balance, a new world order.

In this context, Turkey, largely heir to the Ottoman Empire, has skilfully manoeuvred, initially using its soft power tools, to position itself significantly on the African continent without, so far, arousing the suspicions of other powers.

A brief presentation of these issues and a brief final reflection form the basis of this chapter.

Key words

Turkey, Africa, Ottoman Empire, Soft power, Geopolitical reconfiguration.

Introduction. A world in conflict... in Africa too?

It is clear to everyone that the planet is undergoing a geopolitical reconfiguration, with old and new powers vying to obtain and achieve their interests and objectives, in an era in which the so-called 'world order' seems to have been sidelined and replaced by purely realistic approaches, in a context of constant wars and apparent chaos and disorder, in the search, as in other periods of history, for a new balance of power (Sánchez Herráez, 2023).

In this global reconfiguration, Africa has a renewed and growing interest, due to its wealth, its geographical position—conditioning maritime routes between Asia and Europe, for example—its human capabilities and its governance gaps, which make it more feasible for other powers to occupy those spaces outside state control (Various authors, 2023) or non-state actors, who are increasingly present on the continent.

This action takes different forms, employing, as in any strategic plan, different means and methods to achieve the intended ends. If we add to this the fact that the 'world order' is, to say the least, highly contested, old and new powers, in their search for spaces and territories, areas of influence and resources, securing key areas and denying them to their adversaries, sometimes give the impression (Sánchez Herráez, 2025b) that we are returning to a neo-imperial era.

For this reason, during the 21st century, there has been a growing presence of foreign actors in Africa, interacting in different ways with African countries and other African actors. However, in addition to the Western powers, in many cases former colonial powers on the continent, countries such as China, Japan, Russia, India and even regional powers in the Middle East, such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran and even Israel, are attempting, through various means and channels—from offering low-interest loans, financing investments and infrastructure, or offering certain services and resources, among other things—to gain advantageous positions and growing influence over the continent's vast natural resources , over its potential role as a market—given the region's high population—or, as has been pointed out, to have an active presence in strategic positions from the point of view of controlling the land and sea routes that are so important in this global world.

And Turkey, the government in Ankara, formerly known as the 'Sublime Porte' during the Ottoman Empire, is doing the same, using the tools and capabilities of state action and power at its disposal. And, quietly, gradually, without fanfare, Turkey is becoming increasingly present, visible and prominent in Africa (Orakçi, 2022) and is becoming a major player on the continent, in this area that is also part of the global dispute.

1 Background to the conflict. From memories of the past to action in the present?

Turkey has had a previous presence in Africa (Parens and Plichta, 2025), dating back to the 16th century, and, especially during the Ottoman Empire, it was mainly concentrated in North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, etc.), in relation to the Mediterranean coast and the Horn of Africa (Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia), also in relation to the Red Sea and access to routes to Islamic holy sites, such as Mecca.

This presence left its mark during the four centuries of the Ottoman Empire's presence in the area, as the dominant power, permeating, to a certain extent, the political, social and religious structures and institutions of these areas, until, after the end of the First World War (1914-1918), the Ottoman Empire, which was on the losing side, disappeared. In 1923, the Turkish Republic was founded by Mustafa Kemal, who sought to usher the country into a new era far removed from its imperial past, leaving behind, to a certain extent, the Ottoman legacy.

The Second World War, the Cold War, Turkey's entry into NATO, the struggle between the superpowers, Ankara's efforts to be part of Europe and the only relative successes in this regard generated a certain particular perception, which led to the constant growth of Ottoman nostalgia, especially since the end of the 20th century (Lee, 2025), from the explicit rejection of the Ottoman legacy during the republican era. This has had an impact not only on foreign policy, but also on national identity itself, with its nuances and differences, in a kind of neo-Ottomanism that has been growing since the end of the 20th century (Lee, 2025). especially since the end of the 20th century (Lee, 2025), in a kind of neo-Ottomanism that has an impact not only on foreign policy but also on national identity itself—with its nuances and differences—as well as the support of political Islam for the design of a neo-Ottoman agenda.

And Africa was part of that agenda. Although Ankara's growing interest in Africa initially materialised in the so-called Africa Action Plan, which was designed in 1998, it was when the AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power in November 2002 that activity and actions on the continent became exponential. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Minister of Foreign Affairs developed intense activity on the continent, including countries that had previously had little relationship with Ankara.

In line with this upward trend in relations and activity, Turkey designated 2005 as 'the year of Africa' and increased and strengthened its relations with African countries.

Relations with Africa are one of the key policies of Ankara's foreign policy, with constant and intense action and activity. In fact, Turkey achieved observer status in the African Union in 2005 and, continuing along these lines, became a 'strategic partner' of Africa at the first Africa-Turkey summit (Bacchi, 2015) held in Istanbul in August 2008.

The use of 'soft power' tools is constant, and terms such as 'common future', 'cooperation', and 'solidarity' (Parens and Plichta, 2025) were dominant in the speeches of both African and Turkish leaders, where agreements were reached to implement specific programmes guided by equality, respect and mutual benefit.

Initiatives, summits, forums and meetings will continue; the second Africa-Turkey summit was held in Malabo (Equatorial Guinea) in 2014, where progress was made on agreements and trade and other relations, including a joint implementation plan.

Ankara's action is not limited to regular summits and forums but also makes extensive use of high-level visits and the physical presence of President Erdogan and Turkish government leaders in Africa. In fact, the president has visited some thirty African countries in recent years, clearly demonstrating Turkey's interest in Africa. Similarly, two decades ago, Turkey had only a dozen embassies on the continent, compared to more than forty today (Sánchez Wilder and Morgan, 2022).

Activity in all areas has been so intense that, while Africa was considered by the Turks to be a place of poverty and conflict just over a decade ago, it is now largely seen as a place of hope and a significant economic and political partner (Özkan, 2021).

All of this must be viewed from a global perspective, from the perspective of the struggle between the powers—and the narratives

used or applied to and by each of them—such that the West—and perhaps that 'old order'—is, to a large extent, being invited to leave parts of Africa, from France as a nation to United Nations missions such as MINUSMA or the European Union—EUTM Mali—in this African nation, spaces and voids that are being filled by other nations, by other powers, (Sánchez Heraáez, 2025a) and the Ottoman imprint seems to a large extent to be seeking to capitalise on this.

The case of Turkey stands out in a special way, as it is not, apparently, just another country investing and expanding, because the process it is employing is very proactive, apparently different from that employed by other nations, and it is obtaining great returns in a very short space of time, especially in economic matters—as well as in other aspects—(Özkan, 2021).

To this end, the use of soft power has become a key tool for Ankara (Siradagi, 2022)—including the legacy of the Ottoman past—which has allowed it to gradually increase its presence and action in other fields and areas as the African continent is of paramount strategic importance to Ankara on a planet undergoing radical reconfiguration, and where Africa has a powerful role to play.

2 Current situation of the conflict. Turkey, a power in Africa?

Every nation uses its tools of power to achieve its objectives; these tools of power are usually summarised by the acronym DIME (Baqués, 2021) (Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic), although there are, of course, variations and derivatives. Turkey has been focusing its activity (Parlar and Dipama, 2023) on various areas in a highly orchestrated manner.

2.1 Turkey, a diplomatic and informational power in Africa!

Turkey has been able to use its soft power tools—humanitarian aid, education, religion, diplomacy, etc.—very efficiently and has offered an alternative, a different path to that of the traditional powers present and active in Africa, such as the Western powers, Russia and China itself. In fact, it has already been pointed out that diplomatic missions have practically quadrupled in a few years (Vial and Bouvier, 2025a), as a clear sign of Ankara's interest in Africa.

President Erdogan himself (2021), in his work *A More Just World is Possible*, not only points out that the world is bigger than five nations (Natz, 2024)—referring to the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—but also that current institutions are ineffective, making it necessary to create another, more multicultural world order. And this is where Ankara comes in, especially in Africa, as the pole, the focus for leading this option against the 'Western' world order.

Thus, for example, in Somalia, a country ravaged by a multitude of calamities, in 2011 Turkey became involved—and in a constant manner—in humanitarian actions to alleviate the human suffering of the population, including a visit by President Erdogan and Turkish action by the government, companies and non-governmental organisations increased in sectors such as education, agriculture and health—without asking for anything in return—which contributed to creating a climate of closeness and trust between the Somali population and Ankara, a perception reinforced by historical and religious ties. Years later—this issue will be addressed later—this would even lead to the authorisation of the establishment of a large military base where Somali military and police forces are trained, while Western nations lament the low level of coordination with the country and point out (Wasuge, 2016) that Turkey is more visible and quicker to act than they are, that Turkey is the power of reference in this nation. The appropriate use of soft power undoubtedly facilitates the creation of subsequent relationships that could be framed within hard power, such as military power.

Development aid and humanitarian aid (Parens and Plichta, 2025) are therefore an essential pillar of Turkey's presence on the continent, given the low level of development in many African countries. Access to drinking water and electricity is a key issue for a large part of Africa's population, which is why Ankara pays special attention to the development of projects of this type on the continent, in addition to building hospitals, schools, etc. These centres directly and noticeably improve the quality of life of the African population, which substantially improves the host country and the population's perception of Turkey and increases Ankara's influence in all necessary areas of action. As a simple example, the fact that a hospital in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia (The Economist, 2022), bears Erdogan's name is a powerful tool of influence.

The education sector has also been an area in which Ankara has been actively involved in Africa. Through a state foundation, the Maarif Foundation, it has supported seventy thousand students from fifty-five countries in recent years (Daily Sabah, 2025) and has similarly increased opportunities for higher education for African students. In fact, it is estimated (Parens and Plichta, 2025) that some fifteen thousand African students have obtained scholarships from the Turkish state, so that instead of heading to Europe for higher education, the path to Turkey is becoming increasingly common. And it is a two-way street, as the flow of people, businesspeople, tourists, migrants (Orakçi, 2022), etc. travelling from Africa and to Africa from Turkey is growing, generating a very positive trend for the establishment and maintenance of all kinds of relationships.

In addition, Turkey is gradually deploying its news agency, the Anadolu Agency, in different African countries (Ethiosports, 2014) in a gradual manner, allowing it to provide its own information and images without relying on those supplied by major global networks such as the BBC or France 24, as well as organising courses and various activities to increase the level of training of African journalists, which has a direct impact on the narratives that are disseminated.

And although Turkey is a secular country, it does not rule out the use of religion as an element of soft power, building and financing the creation of mosques in Africa in an attempt to achieve relevance in the different existing currents of Islam *vis-à-vis* other nations. In fact, Saudi Arabia has exerted great influence and action in this field, building mosques in Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Mali; Iran has also built mosques in Senegal, Ivory Coast and Guinea, and Turkey has been very active in Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Ghana and Mali. In fact, in 2019, it inaugurated the largest mosque in Djibouti, and during the opening ceremony, the Turkish government representative present at the event pointed out that the construction would serve to strengthen the ties of 'our religion, culture and brotherhood' (TRT World, 2019). In 2021, Ankara inaugurated a large mosque in Ghana, which also serves as a cultural complex and is intended to demonstrate religious harmony between Muslims and Christians (AA, 2021b), in many cases using historiography and symbolism from the Ottoman past.

All of this contributes to Africa's view of Ankara being very positive for the time being and to the narrative that the presence, action—

and even the deployment of military forces, which is discussed below—is beneficial for everyone, especially for the African host nations. This enables Ankara to take the lead in supporting these nations over other powers whose narratives, rightly or wrongly, position them as colonialist or exploitative. This provides Turkey with a substantial advantage in undertaking all kinds of activities.

And among these activities, as another factor in a state's actions, is the economy.

2.2 Turkey, an economic powerhouse in Africa!

With regard to economic cooperation (Parens and Plichta, 2025) and trade relations, these have become one of Ankara's main priorities on the continent. In fact, Turkey regularly organises economic forums and various activities that have enabled trade to increase from three billion dollars in 2003 to twenty-six billion dollars in 2021, in addition to Turkey's direct investment in Africa, which is close to ten billion dollars. These figures show that a large number of Turkish private companies are investing in different African countries. In fact, as a sign of this growing relationship, it is significant that the Turkish flag carrier Turkish Airlines offers sixty-one different destinations to forty African countries.

In the field of infrastructure development, Turkish companies are expanding rapidly across the continent, meaning, and this is part of the narrative constantly used by Turkey (AA, 2024), that these projects and developments create employment opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Africans and the total amount of investment is significant; in 2023, Turkish companies carried out a total of 1,864 projects in Africa, with an investment of $85.4 billion. For example, Ankara is financing major infrastructure projects such as the new airport in Addis Ababa, the port and several roads in Senegal (Parens and Plichta, 2025).

It is important to remember the great interest aroused by Africa's natural resources—not only oil and hydrocarbons, but also uranium, gold and, increasingly, strategic minerals—and it is also necessary to remember that Turkey needs to import about three-quarters of the energy it requires (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.) and wishes to achieve a greater degree of independence in this regard.

Ankara imports oil and liquefied natural gas from African countries such as Algeria, which has become one of the main exporters of

gas to Turkey; 90% of bilateral trade between Nigeria and Turkey consists of imports of liquefied natural gas. Chad, a mineral-rich country, has shown its willingness to invite Turkish companies to establish themselves in the country, as did Somalia, so that Turkey could exploit the oil off its coast. And so, in the energy sector, which is key for Africa—and for Turkey—innovative projects have been developed by companies such as Turkey's Karpowership[1], which specialises in the development of floating gas plants—such as those in the large African cities of Dakar and Freetown, among others—making this Turkish company a key energy supplier for many African countries.

But it is not only hydrocarbon-related issues that are being addressed; in its quest for greater proactive energy capacity, Ankara aims to achieve this through the development of a nuclear power plant programme, for which it is relying on Russia and its company Rosatom to provide the necessary fuel. for the planned reactors... but which, in the context of the sanctions imposed on Moscow for the current war in Ukraine, is motivating Ankara to seek potential alternative sources of uranium for this project, thereby increasing interest in this resource, ... and Niger (Parens and Plichta, 2025) is a country rich in uranium.

Trade relations are growing, the narrative of mutual benefit continues to be successful, and trade relations and agreements are increasing. This is true both and so much so that it can be stated unequivocally that Turkey is a new power in Africa, also in economic terms (Vial and Bouvier, 2025b). In fact, Ankara has signed a multitude of free trade agreements with several African countries, resulting, as indicated above, in mutual trade growth... although, for example, Morocco is seeking to renegotiate its free trade agreement with Turkey, concerned to some extent by the existing trade deficit (Walaw, 2025).

It is also necessary to remember that resource-rich areas are not always found in stable countries or regions—and in Africa, less and less so—which greatly complicates the extraction and export of these resources and requires a growing demand for security to keep the supply chain secure. And that is where military force comes into play.

[1] The company's projects in Africa can be consulted on its website: https://karpowership.com/africa

2.3 Turkey, a military power in Africa!

In relation to the military and security sector (Parens and Plichta, 2025), in Libya and Somalia, the Turkish Armed Forces have implemented training programmes for the armies of these countries, among others[2], and Turkish forces have participated in peacekeeping missions in Central Africa and Mali.

However, one of Ankara's main achievements in the security sector has been the construction of a military training centre called TURKSOM in Mogadishu in 2017 to train the Somali National Army. At this centre, more than fifteen thousand Somali troops have been trained by Turkish military personnel, and specific special forces training capabilities have also been provided to some units of the Somali Army (AA, 2021a).

Furthermore, considering Ankara's interest in the Horn of Africa (Parens and Plichta, 2025), due to the region's crucial importance for global trade and access to the Indian Ocean, this base provides Turkey with access to the Indian Ocean, as well as various types of support for the Somali government, and also raises a certain rivalry with the United Arab Emirates, which also has an interest in the complex situation in Somalia.

In any case, Turkey's presence and action in Somalia—as in many other African countries—is growing. In fact, in 2024, it signed a memorandum of understanding with this nation to strengthen the Somali Navy (Agenzia Fides, 2024) and, in return, Turkey will receive 30% of the revenue from Somalia's exclusive economic zone, which also allowed Ankara to have a permanent naval presence in the Red Sea.

However, it is not only the Turkish Armed Forces that are involved in this area; military contractors are also employed. Thus, the Turkish company SADAT[3], which is sometimes referred to as Ankara's version of the Russian Wagner Group, is a private security company but operates largely under the dictates of the state (Parens and Plichta, 2025), although it formally maintains some separation. This company emerged in 2012, in the context of the Libyan civil war, and since then, the company has grown and

[2] A detailed study on this subject can be found at Vial and Bouvier (2025c). Available at https://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Turkiye-the-new-regional-power-in-Africa-3-3-A-military-presence-that-is-now.html

[3] SADAT, International Defence Consultancy. Available at: https://sadat.com.tr/en/

expanded into different areas of Africa, providing not only training services to soldiers, but also direct security services, protection of authorities and counter-terrorism operations, in exchange for guarantees for the extraction of resources by the host nations, such as in certain areas of the Sahel. In a show of Ankara's pragmatism, both the Turkish and Russian companies coincide in certain scenarios in the Sahel, while in Libya they are on opposing sides.

The importance of the religious factor in this company should not be overlooked (Valdés de Olives, 2025: 34-40). Its founder, a Turkish army general, became an advisor to President Erdogan in his cabinet, which is why promoted and encouraged intra-Muslim cooperation and gave SADAT a powerful link to religion, as even the name of the company comes from the name given to notable families who were descendants of the prophet (Venere, n.d.). And while the use of these ideals wins supporters, it is no less true that, for example, in the Sahel, where they have to fight against jihadist groups—also Muslim—it sometimes causes some dysfunction in these alignments, as well as occasional friction between Russian and Turkish contractors.

Another activity in this field is the sale of arms, and although Turkey is not a major seller on a global scale, its activity in Africa has led it to become the fourth largest exporter of military equipment to the continent, and the demand for Turkish arms and military equipment is growing steadily (Parens and Plichta, 2025), as efficiency parameters and cost-effectiveness are highly valued, especially in these countries, which in many cases have very limited budgets.

In fact, arms sales are one of the pillars of Turkish expansion in many African countries, which, especially in those engaged in fierce struggles against terrorism, greatly enhances Ankara's actions and presence. Thus, after a first batch of Bayraktar TB2 drones purchased by Bamako and delivered in December 2022, in mid-February 2023, Mali received a second batch of drones (Ecsaharaui, 2023) of the same type, which were deployed in the city of Gao, in the north of the country.

Drones constitute a very substantial part of Turkish arms sales in Africa, where they are used for both intelligence missions and air support. In addition, Turkey also exports light weapons, training aircraft, helicopters and armoured vehicles to a growing number of countries across Africa.

Turkey is therefore a diplomatic, informational, military and economic power in Africa... but what do the other powers think about this?

3 Role of external actors. Room for everyone or points of friction?

Turkey is not the most important power in Africa, as other nations have greater capacity and presence on the continent (Parens and Plichta, 2025). However, it is necessary to consider that, on occasions, not being identified as a major power provides a number of advantages, as a lower level of ambition or presence than that sought by the United States, China, Russia or the European Union itself means that it is much easier for that other nation—in this case, Turkey—to be able to manoeuvre appropriately to exert influence and act in a way that pursues its national interests, in principle, in a 'discreet' manner.

Even despite being a member of NATO—and having a long-standing rivalry with Moscow—and even having been present in certain areas of Africa as the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has been able to position itself both as a nation and through its companies and agencies, and has developed an attitude and narrative of a neutral actor on the sidelines of the competition between powers. And so, while there is concern about the positions being taken in Africa by Russia, China, or the role of the United States or the European Union, Turkey has so far been able to reap benefits in all areas without arousing the suspicion of the major powers.

The interests of the major powers in Africa, a disputed continent in a globally contested world, are diverse: raw materials, security spaces, the installation of Atlantic naval bases, control of strategic mineral resources[4]... and, so far, Turkey has not only been able to manoeuvre adeptly in Africa, but also within the framework of the global dispute, as it is a NATO country but one that repeatedly points to and targets the global south, offering tactical and specific alliances and support when necessary, even with strategic adversaries—as in the case of Russia—and which, thanks to a narrative that is appropriate and widely accepted by most African countries, has been increasingly positioning itself.

[4] An analysis of the interests of the major powers in Africa can be found in chapter 1 of the book *Africa: the ambition of world powers on the continent*. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/cuaderno-de-estrategia-221-copiar-

This growing position could cause problems with the major powers... but it is already causing problems with the middle powers of the East, which are watching Ankara establish itself in key areas such as the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, with significant specific weight.

At the moment, it seems unlikely (Parens and Plichta, 2025) that Ankara will have major disputes with the United States, Russia or China, so, in principle and for the time being, these nations are not taking too much action against Turkish activities in Africa. However, the situation could change if trade disputes arise in certain areas with China—over the construction of certain infrastructure, for example—or competition in certain areas between Russian and Turkish private military companies, or over certain natural resources.

A priori, Turkey's biggest rival in Africa appears to be the United Arab Emirates; in fact, they are on opposing sides in Libya and Somalia. And although the United Arab Emirates does not have a similar deployment of capabilities to Ankara, it can be very active through elements related to the financing of certain actions, such as the sale of arms or support for certain groups and factions.

However, recently (July 2025), the first meeting of the so-called 'High-Level Strategic Council' (African Initiative, 2024) took place in Ankara between Turkey and the UAE, with the aim of turning the intense competition between the two nations in Africa into a kind of strategic partnership.

The existing disputes between the two nations, both in some of the active conflicts on the continent and in its 'hot spots'—North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, Sudan and the Red Sea coast—but especially in Libya, where they support opposing sides—and with a situation that is very complex to resolve—have been put on the table, with Ankara seeking to achieve greater efficiency in the use of its resources by reducing disputes with Abu Dhabi, which would allow for greater capacity for action in Africa and in Turkey itself.

With the West largely displaced from much of Africa and the anti-colonial narrative of South-South cooperation and mutual support triumphant, Turkey will apparently be able to continue increasing its presence and action on the continent... until some major power feels its interests threatened and says, 'enough is enough'?

Conclusions and outlook. A new dispute on the horizon?

On a planet undergoing geopolitical reconfiguration, where old and new powers are vying for a position that will allow them to pursue their national aspirations and interests, Turkey has made a strong commitment to Africa, among other areas.

To this end, it has applied its tools of national power in a very intelligent and active manner and, so far, without causing serious disruption to any other power, large or medium-sized, on the African continent.

Depending on how the situation on the continent and globally develops, Turkey's presence and actions could become an impediment to the interests of another power in some respects, which would most likely lead to friction that could generate conflict.

The world, the world order, is changing and being questioned. No space, power or nation can feel free from facing some kind of conflict. This is even more so if it is a medium-sized, expansionist power such as Turkey has been in Africa until now.

The future is not written, although similar trends tend to lead to similar results. Perhaps the Sublime Porte will face some challenge in the near future. Or perhaps not.

APPENDIX

Chronology of the conflict and geopolitical indicators

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	**EVENTS**
16TH CENTURY	Ottoman Empire makes its presence felt in Africa
1922	The Ottoman Empire disappears
1923	The Republic of Turkey is born
1952	Turkey joins NATO.
1989	The Berlin Wall falls. The Cold War comes to an end.
1998	Turkey designs Action Plan in Africa
2002	AKP (Justice and Development Party) comes to power.
2005	Turkey designates this year as 'the year of Africa'
2005	Turkey obtains observer status in the African Union

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	**EVENTS**
2008	Turkey becomes a 'strategic partner' of Africa at the first Africa-Turkey summit held in Istanbul in August 2008
2011	Massive support from Turkey to Somalia
2012	SADAT Private Military Company is founded.
20	Second Africa-Turkey Summit held in Malabo (Equatorial Guinea)
2017	Turkey opens a military training centre called TURKSOM in Mogadishu (Somalia)
2019	Turkey inaugurates the largest mosque in Djibouti
2022	Turkey delivers drones to Mali
July	The first meeting of the so-called 'High-Level Strategic Council' between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates took place in Ankara.

Table of geopolitical indicators

In the tables below, data is from 2025 unless otherwise stated.
Source: CIA, The World Factbook

TURKEY		
Area (km²)		783,562
GDP in billions of dollars		1323 (2024 est.)
GDP structure	Agriculture	5.6
	Industry	25.9
	Services	56.8 (2024 est.) *NOTE:* The figures do not add up to 100% due to a lack of access to certain data for each sector.
GDP per capita (dollars)		35,300 (2024 est.)
GDP growth rate		3,2 (2024 est.)
Exports: in billions of dollars		372,756 (2024 est.)
Imports: in billions of dollars		367,022 (2024 est.)
Population		84,119,531 (2024 est.)

TURKEY		
Age structure	0-14	21.7
	15	68.6
	Más de 65	9.6 (2024 est.)
Population growth rate		0.61 (2024 est.)
Ethnic groups		Turks 70-75% Kurds 19% Other minority groups 6-11% (2016 est.)
Religions		Muslims 99.8% (mostly Sunni) Others 0.2% (mostly Christian and Jewish)
Languages		Turkish (official), Kurdish, other minority languages
Literacy rate		97 (2021)
Population below the poverty line		13.9 (2022 est.)
Military expenditure as % of GDP		2.3% (2025 est.)

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Chapter Six

Crisis and challenge: national security in Ecuador as a political and social problem

Rocío de los Reyes Ramírez

Abstract

Ecuador faces an unprecedented security crisis, resulting from the expansion of organised crime, institutional corruption and the collapse of the prison system. The state's response, marked by militarisation and the declaration of an 'internal armed conflict', has redefined the relationship between security, power and democratic legitimacy. Under the leadership of Daniel Noboa, the country has adopted coercive policies and legal reforms that seek to restore state control, but which also pose risks of authoritarianism and the erosion of rights. Citizens live between fear and hope, in a constant tension between order and freedom. In this context, national security is revealed as a political, social and structural challenge that requires a balance between operational effectiveness, institutional strengthening and respect for the rule of law.

Key words

National security, Organised crime, Daniel Noboa, Ecuador.

'He who does not live safely does not live'.

Francisco de Quevedo

Introduction

As global tensions escalate, Ecuador is currently experiencing one of the most delicate moments in its recent history in terms of security. Over the last few decades, the country has gone from being considered a territory of relative political and social stability to becoming the scene of an unprecedented escalation of violence, marked by the rise of organised crime, drug trafficking and institutional corruption.

The collapse of the prison system has been one of the most visible factors in this deterioration, with prisons dominated by criminal gangs functioning as centres of operations for illicit activities. Added to this is the penetration of drug trafficking into state structures, the strengthening of local armed groups and an increase in political violence that has even affected the ruling elites, as evidenced by the murders of candidates and authorities in 2023 (Gordon, 2023). The result is a scenario in which security is no longer a temporary problem but has become a structural challenge of national scope. This deterioration in security has transformed not only citizens' perception of the state and its capacity to protect them, but also the country's political and social dynamics (Basabe-Serrano, 2023). Violence in Ecuador should not be understood as a sudden phenomenon, but rather as the outcome of an accumulation of internal processes and weaknesses that have left the country vulnerable to drug trafficking networks. This 'labyrinthine' framework reflects the state's difficulty in responding effectively, while underscoring the need for measures that combine coercion with institutional strengthening policies (De los Reyes, 2024).

The accelerated transformation of security has tested the resilience of institutions and social cohesion. Far from being confined to the peripheries, violence has spread to strategic urban centres such as Guayaquil and Quito, affecting the daily lives of millions of citizens and increasing the perception of insecurity. In this context, the government's declaration of 'internal armed conflict' in January 2024 marked a turning point. This measure, unprecedented in the country's democratic history, introduced a new legal and operational framework to address

a threat that combines organised crime, prison insurgency and political violence.

The security crisis facing Ecuador must therefore be understood as a complex and multidimensional process, in which criminal actors, institutional limitations and a state response still under construction converge. Beyond the seriousness of the situation, this moment also opens up the possibility of rethinking security from a comprehensive approach that articulates coercive force with a far-reaching agenda of institutional and social reform.

This chapter proposes to examine national security in Ecuador from a comprehensive perspective that articulates the political, social, and criminal dimensions of the problem. Throughout the analysis, we will address the structural causes of insecurity, the role of the state and its institutions, recent political responses, and the social consequences of violence, and we will seek to provide a critical view that allows for an understanding of the challenges facing the country in building sustainable security.

1 Background

The current security crisis in Ecuador cannot be understood without looking back at the structural processes that, since the end of the 20th century, have shaped a vulnerable and fragmented state. The financial crisis of 1999 marked a turning point: the bankruptcy of 70% of banking institutions and estimated losses of eight billion dollars triggered a deep recession and an unprecedented institutional collapse (Ganuza, 2019). The dollarisation of the economy, decreed in 2000, partially stabilised inflation but eroded monetary sovereignty and deepened social inequalities, creating a climate of mistrust towards the political and financial elites.

In this scenario of uncertainty, a succession of weak and short-lived governments emerged. Gustavo Noboa Bejarano, following the overthrow of Jamil Mahuad, attempted to restore fiscal stability and regain international confidence, but his administration was perceived as a continuation of the neoliberal model that the population rejected (Pachano, 2010). The following years, marked by the arrival and subsequent removal of Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005, revealed the persistence of structural political instability and a citizenry that was increasingly sceptical of the ruling class.

The political shift came with Rafael Correa (2007–2017), whose 'Citizen Revolution' ushered in a period of expansion in public spending, investment and infrastructure construction, aided by high oil prices. The new Constitution of 2008 and Correa's pro-sovereignty rhetoric consolidated a strong presidential system, which succeeded in reducing poverty and strengthening the state, but also weakened institutional checks and balances and concentrated power in the executive branch (Basabe-Serrano, 2012). However, beneath this apparent stability, a silent threat began to brew: the consolidation of drug trafficking and organised crime networks in Ecuadorian territory, driven by its geographical position between Colombia and Peru—the world's two main cocaine producers—direct access to the Pacific Ocean, which facilitated export routes to North America, Europe and Asia, and the state's limited capacity to control them, as it had historically been on the margins of the internal armed conflicts that characterised Colombia and Peru in previous decades (De los Reyes, 2024).

The demobilisation of the FARC in Colombia (2016) and the expansion of Mexican and European cartels reconfigured drug trafficking routes, turning Ecuador into a key logistical and financial enclave. Correa's decision to close the US base in Manta in 2009, although consistent with his pro-sovereignty policy, reduced cooperation in intelligence and maritime surveillance and increased the country's vulnerability to criminal networks. At the same time, suspicions grew about the illicit financing of political campaigns and the infiltration of criminal structures into local spheres (Ecuavisa, 2018), which eroded institutional trust.

This dual scenario—economic prosperity and state consolidation, but at the same time the emergence of new transnational threats—laid the foundations for a paradox that would mark the following years: a stronger state economically and politically, but at the same time more vulnerable to the expansion of organised crime and its effects on national security.

Lenín Moreno's takeover in 2017 marked a political break with *Correismo*, but not a structural solution. His attempt to dismantle the centralised apparatus inherited from his predecessor involved the elimination of ministries and coordinating bodies, further weakening the state security architecture (Velasco and Andrade, 2024). Economic reforms and reduced public spending were combined with a collapse of the prison system and an unprecedented increase in criminal violence. The prison massa-

cres of 2019 and 2021—with more than a hundred victims in the Penitenciaría del Litoral—symbolised the overflowing of institutions in the face of the growing power of gangs (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

During the government of Guillermo Lasso (2021-2023), the crisis reached a new dimension. Despite the declaration of multiple states of emergency and military deployment, violence continued to escalate, with more than six thousand homicides between January and October 2023 alone (González, 2023). Institutional weakness, political polarisation and the lack of a comprehensive strategy exacerbated the sense of state collapse. Amid social pressure and corruption scandals, Lasso resorted to a 'cross death'1, dissolving the National Assembly and calling early elections that brought Daniel Noboa to power in 2023.

Thus, when Noboa took office, Ecuador was already a country caught between structural violence, the penetration of organised crime and the loss of state legitimacy. The fragility inherited from previous decades not only conditions current policies but also explains the depth of the challenge facing his administration: rebuilding national security in an environment marked by mistrust, inequality and social fear.

2 Current situation

2.1 The state's response: militarisation, security policies and Daniel Noboa's leadership

Daniel Noboa's rise to the presidency in November 2023 came in the midst of this storm. With a discourse of renewal and pragmatism, Noboa promised to restore security through a combination of social investment, international cooperation and forceful action against crime. However, barely two months after taking office, the country was shaken by an unprecedented wave of violence. On 7 January 2024, coordinated attacks were reported in several cities, along with simultaneous prison riots, hostage-taking, kidnappings of police officers and bombings. The most symbolic episode occurred when an armed group stormed the TC Televisión channel in Guayaquil and broadcast its threat to the Ecuadorian state live on television.

[1] 'Cross death' is a constitutional clause whereby the National Assembly is dissolved and elections are subsequently called to renew the legislative and executive powers.

Figure 1. Soldiers arriving at a prison in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Source: Vicente Gaibor Del Pino/Reuters/Nytimes

The widespread violence and loss of state authority prompted the executive branch to resort to constitutional emergency mechanisms. On 8 January 2024, Noboa declared a state of emergency in response to what he defined as a 'serious internal disturbance' following the escape of Adolfo Macías, alias Fito, leader of the Los Choneros organisation, whose escape highlighted the profound deterioration of the prison system and criminal infiltration of public institutions. From then on, emergency decrees became a constant tool used by the government to tackle violence in various provinces of the country, including Guayas, Los Ríos, Manabí, Orellana, Santa Elena, El Oro, and Sucumbíos, as well as in specific cantons of Quito, Camilo Ponce Enríquez, and La Troncal (Europa Press, 2025).

The state of emergency involved the suspension of several fundamental rights, such as the inviolability of the home, freedom of assembly and movement, as well as the establishment of curfews in certain territories and at certain times. These measures were justified as indispensable for restoring public order and regaining state control over areas dominated by organised crime. However, the repeated application of states of emergency has generated criticism regarding their sustainability and constitutionality, especially following the rulings of the Constitutional Court, which in several cases has warned about the legal limits

of the executive branch and the need to justify the suspension of rights in detail.

In mid-2024, the Government took a further step by declaring the existence of an 'internal armed conflict' in the country, with the aim of establishing a legal framework that would allow for broader and more direct intervention by the Armed Forces in internal security operations. This semantic and political change marked a break with the traditional view of criminal violence as a public order problem and redefined criminal gangs as terrorist groups or non-state armed actors. Under this premise, the Army assumed a central role in the recovery of prisons, border control and joint operations with the National Police in highly conflictive urban areas.

The militarisation of internal security thus became the main focus of Noboa's policy. The executive argued that the military deployment was a necessary response to the institutional inability to contain violence. Military operations included raids without warrants, checkpoints in residential areas, and permanent patrols in cities such as Guayaquil, Esmeraldas, and Manta, epicentres of criminal violence.

The results of these measures have been ambiguous so far. In January 2025, Ecuador recorded 781 homicides, an increase of 55% over the same month last year. Although the total number of murders in 2024 was slightly lower than in 2023—6,818 compared to more than 7,500—the country remains among the most violent in Latin America (Prensa.ec, 2025). States of emergency and militarisation have made it possible to partially regain control of some prisons and temporarily reduce crime rates in certain areas, but without yet achieving structural stabilisation.

All these measures, although understandable given the urgency of the situation, involve significant risks. The first is the normalisation of the state of emergency as a mechanism of government, which can weaken democratic controls and expand the discretion of the executive branch. The second is the reliance on a military response, without a clear strategy for institutional strengthening, judicial reform and social reintegration. And the third, perhaps the most serious, is that militarisation without political and social support can exacerbate existing tensions and displace the problem without resolving it structurally (De los Reyes, 2024).

Indeed, as Bergman (2022) points out, intensive repression policies in Latin America have had contradictory effects: in the short

term, they reduce visible crime, but in the long term, they tend to fragment gangs, encourage new violence and erode the rule of law. In the case of Ecuador, the challenge is to prevent the 'war on gangs' from leading to a prolonged crisis of human rights and governance.

2.2 Intelligence legislation and new security laws

In addition to coercive measures, Daniel Noboa's administration has promoted significant legal reform aimed at institutionalising new security tools. Since mid-2025, these initiatives have taken shape with the approval of the *Organic Intelligence Law* and other regulations aimed at strengthening the legal framework for combating organised crime, in a context of high social and political conflict.

The *Organic Intelligence Law* was approved by the National Assembly on 10 June 2025 with seventy-seven votes in favour, after a legislative process fraught with controversy. President Noboa decided not to object to the law, so it was published in the Official Register the following day, making it part of the current legal system. This legislation introduces for the first time in Ecuador a National Intelligence System (SNI), composed of subsystems linked to military, police, tax, financial, customs, prison and Presidential Military House institutions. The stated objective is to provide the State with modern instruments to deal with internal and external threats to national security. The law reorganises the national intelligence system through the creation of the National Intelligence Centre (CNI), a body directly attached to the Presidency of the Republic that replaces the former Strategic Intelligence Centre (CIES) and concentrates the functions of collection, analysis and coordination of sensitive information (National Assembly of Ecuador, 2025).

A central feature of the law is the creation of a governing body with ministerial status, whose highest authority will be appointed directly by the President of the Republic. In addition, the law grants powers to request information from telecommunications companies without the need for a court order, as well as to intercept, open and retain communications by administrative decision of the intelligence authority. It also incorporates a permanent fund for confidential expenses, secret identities and the possibility of operating under cover in certain procedures.

However, not everyone agrees. The centralised nature and scope of the powers granted to the executive branch have generated intense controversy in both political circles and civil society.

Human rights organisations, trade unions and citizens' groups have filed multiple appeals of unconstitutionality before the Constitutional Court, arguing that several articles of the law and its regulations violate fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution and international treaties. The main criticisms relate to the lack of a precise definition of key concepts such as 'comprehensive state security', which could lead to legal loopholes; the excessive scope of the information confidentiality regime; the possibility of interceptions and surveillance without judicial authorisation; and the weakness of democratic control and transparency mechanisms.

Specifically, on 4 August 2025, the Constitutional Court provisionally suspended twelve articles of the law, eight articles of the regulations and the first general provision in response to these demands (El Comercio, 2025). This decision highlighted the tensions between the government's need to strengthen security and the guarantees of the rule of law, which opened a debate on the proportionality between operational effectiveness and respect for human rights.

Compared to other countries in the region, the Ecuadorian model is closer to the Mexican model than to the Colombian or Brazilian models. In Mexico, the National Security Law grants broad powers to the National Intelligence Centre (CNI) under the Ministry of the Interior, with little parliamentary or judicial oversight, while in Colombia, Law No. 1621 of 2013 provides for the existence of a specific legislative commission responsible for overseeing intelligence activities, giving greater institutional legitimacy to the process. Brazil, for its part, offers a more balanced model in terms of civilian control, as its Law No. 9883 of 1999 establishes the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) under the supervision of the Institutional Security Office of the Presidency, but with parliamentary oversight through a joint commission.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2024) has warned that the regional trend toward expanding intelligence powers without effective controls constitutes a structural risk to Latin American democracies, as it can lead to mass surveillance and political persecution under the guise of national security.

Additionally, complementary legal reforms aimed at strengthening the state's powers to combat criminal gangs were approved this year. These reforms include harsher penalties for crimes related to organised crime and fuel theft, accelerated procedures for the confiscation of assets linked to illegal activities, as well as expanded powers for security forces in operations (Reuters, 2025).

These laws seek to close the legal loopholes that criminal organisations use to operate, launder money, and evade justice.

From a critical perspective, these laws represent an attempt to modernise and equip the state with more robust tools to deal with real threats of violence, drug trafficking and territorial control by armed gangs. However, the expansion of executive power in the area of intelligence, without a clear design for effective checks and balances, poses serious risks. These include the possibility of abuse, political persecution, mass surveillance, the erosion of constitutional guarantees, and the loss of public confidence if transparency and effective accountability for violations are not ensured.

2.3 Social impact and public perception of security policies

The security policies implemented by President Daniel Noboa have had a profound and ambiguous social impact on Ecuadorian society. Although the declaration of internal armed conflict and the militarisation of large areas of the country were welcomed by significant sectors of the population as a necessary measure in the face of the collapse of public order, they also generated a climate of uncertainty, polarisation and social unrest. Latinobarómetro surveys (2024) show that 72% of Ecuadorians considered insecurity to be the main national problem, while 58% said they had 'a lot or quite a lot of confidence' in the Armed Forces, compared to only 21% in the National Police and 17% in political parties. This pattern shows a growing militarisation of public trust, where the legitimacy of the use of force tends to replace that of political consensus.

The persistence of violence has changed the daily lives of Ecuadorians. In the main cities—Guayaquil, Esmeraldas and Manta—the population has become accustomed to living with armed patrols, checkpoints and prolonged curfews. The exceptional measures, initially conceived as temporary, have led to a kind of 'normal-

isation of the state of emergency', in which citizens accept the permanent military presence as an inevitable part of urban life. Various human rights organisations have warned of arbitrary detentions, excessive use of force and house searches without warrants, especially in working-class neighbourhoods where the armed forces and police carry out joint operations.

Public perception is marked by a dilemma between the demand for security and the fear of authoritarianism. In a survey by the Perfiles de Opinión Institute, 64% of those consulted said they supported Noboa's policies on organised crime, although 48% acknowledged feeling less free to express political opinions or hold public demonstrations during the months of increased military control. This unstable balance reflects a citizenry that, while seeking protection from violence, fears that the price of security will be the erosion of civil liberties.

Militarisation has also had a different impact depending on social class and territory. In higher-income urban areas, security policies have been interpreted as a relief from crime and a restoration of order. In contrast, in working-class neighbourhoods and coastal communities—where the presence of criminal gangs is more intense—military operations have exacerbated precariousness and fear. Testimonies collected by *BBC Mundo* (2025) indicate that in areas such as Durán and Esmeraldas, families have limited their children's attendance at school and restricted their movements for fear of armed clashes.

In this context, the psychological impact of violence is a growing phenomenon. The Ecuadorian Institute of Mental Health (ISAME, 2025) reported a 34% increase in cases of anxiety and post-traumatic stress during the first half of 2025, especially among young people between the ages of fifteen and thirty in the coastal provinces. Fear of violence and the loss of institutional security references are generating a feeling of 'structural helplessness' that translates into social withdrawal, self-imposed isolation and, in some cases, internal migration to rural areas or abroad.

The reactions of civil society have been mixed. While some citizen movements such as *Ecuador Sin Miedo* (Ecuador Without Fear) and *Guayas Unido por la Paz* (Guayas United for Peace) support the emergency measures, human rights organisations and university groups have promoted campaigns denouncing abuses of authority and demanding the restoration of civilian control over military operations. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationali-

ties of Ecuador (CONAIE) has also expressed concern about the expansion of the concept of the 'internal enemy', which could be used to criminalise social protest or political mobilisation.

Figure 2. Police guard a march against Noboa in Quito. Source: EFE/ABC

Social mobilisation has escalated, as evidenced by the announcement of a referendum in November to decide on the presence of foreign military bases in the country, which places the security debate not only in the operational arena, but also in the constitutional and political arena. This announcement has sparked a wave of protests in various cities across the country, led by student groups, indigenous organisations such as CONAIE and human rights groups, who denounce a threat to national sovereignty and fear that the installation of foreign bases will reactivate forms of geopolitical control and internal repression. The demonstrations have been particularly intense in Quito, Cuenca and Guayaquil, where marches, sit-ins and public forums have been held in rejection of what many consider to be a 'covert militarisation' of the territory. For large sectors of the population, the referendum not only raises a foreign policy issue, but also symbolises a breach of the 2008 constitutional pact, opening the door to a redefinition of the state's role in defence and security. At the same time, other social groups—especially in areas

affected by drug trafficking—have expressed their support for the measure, seeing it as an opportunity to strengthen the fight against organised crime through international cooperation. This polarisation shows that citizens' perceptions of security are no longer limited to the effectiveness of operations, but are intertwined with deeper notions of national identity, autonomy and democratic legitimacy.

In institutional terms, Noboa's policies have led to a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and its citizens. The expansion of the security apparatus has reinforced the figure of the president as the guarantor of order, to the detriment of the role of intermediate and control institutions. This phenomenon is reflected in the growing personalisation of politics and the tendency to link the effectiveness of the government with the coercive capacity of the state. According to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2025), this shift in the axis of legitimacy from welfare to order is one of the most profound transformations of the Ecuadorian political system in recent decades.

In short, Daniel Noboa's security strategy has reconfigured not only the institutional architecture of the state, but also the collective psychology of the nation. Ecuador in 2025 lives in a permanent tension between fear and hope: between the urgent need to restore peace and the risk of sacrificing fundamental freedoms in the name of that same security. This new balance, sustained by militarisation and a citizenry increasingly accustomed to exceptionalism, represents one of the greatest political and social challenges for the country's immediate future.

3 Role of external actors

The security crisis in Ecuador is part of a regional and international context that not only provides technical and diplomatic resources, but also raises tensions over sovereignty, cooperation and shared responsibilities. Actors such as the United States, the Organisation of American States (OAS), the European Union and neighbouring countries—Colombia, Peru and Mexico—are involved to varying degrees, which directly influences the formulation of the security policies of Daniel Noboa's government.

The United States plays a key role in technical, financial and intelligence cooperation with Ecuador. Joint projects supported by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement

Affairs (INL) seek to strengthen the National Police, modernise prisons, improve border controls and facilitate extraditions. However, such cooperation also raises debates about dependence, transparency and conditions that could undermine Ecuadorian institutional autonomy.

The OAS has launched the Multidimensional Security Programme for Ecuador, which includes support for strategic intelligence, maritime and port control, the fight against money laundering, the recovery of illicit assets and the improvement of the judicial and prison systems. Similarly, legislative cooperation agreements between the Ecuadorian National Assembly and the OAS aim to strengthen democratic oversight and ensure accountability in extraordinary security measures.

The European Union has also been strengthening its participation, with assistance programmes in criminal justice, the fight against drug trafficking and multilateral financing, aimed at prevention and institutional strengthening, not just the coercive component.

As for neighbouring countries, Colombia has reactivated bilateral border agreements with Ecuador to combat transnational drug trafficking networks and the movement of criminal groups; patrols are coordinated and intelligence information is shared in border areas such as Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos. Peru has signed, together with Ecuador, a border security plan that prioritises cooperation on river drug trafficking, smuggling and illegal mining.

Mexico, under the presidency of Claudia Sheinbaum, although it has no operational presence in Ecuador, participates indirectly in the transnational dynamics of organised crime, given that Mexican cartels such as Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación have proven links to Ecuadorian gangs such as Los Choneros and Los Lobos (Insight Crime, 2024). Sheinbaum has proposed a security policy based on several principles: prevention, respect for national sovereignty, international collaboration with clear limits, strengthening intelligence, and no return to indiscriminate shock strategies. , the Mexican leader has stated that agreements with the United States must be based on mutual respect, sovereignty, and action within each country's territory (Expansión, 2025). She has also rejected proposals for direct foreign military involvement in Mexico, even when put forward by the United States.

Cooperation between Mexico and the United States continues to be relevant for Ecuador, not so much because of direct participa-

tion, but because of how it changes the flow of drugs, weapons, and illicit financing towards the south. When Mexico strengthens operations against cartels, displaced cartels may move to alternative routes that pass through Ecuador or use Ecuadorian ports. Therefore, Mexican security indirectly impacts Ecuadorian strategy.

The external framework has concrete benefits: equipment, training, support for extraditions, institutional strengthening, improved logistical capabilities, and international intelligence sharing. But there are also risks: loss of autonomy for the Ecuadorian state, imposition of external agendas, the possibility that cooperation will be used to justify human rights violations or opaque interventions, and dependence on external financing that can condition internal policies.

The challenge for Noboa and his administration is to manage this balance: to take advantage of external support without ceding sovereignty or weakening democratic controls, and to ensure that security policies do not replicate authoritarian or unaccountable models. In short, the role of external actors in Ecuador is twofold: they offer essential tools and support, but they also introduce demands and risks that must be managed with institutional care, transparency, and citizen participation.

Conclusions and outlook

National security in Ecuador is a complex, multidimensional and constantly evolving challenge, the result of historical, economic, social and political factors that have accumulated over decades. The financial crises of the late 20th century, dollarisation, the expansion of drug trafficking and institutional erosion laid the foundations for persistent insecurity, which has been exacerbated in recent years by violence, the growth of criminal gangs and the fragility of justice and control institutions.

Daniel Noboa's administration has responded with militarisation measures, declarations of states of emergency and legal reforms, including the classification of organised crime as an internal armed conflict and the expansion of powers to seize illicit assets and detain suspects. These actions have had some impact on operational control, but they have also generated social tensions, protests and questions about the limits of civil rights and democratic governance.

As this chapter was being completed, news broke of the 'assassination attempt' on President Noboa on 8 October. Inés Manzano, Ecuador's Minister of Economy, explained how the president's car, after being attacked by a crowd, showed bullet marks, although he emerged unscathed from the incident.

The security crisis in 2025 shows that violence is not limited to the coast, but has spread to Amazonian and border regions, consolidating Ecuador as a strategic hub for transnational organised crime. The sustained increase in homicides, the expansion of foreign cartels and the weakness of social prevention indicate that purely coercive responses are not sufficient.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of national security depends on a comprehensive approach that combines police and military action with social prevention policies, institutional strengthening, prison rehabilitation, and regional cooperation. The Ecuadorian state must balance operational effectiveness with the protection of human rights in order to rebuild legitimacy and social trust and prioritise territorial cohesion in the face of the *de facto* fragmentation of power by criminal groups.

Finally, Ecuadorian national security cannot be conceived solely as a public order problem, but rather as a political and social challenge that requires strategic leadership, long-term vision, and consensus-building among society, institutions, and international actors. The possibility of a more secure and stable Ecuador depends on the country's ability to transform the current crisis into an opportunity for institutional strengthening, social cohesion, and democratic governance.

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Timeline of the conflict

TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	**EVENTS**
2000	Political crisis following the fall of Jamil Mahuad; institutional instability and weakening of state control in border areas.
2002	Rafael Correa begins his political rise; debate begins on military autonomy and the need for a new security model.
2007	Correa's government and the 'Citizen Revolution' begin; security is centralised in the executive branch and the intelligence system is restructured.

TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	**EVENTS**
2008	New Constitution creates the Public and State Security System (SSPE) and introduces a citizen-centred approach to security, replacing the traditional military doctrine.
2009	Closure of the Manta Base (end of anti-drug cooperation with the United States) and dissolution of the Special Investigations Unit (UIES), weakening internal intelligence capabilities.
2013	Expansion of drug trafficking and illegal economies on the coast; consolidation of the presence of gangs such as Los Choneros.
2017	End of Correísmo and arrival of Lenín Moreno, beginning of a shift towards international cooperation on security and the depoliticisation of the armed forces.
2019	First prison massacres and spike in homicides; the government acknowledges the penetration of organised crime in prisons.
2020	The COVID-19 pandemic worsens the prison situation; the murder of alias 'Rasquiña' (leader of Los Choneros) provokes violent realignments among gangs.
2021	Unprecedented prison crisis (more than 300 deaths in riots); state of emergency declared in the prison system and military sent to prisons.
2022	Increase in homicides in Guayaquil, Durán and Esmeraldas; creation of the Joint Command of the Armed Forces for Conflict Zones and the Joint Task Force 'Guayas'.
2023	Guillermo Lasso's government decrees several states of emergency; the Law on the Legitimate Use of Force is approved and military participation in tasks is intensified.
Nov 2023-Jan 2024	Daniel Noboa assumes the presidency and declares an 'internal armed conflict' against twenty-two criminal groups following the attacks of 9 January. Article 158 of the Constitution is activated.
2024 (June-November)	Priority Security Zones are consolidated; Congress debates and approves reforms to the Public and State Security Act and the Intelligence Act.
2025 (January-June)	High levels of violence persist (more than 4,000 homicides in six months); Plan Fénix 2025 is launched, focusing on border militarisation, prison control and cooperation with the United States.
2025 (October)	Social protests over economic deterioration and allegations of military abuses; the government maintains its focus on comprehensive security and defence of internal order.

The tables below show data as of 17 September 2025, unless otherwise stated. Source: CIA The World Factbook

TABLE OF GEOPOLITICAL INDICATORS	
Area	283,561 kilometres
GDP in billions of dollars	252,728 billion (2024 est.)
GDP structure	Agriculture 9.5% (2024 est.)
	Industry 26.5% (2024 est.)
	Services 57.2% (2024 est.)
GDP per capita	13,900 (2024 est.)
GDP growth rate	-2% (2024 est.)
Trade relations in billions of dollars (exports)	38,468 billion (2024 est.)
Trade relations in billions of dollars (imports)	33.97 billion (2024 est.)
Population	18,309,984 (2024 est.)
Age structure	0-14, 26.8%
	15-64, 64.1%
	Over 65, 9.1% (2024 est.)
Population growth rate	0.94% (2024 est.)
Ethnic groups	Mestizo (mixture of indigenous and white) 77.5%, Montubio 7.7%, indigenous 7.7%, White 2.2%, Afro-Ecuadorian 2%, Mulatto 1.4%, Black 1.3%, other 0.1% (2022 est.)
Religions	Roman Catholics 68.2%, Protestants 19% (Evangelicals 18.3%, Adventists 0.6%, other Protestants 0.2%), Jehovah's Witnesses 1.4%, others 2.3%, none 8.2%, don't know/no answer 1% (2023 est.)
Population literacy rate (aged 15 and over who can read and write)	94% (2022 est.)
Population below poverty line	26% (2023 est.)
GINI index	44.6% (2023 est.)
Military expenditure, % of GDP	2.2% of GDP (2024 est.)

Chapter Seven

India and Pakistan: the scar where the border never sleeps

Javier Fernández Aparicio

Abstract

The Indo-Pakistani conflict remains a critical source of global instability, reignited after the Pahalgam attack in April 2025 and the subsequent Operation Sindoor launched by India on Pakistani territory. Islamabad's response, with Operation Unbreakable Wall, shifted the confrontation to the air, cyber and diplomatic arenas, until the US-brokered ceasefire. This episode highlighted a certain Indian operational vulnerability, as well as Pakistan's ability to capitalise on the narrative surrounding Kashmir. For India, despite its global economic rise, the conflict has meant diplomatic attrition, adding to the impact of subsequent US tariffs. Pakistan, on the other hand, despite its internal fragilities and dependence on China, has strengthened its visibility. Nuclear deterrence continues to contain the escalation towards open war, while Kashmir remains caught between militarisation, insurgent violence and the economic impact of insecurity.

Key words

India, Pakistan, Kashmir, Terrorism, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction: Pahalgam, terrorist attack

Shortly after midday on 22 April 2025, a terrorist commando arrived in Pahalgam, in the Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir, and cold-bloodedly murdered twenty-six people, twenty-five Indians and one Nepalese citizen who was working as an assistant. An unknown number of people were also injured. Pahalgam is about ninety kilometres from Srinagar, the capital of Indian Kashmir, and about thirty-five kilometres from the Amarnath cave temple, a place of worship for the Amarnath Yatra, a Hindu pilgrimage held during the summer that brings together hundreds of thousands of devotees from various parts of India. The entire region is thus an important pilgrimage route for Hindus and a beautiful natural area nestled between valleys in the foothills of the Himalayas. The attack in Pahalgam was not the first in the enclave, but it holds the record for being the deadliest in India since the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, which left 173 people dead.

Figure 1. The idyllic Pahalgam Valley, the setting for the April 22 attack. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pahalgam_Valley.jpg

According to the Indian government, less than 24 hours later, the terrorist group Terrorist Resistance Front (TRF), with a separatist nationalist ideology and allegedly dependent on the larger Sunni Islamist group Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), translated into English as 'The Army of the Pure', a group created in 1990 and accused, for example, of carrying out the attack in Mumbai. It should also be noted that the TRF denied its involvement in the attack, according to a statement on a Telegram channel, and in turn accused India of discrediting the so-called 'Kashmir resistance movement' (Sharma, 2025).

Another fact to mention is that the Pahalgam attack was not the only one, nor the most serious, during Modi's term in office, as in 2019, in Pulwama, a suicide bomber killed forty-six people. but it has been a blow to his government's attempts to present a situation of normality in the troubled region, especially considering that since 2019, not without controversy, Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which recognised the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, had been repealed in order to give the central government in New Delhi greater control.

Figure 2. Disputed territory of Kashmir between three countries: India, Pakistan, and China (Source: CIA World Factbook, on Commons. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kashmir_map.jpg)

A region such as Kashmir, which has been embroiled in internal conflicts and wars between India and Pakistan since the partition of 1947, was once again set ablaze from Pahalgam, as in response to the terrorist attack from India, reprisals were soon planned, with the ultimate target being Pakistan itself, as New Delhi accused its neighbour, an endemic enemy since 1947, of harbouring jihadist terrorists and separatists in the Kashmir region controlled by Pakistan. as well as using a policy of supporting terrorism not only to destabilise the region, but India itself in general, which could see its priorities as a major power in the Asia-Pacific region compromised (IEEE, 2025).

Indeed, the terrorist attack has been interpreted by Indian military sectors as a possible Pakistani ploy aimed at provoking New Delhi. General S. P. Vishwasrao, former defence attaché in Islamabad, argues that its ultimate goal was to create internal divisions and provoke an immediate military response, for which Pakistan would be prepared, as part of a broader information warfare strategy aimed at destabilising India. It would take advantage of events such as farmers' protests, demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act and riots in the state of Manipur, which would erode internal cohesion and weaken the Indian state in its aspirations to become a major power (Philip, 2025).

1 Kashmir and Indo-Pakistani relations since 2014

Pakistan poses a latent threat to Indian security, not so much because of the magnitude of its military resources, which are inferior to those of its neighbour, but because of the deterrent role of its nuclear arsenal, which to a certain extent balances the theoretical asymmetry in conventional capabilities. Added to this is the fact that, since 2018, a strategic partnership between China and Pakistan has been consolidating, reintroducing a third player into the regional equation, namely China, which was already present in the Kashmir conflict itself with its control of the neighbouring region of Aksai Chin.

In this context, Kashmir has been the epicentre of Indo-Pakistani conflict since 1947. The partition of the subcontinent following independence from the British Raj led to the first war between the two states (1947-1949), which ended with the division of the former principality of Jammu and Kashmir by the Line of Control established by the United Nations. The second Indo-Pakistani war (1965) was again mainly fought in the Kashmir Valley, while the

1971 conflict—more focused on the secession of Bangladesh—reaffirmed hostilities and consolidated the structural rivalry. In 1999, the Kargil conflict, immediately following nuclear tests by both countries in 1998, reignited fears of a nuclear escalation in the region (Bose, 2021).

Figure 3. Insurgency in Kashmir. Indian soldiers in a terrorist tracking operation on 26 April, 2025. Source: Nasir Kachroo Nur Photo via Getty Images

However, beyond the occasional clashes between the Indian and Pakistani conventional armies, since the late 1980s, another type of war has been waged in disputed Kashmir: an armed separatist and Islamist insurgency in the Indian-dominated regions of Jammu and Kashmir. New Delhi has perceived this movement as being supported to varying degrees by Pakistan, without whose help the succession of attacks, armed clashes and even forced displacement, particularly the exodus of the Kashmiri Hindu community in the early 1990s, would not have been possible. The dawn of the 21st century was marked by bloody attacks involving LeT, such as those on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008, which, although not confined to Kashmir, highlighted the connection between these jihadist groups and the conflict in the region.

In 2014, Narendra Modi's rise to power marked a change in tone in Indian policy towards Pakistan, but not towards Kash-

mir, a persistent hotbed of violence with a local insurgency pitted against heavy Indian militarisation of the territory. With regard to Pakistan, at the beginning of his term, Modi surprised observers with symbolic gestures of rapprochement, such as inviting Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his inauguration. but soon the framework of mutual distrust reasserted itself, with Kashmir at the centre of tension, an increase in incidents and attacks against the Indian police and army and, according to New Delhi, encouraged by Islamabad's logistical and political support for these armed terrorist groups, whose target until then had been the Indian armed and security forces.

Figure 4. Map of India showing the location of Jammu and Kashmir, plus the Line of Control. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India_disputed_areas_map.svg

Thus, in September 2016, an attack on the Uri base left nineteen soldiers dead. This marked the beginning of Indian reprisals in the form of cross-border 'surgical strikes' against suspected insurgent camps located on Pakistani territory. On 14 February 2019, another attack took place in Pulwama, killing forty-six Indian police officers. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by another deadly Islamist group, Jaish-e-Mohammed, literally 'The Army of Mohammed', which was also involved in the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and was even declared a terrorist group by the Pakistani government in 2002. In retaliation, India, which accused Pakistan of continuing to sponsor terrorism, reportedly bombed an Islamist training camp in Balakot, on Pakistani territory, leading to a brief air battle.

In August 2019, New Delhi took a step that Islamabad considered 'a *de facto* annexation': it revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted Jammu and Kashmir special autonomous status. The region was placed under the direct control of the central government, with a strict communications blackout and a large military deployment. Pakistan responded by suspending diplomatic relations and bilateral trade and launching a campaign portraying India's attitude as contrary to international law, in particular United Nations Resolution 47, which, since 1948, has recommended a referendum to decide its status. However,

Figure 5. A Kashmiri protester at the protests in Srinagar, the capital of the Indian-administered region, during 2010. Source: Ieshan Wani, Global Voices

for India, the Kashmir issue is exclusively a matter of domestic policy (Bhasin, 2022).

Since then, Indo-Pakistani relations have fluctuated between tense calm and sporadic outbreaks of border violence. In 2021, both countries agreed to reinstate the 2003 ceasefire on the border, known as the Line of Control, but confidence in a resolution to the conflict remained eroded. What did change were the objectives of separatist and Islamist terrorist groups. From attacks and armed clashes exclusively against members of the Indian Armed Forces and security forces, they expanded to the civilian population, more specifically to Hindu citizens in the region and specifically to pilgrims arriving from other parts of the country, under the justification that they are Hindus whom New Delhi wants to resettle in Kashmir to change the demographic balance with regard to Muslims. Above all, they carried out attacks against tourists, of which the attack in Pahalgam was another example.

In May 2024, a targeted shooting inside a private complex in Pahalgam, where the attack took place last April, left two tourists from Jaipur injured. In June of the same year, other terrorists opened fire on a bus carrying pilgrims from the Shiv Khori shrine in the Reasi district. The attack caused the driver to lose control

Figure 6. As shown on this 2019 tourist map, Kashmir has been promoted as a tourist destination due to the beauty of its enclaves and places of worship. Source: https://www.sotc.in

of the vehicle, which plunged into a ravine, killing nine people, including children and women.

Tourism is fundamental to the Kashmiri economy, and any situation of insecurity undermines its development. Indeed, it has become the driving force of the region, encouraged both by the beauty of its enclaves and by a proactive policy from New Delhi. Thus, the influx of tourists grew exponentially, reaching more than half a million in April 2025. In this way, the attack in Pahalgam may also have been motivated by an attempt to torpedo the integration of Jammu and Kashmir into the Union, focusing attention on and undermining tourism as its main driving force, Indian domestic tourism, which seems to be recovering again (ET Travel World, 2025).

2 Sindoor versus Unbreakable Wall: spring under fire

Following the attack in Pahalgam, attributing responsibility to the TRF group and accusing Pakistan of supporting it, the Indian government set up a security committee that developed an initial five-point response plan, all of them focused on Pakistan: the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, the closure of the Attari-Wagah border crossing, the revocation of visas for Pakistani citizens, the expulsion of Pakistani military advisers from New Delhi and the reduction of Indian diplomatic staff in Islamabad (Fernández Aparicio and Pandey, 2025).

The most significant effect was the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, an agreement negotiated in 1960 with the mediation of the World Bank. The inability to access the Indus River exposes Pakistan to serious consequences in a context already marked by economic hardship and widespread protests against the government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. This was a *casus belli* that led some Pakistani leaders to declare that the suspension of the treaty was tantamount to a declaration of war. At the same time, Narendra Modi authorised the Indian Armed Forces to plan an unrestricted punitive operation, indicating that a military response was coming sooner rather than later. There was also an increase in tensions towards the Muslim community in various regions of the country, with incidents of hostility and the implementation of restrictive measures. These events were associated with the dominant narrative following the attack on Pahalgam, which tended to link that community in general with what happened (Nussbaum, 2024).

Figure 7. The Indus River and its tributaries, essential to the economies of India and Pakistan and subject to the 1960 water-sharing treaty. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indus_river-es.svg

Indeed, at midnight on 6-7 May, India launched Operation Sindoor, named after a Hindu cultural symbol in tribute to the widows of those killed in Pahalgam. The military operation aimed to destroy nine terrorist bases and training camps located in the Pakistan-administered region of Azad Kashmir, such as Sawai Nala and Syedna Bilal in Muzaffarabad; Gulpur and Abbas in Kotli, and Barnala in Bhimber; but also venturing into Pakistani Punjab itself with attacks in Bahawalpur, Markaz Taiba Muridke, Sarjal Sialkot and Mehmoona Joya. In the early hours of 7 May, following the start of the Indian offensive, Islamabad responded with its own military campaign to counter it, dubbed Operation

Bunyan-un-Marsoos, translated as 'Unbreakable Wall', a name that evoked the determination of absolute resistance (Majumdar, 2025) .

Initially, the Indian Air Force used air-to-ground missiles from seventy-two aircraft. After forty-eight hours of campaigning, the Pakistan Armed Forces Public Relations Service (known as ISPR), which centralises information on military affairs for the media, announced that five of these Indian fighter jets, three Dassault Rafales plus a Su-30 and a MiG-29, had been hit from the ground. Subsequently, Prime Minister Sharif claimed that a sixth aircraft, a Dassault Mirage 2000, had been shot down. At the time, forty-two Pakistani aircraft, including Chinese-made Chengdu J-10Cs, were flying over the country awaiting possible combat involvement.

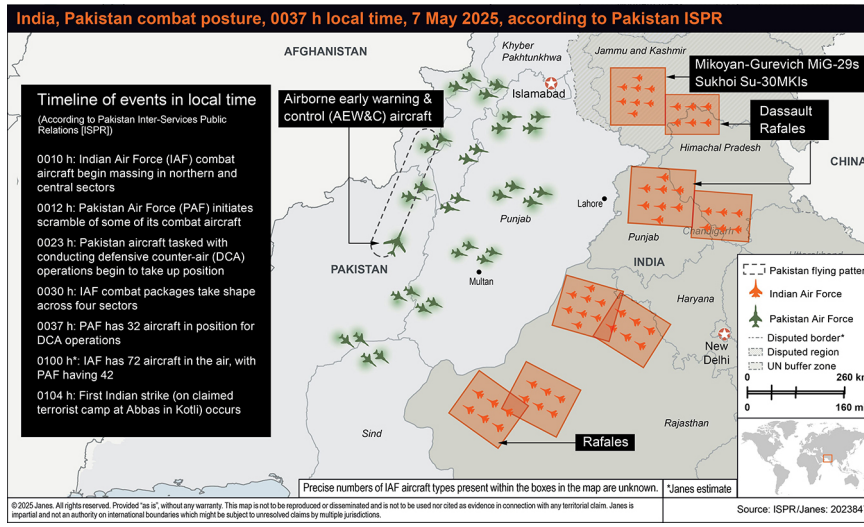

Figure 8. Map of operations as of 7 May, based on information presented by the General Staff of the Pakistan Air Force during a press conference on 9 May. Source: Janes

India's air strike tactics changed in the early hours of 8 May, with the deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles and HAROP loitering munitions, but no longer against alleged terrorist bases, but to damage Pakistan's air defence structure. As Pakistan had done, the Indian Army also showed images of fragments of what appeared to be two Chinese-made PL-15 missiles, all of which gave the exchange of fire the appearance of a test of weaponry and intelligence assets on the ground, such as satellite images,

from different sources and at the service of one country or the other (Ranjan Sen and Strumpf, 2025).

Pakistan also countered Operation Sindoor with precision artillery strikes along the Line of Control and commando raids in strategic sectors, seeking to erode the initial momentum of the Indian forces. In parallel, as had happened in 2019, the Pakistani diplomatic apparatus launched an offensive in international forums, attempting to frame the conflict as a unilateral aggression by India against the self-determination of Kashmir. and on 8 and 9 May it also counterattacked using Turkish-made unmanned aerial vehicles against enclaves within India, ranging from Srinagar to Bhuj, a town in the state of Gujarat, as well as a military base in Dalhousie, Himachal Pradesh, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Figure 9. A Pakistani J-10CE aircraft, manufactured in China, displayed at the Zhuhai Airshow in 2024. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J-10CE_for_Pakistan_air_force_in_Zhuhai_airshow_2024.jpg

Thus, on 9 May, the Indian command decided to attack with unmanned aerial vehicles and BrahMos missiles, of Russian-Indian shared design, as well as air bases, command and control centres and air defence systems in Pakistani Punjab, such as Shaikh Zayed International Airport and the strategic Nur Khan base in Chaklala, completely destroying its operations centre, the unmanned aerial vehicle complexes at the Rafiqui and

Murid air bases, plus other points in Arifwala and the historic cities of Chunian and Sargoda. The Indian attacks reached other regions such as Passur in Gilgit Baltistan, Bholari and Jacobabad in Sindh, where an aircraft hangar was destroyed. In turn, Pakistan launched a massive cyberattack against India, the scope of which was undetermined, although reports emerged that 70% of India's electricity grid had been affected and official websites had been taken down, a claim that was denied by India (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Faced with the risk of an escalation that would involve more resources and targets in territories of both countries, beyond the Kashmir region, on 10 May the United States announced an immediate ceasefire, confirmed first by Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and shortly afterwards by Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, but each country claimed critical successes in the brief conflict. The number of casualties is unknown but is estimated to be in the dozens. Pakistan acknowledged at least twenty-six deaths on 7 May.

Figure 10. General Anil Chauhan, Chief of Staff of the Indian Armed Forces, who acknowledged some tactical errors at Sindoor. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anil_Chauhan_Chief_of_Defence_Staff_(CDS).jpg

In perspective, Operation Sindoor and Pakistan's response to it have raised more questions than answers about India's opera-

tional capabilities. Thus, at the Shangri-La Dialogue forum on 31 May 2025, the Chief of Staff of the Indian Armed Forces, General Anil Chauhan, acknowledged that the Air Force had to change its strategy in light of the losses of Indian aircraft on the first night of operations, highlighting the agility with which certain tactical errors were understood and remedied by addressing other operational tactics (Singh, 2025).

3 Divergent consequences: India under pressure and Pakistani gains

The conflict between India and Pakistan has not only reconfigured regional dynamics but has also had international repercussions for both countries. Although it may seem strange, if we look at the course of both countries in international geopolitics, with India clearly on the rise in the world arena as the fourth economic power, after overtaking Japan even if only symbolically in terms of GDP in 2025[1], while Pakistan, with serious internal political and socio-economic problems, appeared to be an isolated state backed only by China, for India, the consequences of the confrontation have been largely negative.

The international community did not take a clear stance with India, even though it justified its military operation due to the Pahalgam attack and called for restraint from both countries in a possible escalation. Prior to the attack, various forums expressed concern about military escalation and possible human rights violations in the region, particularly since the revocation of autonomy in 2019, which has limited New Delhi's ability to project itself as a responsible power and has even led to some conflict with other countries beyond Pakistan[2].

It should be remembered that the attack took place, on the one hand, during the visit of US Vice-President J. D. Vance to India

[1] However, according to data from the International Monetary Fund, in 2025, India's GDP per capita will be approximately $2,480, which is less than 8% of Japan's GDP per capita of $33,955. See 'India beating Japan as world's 4th biggest economy no cause for major celebration, warns ex-WEF MD'. Available at: India overtaking Japan as the world's fourth largest economy is no cause for major celebration, warns former WEF managing director - The Economic Times.

[2] During the 2023 G20 summit in India, the government attempted to hold a meeting on tourism in Kashmir, with the aim of projecting an image of peace derived from its strengthened control in the region. Apart from Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia decided to boycott the meeting in protest.

and, on the other, that Modi himself had to return hastily from Saudi Arabia, a country with which India has close relations. It is therefore possible that the date of the attack was not random and that the terrorists were seeking to make a dramatic impact by starkly exposing the unresolved situation in Kashmir and its conflict to the West and the Muslim world. In any case, India is facing growing pressure that is limiting its room for manoeuvre in Jammu and Kashmir.

Shortly after the Pahalgam attack and the Indo-Pakistani confrontation of 7-10 May, with India unhappy with what it considered to be US lukewarmness, with the United States presenting itself as a mediator rather than coming to the aid of a supposed preferred ally in the Indo-Pacific, India's definitive disenchantment with the Trump administration came with the imposition of tariffs of around 50% on India, justified by India's purchase of Russian crude oil; in fact, India is the second largest importer globally after China, plus Trump's criticism of India for benefiting from the war in Ukraine and not caring about its victims. Modi's reaction was immediate, in pursuit of strategic autonomy, which strengthened India's ties with other allies and fostered economic agreements, for example, with Japan and Southeast Asian countries, but also initiated an evident rapprochement with China, its secular rival and Pakistan's great supporter over the last few decades.

Figure 11. President Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the latter's visit to the United States in February 2025. Source: AP Photo/Alex Brandon

Thus, at the end of June, at the first summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where the defence ministers of the member countries met, India vetoed the final declaration for not explicitly condemning terrorism supported by certain states, in a clear reference to Pahalgam and Pakistan. Modi himself managed to have it included in the final declaration of the SCO Heads of State summit in Tianjin, during his first visit to China in seven years, since before the Sino-Indian border incidents in the Himalayas in May 2020 (El Grand Continent, 2025). It should be remembered that, during the hostilities between India and Pakistan, China declared itself an unconditional friend and strategic cooperation partner of Pakistan 'in all circumstances'.

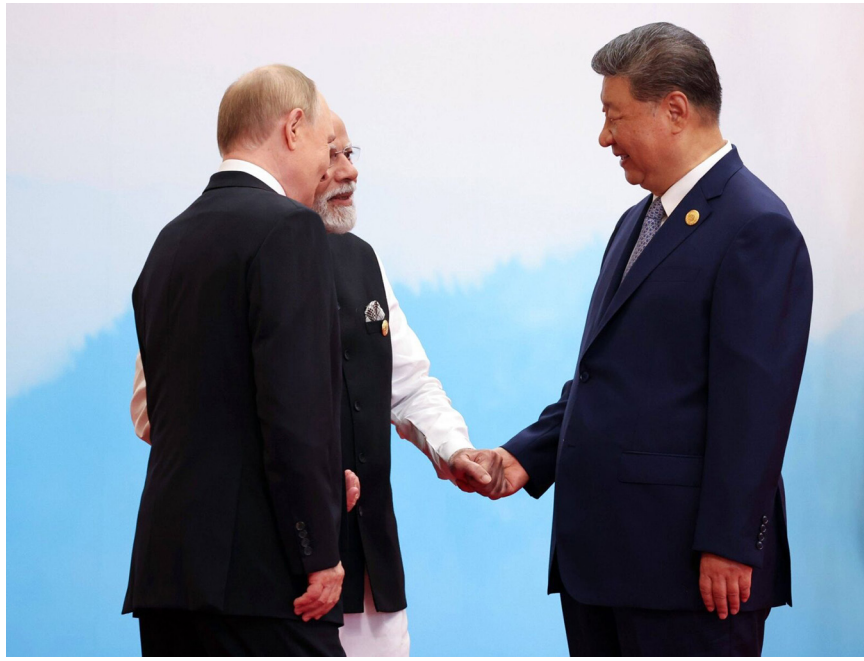

Figure 12. Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping during the SCO Summit in Tianjin on September 1. Source: Alexander Kazakov/Le Grand Continent

Experts such as Christopher Jaffrelot believe that India is, in fact, clearly dependent on China economically, which leads it to alienate part of its strategic autonomy and seek to ingratiate itself with the Chinese giant (Jaffrelot, 2025); but not to express any possible opposition to Washington, something that may be ruled out with the convening of high-level meetings to negotiate the impact and scope of tariffs, as well as agreeing on a strategic

partnership to resolve other possible future frictions between both countries (Campbell, 2025). What is certain is that India is making considerable diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan, which has once again become an uncomfortable neighbour that, beyond its alleged support for Islamist or secessionist terrorism in Kashmir, is pursuing assertive diplomacy with countries that India views with suspicion, primarily China, but also with Bangladesh, since the fall of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheik Hasina in August 2024. India also has two uncomfortable neighbours in Myanmar, whose war has led to border friction, and Nepal, where protests and the resignation of Prime Minister Sharma Oli may lead, as in Bangladesh, to a more hostile policy towards India (Biswas, 2025).

Figure 13. Infographic generated using an AI tool with data on India's main trading partners in 2024. The United States had overtaken China for first place. Source: India Forbes

In contrast, Pakistan has been able to capitalise on its position on the global stage. Although it remains under scrutiny for its alleged tolerance of armed groups on its territory, Islamabad has strengthened its strategic ties, especially with China and other actors interested in countering Indian influence. Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir's self-determination has gained traction in international forums, contributing to greater diplomatic visibility that

had previously eluded it. Furthermore, international pressure on India has allowed Pakistan to present itself as a victim of Indian aggression and has improved its political and negotiating profile, as evidenced by its recent agreement with Saudi Arabia that includes mutual assistance in the event of attacks against either country and, incidentally, contributes to undermining India's position among the Gulf countries (Ardemagni and Missaglia, 2025).

However, Pakistan shows serious internal divisions and the persistent weight of the 'deep state', where the Army conditions foreign and security policy, all of which is exacerbated by the severe monsoon floods that have claimed more than a thousand lives and, above all, by the fact that although the ceasefire has, for the time being, put an end to military operations, other fronts remain open, such as diplomacy, trade and the closure of communications between the two countries. Above all, the suspension of the Indus River Water Supply Agreement continues to be a source of deep concern for the Pakistani economy[3].

Figure 14. General Asim Munir, Chief of Staff of Pakistan and, de facto, the most influential figure in the country's current political situation. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:General_Asim_Munir_(Pakistan).jpg

[3] In May, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague requested India and Pakistan to submit arguments on the impact of the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty. Pakistan was the only party to submit them. In June, the court noted that the treaty

Nuclear deterrence and international pressure therefore seem to be the persistent and dangerous guarantee that escalation into open war between India and Pakistan will not occur. Currently, India is estimated to have 180 nuclear warheads in storage and is developing nuclear submarines and ballistic missiles which, like the Agni-5 tested in August, have the capacity to reach not only Pakistan but also more than seven thousand kilometres away, i.e. Chinese territory. For its part, Pakistan is estimated to have 170 nuclear warheads in storage, although it is developing new delivery systems and is likely to increase its arsenal in the coming years (SIPRI, 2025)

However, in the conventional sphere, India was one of the countries with the highest investment in armaments in 2024, acquiring equipment from various sources, including Russia, the United States, France and Israel. In 2025, it was announced that its defence budget would be linked to GDP rather than to the deficit in relation to GDP, which means that it will increase to a historic figure of 6.81 trillion rupees, or around 72 billion euros. The Indian Armed Forces are made up of 1,260,000 active soldiers and 300,000 in the reserve, making it the largest army in South Asia (The Military Balance, 2025) . In the case of Pakistan, its Armed Forces were estimated to have some 625,000 active personnel, but it is a army under severe strain due to the internal situation in the country, which is plagued by terrorism in the regions of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as well as political unrest; nevertheless, it has staged three coups since independence in 1947 and continues to play a significant role under the leadership of Chief of Staff General Asim Munir.

Finally, the third part of this Indo-Pakistani equation would be the Kashmir region itself, with remarkable economic development now subject to the effects of violence on tourism, but also on other sectors such as construction and the automotive industry, the increased Indian military presence and possible episodes of social unrest. On 5 August 2024, a newly re-elected Prime Minister Modi announced his intention to permanently integrate the territory into the central administrative domain of New Delhi. The polarisation surrounding this decision was very visible in the first local elections held between September and October of that year,

does not provide for unilateral suspension and reaffirmed its jurisdiction through an award. India considers it illegal and therefore rejects any resolution. See 'The Indus Waters Western Rivers Arbitration (Islamic Republic of Pakistan v. Republic of India)'. Available at: https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/76022.

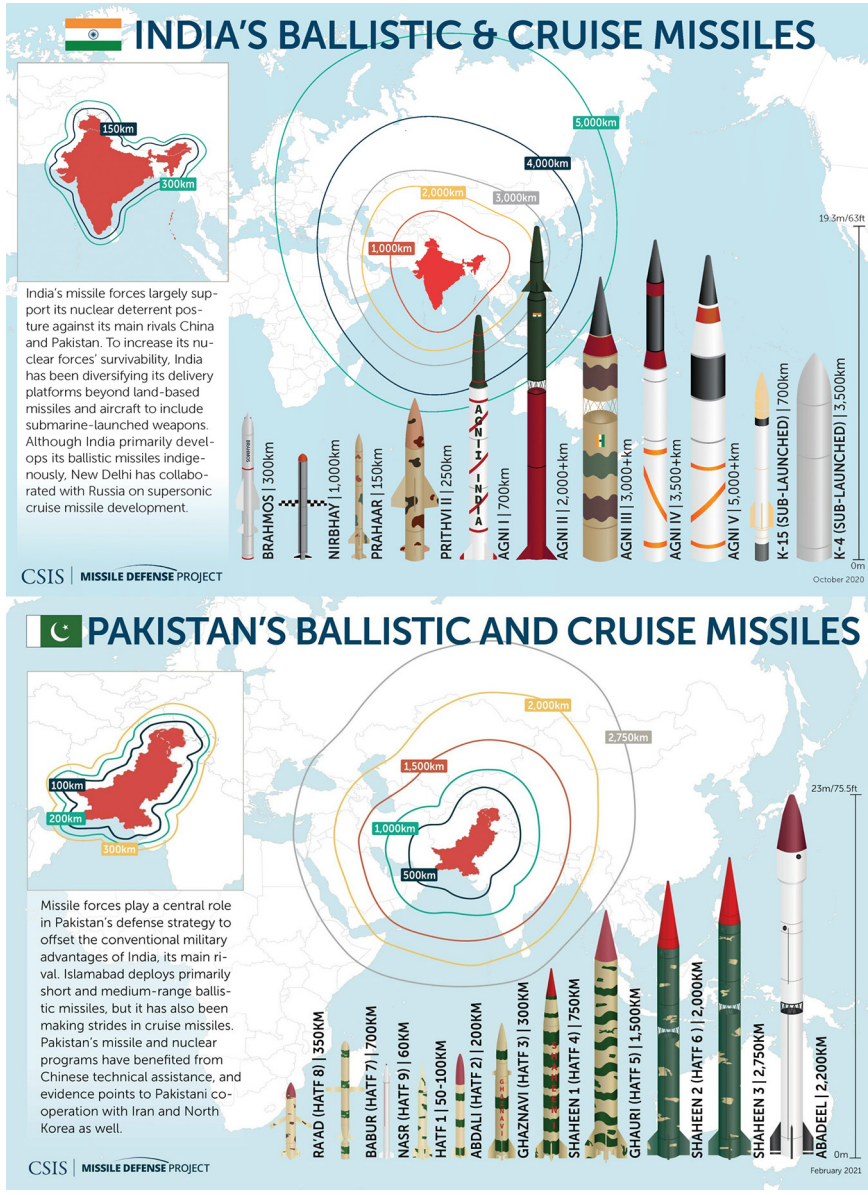

Figure 7. The Indus River and its tributaries, essential to the economies of India and Pakistan and subject to the 1960 water-sharing treaty. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indus_river-es.svg

where an alliance between the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India won, although without achieving an absolute majority, while the prime minister's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata

Party consolidated its presence in Jammu, thus serving as a counterweight. Omar Abdullah, grandson of the historic leader Mohammed Abdullah, was appointed prime minister by the Legislative Assembly, and a period of political normality seemed to be beginning, only to be shattered after Pahalgam. Abdullah was quick to condemn the attack and warn of a political and economic crisis, which was not long in coming (Kashmir Life, 2025).

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Timeline of the conflict and geopolitical indicators

DATE	EVENTS
1947	Partition of British India and first Indo-Pakistani War (1947-1949) over control of Kashmir, which is divided between the two countries.
1965	Second Indo-Pakistani War, centred on Kashmir, which ended without any significant changes to the previous situation.
1971	Third Indo-Pakistani War, with the independence of Bangladesh. Establishment, following the Simla Agreement (1972), of the Line of Control, a border supervised by the United Nations.
1990	In Kashmir, the Sunni Islamist group Lashkar-e-Tayyiba is created, which will carry out serious attacks in the region and other parts of India.
1999	The Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan breaks out, following nuclear tests by both countries in 1998.
2001	Attack on the Indian Parliament: fourteen dead.
2008	Mumbai attacks: 166 dead.
2014	Narendra Modi is elected Prime Minister of India, inviting Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif to his inauguration. Last legislative elections in Kashmir before the suspension of autonomy. The PDP wins in coalition with Modi's BJP.
2015	Modi's surprise visit to Lahore in December, the Indian leader's only and last visit to Pakistan.
2016	Insurgent attack in Uri (Kashmir), resulting in the deaths of nineteen Indian soldiers. India launches cross-border 'military surgery' for the first time.
2017	Intensification of armed clashes on the Line of Control between forces from both countries.
2018	Elections in Pakistan, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) comes to power. Beginning of closer Sino-Pakistani relations.
2019	In February, Pulwama attack (Kashmir), with forty-six dead and a subsequent air clash. In August, India revokes Article 370 of the Constitution and removes the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir.
2020	Sporadic border skirmishes and heavy restrictions from India in Kashmir justified by the pandemic.
2021	Indo-Pakistani restoration of the 2003 ceasefire.
2022	Increase in nationalist rhetoric in India and Pakistan-China military cooperation (economic corridor from Xinjiang ending at the port of Gwadar).
2023	Elections and internal instability in Pakistan with supporters of Imra Khan, who is in prison, protests over the economic situation and a resurgence of Baloch and Pashtun independence terrorism. Protests in Kashmir against Indian control. In September, during the G20 summit, New Delhi attempts to organise a meeting in Kashmir, boycotted by several countries, primarily China.

DATE	EVENTS
2024	In May 2024, a targeted shooting inside a private complex in Pahalgam leaves two Indian tourists wounded. Cross-border tensions arise due to Indian military exercises near the Line of Control. On 5 August, a newly re-elected Modi announces his intention to permanently integrate Kashmir into New Delhi's central administrative domain. In October, the first elections in Kashmir in a decade take place, with the INDIA Alliance winning and autonomist Omar Abdullah being appointed chief minister.
2025	Attack in Pahalgam (Kashmir, 22 April) resulting in twenty-six deaths. The terrorist group Resistance Front, affiliated with Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, claims responsibility. After several diplomatic and economic measures, in particular the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (1960), on 7 May, India launches Operation Sindoor to punish terrorist camps on Pakistani territory. Pakistan's reaction escalated the conflict to a military and diplomatic level until a ceasefire was established on 10 May.

INDIA	
Area: 3,287,263 km²	
GDP: €3,612,664 million	
GDP structure	**Agriculture:** 17%
	Industry: 25%
	Services: 58%
GDP per capita: €2,450-2,480	
GDP growth rate: 6.5%	
Trade relations (exports): refined oil, diamonds and software	
Trade relations (imports): crude oil, gold and electronics	
Population: 1.42 billion	
Age structure	**0-14:** 25%
	15-64: 68%
	Over 65: 7%
0-14: 25%	
15-64: 68%	
Over 65: 7%	
0-14: 25%	
15-64: 68%	
Over 65: 7%	
0-14: 25%	

PAKISTÁN	
Area: 881,913 km²	
GDP: €312.8 billion	
GDP structure	**Agriculture:** 19%
	Industry: 20%
	Services: 61%
GDP per capita: €1,550-1,570.	
GDP growth rate: 2%	
Trade relations (exports): textiles, rice and leather	
Trade relations (imports): oil, machinery and chemicals	
Population: 243 million inhabitants	
Age structure	**0-14:** 34%
	15-64: 65%
	Over 65: 1%
Population growth rate: 2.55% per annum	
Ethnic groups: Punjabi (45%), Pashtun (18%), Sindhi (14%), Saraiki (8%), Balochi (5%) and others (7%).	
Religions: Muslims (97%, Sunni 90% and Shia 10%), Hindus (2%) and Christians (1%).	
Population literacy rate: 62%	
Population below the poverty line: 25%	
GINI index: 31	
Military expenditure as a percentage of GDP: 2.67% (SIPRI)	

Chapter Eight

Thailand and Cambodia: a border of friction

María del Mar Hidalgo García

Abstract

In 2025, relations between Thailand and Cambodia have been marked by historical tensions related to the border dispute over several points along the border that are very important from a religious and cultural point of view for both nations.

Throughout the year, there have been several conflicts in these border areas. The most serious clashes took place between 24 and 28 July, resulting in more than forty deaths and over three hundred thousand displaced persons. With the aim of reducing tensions, ASEAN, China and the US have intensified their mediating role, which led to a ceasefire. However, despite attempts at negotiation by external actors, nationalism and historical claims remain obstacles to a definitive solution between Thailand and Cambodia.

The conflict continues to be a source of friction in bilateral relations, with both countries seeking recognition of their territorial rights, while the international community presses for a peaceful resolution.

Key words

Cambodia, Thailand, Preah Vihear, Ta Moan Thom

1 Background

For more than a century, Thailand and Cambodia have disputed sovereignty over several undemarcated points along their 817 km land border. Of these, the focus of the disputes has mainly been around the ancient Hindu temples of Ta Moan Thom and Preah Vihear, dating from the 11th century, whose ownership is claimed by both countries.

The border between the two countries was established in 1904 through the signing of an agreement between the then Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand) and France, which occupied the territory that is now Cambodia as a colonial power. This treaty stipulated that the border should follow the watershed between the Nam Sen and Mekong basins on one side and the Nam Moun basin on the other, this division being, by its nature, a fixed physical feature. The result was that the temple of Preah Vihear (Phra Viharn in Thai) was left on Thai territory[1].

The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907 redrew the map, jeopardising Thai control over several religious and culturally significant sites, including the famous Preah Vihear temple. Thailand (then still Siam) signed the treaty, but resentment and controversy persisted. Since 1907, the Preah Vihear monument has been under the jurisdiction of a public body, the Cambodian Archaeological Services[2].

The temple and its surroundings became the symbolic and strategic epicentre of the territorial dispute. During the Second World War, when France was under Nazi occupation and Japan had gained control of most of Southeast Asia, Thailand seized the opportunity to occupy much of the disputed border by appropriating areas that belonged, according to the 1907 treaty, to Cambodia. After the war, Thailand was evicted from these areas, but the trauma of these losses has remained in the nationalist memory of Thai society.

Years later, the Thai authorities considered that the actual demarcation of the border deviated from the text of the 1904 treaty, including the territory around the Preah Vihear temple and other border points. Cambodia appealed to the International Court of Justice to defend its ownership of the Preah Vihear temple. The

[1] See: https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/45/9259.pdf
[2] See: https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/45/9249.pdf

Court ruled that the temple belonged to Cambodia in 1962[3], but Thailand did not agree with that resolution, although it accepted it. Society remained highly dissatisfied with the resolution, especially among nationalist factions in Thai politics, and for this reason Thailand's ownership claims did not end.

[4]In 2000, the two countries agreed to establish a Joint Boundary Commission to peacefully address the claims, but little progress has been made in resolving the disputes.

These claims over the ownership of historical sites have increased nationalist tension between the two countries, particularly in 2003, when a group of violent protesters set fire to the Thai embassy and several Thai businesses in Phnom Penh in response to an alleged comment by Thai soap opera star Suvanant Kongying questioning Cambodia's jurisdiction over the Angkor Wat temple[5].

Tension on the border between the two countries increased in 2008 after Cambodia proposed to include the Preah Vihear temple on UNESCO's World Heritage List[6]. Over the following years, there were several altercations, notably in 2011, which resulted in more than a dozen casualties.

At that time, Cambodia again appealed to the ICJ and asked it to clarify a 1962 ruling in which the same court granted it sovereignty over the temple but did not specify anything about the surrounding territory, and to issue measures to prevent further military clashes. In 2013, the ICJ reaffirmed that the entire temple promontory was within Cambodian territory[7].

After more than a decade without large-scale clashes since the 2011 confrontations, border tensions have seen a worrying resurgence since early 2025.

In February this year, a group of Cambodians escorted by troops sang their national anthem at Ta Moan Thom—another ancient Hindu temple claimed by both countries—before being detained by Thai soldiers[8].

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[3] See: https://www.icj-cij.org/case/45

[4] The text of the agreement can be found at: https://sokheounpang.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/mou-2000-eng.pdf

[5] See: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-feb-03-fg-cambo3-story.html

[6] See: https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/kh/

[7] See: https://news.un.org/es/story/2013/11/1287071

[8] See: https://www.eurasiareview.com/13052025-are-thai-cambodian-military-tensions-at-the-ta-moan-thom-temple-rocking-asean-solidarity-oped/

This situation of latent tension erupted again on 28 May, when a Cambodian soldier was killed near the 'Emerald Triangle' during a brief exchange of fire. Thailand described this incident as self-defence, while Cambodia called it a provocation due to military incursion[9].

After the 28 May clash, both sides met in Phnom Penh on 14 June within the framework of the Joint Border Commission to begin talks that had been stalled for thirteen years. Although no significant progress was made, both sides quickly committed to easing tensions and avoiding further conflict[10]. It seemed that relations between Cambodia and Thailand were improving after the Commission meeting, but unfortunately, subsequent events soon dampened the prevailing optimistic spirit.

In an effort to reduce the tension, Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra called Hun Sen on 15 June, confident that the good relations her father, Thankin, had with Hun Sen could end the hostilities. However, the move backfired, as the conversation was leaked and Shinawatra was heard criticising a Thai army commander for provoking the conflict. Although Shinawatra later argued that it was merely a negotiating tactic to promote a rapprochement with the Cambodian leader and thus achieve a peaceful resolution to the territorial dispute, the statement provoked public criticism and the withdrawal of her coalition partners in the government, who considered that Shinawatra had damaged Thailand's integrity, sovereignty and army.

After only ten months in power, on 1 July, Thailand's constitutional court suspended Shinawatra from her duties as prime minister, although she remained in the Cabinet as culture minister. On 3 July, former Defence Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, seventy-one years old, took office as Thailand's interim prime minister. Shinawatra was finally dismissed on 29 August by Thailand's Constitutional Court 'for violating the ethical code' inherent in the office[11].

[9] See: https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/los-ej%C3%A9rcitos-de-tailandia-y-camboya-intercambian-disparos-en-zona-fronteriza-en-disputa/89424232

[10] See: https://kyotoreview.org/issue-40/hun-sen-burns-thaksin-shinawatra-to-the-ground/

[11] See: https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2025/08/29/mundo/primera-ministra-tailandia-destituida-trax

Plunged into this internal political crisis, Thailand had to deal with the worsening of border conflicts with Cambodia, which continued to escalate.

Between 22 and 24 June, both countries closed their border. Thailand cited security reasons and the fight against cross-border crime. The Cambodian government reiterated that the closures were initiated solely by the Thai side and therefore did not justify bilateral negotiations[12]. During July, military deployment intensified with the construction of infrastructure, fortifications and artillery movements in key areas such as Chong Bok (the border point between the Thai province of Ubon Ratchathani and the Cambodian province of Preah Vihear) and the Ta Muen Thom temple area.

On 16 July, a Thai Army patrol was conducting a patrol in the border areas of Ubon Ratchathani province, which borders Cambodia. Suddenly, an anti-personnel mine exploded under their feet, leaving three soldiers wounded. A week later, on 23 July, another Thai contingent suffered a new incident involving anti-personnel mines in an area adjacent to the first incident. In this context of

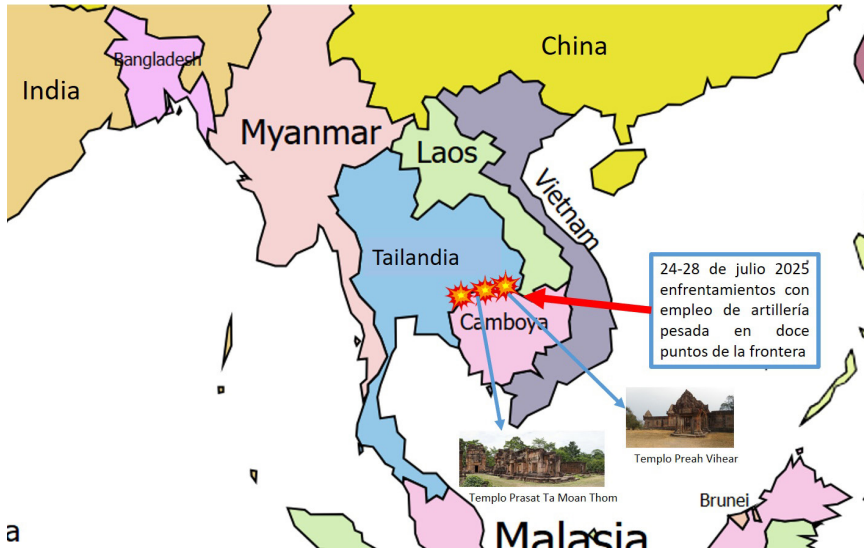

Figure 8. Map of operations as of 7 May, based on information presented by the General Staff of the Pakistan Air Force during a press conference on 9 May. Source: Janes

[12] See: https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodia-confirms-thai-militarys-entire-border-closure

growing tensions, a narrative surrounding the events prevailed in Bangkok: the mines had been recently laid and were not remnants of past conflicts[13].

Thailand closed its border crossings, expelled the Cambodian ambassador from the country and withdrew its top representative from Phnom Penh. It accused Cambodia of violating the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Mines, known as the Ottawa Convention, which bans anti-personnel mines. For its part, Cambodia denied this, suggesting that Thai soldiers had deviated from mutually agreed patrol routes and that the mines were remnants of past conflicts[14] and called for international investigations. In addition, the Cambodian Ministry of Defence urged Thailand to respect the patrol agreements set out in a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2000[15].

Since then, relations between the two countries have deteriorated significantly. The situation escalated on 24 and 25 July, when the Royal Thai Army launched Operation Yuttna Bodin, a coordinated land and air operation aimed at defending Thai sovereignty following the intensification of cross-border attacks by Cambodian forces[16].

Between 24 and 28 July, there were clashes at twelve critical points along the border, the worst in more than a decade, with heavy artillery fire exchanged. The clashes resulted in around forty fatalities and displaced almost three hundred thousand people, destroying houses and farms and collapsing infrastructure.

Both sides accused each other of initiating the firing. Thailand used F-16 aircraft and Thai artillery on areas around the Preah Vihear temple. Cambodia interpreted this as a cultural attack and an attempt at 'historical erasure', in the words of rapper Vannda (a very popular and influential figure in the country). For its part, Cambodia had also deployed truck-mounted rocket launchers, which, according to Thailand, have been used to attack civilian areas.

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13 See: https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/protest-against-the-use-of-anti-personnel-mines-en

14 See: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501720759/cambodia-rejects-thai-accusations-over-border-landmine-incident-cites-violation-of-agreed-patrol-routes/

15 See: https://pressocm.gov.kh/en/archives/113007

16 See: https://www.thaienquirer.com/55490/royal-thai-army-launches-operation-yuttha-bodin-amid-rising-border-clashes-with-cambodia/

After efforts by Malaysia—which holds the presidency of the ASEAN regional bloc in 2025—the United States and China to bring both sides to the table, the leaders of the two countries agreed to end hostilities, resume direct communications and create a mechanism to implement the ceasefire.

2 Current situation

The ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia, signed in Putrajaya on 28 July, has been widely praised as a diplomatic triumph. Negotiated by Malaysia and supported by strategic partners such as China, Japan, and the United States, this agreement offers a rare opportunity to reduce one of Southeast Asia's most sensitive conflicts. However, despite this progress, suspicions about its fragility have always been present. Since the truce was agreed, both sides have accused each other of violating it.

In early August, a controversial report circulated accusing Thailand of planning a GPS-guided missile attack targeting Senate President Hun Sen and his son, Cambodian Prime Minister[17]. These accusations were quickly rejected by the Thai authorities, and Cambodia called on the media and the public to act with caution and responsibility, warning that the dissemination of unverified narratives jeopardises the stability of a peace that remains very fragile.

On 4 August, during a patrol in a border area in Sisaket province (530 kilometres northeast of Bangkok), three Thai soldiers were killed by a mine explosion, apparently a remnant of past conflicts[18]. Following the incident, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Cambodia of violating its sovereignty and international law and of breaching the agreed ceasefire. However, Cambodia has rejected these accusations, arguing once again that the presence of mines is the result of previous conflicts.

In addition, the issue of prisoners has exacerbated tensions. Thailand returned two wounded Cambodian soldiers but is holding eighteen others, whom it considers 'prisoners of war'. Cambodia is demanding their immediate release, while the International

[17] See: https://www.khaosodenglish.com/

[18] See: https://www.dw.com/en/three-thai-soldiers-injured-by-landmine-on-cambodian-border/a-73585330

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has confirmed that they are in good health[19].

To prevent the conflict from escalating, on 7 August Cambodia and Thailand agreed on new measures to reinforce the border ceasefire. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the ceasefire signed on 28 July and agreed to allow ASEAN observers to monitor the situation. In addition, at the Extraordinary Session of the General Border Committee (GBC) between Thailand and Cambodia, a thirteen-point ceasefire implementation agreement between the two countries was signed.

The key points of the agreement are as follows:

1 Cease the use of all types of weapons, including attacks on civilians, civilian property and military targets in all cases and areas.
2 Maintain the current state of troop deployment, in force since 28 July 2015, with no troop movements or patrols towards the other party's position.
3 Refrain from increasing the number of troops along the entire border between Thailand and Cambodia.
4 Refrain from provocative actions that could intensify tensions, including military activity entering the other party's airspace, territory or positions since the ceasefire of 28 July 2025, and refrain from building military infrastructure beyond their own side.
5 Refrain from using force against civilians or civilian property in all circumstances.
6 Comply with the Geneva Conventions: treatment of captured soldiers and transfer of the wounded to the other party's medical centres, according to their capacity. Captured soldiers shall be released and repatriated immediately after the cessation of active hostilities. Facilitate the dignified and timely return of deceased persons.
7 In the event of armed conflict, both parties shall address issues at the local level through existing bilateral mechanisms to prevent the situation from escalating.
8 Maintain regular communications between all army zones, regions and military units along the border. Convene a meeting of the Regional Coordination Committee (CRC) within two weeks of the Extraordinary Session of the Governance

[19] See: https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40053555

Committee of the People's Republic of China (GBC) on 7 August 2025.
9 Maintain regular and direct communication between ministers and heads of defence forces.
10 Refrain from spreading false information or fake news.
11 Both sides should implement the common understanding reached on 28 July 2025, which includes the ceasefire and the formation of an ASEAN observer team led by Malaysia.
12 It was agreed that the CRCs in each zone will implement the ceasefire agreement, coordinated and observed by the ASEAN observer team led by Malaysia. The CRCs will meet regularly and report to the GBC through their respective national chains of command.
13 Pending the establishment of the ASEAN observer team, led by Malaysia, a provisional observer team, composed of defence attachés from ASEAN member countries accredited to Thailand and Cambodia, will be used to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire on both sides.
14 A meeting of the High-Level Committee will be held one month after 7 August 2025 (at a location to be agreed). Otherwise, an extraordinary meeting of the Committee must be convened immediately to discuss the ceasefire.

The agreement requires forces to withdraw and reinforcements to be halted, but does not specify who will monitor this or who has the authority to intervene if the rules are broken. Without a neutral, trustworthy and well-resourced third party on the ground, the ceasefire could easily fail. Current monitors from Malaysia, China, Japan and the United States are present, but their coverage is limited given the vast and complex terrain.

Cambodia has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the ceasefire agreement reached on 28 July 2025 in Putrajaya, as well as to the thirteen-point outcome of the extraordinary meeting of the Cambodia-Thailand General Border Committee on 7 August 2025 in Kuala Lumpur. However, it continues to seek international justice to resolve unresolved and sensitive issues that could increase tensions. In fact, Cambodia has again appealed to the ICJ to request a ruling on four other border areas covering the Ta Muen Thom temple, two other temple sites Ta Muen Tauch and Ta Krabei, as well as Mom Bei.

However, Thailand has not recognised previous ICJ rulings on the dispute and wants to resolve it bilaterally. The army's agitation and assertiveness over the border dispute with Cambodia has

once again turned the spotlight on Thailand's powerful army and its animosity towards the Shinawatra family, whose governments it overthrew in coups in 2006 and 2014[20]. Faced with the possibility of a new coup, the army has communicated its commitment to democratic principles, constitutional monarchy and the protection of national sovereignty through established legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms.

This commitment by the Thai army to protecting national sovereignty is supported by the rise in nationalist sentiment linked to sovereignty over culturally significant sites among the population. This rise in nationalism may also be motivated by concerns sparked by the Thai government's negotiations with Cambodia to jointly explore energy resources in undemarcated maritime areas, with warnings that such a move could put Thailand at risk of losing the island of Koh Kood in the Gulf of Thailand[21].

On 30 September, Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul said that the government wants to consult public opinion on the cancellation of two controversial memoranda of understanding (MOU) with Cambodia related to border demarcation and maritime claims[22]. According to him, the two agreements signed more than twenty years ago did not prevent border clashes or resolve disputes[23].

This decision was prompted by the incident on 27 September in which Thai soldiers suddenly fired mortars and rifles at a Cambodian army position in the An Ses area near the border[24].

Thailand and Cambodia had a diplomatic confrontation at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly when Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Prak Sokhonn accused Thailand of imposing martial law with the consequent forced relocation of Thai nationals to the Thai-Cambodian border session of the United Nations General Assembly when Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister

[20] See: https://www.emol.com/noticias/Internacional/2025/07/24/1173032/conflicto-camboya-tailandia-frontera-datos.html

[21] See: https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/could-koh-kood-become-a-dispute-between-thailand-and-cambodia

[22] The two documents include the MOU43 on border delimitation signed in 2000 and the MOU44 on overlapping claims on the continental shelf signed in 2001.

[23] See: https://es.laodong.vn/the-gioi/thai-lan-xem-xet-huy-ban-ghi-nho-ve-bien-gioi-voi-campuchia-1584185.ldo

[24] See: https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40056014

Prak Sokhonn accused Thailand of imposing martial law with the consequent forced relocation of Cambodian civilians as a form of racist violence and of using force instead of agreed mechanisms to resolve border disputes[25].

In his speech, Sokhonn criticised his neighbours for relying on unilateral maps rather than international maps established by binding treaties, actions he believes undermine efforts to build trust and peace[26].

For his part, Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow accused Cambodia of initiating the conflict 'with the intention of expanding a border dispute into a national conflict and further internationalising it'[27].

2.1 Economic consequences

The border crisis has spread from the battlefield to the economy. Hun Sen has encouraged the population to boycott Thai products and currency, and to use Cambodian currency or US dollars instead. On the other hand, the border conflicts have led many Cambodian migrant workers to return home from Thailand, in many cases without even notifying their employers. Thailand was a key destination for labour migration from Cambodia, accounting for 93% of the country's migration flow, which amounts to around 1.2 million people. Through Poipet alone, 786,899 migrant workers returned to the country between 24 July and 31 August, according to Cambodian immigration authorities, and more are likely to have returned since then. As a result, Thailand has faced rising costs due to labour shortages, while Cambodia has experienced increased unemployment and a sharp decline in remittances, which totalled $2.8 billion in 2024[28].

But perhaps the aspect that most influences the economic consequences of the border conflict is related to the lucrative casino business. Border casinos in Cambodia are an important source

[25] See: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501767784/cambodia-slams-thailands-racist -violence-at-un/

[26] See: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501763788/cambodia-and-thailand-clash -at-un/

[27] See: https://www.anews.com.tr/world/2025/09/28/cambodian-thai-top-diplomats -take-border-conflict-to-un-general-assembly

[28] See: https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/cambodia-is-beginning-to-feel-the-economic-costs-of-the-border-conflict-with-thailand/

of revenue for the government, and several have been forced to close during this period. Cambodia is now home to approximately one hundred casinos, making it the gambling capital of Southeast Asia, with most concentrated along the Thai border. The largest centre is Poipet, in Banteay Meanchey province, opposite the Thai district of Aranyaprathet in Sa Kaeo, where an estimated 80% of gamblers are Thai citizens[29].

In addition to the economic consequences of the shutdown, some analysts point out that among the possible sources of the current border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand is the latter's plan to open legalised casinos and entertainment centres to attract investment and curb illegal gambling near the border with Cambodia. This would be a loss of revenue for Cambodia, as well as a loss of lucrative money laundering operations[30].

2.2 Humanitarian consequences

Meanwhile, the humanitarian response has been slow to materialise. In the early days of the conflict, tens of thousands were displaced with little access to shelter, food or medical care. Local institutions, such as Buddhist temples and schools, acted as emergency shelters, but international aid was limited and largely reactive. To date, there are no binding plans for the recovery, compensation or reintegration of affected communities.

3 External actors

Although both the United States and China played a key role in promoting the ceasefire in July 2025, the reality is that their involvement is limited in reaching an agreement that would end border tensions. China's quiet diplomacy based on its strategic interests has helped to de-escalate the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia.

3.1 United States

For his part, President Trump did not invoke the defence treaty between the United States and Thailand or speak of regional stability. Instead, he resorted to his signature tool: economic coer-

[29] See: https://www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40051074
[30] See: https://www.trtworld.com/article/ab3b547974fc

cion[31]. He stated that he would not conclude trade agreements with them if the fighting continued. The United States imposed a 19% tariff on imports from Thailand and Cambodia after the ceasefire, down from the 36% originally faced[32].

Trump's role in mediating the conflict is particularly significant, above all because of his conciliatory and peaceful approach. In fact, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet nominated the US president for a Nobel Peace Prize and credited him with 'innovative diplomacy' that ended the military clashes[33]. Trump has also pledged to provide Cambodia with approximately $675,000 in economic aid to remove mines left over from previous conflicts, which is an exception to Trump's policy of eliminating development aid[34].

This new diplomacy was also reflected in Trump's letter to Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, in which he expressed his willingness to help mediate the border situation between Thailand and Cambodia[35]. The Thai government has stated that talks could begin to resolve the conflict definitively if Cambodia withdrew heavy weapons from the border areas, removed landmines, took strong action against internet fraudsters and relocated its citizens from the border lands that Thailand considers its own[36].

3.2 China

Since the beginning of the conflict, China has actively promoted peace talks[37]. Its geostrategic and economic interests in Cambodia are at stake and may be affected if border disputes escalate. For this reason, China is encouraging Cambodia to resolve the

[31] See: https://www.9dashline.com/article/five-days-that-shook-asean-how-the-cambodia-thailand-border-clash-became-a-superpower-showdown

[32] See: https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3328362/thailand-snubs-trumps-mediation-tells-cambodia-remove-border-troops

[33] See: https://edition.cnn.com/2025/08/07/world/cambodia-trump-nobel-prize-intl-hnk

[34] See: https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-us-land-mines-foreign-aid-c3e3b3e9a-98bca75504ad8a3d8e723d2

[35] See: https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/trump-sends-letter-to-thai-pm-on-border-conflict-with-cambodia

[36] See: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/trump-letter-anutin-thailand-cambodia-border-conflict-5391556

[37] See: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202509/t20250916_11708902.html

dispute with Thailand through dialogue and negotiation as soon as possible[38].

One of China's main geostrategic interests in Cambodia is the Ream naval base in the far south of Cambodia. Chronological satellite images show the development of a large pier between December 2023 and October 2024 built by China, almost identical to the 363-metre-long pier at the Djibouti base, and long enough for China's largest aircraft carrier to dock[39].

The US suspects that the Ream base is being turned into a Chinese naval base to expand its military footprint, as it has already done on the three disputed islands in the South China Sea. However, the Cambodian government has repeatedly denied such a possibility, citing its constitution which prohibits any permanent foreign military presence and stating that Ream is open for use by all friendly navies. So far, only Chinese warships have been allowed to dock at the new pier. Two Japanese destroyers that visited in February were told to dock in the nearby city of Sihanoukville[40] .

Currently, China has only one overseas military base, in the African state of Djibouti, which it built in 2016. For the rapid rise of its maritime power, China also needs a global network of bases or civilian ports that it can use as a base. In this regard, the Ream base could become a vital strategic point for China, as it could form part of the 'string of pearls' to establish itself as a maritime power capable of challenging the United States. The ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, both on the Indian Ocean, which are largely financed or controlled by Chinese state-owned companies, are examples of how China gains access to strategic maritime points.[41]

The paradox is that, until a few years ago, Ream was being upgraded with US assistance, but this assistance was cut after 2017, when Cambodia's main opposition party was banned and its leaders exiled or imprisoned[42].

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[38] See: https://www.aseanall.com/news/11070.html

[39] See: https://www.naval-technology.com/features/chinas-secret-naval-base-in-cambodia-through-satellite-imagery/?cf-view

[40] See: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501443167/two-japanese-destroyers-to-dock-in-sihanoukville/

[41] See: https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/cambodia-ream-naval-base-chinese-trojan-horse

[42] See: https://e.vnexpress.net/news/world/cambodia-pm-accuses-united-states-of-lying-over-aid-cut-3717950.html

Increasingly dependent on Chinese aid and investment, the Cambodian government abruptly changed partners. It cancelled regular joint military exercises with the United States and switched to the so-called Golden Dragon exercises it now conducts with China.

Cambodia claims that the Chinese ships present at the Ream base are there for training and to prepare for this year's Golden Dragon exercises. It also says that China is building two new 056A corvettes for the Cambodian navy itself and insists that the Chinese presence in Ream is not permanent, so it does not count as a base.

However, that has not stopped the US from expressing concern about the expansion of the base, which, as satellite photographs show, has, in addition to the new pier, a new dry dock, warehouses and what appear to be administrative offices and housing with four basketball courts. One way to circumvent the constitutional ban is not to call it a foreign base, but to allow continuous access to foreign forces on a rotational basis[43].

In addition to maritime projection, the base can provide other functions to China, such as intelligence gathering, satellite tracking, and long-range target detection or monitoring[44].

3.3 Other actors: United Nations and ASEAN

This positive approach to ending disputes shown by both China and the US has allowed ASEAN to show its leadership in ending hostilities. However, it remains to be seen whether ASEAN is capable of achieving this goal, given the little progress that has been made in ending other conflicts in Southeast Asia, such as the one taking place in Myanmar.

Neither China nor the US has offered concrete guarantees or resources to ensure the durability of the ceasefire. The lack of sustained external support for reconstruction or reconciliation has left the peace process without a long-term foundation.

Meanwhile, Cambodia has written to the United Nations Security Council urging the body to convene a meeting to stop what it describes as 'unprovoked and premeditated military aggression' by Thailand, which doubts Cambodia's sincerity and points out

[43] Kirsten Gunness, senior policy researcher at Rand Corporation, based in California.
[44] See: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2k42n54kvo

that Phnom Penh continues to incite violence and attempts to 'internationalise' the issue instead of using the bilateral mechanisms already agreed upon[45].

4 Future developments

The ceasefire signed in July between Thailand and Cambodia has been a response to the crisis rather than a lasting solution. Without enforcement mechanisms, long-term aid commitments or structural reforms, the underlying tensions remain unresolved and the risk of renewed conflict persists. Peace is not a slogan, it is a structured system of cooperation that must be tested and verified[46].

Without progress towards the creation of a demilitarised border zone between Cambodia and Thailand, equipped with a mechanism to verify troop withdrawals and investigate ceasefire violations, there is a risk of recurring disputes with cyclical clashes and the consequent danger of escalation that could affect and destabilise the whole of Southeast Asia.

The Cambodian government has said it will continue with the ICJ proceedings on the disputed areas, regardless of Thailand's cooperation in the process, which could take several years. For its part, the Thai government does not recognise the court's jurisdiction and will insist that the dispute be resolved through bilateral means.

The border struggle between Thailand and Cambodia is far from over. Relations remain unstable and may tend to worsen as anger simmers among the populations of both countries due to a mixture of misinformation, threats and nationalism.

An important aspect to note in both nations is the role being played by state-aligned or nationalist media outlets. The use of emotional and inflammatory language, often blaming the 'other' side for land grabs and historical injustices, may contribute to a possible resurgence of clashes.

At the heart of the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia lies a significant asymmetry in military power. Thailand has one of the most capable armed forces in Southeast Asia, with a

[45] See: https://www.nationthailand.com/news/world/40056669

[46] See: https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2025/08/07/beyond-ceasefire-asean-must-anchor-peace-between-thailand-and-cambodia.html

defence budget exceeding $5.5 billion, more than 360,000 active personnel, a fleet of F-16 multi-role fighter jets, an aircraft carrier and thousands of armoured vehicles and artillery systems. Cambodia, by contrast, has a much more limited military capability: a budget of $1.3 billion supporting approximately 124,000 soldiers, a small number of tanks and no combat aircraft, with air and naval forces focused primarily on transport and patrol duties[47].

This disparity reduces the likelihood of a large-scale war. Any attempt by Cambodia to dislodge entrenched Thai positions along the disputed border would almost certainly fail in conventional military terms.

The international community is watching closely as these events unfold, which could have broader implications in Southeast Asia that external powers may exploit. China's inability to end the conflict in Myanmar calls into question its ability to stabilise conflicts in its vicinity that affect its geostrategic interests. The same may happen with the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. China's efforts to reach an agreement between Thailand and Cambodia have been less effective than those of Trump, who has shown his willingness to use economic coercion, demonstrating a more persuasive position.

Finally, Trump may be trying to regain ground in Southeast Asia and throughout the Indo-Pacific region, to the detriment of China, by applying a new active diplomacy in the area.

*All links are active as of 12 October 2025

[47] See: https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/thailand-cambodia-border-conflict-whats-behind-the-clashes/

Thailand's socio-economic data		
Population	69,920,998 (2024)	
Ethnic groups	Thai 97.5%, Burmese 1.3%, others 1.1%, unspecified <0.1% (2015)	
Religions	Buddhist 92.5%, Muslim 5.4%, Christian 1.2%, other 0.9% (2021)	
GINI index	44.4 (2015)	
GDP	$1.558 trillion (2024)	
GDP per capita	$21,700 (2024)	
Poverty incidence rate (% of population) *	5.4 (2022)	
GINI index*	33.5 (2023)	
Exports	$369,191 billion (2024) US 18%, China 13%, Japan 7%, Australia 4%, Singapore 4% (2023)	Machinery parts, integrated circuits, trucks, automobiles, broadcasting equipment (2023)
Imports	$351.419 billion (2024 est.) China 26%, Japan 11%, USA 7%, UAE 6%, Taiwan 5% (2023)	Crude oil, integrated circuits, natural gas, gold, vehicle parts and accessories (2023)

Tabla 1. Datos socioeconómicos de Tailandia. Fuente: CIAFactbook y Banco Mundial [Consulta: 29 septiembre 2025]

Datos socioeconómicos de Camboya		
Population:	17,063,669 (2024 est.)	
Ethnic groups:	Khmer 95.4%, Cham 2.4%, Chinese 1.5%, others 0.7% (2019-2020 est.)	
Religions	Buddhist (official) 97.1%, Muslim 2%, Christian 0.3%, other 0.5% (2019 est.)	
GDP	$123,676 billion (2024 est.)	
GDP per capita	$7,000 (2024 est.)	
Poverty incidence rate (% of population) *	17.7 (2012)	
Exports	$31,712 billion (2024 est.) USA 36%, Germany 6%, China 6%, Japan 6%, Thailand 5% (2023)	Clothing, semiconductors, footwear, gold (2023)
Imports	$34,329 billion (2024 est.) China 39%, Thailand 20%, Vietnam 12%, Singapore 6%, Indonesia 3% (2023)	Refined petroleum, fabrics, gold, plastic products, synthetic fabrics (2023)

Tabla 2. Datos socioeconómicos de Camboya. Fuente: CIAFactbook y Banco Mundial [Consulta: 29 septiembre 2025]

Chronology of the conflict	
1904	Establishment in 1904 of the border between the two countries through the signing of an agreement between the then Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand) and France.
1907	The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907 redrew the map.
1962	The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the Preah Vihear temple belonged to Cambodia in 1962.
2000	The two countries agreed to establish a Joint Border Commission to peacefully address claims, but little progress has been made in resolving disputes.
2003	A group of violent Cambodians set fire to the Thai embassy and several Thai businesses in Phnom Penh.
2008	Cambodia proposed to include the Preah Vihear temple on UNESCO's World Heritage List.
2011	Exchange of artillery fire around Cambodia's Ta Krabey temple, resulting in more than a dozen casualties.
2013	The ICJ reaffirmed that the entire promontory of the Preah Vihear temple was located within Cambodian territory.
2025	13 February. A group of Cambodians escorted by troops sang their national anthem at Ta Moan Thom—another ancient Hindu temple claimed by both countries—before being detained by Thai soldiers. 28 May. A Cambodian soldier was killed near the 'Emerald Triangle' during a brief exchange of fire. 14 June. Meeting within the framework of the Joint Border Commission. 1 July. Thailand's constitutional court suspended Shinawatra from her duties as prime minister. 22-24 June. Border closure. 16 July. A Thai army patrol was conducting a patrol in the border areas of Ubon Ratchathani province, bordering Cambodia, when an anti-personnel mine exploded under their feet, leaving three soldiers wounded. 23 July. Another Thai contingent suffered a new incident with anti-personnel mines in an area adjacent to the first incident. 24-28 July. Clashes involving heavy artillery at twelve points along the border. 28 July. Ceasefire signed. 4 August. Three Thai soldiers were killed by a mine explosion. 7 August. Cambodia and Thailand agreed on new measures to reinforce the border ceasefire. 27 September. Thailand and Cambodia had a diplomatic confrontation at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly. 30 September. The Thai Prime Minister proposes the cancellation of two memoranda of understanding (MOUs).

Chapter Nine

The Arctic as a space of conflict

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Abstract

For a long time, the Arctic was a remote, inhospitable territory that was difficult for human life. Historically, it has been a final frontier and became a zone of separation between the superpowers during the Cold War. During this period, large-scale exploitation began, which gradually increased due to the discovery of new hydrocarbon and mineral deposits and fisheries. With the end of the bipolar confrontation, it lost its strategic interest and the expression 'Arctic exceptionalism' was coined to highlight its limited weight in global geopolitics. However, after recovering from a deep internal crisis, Russia began to regain its position in the region. The exploitation of resources, new maritime routes and control of the seas and air routes are shaping the Arctic as an area of cooperation, but also of conflict, between major powers in their struggle for global hegemony.

Key words

Strategic competition, Russia, United States, China, Arctic.

Introduction

The Arctic Circle, currently located at 66° 33’ 46” N, is one of the five main terrestrial parallels of astronomical value. It delimits the region in which, during the summer and winter solstices, the sun does not set or rise for twenty-four hours. However, this definition is insufficient to describe a region with common characteristics. For this reason, other indicators are used, such as the 10° isotherm in July, or the tree line, which marks the area where trees cannot grow.

It is considered to cover some 14,050,000 square kilometres, equivalent to 8% of the Earth’s surface. This is a politically and geographically diverse region, but it is also a Mediterranean, that is, a portion of sea completely surrounded by the Eurasian and American continents that physically delimit it (López Ibor *et al*., 2014). These factors mean that this space, in every sense extreme, acts as a strategic junction.

Indeed, the Arctic is a strategic junction, because whoever controls it dominates an area where three continents converge and can be accessed simultaneously. It is the nexus of two oceans

Figure 1. Border between Thailand and Cambodia. Location of the temples. Source: Author’s own elaboration

and the immediate environment of two major nuclear powers, so control of it contributes to the balance of power between the two (Aznar, 2023).

Its coastline is occupied by Russia, Canada, Denmark (through the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Norway and the United States. To these should be added Iceland, Finland and Sweden, which, although they do not have an ocean coastline, are part of this geographical area. Among these eight countries are two nuclear powers and seven NATO members, which divides this sea between blocs.

In addition, the Arctic connects to the Atlantic through the passage known by NATO as GIUK (an acronym for Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom) or GIN (Greenland, Iceland and Norway), centred on the Svalbard Islands (Spitsbergen). These passages were of great strategic interest during the Cold War because, in the event of armed conflict, they were to be blockaded to prevent Soviet submarines from reaching the Atlantic, thereby exerting negative control over this ocean and interrupting the link between Europe and the United States. Denmark, with the Faroe Islands halfway between Iceland, Norway and Scotland, complements Danish control over both GIUK and GIN.

The geographical imperatives remain. The Scandinavian peninsula lies between north-western Russia and the open waters of the Atlantic, providing control of Russia's north-western sea approaches (the Barents and Baltic Seas). This wedge-like, spur-like or outpost-like character explains the pressure Norway is under from its Russian neighbour.

The Arctic and Antarctic, the polar regions, share many similarities, which, starting with their extreme nature, mean that they are treated in a similar way despite their opposite natures. In this sense, Antarctica is an isolated land mass, a continent (the fourth largest in the world or the largest island), while the Arctic is physically the opposite, an ocean basin, an enclosed space bounded by land.

The legal status of the polar regions is disparate. However, both have common bases that have allowed them to be treated jointly in the common ground that has shaped a kind of 'polar law'. All this has led to different statutes. The characteristics of the former have made an *ad hoc* agreement possible and it has become a legally ordered space. In the latter, the diversity, strength and multiplicity of interests involved have not allowed this. As a

result, while Antarctica has been internationally declared a zone for research and science, free from commercial, economic or military activity, a *global commons*, in the Arctic each coastal country decides on the exploitation of its resources.

Another issue is the incidence and effects of climate change in the region. In fact, the poles are the areas of the world most vulnerable to global warming, as melting ice gives way to water that absorbs sunlight instead of reflecting it, causing it to melt even more. It is this 'positive feedback' that explains why warming in the region is three to four times greater than global warming.

As a result, the Arctic is undergoing a thawing process that has reduced the thickness of its ice cap by 30 to 40% over the last thirty years. In 2015, the ice surface area was 9.7 million square kilometres, compared to 13.38 million in 2007. It is estimated that since 1978, it has lost an ice surface area equivalent to five times the size of Spain, making a completely ice-free summer likely by 2035. Every year, between 200,000 and 250,000 tonnes of this ice melt, and it is worth remembering the discovery in Greenland of DNA dating back more than two million years as a result of the thaw. Thus, if all the ice in Greenland melted, the global sea level would rise by up to six metres.

The melting ice makes borders accessible that were previously impassable in practical terms, creating new security scenarios. This is happening at a time when the region has the shortest distance between Russia and the United States, which encourages militarisation, especially of its airspace.

The disappearance of the ice also brings with it improved accessibility to resources and the opening of new shipping routes. This convergence has led to the emergence of new players in the region, such as China and India. In the case of China, 46% of its GDP depends on maritime traffic and 80% of the oil it imports passes through Malacca, making an alternative route of utmost interest.

The so-called Northeast Passage and Northwest Passage are routes of increasing accessibility. The latter, seven thousand miles long in the Canadian Arctic, links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and would reduce the distance between the United States and Asia by 15%. The Northeast Passage or Northern Sea Route (NSR) is the easiest to navigate, running along the Russian coast and connecting the Pacific and Atlantic without having to pass through Suez, Panama or the Cape of Good Hope.

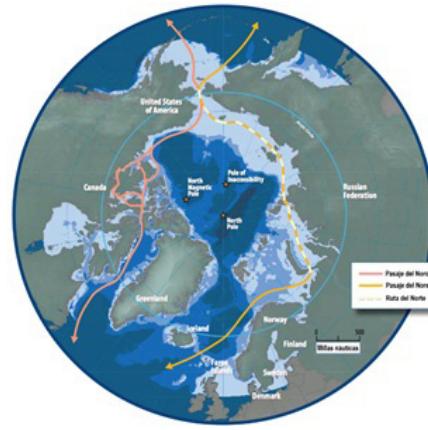

Figure 2. Map of Arctic space

This second route was only navigable during part of the summer, but climate change is favouring its progressive expansion. In the summer of 2017, a merchant ship made the journey to South Korea in nineteen days, 30% faster than via the Suez route and without an icebreaker escort. A year later, in January 2018, another Russian ship, the first in the middle of winter, made the journey between South Korea and Sabetta, on the Yamal Peninsula.

This route is 40% shorter in distance between Europe and the Far East, some 3,900 miles, or twelve to fifteen days less, although the adverse weather conditions that can be expected and the dangers to navigation reduce the advantage to 30%. The distance between Tokyo and New York, to give another reference, is reduced by 3,700 miles. As a result, in 2018, 18 million tonnes were transported along the Russian coastline, 80% more than the previous year; in 2019, the figure was 26 million, and in 2024, it reached 37.9 million. It is estimated that by 2035, this figure will reach 130 million tonnes (Pérez Gil, 2025a: 535-557).

The Arctic is an area rich in resources. In this undefined space where the great powers converge, it is estimated that around 30% of the world's gas reserves and between 13% and 20% of its oil reserves are located. Added to this are mineral resources, which account for 40% of the world's palladium, 26.8% of diamonds, 15% of platinum, 11% of cobalt, 10.6% of nickel, 9% of tungsten and 8% of zinc. Then there are the rare earths present in large quantities in Greenland and Sweden, which are of particular interest to China. In addition, fisheries account for between 4%

and 5% of global catches. Most of these riches are still difficult to access, although in some comparatively warmer areas, such as the Barents Sea, this is already being achieved.

The melting ice, combined with other factors such as rising commodity prices and technological advances, has made natural resources, from hydrocarbons to fisheries, more accessible and profitable. These can also be exploited in a milder climate, which reduces production costs. All of this has contributed to changing the *status quo* in the region. In fact, it has encouraged a kind of 'race for the Arctic' that runs counter to the cooperative reality that prevailed until the war in Ukraine. This race seeks to legally validate the domination of an ever-expanding space by consolidating previous advances that remain as milestones or references.

This is not, strictly speaking, a division of this ocean, but rather an expansion of the territory based on what has already been allocated; this serves as legitimisation and is the basis for further advances. The result is demands that, although formulated in legal and scientific terms, are in fact political in nature and are presented by exploiting existing grey areas and ambiguities.

In the Arctic Ocean, the Law of the Sea was used to delimit this space. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes, in general terms, a territorial sea of twelve miles, an adjacent area of another twelve miles and an exclusive economic zone of two hundred miles, which could be extended to the length of the continental shelf, each with its corresponding rights and obligations. Thus, approximately half of the Arctic Ocean is international waters, even though states claim rights over their continental shelf. This is the underwater continuation of the continents[1].

The five circumpolar states seek to extend their sovereignty and economic zone under this regulation, as well as under the unique circumstances offered by their location and history. UNCLOS sets a deadline of ten years after signing to submit claims. Norway

[1] UNCLOS, in Article 76, allows continental shelves to be extended when a State has scientific data demonstrating that certain geological or geographical features of the seabed are related to the continental shelves. However, the waters beyond the territorial sea are free seas, and the Convention limits the sovereignty of States by declaring that the seabed is the 'common heritage' of mankind and that its exploration and exploitation 'shall be carried out for the benefit of all mankind, irrespective of the geographical situation of States'.

ratified it in 1996 and submitted its claims in 2006; Russia ratified it in 1997 and submitted its claim in 2001; Canada ratified it in 2003 and submitted its claims in 2013; Denmark ratified it in 2004 and submitted a claim in 2014. The United States, for its part, has not yet ratified it, although it submitted claims in 2025.

All this at a time when the period of low tension in the Arctic has come to an end, as it has been unable to escape the dynamics of confrontation sparked by the war in Ukraine. This has undermined an instrument of governance and consensus such as the Arctic Council, created in 1996, and has also broken the geopolitical balance in the region following the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. And the lack of governance encourages power struggles.

1 The West and its geopolitical vision of the Arctic

In just a few years, the Arctic has gone from being a space of peace and cooperation to one of growing geopolitical tension, as a result of the return to strategic competition and scenarios of confrontation between major powers. Of the eight Arctic states (A8), all except Russia belong to the community known as the West, which has been responsible for designing and directing the global order in recent decades, based on rules that are now being challenged by many countries in the international system.

Since the end of the Cold War, relations in this predominantly maritime region have been governed by the Arctic Council at the institutional level and by UNCLOS at the regulatory level. For years, this form of governance facilitated a scenario marked by stability, low tension and cooperation, a period that has been called 'Arctic exceptionalism', defined by the adage 'High North, Low Tension' (Dams and Van Shaik, 2019). The premises were that geopolitical struggle should not play a leading role in the region and that climate change issues should be addressed as the main threat to the Arctic.

Despite growing tension between Russia and the West over the past two decades, which arguably began with NATO's eastward expansion and continued with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its intervention in Syria and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Arctic relations remained stable.

During this period, some exercises between NATO states and Russia were cancelled and activities in some cooperation forums were

suspended, but cooperation continued in others, and attempts were made to preserve this Arctic exceptionalism. However, tension and mistrust have been growing to such an extent that Norway itself has called for a greater NATO presence and even an official Arctic policy (Bykova, 2024).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point in relations between the A8, resulting, among other things, in the *de facto* paralysis of the Arctic Council, as the seven Western countries cut off cooperation with Russia. Thus, geopolitical tensions have returned and organisations such as NATO are regaining a prominence they had lost after the end of the Cold War. The accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 to NATO has complicated the unstable balance within the Arctic Council, where there are now five NATO members on one side and Russia on the other.

This war has therefore caused a rift that has changed the security landscape in the Arctic as well. Abruptly, geopolitics is once again determining regional relations, and the Arctic Council is ceding prominence to NATO and, to a lesser extent, to the European Union (EU). While for years the disputes and disagreements between the Arctic states, particularly between Russia and Norway, remained bilateral, the new situation created by the war in Europe has led to the emergence of NATO in a region where, until then, it had played a limited role. This presence has come about mainly at the request of Norway and Canada, which previously advocated keeping the Alliance out of Arctic disputes in order to facilitate some control over possible regional geopolitical tensions.

1.1 New approach to Arctic security by the United States

Since the end of the Cold War, and unlike Russia, the Arctic had not been a region of priority interest for the United States. In terms of energy resources, it has its needs adequately covered by using fracking technology, and in foreign policy it has more priority fronts such as the Indo-Pacific. In terms of security, the Arctic was an area of low tension and cooperation between states, including Russia, as the heir to the former Soviet Union.

However, in recent years, factors such as Russia's militarisation of the Arctic and China's growing presence, initially for economic reasons (access to resources and use of maritime routes), have

attracted increasing attention and, it could be said, concern from the United States. This gradual change has been evident in recent strategic documents from the US government. In October 2022, the Biden administration approved the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (The White House, 2022a) and the current National Security Strategy (The White House, 2022b). The latter devotes a section to the Arctic for the first time and highlights the need to increase the US presence to preserve peace and stability in the face of growing Russian and Chinese power. The National Defence Strategy, also from October 2022, takes a similar approach, but emphasises that the main priority is the Indo-Pacific (US Department of Defence, 2022).

It can be said that its stance towards the Arctic is essentially reactive. The United States is not willing to allow either Russia or China to gain control of the region. There are four key elements of interest. First, ensuring freedom of navigation in Arctic sea routes, countering Russian attempts to dominate the RMN. Second, control of the seas, in particular the outlet to the Atlantic through which Russian nuclear submarines of the Northern Fleet transit. Third, dominance over Greenland to exercise control over the airspace of the shortest route between Russia and the United States in the event of conflict (early warning and missile defence). And fourth, access to resources, particularly minerals and rare earths, where China's control of the global market leaves the United States in a vulnerable position.

These issues were consolidated in the US Department of Defence's 2024 Arctic Strategy (US Department of Defence , 2024), which adopts a monitor and respond approach and seeks integrated deterrence to be carried out with its partners and allies. This document contains numerous references to NATO, reflecting the United States' growing concern about the region, but also its awareness that its maritime priority lies in the Indo-Pacific and that it needs to work with its allies.

However, as a result of the low priority given to the Arctic in the US foreign agenda for decades, it does not have sufficient resources to deal with the new geopolitical scenario. An example of this reality is the small and ageing US icebreaker fleet (three ships, but only two operational) compared to Russia's nearly fifty[2],

[2] Russia currently has more than fifty icebreakers, seven of which are nuclear-powered, as discussed below. As noted below, China is building its own fleet of icebreakers.

the insufficient military presence in the region, and the lack of adequate maritime infrastructure, such as deep-water ports[3].

In this unfavourable scenario, the attitude of the new Trump administration does not help, as it jeopardises critical alliances in the Arctic, particularly with Denmark over the issue of Greenland and with Canada, which it needs if it wants to compete with China and Russia (Conley, 2025), as pointed out in the 2024 Arctic Strategy.

The United States is strengthening its presence and capabilities in the region, but it would need to deploy more personnel, better port facilities, more sensors and satellite communications, and unmanned vehicles to be able to *monitor* Russian and Chinese activity and *respond* if necessary. The problem is that the Trump administration is taking unilateral action without consulting its allies, when it seems more reasonable to strengthen cooperation in order to share efforts and jointly develop the necessary capabilities. According to the latest document cited, NATO should take the initiative to secure Europe's northern flank (High North)[4], which would allow the United States to focus on the Indo-Pacific (Mckenzie, 2025).

In this Arctic scenario, characterised by growing geopolitical tension, the United States is taking important measures such as the reactivation of the 2nd Fleet based in Norfolk (2018), whose main mission is to ensure and defend freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic, with a special emphasis on the High North and the Arctic[5]. Thus, in 2018, an American aircraft carrier (USS *Harry S. Truman*) was deployed in the area for the first time in twenty-seven years (Mizokami, 2018); a presence that has been repeated, most recently in August and September 2025 with the US Navy's most modern aircraft carrier *(*USS *Gerald Ford)*, along with other allied naval vessels[6].

See also: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320887/artico_2025_dieeeo52.pdf/

[3] In any case, in recent years, increased geopolitical tension in the region has led to an increase in military presence, particularly in Alaska, as well as the announcement of plans to modernise old military installations in the region.

[4] The High North is understood to be the European Arctic, stretching from Greenland in the west to the border between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea in the east, and encompassing areas of strategic importance such as the GIUK.

[5] See: https://www.c2f.usff.navy.mil/About-Us/Mission/

[6] See: https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/display-news/Article/4296815/ford-carrier-strike-group-operates-in-the-high-north-with-nato-allies

Figure 3. US aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford in Arctic waters. Source: 6th Fleet Public Relations Office

1.2 NATO's return to the Arctic

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has focused on the security of Western Europe. However, the Arctic was a region of priority interest during the Cold War, a key area for halting Soviet expansion towards the west, as well as for ensuring the defence of North America and northern Europe.

During that period, Norway built important military installations in the north of the country to monitor the movements of the Soviet fleet towards the Atlantic[7]. Iceland and Greenland also played a key role in protecting the maritime gap between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom (the GIUK), considered a critical bottleneck for NATO security.

Greenland was vital to NATO's strategic and security interests in the North Atlantic, leading to the signing in 1951 of a Defence Agreement between the United States and Denmark on that territory, which allowed bases (many of which had existed since the Second World War) to be established for NATO defence activities and to operate with virtually no restrictions (e.g., the Thule

[7] For Soviet leaders, the Svalbard Islands were essential for the security of their naval fleet stationed on the Kola Peninsula, as well as for their ships and submarines to access the Atlantic.

Figure 4. GIUK Gap during the Cold War

Air Base, now called Pituffik, which housed bombers and a huge radar station) (Bykova, 2024).

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the definitive collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a new era in relations between the West and Russia, with the Arctic taking a back seat. The era of Arctic exceptionalism began, marked by regional stability and cooperation.

In this new scenario, the Arctic lost prominence in NATO, which focused on its expansion eastward and on crisis management operations and cooperative security activities, to the detriment of the deterrence and defence activities that had characterised its actions during the Cold War.

The post-Cold War strategic scenario, characterised by a more stable Arctic, led to the closure of military facilities and the region began to lose importance within the Alliance structure itself. It was decided to deactivate the Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT), which was responsible for the security of maritime lines of communication between North America and Europe, key to reinforcement in the event of conflict. In 2003, it became the Allied Command Transformation (SACT), with the task of promoting continuous innovation of the Alliance's forces and capabilities, and lost its maritime focus.

A clear example of how the Arctic had taken a back seat is the current Maritime Strategy of March 2011[8], which does not even

[8] See: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_75615.htm

mention the region. In fact, until 2021, references to the Arctic in official NATO documents are almost non-existent, when the concept of the High North is revived[9]. During the thirty years following the end of the Cold War, the lack of concern for the Arctic stemmed both from its having become an area of stability and from the lack of agreement among the allies on NATO's role in the region. Both Canada and Norway chose to keep a low profile in their disputes with Russia and sought to resolve them bilaterally.

Even as relations between Russia and the West grew more distant, the Arctic remained outside the growing tensions until the outbreak of war in Ukraine, which sparked renewed interest from the Alliance. Perhaps the most important geopolitical event has been the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, which has strengthened collective defence in the north-eastern region. Thus, as noted above, seven of the A8 countries are now NATO members, a situation that has further strained relations between Russia and the West and seems to take us back to the bipolar balance of the Cold War period (Bykova and Houck, 2024).

The growing militarisation of the Arctic, the increased activity of the Northern Fleet and the growing presence of its nuclear submarines have led the West, and NATO in particular, to perceive the region as unstable. The main challenge it faces is Russia's zero-sum thinking based on political realism, with Russia seeking recognition of the Arctic as part of its sphere of influence (Piechowicz, 2025).

However, the Alliance countries are not well prepared for this competition. NATO currently lacks the means and critical infrastructure (ships with polar capabilities, surveillance systems, missile defence) to become a credible force in the Arctic, and its approach continues to be more reactive than strategic. Steps are being taken to regain a presence in the Arctic through exercises such as *Dynamic Mongoose* and *Nordic Response* (Odgaard, 2025).

At the structural level, some progress has been made. In 2018, the creation of Joint Force Command Norfolk[10] was approved. Its

[9] NATO's Strategic Concept, approved at the Madrid summit on 29-30 June 2022, states that "In the *High North*, its ability to disrupt or interfere with reinforcement and freedom of navigation in the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge for the Alliance". Available at: https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/

[10] See: https://jfcnorfolk.nato.int/about-us

commander is also the commander of the US 2nd Fleet and is assigned the missions of protecting transatlantic maritime lines of communication, including the High North as a gateway for Russian naval forces to the Atlantic. In this way, it has become, to a certain extent, a successor to SACLANT. It reached operational capacity in 2021.

1.3 The European Union as a secondary player in Arctic geopolitics

Of the Arctic states, only three are members of the EU: Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Furthermore, the Arctic seas only wash the shores of Greenland, an autonomous region of Denmark, but one that does not formally belong to the EU due to an internal decision by that country. Thus, geographical constraints limit the EU's geopolitical role in the Arctic, particularly in its maritime dimension.

The Joint Communication 27/2021 on the EU's Engagement with the Arctic[11] addresses the challenges affecting the Arctic from a broad perspective conditioned by climate change and focused mainly on environmental issues, sustainable development, scientific cooperation and indigenous issues. However, it barely addresses the geopolitical dimension.

The document states that climate change is a threat to global peace and security and considers that the militarisation of the Russian Arctic increases security challenges, which is why many countries, including NATO itself, are closely monitoring the situation with a view to responding to Russian assertiveness in Arctic waters and airspace if necessary. However, the EU is not involved and no actions are proposed to counter Russian power, which is left to NATO. This suggests that the EU limits its actions in the Arctic to its contribution to consolidating NATO's role in security and defence, but without any ambition to become a geopolitical actor.

To understand this limited role of the EU, it is important to note that the Union requested observer status in the Arctic Council more than fifteen years ago, a request that has not yet been accepted, as Russia and Canada remain opposed on issues related

[11] See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12683-EU-Arctic-policy-update_en

to fisheries and it does not appear that, in the current context, the matter will be resolved.

As a result of its limited military power and capacity as a geopolitical actor, the EU plays a minor role in the tensions in the Arctic, which are essentially limited to the impact of sanctions against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, its three Arctic Member States address security issues either bilaterally with Russia or within the framework of NATO (the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance is a clear reflection of the EU's inability in this regard), leaving the Union with a secondary role. In the future, either this situation is corrected or the EU risks being politically marginalised and strategically overtaken in the Arctic (Komin and Hosa, 2025).

Although the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has committed to reviewing the Communication on the Arctic and has even announced negotiations with Iceland on defence issues, including its possible participation in the SAFE financial instrument[12], these are competences that lie with the Council. Therefore, relevant decisions and actions must be taken by Member States and not by the Commission, whose powers in these matters are limited to the defence industry.

The fragmentation affecting NATO countries' stance on the Arctic is also replicated in the EU. Several European countries are reviewing their policies to adapt to the changing geopolitical, environmental and economic landscape in the region. In March 2025, France published its *Arctic Defence Strategy* which focuses on maintaining regional stability and protecting its interests[13]. Germany published its own Arctic policy in 2024, and the Netherlands, in line with France, combines a military, technological and economic approach with the defence of its interests, which it will update in the next review of its Polar Strategy (2021-2025) (El Hajji, 2025). These initiatives, while reflecting a clear interest in the region on the part of various non-Arctic countries, reveal the division within the EU regarding the Arctic in all its dimensions, including geopolitics and military matters (Stępień and Raspotnik, 2023).

[12] It makes available to Member States credits of up to €150 billion to develop common defence capabilities.

[13] See: https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/enjeux-regionaux/poles/strategie-defense-larctique-fruk

1.4 Disagreements between Denmark and the United States over Greenland

One of the issues that has negatively affected Western countries' stance on the Arctic has been the tensions between Denmark and the United States over Greenland. It is the largest island in the world, an autonomous territory of Denmark, with its own Parliament, and the 2009 Danish Self-Government Act would allow it to hold a referendum on independence. It is NATO territory but has not been part of the EU since 1985 by its own decision.

However, as the Arctic thaws, Greenland's economic and strategic importance is growing as a result of easier access to its enormous resources (energy, minerals, rare earths) and its geographical location in relation to polar sea routes, which are becoming increasingly navigable.

Furthermore, its geographical location gives it enormous geopolitical value. The United States considers it a key territory for its security, located halfway between Russia and the United States, as it is the shortest route between them in the event of conflict. Since the Second World War, it has been the guarantor of its security, a circumstance endorsed in 1949 by the Washington Treaty and in 1951 by the Greenland Defence Treaty. During this period, several US military bases were established to provide early warning and defence capabilities against missiles, as well as to station military assets for possible actions against Russia, including nuclear weapons.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the repeated US attempts to take over the island, always by peaceful means. There were initiatives to purchase the island in 1867 (coinciding with the acquisition of Alaska from the Russian Empire), in 1946 under President Harry Truman, and in 1955 by President Dwight Eisenhower. However, after the end of the Cold War, interest in Greenland waned, until in 2019 President Donald Trump brought the issue back to the table during his first term, citing national security, resource protection and control of Arctic Sea routes as reasons. Therefore, the current proposals are not new and are based on solid geopolitical foundations (Carafano, 2025; Witker, 2025b: 89-93).

However, the emphasis of the current US administration has caused tensions between allied countries, which has had a negative impact on NATO's internal cohesion and generated mistrust in Denmark, but also in Canada, which is very sensitive

to changes in the Arctic. Consequently, it is important to seek a consensus formula that avoids tensions over something that the United States already has *de facto*, namely military sovereignty over Greenland, ratified in 2004. In any case, it must be acknowledged that President Trump's rhetoric on Greenland has made Denmark pay more attention to it and announce extra military spending to guarantee its security.

2 Russian ambitions and capabilities in the Arctic

A glance at a world map is enough to recognise that Russia is the largest country on the planet, has the widest coastline on the Arctic Ocean and dominates its entrances to the Norwegian Sea and the Bering Strait. Furthermore, in the geographical area comprising the Arctic Ocean, its adjacent seas and the regions they wash, huge deposits of hydrocarbons and minerals have been discovered over the last hundred years. In more recent decades, processes associated with climate change are turning this area into a new promised land as a result of melting ice, but also into a new arena for strategic competition between major powers.

The current Russian leaders believe that the country's future lies in its development, within the framework of a new phase of strategic thinking, strengthening of state power and a return to traditional areas of influence, including strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church as a legitimising force for state policies. To this end, they have long-term plans and strategies with policies that are driven directly from the Kremlin[14].

At the institutional level, the Russian presidential structure includes a special envoy whose main mission is to coordinate state policies affecting these territories at the highest level. In the federal government, a deputy prime minister is responsible for coordinating the work of the ministries with jurisdiction over the Arctic, as well as monitoring and controlling the implementation of the federal programme for the development of the Far East and the Arctic, which is one of the most important. It covers everything from the development of the Arctic territories, the promotion of maritime transport through the NSR and rescue

[14] See statements by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the 10th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on 5 September 2025. Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77927

and salvage resources, to submarine and space cable connectivity in these regions[15].

At a lower level is the special representative of the state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom for Arctic development and its Northern Sea Route Directorate, which has been assigned management responsibilities in this area, precisely because of its long experience in operating the world's most advanced icebreaker fleet, *Atomflot*. Its main task is to safely increase maritime transport through the NSR under the direct guidelines of the Kremlin (Pérez Gil, 2025a).

The aim of these plans, policies and strategies is to expand, dominate and control Russian sovereignty in the Arctic. To this end, in addition to increasing its permanent presence through military bases and scientific facilities, it is improving and expanding its scientific research programmes throughout the region. These plans go hand in hand with growing regulatory activity that aims to establish exclusive and exclusionary control over those territories that they consider to be under their sovereignty[16] and over which they intend to exercise state powers[17]. All this activity is part of long-term development plans, but now in a scenario of competition for global hegemony (Grady, 2024). However, they boast that they have unique capabilities to control the Arctic, which are unmatched by other coastal states and other powers with Arctic aspirations.

It should be noted, first of all, that according to studies by the Russian Geological Institute, they have proven reserves of oil for seventy years, gas for a hundred years and coal for several hundred years, which ensures them a prominent position in the global energy markets for a very long period of time. This reality influences many political and strategic decisions and allows Russian leaders to exert an influence that goes far beyond their current material power.

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[15] The federal Arctic Development programme, in conjunction with the federal space programme, envisages the creation of a constellation of satellites in full and permanent polar orbit over these territories.

[16] On 2 August 2007, a manned mini-submarine Mir descended to a depth of 4,261 metres to plant a Russian flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, on the Lomonosov Ridge, with claims of sovereignty.

[17] The Russian Arctic continental shelf covers more than four million square kilometres and is a maritime area rich in oil, gas and raw materials. It is estimated that more than 20% of all the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves are concentrated there.

2.1 Strategic approach to the Arctic

Historically, for Russia, the Arctic has been a frontier territory, explored since ancient times but almost unexploited until recent times. The Soviet Union focused on its development, mainly of ports and mining operations. During the Second World War, its ports received a large part of the supplies sent from the United States, which overcame the German naval blockade from occupied Norway. Shortly afterwards, the start of the Cold War pitted the first two nuclear powers in Europe and Asia against each other, but also in the High North, where the development of the first ballistic missiles showed that the shortest route to reach the enemy's territory was to fly directly across Arctic territory. At that point, a new vision of the world map emerged, centred on the Arctic, as illustrated by the United Nations emblem itself.

Figure 5. UN emblem

Consequently, it was this threat of nuclear war that determined the strategic vision for the Arctic. New naval bases were quickly built on the Kola and Kamchatka peninsulas, at opposite ends of the country, which began to house the new nuclear submarines equipped with ballistic missiles (SSBNs). The Russian Navy specialised in polar navigation, and its submarines dominated those waters, although they suffered heavy losses in their struggle with the United States (Giltsov, Mormul, and Ossipenko, 1993). At the same time, they began to build a fleet of large nuclear icebreakers with unique capabilities that allowed them to escort ships responsible for transporting supplies to military bases and scientific facilities in the Arctic territories. Their submarines and nuclear icebreakers also made regular incursions into the geographic North Pole (90º N).

The Russian authorities have sought to maintain these capabilities inherited from the Soviet era. Starting in 2010, they launched a programme to modernise naval bases in the Arctic and, shortly thereafter, began to receive new SSBNs that ensure the counter-strike capability of their nuclear deterrent force (Pérez Gil, 2025b). They also have new attack submarines (SSNs) equipped with cruise missiles with dual conventional and nuclear capabilities, enabling them to carry out sub-strategic and theatre missions. Russian Navy commanders emphasise that their submarines are proficient in polar navigation[18], conduct regular exercises in the Arctic ice pack and have the capability to launch their weapons in icy conditions.

Figure 6. Strategic nuclear submarine emerging from Arctic sea ice, 2022

Shortly thereafter, construction began on a new generation of Arktika-class nuclear icebreakers, with a displacement of thirty-three thousand tonnes, to support civilian shipping operations, mainly in three maritime areas: the Kara Strait, the Gulf of Ob and the East Siberian Sea. There are four in service and plans are in place to have around ten by the beginning of the next decade[19]. Their main mission is to escort large gas tank-

[18] President Putin said during a meeting with nuclear experts in the city of Sarov (formerly Arzamas-16) that 'This is our military advantage. And research, even in this Arctic zone, is extremely important to us'. Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77837

[19] On 26 May 2025, President Putin approved plans to build two new ships, with production scheduled to begin in 2026. Available at: https://portnews.ru/news/379923/

ers sailing from the Sabetta terminals to Asian ports (Staalesen, 2025), with the advantages of time and cost savings noted at the beginning.

Figure 7. Nuclear icebreakers, 2025

2.2 Russian military presence in the Arctic territories

The return to stability, together with a significant increase in hydrocarbon prices in the first decade of this century, facilitated the reorganisation and modernisation of its armed forces. The activation of a first state armaments programme for 2011-2017 (PEA-17) made it possible to begin improving remote bases and recovering settlements that had been abandoned in the 1990s due to lack of funds. From 2012 onwards, improvements were made to bases located in Novaya Zemlya, Franz Josef Land and the islands of Eastern Siberia, key positions for dominating and controlling the Arctic Ocean. To this end, they were equipped with advanced weaponry and equipment such as S-400 anti-aircraft systems and Bastion-P and Bal anti-ship missiles, and anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) zones were created to confront any adversary. As can be seen, in Russian planning, military deployment and economic development go hand in hand.

In addition to the permanent presence of its nuclear submarines, the Russian Navy began to carry out regular naval deployments along the RMN with several objectives: to ensure presence, to dominate navigation in icy seas, and to train ground forces in

Figure 8. Severny Klever Base in Kotelny, Sibir Islands

joint operations. On several occasions, due to weather conditions, they have required the escort of *Atomflot* nuclear icebreakers, demonstrating the suitability of having this type of vessel available at any time of year.

The Aerospace Forces also began to deploy combat aircraft to remote airfields. Sukhoi Su-33 and Su-35S fighters are regularly deployed to Novaya Zemlya. The improvement and extension of the runways allow for the refuelling of Ilyushin Il-76 heavy transport aircraft, as well as the deployment of strategic bombers to territories such as Anadyr, in the Chukotka region, close to Alaska.

In 2014, the joint strategic command of the Northern Fleet was established, and in January 2021, it became an independent military district with responsibilities throughout the Arctic territory. However, the reorganisation of the western strategic command as a result of the war against Ukraine reversed this measure and reassigned resources, assets and personnel to the new Leningrad Military District. In addition, the creation of a new North-West Army Corps was ordered, which will be stationed on the Russian-Finnish border to respond to the new situation created by Finland and Sweden joining NATO.

It should also be noted that the Arctic is a testing ground for advanced Russian missiles, particularly at the Nenoksa firing range in the White Sea (Pérez Gil, 2025c). Ballistic missiles and military satellite launch vehicles are launched from Plesetsk, in

the Arkhangelsk Oblast (province). They also have a nuclear test site in Novaya Zemlya, although for now there is a complete moratorium on testing by the major powers.

2.3 Plans for the development of the Northern Sea Route

The war in Ukraine has posed new challenges to the NSR's expansion plans. In the short and medium term, Western sanctions have affected the volume of cargo transported and prevented the milestones set by the Russian president himself from being met[20]. The sanctions have affected the volume and types of cargo, as well as the ships sailing in the Arctic seas, including fishing vessels[21]. However, these measures do not only affect maritime transport passing through the Arctic, but all modes of transport. Therefore, if we take the most recent data on both cargo traffic and Arctic ports, we can see a sustained increase in volumes which, although not offsetting the overall decline, does show the growth of the NAMR[22] and, therefore, progress in long-term development plans.

The focal points of the RMN are, from west to east, Murmansk, on the Kola Peninsula, with its large naval port, the main base for nuclear icebreakers and plans to convert it into a major distribution centre for coal and liquefied natural gas (LNG); Sabetta, in Yamal, where Russia's main gas fields are located, both in operation and in development[23]; Dixon, at the mouth of the Yenisei River, with its port and logistical capabilities; much further to the northeast, Pevek, in Chukotka, as a gateway to the Baimskaya mining basin[24] and, finally, beyond the Bering Strait in the

[20] In 2024, cargo volume in the RMN was 37.9 million tonnes, less than half of the 80 million target set by the President in Russian in 2018. On 21 May 2025, Glavsevmorput Director General Sergey Zybko announced an ambitious target of 110 million tonnes by 2030. Available at: https://sudostroenie.info/novosti/45253.html

[21] On 27 August 2025, Russian authorities announced reciprocal measures against the ban on Russian fishing vessels operating in EU and Norwegian maritime areas and exclusive economic zones. Available at: https://fish.gov.ru/main-news/2025/08/27/ilya-shestakov-rossiya-primet-otvetnye-mery-v-otnoshenii-norvezhskih-rybopromyslovyh-sudov/

[22] Data available at: https://sudostroenie.info/novosti/45995.html

[23] The largest marine infrastructure ever built operates here, a 640,000-tonne gas processing platform, which was built in Kola and towed to its operating area.

[24] As part of this project, in 2019, the first floating nuclear power plant was commissioned in the port of Pevek, and there are plans to build four more, under the leadership of Rosatom.

Pacific Ocean, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where there are also plans to build a major LNG redistribution centre for Asian ports.

Figure 9: Floating nuclear power plant at Pevek

In the long term, there are plans for the giant nuclear icebreakers of the new Leader class, with a displacement of 69,600 tonnes, to operate from a new base in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski. Their mission will be to cover the most difficult stretch of ice in the winter season, which is the sea area from the East Siberian Sea to the Bering Strait. The first ship, *Rossiya*, is being built at the Zvezda shipyard in Bolshoy Kamen, Vladivostok, at an estimated cost of more than two hundred billion roubles (about $2.5 billion at current prices). In addition, AFRAMAX gas tankers are being built at these shipyards to transport LNG from Sabetta to ports on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts[25]. Although there is repeated talk of state plans, it should be borne in mind that all this infrastructure is financed by large Russian energy corporations such as Gazprom, Novatek and Rosneft, which are owned by businessmen close to the Kremlin and, in some cases, by partners from its early days.

During the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok held from 2 to 6 September 2025, Rosatom signed an agreement with Rosmor-

[25] On 26 May 2025, Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov (one of the Kremlin's *protégés*) chaired a government meeting on shipbuilding plans, where a target of 1,600 large-tonnage vessels by 2026 was set, particularly gas and oil tankers.

rechflot for the development of river transport routes for goods from Siberia and the Far East to the RMN, as well as the creation of logistics centres in river ports. It also announced plans to build two new nuclear power plants, one in Fokino, Primorie, to be started in 2026, and another in Khabarovsk, to meet the electricity demands of these projects.

2.4 Cooperation with China and India in the Arctic

It was previously stated that the Russian authorities are actively working to establish an exclusive regime over the Arctic and, above all, to control its resources, from gas, oil and mining to fisheries. In the past, they only agreed to coordinate with other Arctic states within the Arctic Council and opposed interference by other countries in an area they consider to be under their exclusive control, a position shared by Canada and Norway.

However, the war in Ukraine has imposed a new political-strategic approach. On the one hand, the rejection by Western powers of Russian initiatives as part of their attempts to isolate Russia has led to the blockade of the Arctic Council, which had been so successful in regional cooperation, particularly between Russia and Norway on sensitive issues such as access to the Svalbard archipelago, fisheries in the Norwegian and Barents Sea limits, and search and rescue capabilities in those waters.

On the other hand, anti-Russian sanctions have forced Russia to seek new markets for its hydrocarbons, which has caused a huge shift in global energy flows. India stands out in this regard, having quickly become the main importer of Russian oil thanks to the discounts applied to the price, which it then re-exports to Europe and North America. The same has happened, albeit to a lesser extent, with China, some Persian Gulf countries and Africa. At the same time, Western sanctions also led to the withdrawal of Western energy companies from joint projects in Russian territory, with Japanese and South Korean companies being the last to pull out.

These measures have posed a huge challenge for the Russian authorities, firstly because they must maintain a high level of hydrocarbon exports in order to continue financing a long war in Ukraine (Pérez Gil, 2024a). Secondly, because a substantial part of their exports, and therefore of their tax revenues, comes from

these exports, which finance everything from the structure of the state to public services. Thus, they cannot afford to stop exploiting known deposits or deplete current deposits without replacement, such as Shtokman in the Barents Sea.

To this end, there are plans for Chinese and Indian companies to enter both the Yamal and Sakhalin projects, from which their Western counterparts have withdrawn. On 20 August 2025, First Deputy Prime Minister Manturov highlighted these aspects during the annual meeting of the Russian-Indian Intergovernmental Commission.

In the case of China, cooperation seems to be deeper and more long-term because, despite its remote geographical position, it has its own strategy for the Arctic and aspires to have free access to those seas[26], a circumstance that, until now, had not occurred due to the consensus among the members of the Arctic Council on their undisputed possession of the assets and rights in that polar Mediterranean.

Thus, in March 2023, the Russian and Chinese governments created a joint group on the NMR, in October 2024 the Ministries of Foreign Affairs established a dialogue on the Arctic, and in December 2024 the first meeting of the NMR cooperation body was held. As a corollary, on 8 May 2025, Presidents Putin and Xi made a joint statement in Moscow emphasising their common position in favour of peace and stability in the Arctic, as well as their willingness to prevent military and political tensions in the region[27]. However, it is worth noting that the first summit between the Russian and US presidents since the start of the war in Ukraine was held in Alaska (15-16 August 2025), an Arctic territory.

On the Russian side, the Russian government appointed the vice-chairman of the State Commission for Arctic Development as special representative for Arctic Development and Cooperation with China. This collaboration therefore seeks to achieve Arctic development objectives, fill capacity gaps in critical sectors where sanctions have had the hardest impact, such as ship-

[26] Chinese President Xi Jinping stated during his visit to Moscow on 8 May 2025 that 'there has been significant progress on issues related to the development and commercial use of the Northern Sea Route', while Putin mentioned plans for logistics centres in Murmansk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76873

[27] Available at: http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6309

building[28], and continue to bring in foreign currency through energy exports.

On the Chinese side, this has taken the form of the construction of new icebreakers (three so far), which are used for scientific expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic. Large Chinese merchant ships are increasingly frequent in the RMN, and since 2017, there has been talk of the Polar Silk Road as part of its global projection strategy (Pardo Delgado, 2025). In addition, they are showing increasing activity in deep-sea operations, where they can benefit from Russian capabilities and experience (Pérez Gil, 2024b: 575-597), in preparation for an upcoming confrontation with the United States in the Pacific. However, in the short term, a Russian-Chinese alliance does not seem likely (Myklebost and Lanteigne, 2024). These are strategic projections that are being considered in the face of a rapidly emerging new distribution of global power (Witker, 2025a).

Conclusions

Over the last decade, the major powers have entered a new phase of strategic competition, which has become clearly apparent since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Two antagonistic blocs have emerged: the West on one side, and an informal and loosely structured bloc on the other, led by Russia and China, which seeks to attract most of the Global South. This division is gradually spreading to all areas of geopolitical interest, including the Arctic.

Russia's growing militarisation is creating a classic situation derived from the security dilemma, in a regional and global geopolitical scenario where force and deterrence are replacing rules and cooperation.

For many years, NATO has had a regional approach characterised by fragmentation. The traditional lack of interest on the part of the United States was compounded by the caution of some allies who sought to preserve their relations with Russia. The consequence is that, despite the importance of the High North, NATO continues to lack an official position on the Arctic, an issue that needs to be corrected in order to address the challenges that will arise in the coming decades.

[28] In 2024, New New Shipping established a joint venture with Rosatom registered and under jurisdiction in China to explore avenues of collaboration in the NSR.

For its part, the EU has a limited role confined to the implementation of environmental policies and sustainable development, despite official statements such as the Union's own Global Strategy of 2016. In a scenario of growing tension, aggravated by the escalation in Ukraine and with China increasingly present, it seems unlikely that it will gain prominence in the region.

For Russia, the Arctic is a key part of its strategy as a country. Despite the problems caused by Western sanctions, Russian leaders are sticking to their long-term plans. The development of the Arctic territories is conceived as a race for the next hundred years, ranging from dominance of the energy markets to scientific and technical leadership in areas such as nuclear energy. With this vision, they are implementing their strategy of expanding the Northern Sea Route.

But these plans are also part of their strategy to act as a major power in the Pacific, which is gradually becoming the main arena in the struggle for global hegemony.

In this scenario, complex issues arise, such as the reconfiguration of regional governance, either through the Arctic Council (the Arctic's governing body) or through the creation of new forums that allow other non-Arctic powers but which have an interest in the region, such as China or India; or the maintenance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which has been widely respected by the Arctic states until now.

The existence of these institutions brings stability to the region, allows differences to be resolved peacefully and resolves the conflict dilemma in favour of negotiations. Because for the great powers, the alternative to achieving their vital interests is often the use of force: war.

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Composition of the working group

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