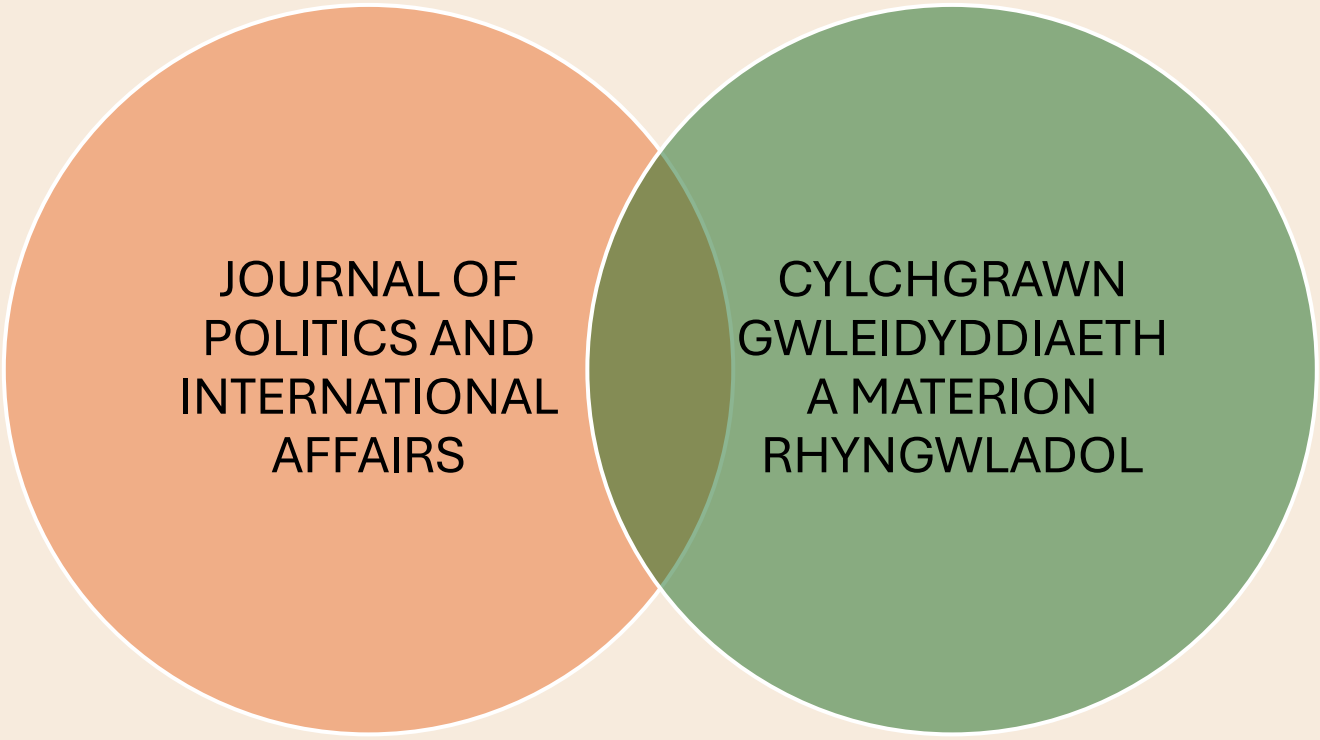
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INTERSTATE



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Battleground Yemen – How international actors shaped Yemen's civil war

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Edited by Margaret Brown

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Situated on the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen has long been troubled by conflict. Once the ancient Romans knew of Arabia Felix or Fortunate Arabia, today, modern-day Yemen is a nation struggling with internal conflict. Influenced by external international powers exercising their influence on the region through financial or material means, Yemen is in the midst of one of the worst conflict-induced humanitarian crises of the 21st century. Beginning in 2014, the Yemeni Civil War has been fought by three major players. The Houthi Movement (Ansar Allah), the Internationally Recognised Government (Presidential Leadership Council), and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The contents of this article will not focus on the history or political influences driving these factions through conflict, but rather, it will focus on the external international players with investment in the conflict; exploring how the range of international actors support each faction. Each of these factions receives varying support from its international contributors, including, financial support, arms, personnel, logistics, and political pressure. This support (predominantly for the PLC) comes through official government channels and is publicly available information.

However, as is the case for many international actors supporting the Houthis, this support was intended to be clandestine but has since come to light through investigation and media exposure. The varying ways in which international actors support and influence the Yemeni Civil War provoke contemplation regarding the nation's true involvement in the conflict, and, to what extent they are willing to go to achieve their individual foreign policy goals.

Funding in Support of Houthi Rebels

Iran represents the major external military supporter of the Houthis. From 2016 onward, several United Nations (UN) Panels of Experts documented repeated interdictions of dhows and skiffs carrying missile components, UAV parts, and small arms assessed to be of Iranian origin (UN PoE Yemen, 2016–2023). Forensic analyses conducted by the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) identified serial numbers and manufacturing characteristics that linked seized material to Iranian weapons systems, such as Qasef UAV variants and cruise missile guidance assemblies (UK FCO, 2020; US DIA, 2024).

Beyond the delivery of weapons, Iran has been widely believed to provide technical training, doctrinal guidance, and operational assistance through Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) networks, enabling the Houthis to assemble missiles and UAVs within Yemen (CFR, 2023; CSIS, 2022). This assistance dramatically expanded Houthi strike range and precision against Saudi infrastructure and international shipping. Iranian involvement transformed the Houthis from a local insurgent group into a regional missile actor, integrating the Yemen conflict into Tehran’s broader regional deterrence architecture.

Unlike many Western nations, Russia maintained diplomatic engagement with the Houthis and Yemeni factions while opposing Western-led intervention within the region. Although UNPanels do not document systematic Russian weapons transfers to the Houthis,

investigative reporting in 2024 suggested Russian intelligence-sharing and satellite support may have indirectly assisted Houthi maritime targeting (Wall Street Journal, 2024). This reported intelligence sharing increased the Houthis targeting capabilities in the region, posing a greater threat to maritime shipping routes and naval activities in the Red Sea, and threatening international interests in the active waters off the coast of Yemen.

UN Sanctions Monitoring bodies documented attempted illicit North Korean (DPRK) weapons sales to Middle Eastern actors linked to Yemen between 2016 and 2019 (UN Panel on DPRK Sanctions, 2018). These reports indicated attempted missile-related technology transfers to Houthi-linked networks. Although these reported transactions were intercepted or failed to be acquiredby the Houthis, there still exists the possibility that weapons may have been supplied to the Houthis without the knowledge of intelligence services and investigative journalists.

The actions of Houthi supporting actors provide the faction with several capabilities otherwise unavailable to them. Modern missile and UAV systems supplied by Iran allow the Houthis to strike further and with greater precision than previous capabilities allowed. Moreover, Russian intelligence sharing efforts increase the lethality of the available weapon systems, allowing for more effective targeting and intelligence gathering. This not only poses a threat to the internal struggle taking place within Yemen, but also to the larger military and commercial infrastructure within the region. However, without concrete evidence of DPRK or possible further actors' involvement, it is impossible to make a conclusive statement regarding the full military and intelligence capabilities of the group.

Saudi-led Coalition

Saudi Arabia has functioned as the primary actor at the core of the anti-Houthi military coalition since the launch of Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 (UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, 2016). The intervention was formally justified as an effort to restore Yemen's internationally recognised government (the PLC) following the Houthi seizure of Sana'a. However, Saudi operations rapidly evolved into a prolonged air-centric conflict strategy, relying on blockade enforcement, proxy mobilisation, and extensive arms procurement.

The UN Panel reports from 2015 and onwards document Saudi leadership of coalition air operations and maritime interdictions, to include restrictions imposed on Hudaydah port, Yemen's principal humanitarian entry point (UN PoE Yemen, 2016; 2018; 2020). Human Rights Watch and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded repeated incidents of coalition airstrikes causing many civilian casualties and the destruction of protected civilian infrastructure. This included hospitals, markets, food production facilities, and water systems (HRW, 2016–2022; OHCHR, 2017–2023).

Saudi Arabia further reinforced its commitment to the conflict through extensive sponsorship of Yemeni proxy forces. The Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies and the UN Panel documenteddirect Saudi financing, salary payments, equipment provision, and operational guidance to tribal militias and government-aligned units in Marib, al-Jawf, Hadramawt, and border regions (Sana'a Centre, 2019; UN PoE Yemen, 2021). These forces enabled Saudi Arabia to exert ground-based influence without large-scale Saudi troop deployments.

Arms procurement played a key role in the Saudis' strategy. According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Saudi Arabia became the world's largest arms importer between

2015 and 2020. Sourcing combat aircrafts, precision-guided munitions, and missile defence systems primarily from the US, UK, and France (SIPRI, 2021). The legality of UK arms transfers to Saudi Arabia was challenged in domestic courts, resulting in a 2019 Court of Appeal ruling that previous licensing decisions were unlawful due to inadequate assessment of risks of international humanitarian law violations (Campaign Against Arms Trade v Secretary of State for International Trade [2019] EWCA Civ 1020).

Saudi Arabia's intervention transformed Yemen into a managed security frontier whose political and military interests remain deeply shaped by Saudi financing, mediation – such as the 2019 Riyadh Agreement – and continuing military leverage over Yemeni institutions.

In March 2015, Morocco joined the Saudi-led coalition and contributed military aircraft and personnel to early coalition air operations. Moroccan F-16s were confirmed to have participated in coalition airstrikes against Houthi positions during the initial phase of Operation Decisive Storm (Reuters, 2015). One Moroccan aircraft was reportedly lost in combat in May 2015, reinforcing Rabat's prominent early direct operational involvement.

By 2018, in line with growing domestic criticism and strategic realignment in Rabat's foreign policy, Morocco had quietly withdrawn from active military participation. Moroccan disengagement did not include major public announcements but was widely reported by international media (Middle East Eye, 2019).

Bahrain – a close Saudi ally – participated in coalition air operations from the outset. Bahraini F-16 aircrafts were confirmed by Reuters to have joined coalition airstrikes in 2015. Bahrain also hosted coalition logistical coordination and publicly endorsed Saudi military objectives within the region (Reuters, 2015).

Kuwaiti, involvement in the conflict must also be noted. Although not militarily involved, Kuwait joined the coalition politically and logistically in 2015 and later served as a diplomatic venue for the UN-brokered Yemen peace talks in 2016 (UN Special Envoy Office, 2016). While its direct military engagement was limited, Kuwait provided logistical and financial support to coalition operations.

Qatar initially joined the Saudi-led coalition and deployed troops in 2015. However, following the Gulf diplomatic rift in 2017, Qatar was expelled from the coalition and ceased military involvement (Reuters, 2017).

In 2015, Senegal announced the deployment of approximately 2,100 troops to Yemen in support of the Saudi-led coalition, though reporting later indicated that fewer were ultimately deployed (Reuters, 2015). Senegal's involvement was largely symbolic, reflecting its political alignment with Saudi Arabia, rather than sustained combat engagement. By 2017, however, Senegal began scaling back its involvement amid domestic political pressure and humanitarian concerns (Jeune Afrique, 2017).

Between 2015 and 2019, Sudan contributed thousands of ground troops to the Saudi-led coalition, including Rapid Support Forces (RSF) units (Associated Press, 2018; UN PoE Yemen, 2019). These forces were deployed primarily along Yemen's western coast. However, political changes following Sudan's 2019 revolution led to phased troop withdrawals (Reuters, 2019).

Jordan provided aircraft, training, and logistical support during early coalition operations. Reuters confirmed Jordanian F-16 aircrafts participated in coalition airstrikes in 2015, and Jordan hosted training facilities for Yemeni pro-government forces (Reuters, 2015; UN PoE Yemen, 2016).

Saudi-linked Mercenaries

Private military contractors have played a role as a critical auxiliary component of coalition ground operations, particularly for the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Investigations by The New York Times documented the recruitment of Colombian and other Latin American mercenaries under private contracts to fight in Yemen beginning in 2015 (Mazzetti & Hager, 2015). The UN Panel of Experts reports later corroborated the existence of contractor training pipelines and foreign mercenary deployments linked to Emirati operations (UN PoE Yemen, 2021). These networks represented one of the most extensive uses of privatised foreign combatants in a modern Middle Eastern conflict outside of previous modern conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE financed, trained, and armed numerous Yemeni militias and tribal fighters who operated as ground proxies against the Houthis. UN Panel reports and Sana'a Centre analyses document salary payments, weapons distribution, and operational tasking for these forces, which included border units, tribal fighters in Marib and al-Jawf, and southern militias (UN PoE Yemen, 2019; Sana'a Centre, 2021). These militias played a central role in territorial control and counter-Houthi operations.

International allies

The US has functioned as the principal external enabler of the Saudi-led coalition during the first phase of the conflict, providing intelligence, logistical assistance, refuelling, and arms transfers critical to coalition air operations. The US support did not involve a large-scale deployment of American ground forces, but its role was structurally decisive.

From 2015 to 2018, US aircraft provided aerial refuelling capabilities for coalition aircraft conducting bombing missions over Yemen. Pentagon statements and Government Accountability Office reports confirm that US intelligence sharing and target development supported coalition operational planning. Meanwhile, the US approved tens of billions of dollars in arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including aircraft, precision-guided munitions, and missile defence systems, as documented by SIPRI and Congressional notifications.

Mounting civilian casualties and humanitarian concerns prompted political backlash. In 2018, the US formally ended aerial refuelling support, and subsequent congressional actions attempted to restrict offensive arms sales. However, US logistical and intelligence cooperation continued in modified form, and arms exports were periodically resumed following executive waivers.

Beginning in 2024, the US shifted into a direct combat role against the Houthis following the Houthis' attacks on international shipping. US and UK forces conducted repeated strikes against Houthi missile launchers, radar systems, and drone facilities, marking Washington’s first overt kinetic engagement in the Yemen war since 2016. Therefore, the US has acted as both an indirect supporter of coalition warfare and a direct military antagonist of the Houthis, embedding Yemen within broader US–Iran and Red Sea maritime security planning.

The UAE emerged as a parallel architect of the Yemen war but pursued a territorially differentiated strategy focused on southern coastal regions and maritime corridors. The UN Panel of Experts reports documented UAE military deployments to Aden, Mukalla, and the Red Sea coast beginning in 2015, alongside the training and equipping of local militias, including the Security Belt Forces, Hadrami Elite Forces, and Shabwani Elite Forces (UN PoE Yemen, 2017; 2019).

Investigative reporting by The New York Times established that the UAE recruited and deployed hundreds of Latin American mercenaries, primarily from Colombia, under private contracts to participate in ground combat operations (Mazzetti & Hager, 2015). UN Panel annexes later confirmed the existence of contractor networks and foreign military training chains linked to Emirati operations (UN PoE Yemen, 2021).

Emirati support facilitated the creation of the STC in 2017, a separatist political-military faction seeking autonomy or independence for southern Yemen (International Crisis Group, 2018). While the STC entered Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council in 2022, its military infrastructure remains rooted in Emirati patronage, generating sustained intra-coalition tensions with Saudi Arabia (Sana'a Centre 2023).

The UAE's intervention effectively transformed southern Yemen into a semi-autonomous security sphere, shaped around Emirati maritime and counter-Islamist priorities, particularly in relation to Bab al-Mandab shipping routes.

The UK has been one of the most significant external supporters and enablers of the Saudi-led coalition through arms transfers, maintenance support, and operational liaison. Between 2015 and 2023, the UK licensed more than 23 billion pounds in military exports to Saudi Arabia. This included Paveway IV precision-guided munitions, aircraft components, and maintenance services essential to Royal Saudi Air Force operations (UK Department for International Trade, 2023).

UK military personnel were embedded in Saudi command centres in advisory and liaison roles, providing technical assistance for air operations (UK Ministry of Defence, 2016). Although the government denies direct participation in targeting decisions, this embedded presence of UK-linked defence structures in coalition air campaigns signals a greater involvement in the conflict than is being acknowledged.

Legal challenges culminated in the landmark 2019 Court of Appeal ruling in Campaign Against Arms Trade v Secretary of State for International Trade, which found that UK export licensing was unlawful due to inadequate assessment of Saudi compliance with international humanitarian law (EWCA Civ 1020, 2019). Exports were suspended before being resumed in 2020 following revised government assessments. In 2024, the UK joined US forces in direct airstrikes against Houthi missile and drone infrastructure following attacks on Red Sea shipping (UK Parliament Research Briefing, 2024).

France has maintained a sustained role as a major arms supplier to coalition states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. SIPRI data showed France was among the top three arms exporters to Saudi Arabia during the peak war years, providing armoured vehicles, naval systems, and precision munitions (SIPRI, 2021). Investigative reporting revealed French-made weapons were deployed in Yemen, including CAESAR artillery systems positioned near civilian areas (Disclose, 2019). Although French authorities maintained that exports complied with domestic law, NGOs documented the battlefield presence of French equipment in the region. French naval forces also supported Red Sea maritime security operations aligned with coalition objectives (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2021).

The Canadian involvement has been primarily through arms exports. Between 2015 and 2020, Canada approved multibillion-dollar exports of Light Armoured Vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia (Global Affairs Canada, 2020). Human rights organisations raised concerns regarding the potential use of these vehicles in Yemen. Although the Canadian government claimed no conclusive evidence of their deployment in Yemen, civil society organisations and UN experts repeatedly urged greater scrutiny (Project Ploughshares, 2019).

South Korea's involvement was limited to arms exports to Gulf coalition partners. Some NGOs criticised export approvals, citing Yemen conflict risks (Amnesty International, 2020).

Australia approved defence exports to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, drawing NGO criticism due to Yemen risks (Amnesty International Australia, 2021).

Conclusion

To conclude, the factions engaged in prolonged conflict within the boundaries of the Yemen civil war have been provided with enhanced military and intelligence capabilities that have allowed the conflict to transition from a moderately regionally confined conflict to one that now reaches beyond its borders. Houthi support from Russia, Iran, and possibly the DPRK has demonstrated how modern, nationally inaccessible technological and intelligence capabilities increase the presence of the Houthi movement within the region. The ability of the faction to strike targets with greater precision and efficiency, aided by Russian intelligence sharing and Iranian missile and UAV technology, has been demonstrated directly to Western superpowers with strikes on NATO naval vessels and commercial shipping boats. Not only has this support increased their reach and lethality, but there is a signal that, armed with the sword of international funding and support, the Houthis' broader regional goals stretch far beyond the boundaries of Yemen towards surrounding nations and further afield.

Since 2015, the anti-Houthi campaign in Yemen has evolved into a deeply externalised war system rather than a limited coalition intervention. Saudi Arabia and the UAE constructed a durable military architecture combining airpower, proxy ground forces, mercenary networks, maritime control regimes, and expansive international arms-supply chains. This structure did not merely assist Yemeni allies; it reshaped Yemen's political and

military order. Western states – particularly the US, UK, France, and Canada – functioned as critical enablers through weapons transfers, maintenance support, training pipelines, and intelligence cooperation that rendered sustained coalition operations technically possible. UN investigations and domestic court rulings demonstrated that coalition operational capacity remained structurally dependent on these external systems, even amid political controversy.

Regional partners provided manpower, basing access, and diplomatic legitimacy, while the outsourcing of ground combat to Yemeni militias and private contractors fragmented authority on the ground. Collectively, this support network transformed Yemen from a domestic civil war into a managed international security theatre. Rather than facilitating a decisive settlement, the durability of external backing embedded militarisation into governance structures and prolonged the conflict's lifespan.

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What happened to political communication?

How Polarisation is Facilitated in the Digital Age.

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Edited by Jessie Carver

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Politics now, is indistinguishable from hostile discussion. Perhaps now more than ever. In determining what has changed, it is important to consider technological advancements, partisan reporting and populist leaders. The media, often depicted as a fourth pillar of democracy, a critical line of communication between government and the people, has fundamentally altered in the way it disperses information. The digital age of new media has played an instrumental role in challenging traditional media outlets, with it, the rise of media bias, disinformation and fake news. Consequently, the truth is harder to identify, especially when it is weaponised. The consequences on global politics are unfolding catastrophically. Whilst it may not be the most pressing political issue today, its relevance is gravely underestimated. It alters how the public access politics and biased news sources are at the epicentre of political opinions, seeping into the way they vote, or interact with the government, or even interact with others, who may be of different opinions. Hence, political polarisation poisons public discussion. This article focuses on the United States of America, where another factor contributes to the boiling pot of hostility- Politicians. Whilst the same can be said for other states, examining how the digital media crisis facilitated the re-

election of President Donald Trump, is a cautionary tale. The role of populist figures such as Trump, in the downfall of the media, and political communication, cannot go unaddressed.

Traditionally, the media is instrumental in informing the public, especially regarding politics. The golden age of radio facilitated an unprecedented connection between president and electorate for the first time, with President Roosevelt's "fireside chats".[1] Forty years later, journalists were instrumental in exposing President Nixon in the 1972 Watergate Scandal.[2] This highlights how the media have played an important role in "holding politicians accountable".[3] History is littered with other victims of media exposure, ensuring that the electorate's expectations of their public servants are met. However, the greater consequences of the decline of "institutional journalism" have become more apparent in the contemporary world.[4] Whereas in 1970, "broadcast networks captured 80 percent of views, that decreased to forty percent by 2005" because of the possibility to access news online.[5] In recent years "fifty three percent of adult Americans accessed news from social media".[6] To summarise, news and information now spread through social media sites which reaches a greater audience than traditional news outlets.

New media facilitates political polarisation, and the decline of traditional media, in several ways. The convenience and accessibility of social media to anyone, has resulted in the proliferation of news sources or "online journalism" where information is available from non-traditional sources, and often produced at greater speed.[7] This is a breeding ground for political division, because viewers cherry-pick the sources they access, often ones that align with the "partisan predispositions".[8] If everything they access does not supply any criticism of their beliefs, it results in greater hostility, or an inability to host discussion with someone holding an opposing belief. Therefore, it can be "more challenging to find consensus solutions".[9] Unregulated access to social media also feeds the epidemic of political polarisation through fake news and disinformation. 'Fake News' can be defined generally as

"(mis)information presented as traditional by outlets outside of dominant mainstream news spheres that work with an intention to deceive".[10] It has grown in precedent because of the proliferation of information on social media, that can be dispersed even if it is not true. Furthermore, it poses a greater problem, when the term is weaponised to "discredit any story with which a person disagrees".[11] When 'Fake news' is weaponised, it can be used as an excuse to not acknowledge opposing views or criticism. This can therefore dictate a polarised public that reaches a gridlock with any communication regarding politics. The weaponization of fake news is a tactic employed by the 47th President of the United States, who claims any negative news coverage, even when the facts "can be proven beyond a doubt", is fake news.[12] Another example of how media has changed is how in the contemporary, it has fallen short of holding politicians accountable by misrepresenting the truth to their electorate. On the contrary, the problem is not confined to President Trump, nor is the media only responsible. Hostility towards the media has occurred from both the public and the administration, with the Pentagon news restraints on the press, as of 2025.[13]

Additionally, the traditional journalistic standards, upheld by conventional media outlets, do not receive the same respect, or warrant the same responsibility, from modern digital media. Historically, there has been clear ethical standards to "ensure bias does not colour news".[14] However, ethics is not law, and the standards are not sacrosanct in the new media age. Equally, media bias is "not a new problem", but its prevalence has grown exponentially in recent years.[15] Only 'twenty eight percent of Americans' now trust mass media to 'report accurately and fairly'.[16]Undoubtedly, "media bias does reduce the quality of journalism and foster distrust".[17] This, therefore, contributes to the gravitation towards social media sources of news, breaking down political communication. A pivot to more media bias, and mass media trust may be a consequence of economic imperatives. Traditionally, there has been separation between the commercial and journalistic functions of media sources to

protect journalism from as much influence as possible. It has been a "cornerstone that upholds American journalism's sense of autonomy".[18] However, to compete with online news sources, modern news finances rely on ratings and digital advertising, a consequence of engaging content.[19] For media outlets, news is not only to inform, but it is "a source of income".[20] This may always have been the case, but now it is a matter of survival against a goliath opponent. Controversial headlines and content, facilitate greater digital traffic to sites, investigative journalism and critical thinking be damned. Therefore, the "potential for blurring between news and commercial content" has increased, to remain relevant in the digital era.[21] The dire consequences are felt by the viewers, whose access to fair and accurate information has been reduced. Analysis of opposing arguments is not as credited in the foundations of their political views. A greater mistrust that is fostered, also influences political opinions and the way viewers engage, and communicate them.

Moreover, the digital age, and the popularity of short form media, has been conducive to the rise of a President such as Donald Trump. It is perhaps a global phenomenon, one with potentially disastrous consequences that extend far into the foreseeable future. Trump has an affinity for Twitter or 'X' because he can "directly engage with his followers and bypass traditional media outlets".[22] Consequentially, what reaches the 67 million American users, is unfiltered, and often without evidence or context.[23] It is a perfect and "fertile market" for the communication of political messages, used by many in modern politics.[24] However, the short character limit, prevents any of these messages being explained, evidenced, or critically analysed in a way that could be done by newspaper articles. So, such statements, are taken at face value, without knowing if they are true. Electing a figure who weaponizes social media with controversial statements, to the most superior office in the United States, exposes the "deep rooted racial faultlines" and "economic resentment that has been simmering in many parts of suburban America".[25] It is damning to hopes of political consensus, because

hostility has taken such precedence. Furthermore, electing a President who is openly hateful to sections of the American demographic highlights how the traditional media power in holding politicians accountable, has deteriorated. However, they may be floundering, in the wake of a president so skilful at manoeuvring negative coverage. This bodes poorly for the electorate, when their main democratic branches are prioritising division and polarisation.

In conclusion, several factors contribute to a vicious cycle of harm that is inflicted upon political communication, ranging from politicians, the media, and the people. The technical advancements of the 21st century have proved to be detrimental to the quality of media produced, through bias, disinformation and fake news. A domino effect has cascaded onto politics, through distrust and polarisation, where hostility is prioritised in discussion, over consensus and understanding. The events unfolding in the United States should raise awareness to media habits, and less political communication in other states, and a caution in approaching new media sources.

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What are the effects of Russia-Ukraine war for Russia's position in the global system?

Edited by Chloe Heaton

Word Count: 1,775

Russia's position in the global system has been weakened by the Russia-Ukraine war.[10] The Russia-Ukraine war, which began with Russia's large-scale invasion in February 2022, has had profound consequences for the international system and global stability.[10] It has diminished Russia's political influence, military strength, and economic power.[10] Russia's position in the global system has been significantly weakened as a result of the war, with long-term implications for its role as a major global power.[13] Due to the conflict, Russia has been facing extensive sanctions from Western nations, making the country increasingly disconnected from global institutions and markets, growing its political isolation.[8] Economically, the war has caused severe disruptions, with sanctions and the loss of critical trade partners, pushing Russia to explore non-Western markets, particularly China and India.[14] In military terms, the war has exposed the vulnerabilities of Russian forces, challenging its ability to maintain dominance on the global stage.[13]

As the war progresses, it reshapes the global balance of power and challenges long-standing international norms.[1] The revaluation of some countries in the Global South has highlighted a shift in Russia's diplomatic influence, as these nations reconsider their policy of

non-alignment.[1] Despite Russia's efforts to counterbalance these challenges by strengthening ties with non-Western powers, its role in the global society continues to diminish.[3] Thus, whilst Russia seeks to maintain its defiant standing, the war has reshaped Russia's international position, leading the country to long-term isolation and a weakened global role.[13] Russia's actions in Ukraine have caused significant political opposition, particularly from Western democracies.[10] The European Union (EU) and the United States have imposed extensive sanctions, cutting Russia off from Western financial systems and limiting its access to technology.[8] Furthermore, Russia's expulsion from organizations such as the G8 (now the G7), and its growing marginalization within international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), make the country's increasing isolation evident.[15] This political isolation has also led to a shift in global diplomatic alignments, calling nations to reconsider their relationships with Russia, with many forging closer ties to Western powers, particularly the countries previously inclined towards neutrality or cooperation with Moscow.[2]

The war has also triggered the most significant expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in decades, with Finland and Sweden moving towards membership, undermining one of Russia's stated goals of reducing NATO's presence near its borders.[11] This expansion highlights Russia's diminished influence in Europe, and its failure to deter Western unity against Russian actions.[13] Thus, Russia has sought closer relations with countries in the Global South, and authoritarian regimes, such as China and Iran.[9] Yet whilst these ties provide some geopolitical advantage, they are primarily practical alliances rather than deep trust, and long-standing relationships.[7]

In the Global South, many nations remain hesitant to align themselves with Russia, balancing their economic interests with the broader geopolitical consequences of supporting Russia's actions.[7] The Council of the European Union highlights Russia's attempts to use these relationships for diplomatic cover, and the Global South's support remains conditional,

shaped by regional interests.[6] Countries from the Global South, whilst critical of Russia's actions, often avoid taking sides, preferring to advocate for dialogue, peace and neutrality in a conflict that has broader geopolitical branches.[6] India's balancing strategy reflected its commitment to strategic autonomy, balancing its growing ties with the United States against its long-standing relationship with Russia. At the same time, India manages the United States-China competition, avoiding escalation in India-China tensions.[4] New Delhi's careful response to the conflict reflects its ambition to lead the Global South, where China is a rival.[4] At the September 2023 G20 Summit, under India's presidency, New Delhi helped craft a consensus statement, that both Western and Global South countries supported.[12] The statement avoided mentioning Russia's invasion, but emphasized the war's negative impact on global food and energy security, supply chains, and financial stability.[12] Similarly, South Africa, shaped by its postcolonial experience, has expressed scepticism towards the West's stance on Russia, viewing it as hypocritical due to past Western intervention in regions like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Libya and Iraq.[4] As a result, South Africa abstained from the 2022 UN vote condemning Russia, and continues to balance its relations with both Russia and the United States.[16]

The Western imposition of economic sanctions has had a significant impact on Russia's economy.[18] Key measures have included freezing Russian assets abroad, removing major Russian bank from the SWIFT international payment system, and restricting exports of critical technologies.[8] These sanctions have limited Russia's access to global markets and resources, creating severe disruptions in trade and financial systems.[18] As a result, Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by approximately 2.2% when the war started in 2022, making a significant economic contraction, and highlighting the immediate economic costs of the war.[18] To outweigh these challenges, Russia has attempted to shift its trade networks towards non-Western markets, particularly in Asia.[5] Its energy exports to China and

India have increased significantly, as European countries have reduced their reliance on Russian oil and gas.[17] However, this reorientation has not fully compensated the loss of the profitable European market, which has traditionally been a cornerstone of Russia's energy exports.[8] These events have hurt Russia's long-term economic stability and its prospects.[8] The sanctions have deeply affected Russia's industrial and technological sectors, with long-term consequences for its ability to modernize and sustain military capabilities.[18] These sanctions are reshaping the global economic system by decreasing Russia's role in international financial markets.[5]

Domestically, the economic pressure has led to inflation and currency fluctuations, which have diminished living standards and increased social discontent.[9] Whilst high energy prices in 2022 provided temporary relief for government revenues, the long-term prospects remain challenging, with sustained economic isolation likely to intensify stagnation and inequality.[2] The redirection of resources toward military expenditures further limits the government's ability to address domestic challenges, raising concerns about social stability.[13] Over time, economic decline could weaken Russia's stability and its ability to project power internationally.[13]

The war has significantly affected perceptions of Russia's military capabilities.[13] Originally expected to be a short conflict, the war has exposed serious issues in Russia's military planning, logistics and morale.[2] The war has demonstrated that Russia's military is not as formidable as previously thought, with many analysts now questioning its ability to sustain a prolonged conflict.[2] High-profile losses, such as the sinking of the Moskva cruiser, and the failure to capture Kyiv, have hurt Russia's image as a dominant military power.[10] NATO's response, with more defence spending, and deployments in Eastern Europe, highlights a stronger Western commitment to counter Russian aggression.[11] The increased cohesion amongst NATO members, coupled with the strengthening of defence capabilities,

has reduced Russia's military influence over its European neighbours.[13] This shift undermines Russia's strategic objectives, and may force it to rely more heavily on asymmetric warfare, such as cyberattacks and misinformation campaigns.[13] Russia's military reliance on proxy forces, like the Wagner Group, reflects a weakening of its conventional military power, pushing it to use non-state actors as force multipliers.[4] Whilst these mercenary groups provide short-term strategic advantages, they also indicate Russia's struggle to maintain control over its military operations, leading to further instability.[4] These challenges may reduce Russia's ability to influence other regions, such as the Middle East and Africa, where it has traditionally projected power through military interventions.[9] Russia's diplomatic influence has weakened considerably amongst Western nations.[10] The war has strengthened a transatlantic alliance that had been weakening in previous years.[11] The unity within NATO and EU has reached unprecedented levels, with countries such as Germany, who previously pursued engagement with Russia through policies like Nord Stream 2, have now reversed course and adopted more adversarial stances.[3] This shift reflects a growing realization in Western capitals that Russia's actions pose a direct challenge to European security.[3]

However, Russia's relationships with non-Western powers have grown, though unevenly.[14] China, for example, has significantly increased its purchases of Russian energy, but Beijing remains cautious about fully endorsing Moscow's actions.[2] Beijing's prioritization of its own global strategy and interests suggests that Russia's role in these alliances is increasingly subordinate, as it becomes more dependent on stronger partners.[13] Despite condemning Moscow's invasion, alongside the West, Brazil, viewing itself as a mediator, took a different stance by calling for a ceasefire, refusing to arm Ukraine, not imposing sanctions on Russia, and choosing not to isolate Moscow.[4] At the same time, Russia's anti-Western discourse continues to resonate with countries in the Global South, where historical grievances against Western powers often align with Russia's current

position.[4] Nevertheless, this support is conditional and varies by region, as economic interests often outweigh ideological solidarity.[4]

Culturally, Russia's soft power has declined sharply in Western nations, where its cultural institutions and historical ties have been overshadowed by the perception of its aggression.[2] However, in the Global South, Russia's anti-Western rhetoric continues to resonate, particularly in countries with colonial legacies or grievances against Western dominance.[2] Whilst undermined in the West, Russia's cultural diplomacy has found some support amongst nations seeking to challenge Western influence.[1] The long-term implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for the global system are complex.[10] On one hand, the war has weakened Russia's position, isolating it from the West, and damaging both its economy and military standing.[8] On the other hand, it has accelerated shifts in the global order, highlighting the decline of Western unipolarity, and the rise of multipolar dynamics.[13] This shift could indicate a new multipolar world order, where the influence of traditional Western powers declines, in favour of emerging economies and regional powers.[1] Russia's shift towards China and other non-Western powers could lead to the fragmentation of the global system into competing blocs.[14] However, this realignment faces challenges, as it depends on the ability of these partnerships to endure in the face of different national interests.[2]

In short, the Russia-Ukraine war has fundamentally altered Russia's position in the global system, weakening its political influence, economic stability, and military strength.[10] Economically, sanctions have severed its ties with critical markets, pushing Russia toward less lucrative non-Western partners.[14] Politically, Russia's exclusion from key international organizations, and the expansion of NATO, highlight its growing isolation.[15] Militarily, the conflict has exposed vulnerabilities in its armed forces, undermining its reputation as a formidable power.[13] Whilst Russia has sought to counterbalance these challenges by cultivating ties with non-Western powers, such as China and India, its long-term prospects

remain uncertain and highlight Russia's increasing dependence on stronger partners.[13] The war has also contributed to broader shifts in the global order, weakening the unipolar dominance of the West, and fostering multipolar dynamics, though Russia's diminished influence limits its role in shaping this transition.[13] Thus, the war has left Russia in a weakened and isolated position, with long-term implications for its ability to shape international norms and influence global systems.[1]

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What role did the intelligence service play in maintaining the state's control of the Soviet population during the 1930s?

Written by Massimo Nunez

Edited by Liv Parker

Word count: 1,628

The Stalinist regime of the 1930s faced great sociopolitical disturbances as efforts intensified to strengthen the Soviet Union on the international scale. These outright-cataclysmic shifts grew to threaten the control held by the state over the population, with the intelligence services – the OGPU, and its successor, the NKVD – acting to ensure the state remained the dominant authority. Considering this, this essay will argue that the role of the intelligence services in the maintenance of state control over the population is a central one. An indispensable role that bolstered the regime and upheld control over the nation; the population was kept in line, the economy was assisted to ensure efficiency, and political dissidence was limited and destroyed. However, a critical limitation of the role of the intelligence services that cannot be dismissed is its failures to crush all dissidence against Stalin and his government, even in the aftermath of crackdowns and purges.

The central role the intelligence services played in the assurance of state control during the 1930s is first presented in the factor of social control, as the population was forced to be obedient and docile to the Stalinist regime. This is outlined when considering the impact of the Great Terror of 1937-38. The Terror, as presented by Vasili Mitrokhin, was deemed a tool for the intelligence services, as it internally divided the population making revolt nigh-impossible[1]. The period of the 1930s, following Stalin's consolidation of power in 1928, was riddled with turbulence resulting from radical policies like collectivisation and continued rapid industrialisation, which threatened to cultivate opposition within the population. This turbulence, pushed by Stalin's '…fear of hostility to his rule'[2], created an environment where revolt was a serious possibility. This resulted in the intelligence services acting to uphold state authority, as they engaged in purge action. An estimated 800,000 to 3.6 million people were victims of the Great Terror[3], with the NKVD engaging in mass arrest campaigns, executions, and imprisonment in Gulags. Dissent within the Soviet populace was culled with extremely effective purge action, as seen by the sentiments held within contemporary literature. Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of poet Osip Mandelstam, writes in her memoirs, 'The only purpose of terror is intimidation…on every floor of every building there must always be several apartments from which the tenants have suddenly been taken away. The remaining inhabitants will be model citizens for the rest of their lives'[4]. Critics to Stalin were swiftly destroyed, as the state pushed a culture where the population was to live in fear, and suffer mass repression. This evidence backs the proclamation of the intelligence services playing a central role in the maintenance of state authority over the population during the 1930s. Their integral service in maintaining the populace in line through mass repression ensured that meaningful opposition was crushed, or deprived of potential popular support, upholding the Stalinist regime and its authority as the ruling government.

Limitations to the role and successes of the intelligence services in maintaining state control, however, arise when considering the failures following social repression. Sarah Davies outlines that '…the official propaganda was not universally believed…some people did strongly object to aspects of the terror'[5]. Open opposition continued in the aftermath of mass repression; this being seen following the 1937 Soviet Union legislative elections. Whilst Stalin secured a landslide victory, the timing of mass crackdowns by the NKVD intensified criticism towards the system, and the clear efforts being made to destroy any opposition Stalin deemed to threaten him and his authority[6]. This ultimately limits the importance of intelligence services in the maintenance of state control; despite mass crackdowns, arrests, and killings, the people continued to lobby criticism against the regime, never truly being subdued by the state.

Further evidence suggesting the intelligence services played a central role in the maintenance of state control over the Soviet population in the 1930s is seen when discussing the factor of economics, and the role the intelligence services played in ensuring worker obedience. Marcus Miller argues, 'An "efficiency wage" model…is reinterpreted in the context of Stalin's Russia…imprisonment – not unemployment – acting as a "worker discipline device"' [7]. Stalin's efforts to develop the Soviet economy progressed the role played by the intelligence services in internal affairs. The OGPU, and later NKVD, became focused on crackdowns against dissidence, but also against the working population, ultimately ensuring a curve against economic stagnation. This is seen in the development of the Gulag. Under Stalin, the forced labour camp not only acted to remove opposition, but it too developed into a tool to maintain productivity, ultimately becoming a '…credible threat to workers who failed to fulfil the commands of the state'[8]. A climate encouraging continued labour or imprisonment kept the population in line, assisting the control of the state, with these policies becoming so

popular that the regime adopted further methods to enforce collaboration through fear within the economy. One of these methods included new laws that '…turned absence from work, tardiness, drunkenness and hooliganism into crimes punished by up to four months in jail'[9]. These policies intensified the authority of the Soviet state over its populace, and outlined the central role of the intelligence services, as the state was provided with additional authority over another layer of dissidence, idleness in the workplace.

The central role of the intelligence services in the maintenance of state authority is further outlined when considering more direct involvement with economic affairs. Oleg Khlevnyuk outlines that the '…most significant part of the forced-labour economy was the economy controlled by the Soviet punitive bodies – the OGPU, NKVD'[10]. The intensification of the 'Five Year Plans' provided the NKVD with greater authority over elements of the economy, with Amy Knight suggesting that 'The most important economic activity of the NKVD was construction – of roads, railways, waterways, and power stations'[11]. A crucial example outlining this responsibility is seen in the construction of the White Sea Canal that, in using roughly 100,000 prisoners for manpower[12], was finished in record time, emphasising the role played by the intelligence services as they oversaw direct economic development[13]. This strengthens the claim that the intelligence services played a central role in the maintenance of state control over the population, as these branches maintained workers in line through repression, but also provided the state with a pool of manpower to intensify economic growth in the USSR.

Final evidence solidifying the central role the intelligence services played in the maintenance of state control over the Soviet population during the 1930s, is identified within the factor of politics. The intelligence services pushed for state control, cracking down on perceived dissidence within the political scene. This assumption is peddled in additional claims by Oleg Khlevnyuk, where '…the secret police was subordinate to the

party up to the mid-1930s…This situation changed fundamentally after Stalin had ordered the secret police to begin arresting suspects in the entourages of leading party figures'[14]. During the 1930s, a development in the role and expectations of the intelligence services is seen, where in a bid to ensure his own authority and to maintain his own base of support within the party and greater population, Stalin pushes the intelligence services to act as a means with which to repress the Communist Party. These actions concluded with the Moscow Show Trials of the late 1930s, where Old Bolsheviks like Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Bukharin, were arrested by the NKVD, being sentenced to death for supposed anti-Soviet activity and their supporters facing exceptional repression. This further bolsters the idea that the intelligence services played a central role in the maintenance of state authority over the population, as the intelligence services ultimately act as a means to limit the potential threat posed by the population – by destroying any potential resistance within the government, the people are left without leaders, unable to muster sufficient opposition against the ruling government.

Further defence for this claim can be seen when considering the work of the intelligence services in the 'subduing' of the Red Army, as Peter Whitewood states, '…a year before the launch of the military purge, the political police had become the driving force behind the growing repression in the Red Army'[15]. Mounting criticisms against the Red Army resulting from failures to maintain its own internal security in the face of active threats to military and state secrets during the 1930s[16], pushed the intelligence services to act on the behalf of the state once again. Mass arrests and army leadership executions, such as the trial of Marshal Tukhachevsky, coincided with the political purges occurring within the Soviet Union, as the Stalinist state removed what it perceived to be threats to its authority. This further consolidates the claim that the role of the intelligence services was central in the maintenance of state control, as once again these services are pushed to act against a

perceived opposition, crushing it to further limit the possibility of a popular uprising that threatens the regime.

To conclude this essay, a clear analysis can be constructed to claim that the intelligence services indeed played a central role in the maintenance of the state's control over the Soviet population. Direct crackdowns on the population to instil passivity through force, involvement in the economy through the inciting of terror to maintain an obedient labour force, and the decapitation of political opposition to further limit the power of the population to oppose the Stalinist regime, all paint a picture of a central role played by the intelligence services to ensure the survival of the state. Nevertheless, continued defiance from those that escaped the mass purges, limits the importance of the role played by these branches in the securing of total state authority; regardless of their efforts, opposition survived to continue challenging the oppressive Stalinist regime.

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Why we think a nuclear-free world unimaginable

Nuclear discourses, power, and political imagination: Reconsidering academia's role

Written by: Himari Ishii

Editor: Mia-Louise Hoyle

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As a human being, or more specifically, as a Japanese citizen, I hold a strong moral conviction that nuclear weapons should be abolished. At the same time, as a student of international politics, I have come to understand that nuclear abolition is probably impossible, or at least unattainable in the foreseeable future. The interesting but horrific thing is that the more I study nuclear weapons and security, the more I feel that claiming nuclear abolition is rather irrational and might be non-academic. This tension raises an important puzzle: what makes me think that a nuclear-free world is implausible, despite not being materially impossible? One well-claimed opinion is that nuclear weapon is firmly embedded in the international security system as a foundation, and the process of eliminating nuclear weapons can make the world more unstable and insecure. While there exist various discussions, it is at least evident that nuclear weapons are put at the centre of security among nuclear-armed states. For instance, the United Kingdom asserts that 'a modernised nuclear deterrent will remain the cornerstone of the UK's defence, and our

commitment to NATO and global security – deterring the most extreme threats we and our NATO Allies face'.[1] Similarly, the United States Declaratory Policy states that the US continues to rely on nuclear weapons as the fundamental means to deter all forms of strategic attacks to defend the interests of the US, allies, and partners.[2] The point here is that the nuclear weapon is regarded as the key to collective security of allies or partners, which conveys that possessing and abandoning nuclear weapons impacts not only one country's own security but also the dynamics of international politics.

However, it can be argued that there is an excessive conviction of the centrality of nuclear weapons, which goes beyond this material fact. In other words, the idea that nuclear weapons are indispensable for security has become common sense, especially among nuclear states. This can be understood by Michel Foucault's conception of the indivisible relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault claims that power is not merely a forceful and repressive function, but a productive network that permeates society, which traverses, defines, and creates things, pleasures, knowledge, and discourses.[3] He notes, each society has its 'regime of truth', which determines what is accepted as true, how people distinguish true and false statements, how each is sanctioned, what are valuable techniques and produce in the acquisition of truth, and who is authorised to define truth.[4] In short, this 'truth' is the effect of power, which is produced through power-knowledge relations, and structures the thoughts and actions of people at a fundamental level. Furthermore, in the Foucauldian recognition, knowledge or what is accepted as 'truth', is constituted within discourses. Discourses define the framework of how the objects of knowledge are reasoned about meaningfully and how ideas are put into practice by both 'ruling in' intelligible ways to talk, write, conduct, as well as 'ruling out' other ways and constructions of knowledge outside of it.[5] In the case of nuclear weapons, the assumption of

the impossibility of nuclear abolition can be recognised as one of the discursively produced truths which governs our way of thinking and acting, sustained by security discourses.

This article argues that those discourses on nuclear weapons prevent the imagination of nuclear abolition, and academia contributes to enforcing the discourses by repeating the self-justification in an exclusive environment. To address these, this article will firstly explore various discourses on nuclear weapons, which exist in the weapon itself and the nuclear deterrence strategy, and explain how those manipulate our understanding of the relationship between nuclear weapons and security. Then, I will argue that those nuclear discourses contribute to sustaining the global order as part of it, which often includes exploitation by great powers. Although there are a number of attempts to dismantle them, it seems they have not found a way to overcome them. Rather, I will claim that academia has created and enforced these discourses through the exclusion of outsiders and the reiteration of discourses despite their desired role of seeking a way to achieve peace. Finally, I will conclude that if we still put nuclear abolition as the global aspiration, academia should bridge between two camps of nuclearism and anti-nuclearism, as well as between the public and political practitioner rather than remaining in an inviolable place.

Exploring the Various Nuclear Discourses

Nuclear Weapons: Not Merely a Means to Destroy but a Symbol of Power

A number of research indicates that nuclear weapons have more value than just a distractive means to attack. Borrowing Marx's ideas of fetishism, Anne Harrington de Santana regards nuclear weapons as 'fetish' objects, which are the embodiment of force in

social value since the power in the form of nuclear weapons decides the opportunities and place of one state in the international order.[6] As many scholars point out, it can be said that the fact that veto power, or P5, in the UN Security Council is the same as the recognised nuclear-weapon states under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), enforces the link between the legitimate global authority and the possession of nuclear weapons.[7] From this perspective, nuclear weapons are proof of or even a medal of international influence, rather than an instrument to defend one's country. In fact, some countries' first intention to develop a nuclear arsenal comes from their desire to ensure their voices are heard in the international political field. Scott Sagan reveals that the French decision to build nuclear arsenal soon after WWII was deeply linked with the French leaders' perception of the significant symbolic value of bombs, 'to ensure that in 10 years' time France will still be an important country', since the French position was unusual in the sense that their military power and international status declined substantially while they were still in the winner's group.[8] It indicates that there is even an intended use of the symbolic value to enhance the status. Additionally, as Harrington asserts, fetishism inherently requires the materiality, or physical presence, of power.[9] There is no doubt that nuclear weapons also serve the real power, as already shown in the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, as well as numerous warnings through the scientific calculation of a larger scale of destruction. Hence, it can be argued that interconnected physical power and symbolic ideas make the value of nuclear weapons significantly higher and more desirable, which can make some people think their values outweigh the idea of abolition.

Nuclear Deterrence: as the Central Element of Strategy

These nuclear weapons are closely connected with security strategy as a form of deterrence, and they further enhance the assumption of the necessity of weapons and nuclear strategy itself. Michael MccGwire reasons that nuclear deterrence has become the central 'dogma' which imposes a rigid framework of Western thinking about defence and foreign policy, based on the belief that deterrence kept the peace during the Cold War or at least caused no harm by adopting it.[10] Admittedly, many politicians during and soon after the Cold War believed that deterrence surely prevented a plausible world war. For instance, in 1994, Michael Howard proudly noted that the Cold War had ended with the victory of the West without a direct military fight between the two great powers, thanks to the effective deterrence against the Soviet Union.[11] However, the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence has been assessed more critically by scholars these days. MccGwire argues that nuclear deterrence dogma, which were developed in intellectually and morally flawed, rather caused problems during the Cold War in roughly four senses: 1) narrowed the focus of foreign policy into containment of Soviet power, 2) made nations pursue more capabilities and fuelled the arms race, 3) lowered the quality of military strategy by replacing its complexity with mathematical permutations, and 4) increased the international tensions which made the negotiation and compromise more arduous.[12] For him, the Cold War indicated a lot of failure, which was caused by the wrong strategy stemming from flawed assumptions. Others see the result more ambiguous and complex manner. Patrick Morgan argues that the role of nuclear deterrence in the Cold War was flexible and peripheral, while there were some contributions. This is because, whilst the nuclear deterrence certainly helped avoid World War III since it is unimaginable that there was no commitment of deterrence at all to explain the 'anomaly' that a highly plausible war stemmed from severe political conflict did not occur, it only prevented

the major war which deterrence itself created the risk and its end indicates that it did not replace the primacy of politics.[13] Although he admits some contribution of nuclear deterrence, his recognition denies its centrality.

However, despite a contestation of the past efficacy of nuclear deterrence strategy, it can be said that many global leaders still regard it as essential or at least highly effective, as represented in the US and UK strategic policy mentioned above. Furthermore, Hiroshima Vision in 2023 implies the conflict between the aspiration of disarmament of nuclear weapons and the assumption of their significance in global security strategy. Although it achieved and celebrated itself as 'the first G7 Leader's document with a particular focus on nuclear disarmament', it also noted that 'Our security policies are based on the understanding that nuclear weapons, for as long as they exist, should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression and prevent war and coercion'.[14] The reaction to this vision was mixed, and the public, particularly the organisations representing Hibakusha (A-bomb survivors), strongly expressed their discontent and opposed carrying the name of Hiroshima, since it rather reaffirmed the significant role of deterrence and nuclear weapons.[15] Not the most ideal form of this official document implicitly tells a predominance of significance of nuclear strategy over humanitarian aspiration.

Nostalgia in the Abolition Movements

Such a biased narrative exists in and manipulates the ideas of how to achieve nuclear abolition as well. Kjølv Egeland indicates that contemporary abolitionists regard the end of the Cold War period, typically dated from 1987 to the late 1990s or early 2000s, as a 'golden age' of nuclear disarmament and show their desire to return, restore, or rebuild those proven successful movements again.[16] This biased and nostalgic reconstruction of history has formed the underlying premise of any progressive approach to abolition, which assures the

significance of the existing institutional and normative framework and, as a result, has been exploited to justify political actions of those who seem in favour of abolition but are actually reluctant to alter the beneficial power structure.[17] While it is hard to assess whether they intend to exploit that, the sense of nostalgia can be seen in Hiroshima Vision. It states that 'The overall decline in global nuclear arsenals achieved since the end of the Cold War must continue and not be reversed' and sets the NPT as the cornerstone of global nuclear non-proliferation.[18] It can be interpreted that they expect any progress of nuclear disarmament to go through the existing system.

Global Nuclear Order: Unequal Order Which Produces and Sustains Discourses

Some scholars identify that those discourses on nuclear weapons, strategies, and even abolition movements are integrated into the global order. Shampa Biswas claims that the nuclear non-proliferation (NNP) regimes have contributed to creating and sustaining a huge, multilayered and unequal global nuclear order by hiding the inequality and exploitation under the ostensible goal of nuclear abolition.[19] Although regimes nominally uphold deterrence, non-proliferation, and disarmament of nuclear weapons as the triad, the last leg has been marginalised and a receding goal because the former two are recognised as the apparent necessities.[20] Nick Ritchie regards global nuclear order as a hegemonic, borrowing the idea of Robert Cox, who refers a hegemony as 'a particular combination of thought patterns, material conditions, and human institutions which has a certain coherence among its elements'.[21] For one of the central roles in 'ordering ideas' of nuclear hegemony, he claims there exist two discourses called "nuclearism" and "proliferationism", which produce the shared sense of 'nuclear truths' in global politics.[22] The first idea, nuclearism, was defined as 'psychological, political, and military dependence on nuclear

weapons, the embrace of weapons as a solution to a wide variety of human dilemmas, most ironically that of 'security'' by Richard Falk and Robert Lifton.[23] Concisely put, this justifies and normalises the possession of nuclear weapons under the banner of national and global security. The other one, proliferationism, is 'a discourse that treats the spread of nuclear weapons as inevitable and thereby justifies or naturalizes both nuclearism and a range of disciplinary non-proliferation', hence, it generates the requirement for active action for the containment of nuclear spread, like control, surveillance, and punishment.[24] In other words, the series of actions that existing nuclear nations order the others' practices as right or even responsible, because if not, nuclear weapons will expand endlessly. Those two can contribute to sustaining the existing global order, which favours the nuclear states as great powers. Additionally, following the analysis of James Ferguson's productive failures of development regimes, Biswas claims that the NNP regimes reproduce and expand themselves despite their consistent failure to make the world safer, because even if these efforts are not effective, they can result in the extension of the reach of power of NNP for each state, for instance, the track and monitor of state by the IAEA which can truncate one's sovereignty.[25] She argues that these can bolster the global hierarchical and unequal system, which appeals to collaborative exercise, but at the same time, fixes the positions of marginalised nations in the name of security, which conveys the sense of urgency.[26] It can be said that these NNP regimes undertake an incomplete pursuit of nuclear abolition based on flawed premises which are spread by the regimes, thereby creating a negative cycle that reinforces the existing unequal and exploitative system. Here, criticism of this approach can be sidestepped by the seemingly urgent issue of security.

Counter Discourses and Their Difficulties

On the other hand, there are different discourses to depict nuclear weapons, which challenge the dominant triumphant narrative that focuses on security. According to Ken Booth, the age of nuclear weapons and the age of human rights were born almost simultaneously, and since then, they have been in contestation. He argues that the construction of a universal idea of the rights of individuals can never be completed as long as nuclearism, which enables nuclear Holocaust, retains political significance.[27]

This humanitarian and moral imperative is one of the underlying beliefs of disarmament advocates. For example, the Vienna Declaration and Action Plan (2022), which was published after the first meeting of states parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), reaffirmed the significance of morality and ethics, which inspired the creation of the treaty and have driven its implementation.

It acknowledges the catastrophic, extensive, and long-term humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and assures that all states share the responsibility to realise a nuclear-free world.[28] Rather than emphasising nation-centred security, this problematises the nuclear violence against individuals and societies. Connected this concept of violence and humanitarian imperative with post-colonialism, environmentalism and gender, Ritchie argues that there is a diverse discourse of 'subaltern anti-nuclearism' which has actively resisted hegemonic nuclearism. Subaltern anti-nuclearism articulates different nuclear ontologies, which illegitimise the possession of nuclear weapons, regard nuclearism as an oppressive system, and put disarmament as a necessary and urgent agenda to ensure equality, justice, and rights.[29] In this discourse, which allows for completely different recognition, nuclear abolition is definitely imaginable and rather essential.

However, these alternatives have faced persistent challenges in the unequal international nuclear

politics field. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe, Ritchie further analyses that contestation between hegemonic nuclearism and subaltern anti-nuclearism is agonistic, which shares a common political space but seeks to organise it differently based on incommensurably different conceptions of nuclear weapons. Although this agonistic contestation has the possibilities for change and progress through open discussion in theory, the current international politics, which has been formed by nuclearism and favours it, denies and delegitimises the other.[30] For instance, the US official document clearly states that it rejects the TPNW's premise that nuclear abolition can be achieved independently of prevailing international security conditions, nor considers that the TPNW could resolve the underlying security conflicts which make states retain or seek nuclear arsenals.[31] This results in the further separation of these two, which disturbs cooperation. David Santoro warns that the nuclear policy field has become increasingly politicised and polarised, which consists of two entirely separate ideological camps of supporters of nuclear deterrence to maintain international security and advocates of aggressive nuclear disarmament. One reason is that many non-nuclear states, especially from the Non-Aligned Movement, have increasingly criticised the nuclear states and their ongoing programs of disarmament. [32] Since nuclear abolition is a global problem which requires collective action, this trend of polarisation can hinder the realisation of disarmament, and ultimately, can contribute to sustaining the hegemonic nuclearism.

Reconsidering the Role of Academia

Academia's Problem?: Uncertainty, Exclusiveness, and Self-Justification

Even though many scholars argue the existence of dominant narratives of nuclear weapons and often describe them as problematic, it seems they have not found an effective

means to overcome them and pursue the path to nuclear disarmament. Some scholars suggest re-examining the existing discourses to dismantle the biased assumption. In his paper, Egeland attempted to assess the history of abolition during the post-Cold War period in more realistic ways by distinguishing between progress on disarmament and progress towards abolition and argued that a successful strategy of abolition should be grounded in unbiased recognition of past efforts.[33] MccGwire suggests replacing the central dogma of nuclear deterrence with the political means through re-education of electorates and their leaders by recognising the costs of nuclear deterrence, which are shown in fifty years of hindsight. [34] Such attempts can be the first step to revise the overgrown narratives, while there is still a problem of whether this can reach and be accepted by the political actors. In the concluding part of her book, Biswas claims that what convinces us urgency of nuclear zero and gives the way to peace is probably the voices of the subaltern, who are disproportionately victimised and drowned by the nuclear order.[35] Compared with her articulated explanation of the global nuclear order, this conclusion lacks some concreteness. She also acknowledges this uncertainty, which can be seen in her heavy use of a tentative and doubtful tone.[36] Those might show that there is an intrinsic difficulty in counteracting the discourses since this affects the mindset of humans.

In addition to their own uncertainties of claimed resolutions, some scholars point out that the discourse itself might make finding the resolutions harder due to its exclusive feature. Some of such effects of discourses, for example, the nostalgia in nuclear abolitionists, can be seen in the political field discussed above, but the more significant issue might be that the academia of security studies is highly exclusive. Carol Cohn claims that defence intellectuals use the specialised ‘technostrategic language’, which elaborately utilises the abstraction and euphemism that enables people to speak about nuclear strategy without touching the realities of nuclear holocaust. For instance, in their language,

human death is referred to as ‘collateral damage’ of cities, factories, or nuclear weapons themselves.[37] Regarding the fact that subaltern anti-nuclearism puts humanitarian requirements as one of the central reasons for nuclear abolition, hiding the reality can undermine contestation. Furthermore, Cohn points out the exclusive feature and the complex problem of technostrategic language. Expert languages deny the voice of the outsider professionals as ‘ignorant’, so if one would like to question their discourse, they need to learn and speak those.[38] In this environment, where even Cohn, a well-educated scholar, felt that her detailed question was not taken seriously when she did not speak that particular language, abolition activists and subalterns' voices cannot be heard or easily ignored as invaluable. However, as her experience indicates, the process of learning and speaking it invites the transformation and militarisation of how they think.[39] What can happen here is that subalterns can no longer convey their pure voice but come along with the filtered opinions which are favourable for security intellectuals. Moreover, in the isolated, or ‘inviolable’ place, academia could just reproduce the discourse to legitimise the current order. Benoit Pelopidas criticises that security studies scholars are now working as managers of a nuclear present and abandoning the responsibility of being the citizens of a future to address the problems and create a resolution of global nuclear weapons vulnerability through self-censorship.[40] He points out three ways of self-censorship, epistemological, which denies the normative foundation of nuclear studies, rhetorical, which delegitimises transformative ideas as unrealistic by fostering the discourses of non-proliferation and deterrence, and imaginative, which obfuscates the role of possible futures.[41] Concisely put, scholars result in maintain the status quo by analysing the current situation. In this sense, academia functions to legitimise the political outcomes, rather than inform and shape political decisions.

Returning to the Origins

Regarding the origins of academia in international politics, this is not the desired figure. In 1919, when the first-ever International Politics Department was established at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, the discipline was defined as 'political science in its application to international relations, with special reference to the best means of promoting peace between nations', reflecting the founder and early professors' normative visions of study sustained by the moral obligation, which advocates the need for action, particularly policy-making, to solve the problem, as well as disseminates the learning of scholarship among the public.[42] It should be noted that there has been criticism for this normative purpose as 'utopianism', where wishes precede thinking.[43] However, it is at least evident that the expected role of academia has not been to reproduce self-justification through the exclusion of non-professional and progressive ideas. Additionally, whilst there is the contestation of the idea of peace, where nuclear abolition cannot always be the absolute virtue, it seems that nuclear disarmament remains a global aspiration, which can be seen in the current continuous movement, like the TPNW. Although both the US and the UK declare to maintain their nuclear deterrent as long as it is required, they put a world without nuclear weapons as their long-term goal and promise to keep their consistent and leading commitment.[44] Even if it might be an alleged goal, it is evident that nuclear abolition is not a completely obsolete idea. Hence, academia has to play a more productive role to realise it.

Possible Future Roles of Academia: Bridging the Gap

Then, the question is what task academia should contribute to. I argue that they need to be a mediator to create a bridge in the two different levels: between nuclearism and anti-nuclearism, and between the public and political practitioners. For the first level, some

scholars claim the necessity of seeking a consensus between two polarised camps, nuclearism and anti-nuclearism, through 'bridge-building', which enables ideological reconciliation.[45] In many cases, they put the conversation with the other camps as the starting point, but how to achieve this conversation without the misconception is the problem. In fact, some of the past attempts at bridge-building, for instance, Barack Obama's balanced approach, failed and resulted in further polarisation.[46] Because such a state-led approach could happen without relieving the opposing ideologies enough, which often include misunderstanding, it can repeat similar consequences. As some scholars point out, the debate should be depoliticised, particularly by recognising the conflict within the TPNW itself as a dangerous pathology.[47] Therefore, as a less political actor, academia should be an initiative through the re-examination and dismantling of the biased assumptions in both to facilitate the reconciliation of ideologies. The second level is mediating between the public and political practitioners to empower the moral and humanitarian demands. According to Michiru Nishida, the 'paradigm shift' of the value of nuclear weapons through humanisation of them can drive the global nuclear abolition movement considerably faster. For the realisation of the paradigm shift, he suggests the importance of nuclear non-proliferation education supported by the conveyance of the devastating reality and experience from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which both contribute to achieving and sustaining a nuclear-free world.[48] What can enable this down-to-top movement is that academia stops the collusion with politicians and becomes neutral and open to both to produce the mediated and achievable ideas of policy-making. In both levels, academia cannot be an isolated actor needs to emphasise communication and interaction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article discussed that there is an excessive assumption of the centrality of nuclear weapons, which steals our imagination of nuclear abolition. In Foucauldian recognition, there are various 'nuclear discourses' which can manipulate our thinking. Nuclear weapons are not just a means of attacking others, but have acquired the social and symbolic values which can legitimise the huge authority and impact in the international political field. Weapons are embedded into the security strategy, especially connected with deterrence, and this strategy has been understood as necessary in both national and global security today, despite there has been continuous research which questions its effectiveness, especially the possible failure in the Cold War. Furthermore, there is a biased narrative in the abolition movement as well, which captivates the period soon after the Cold War as the golden age of nuclear disarmament and expects that any progress will follow and happen within the legacy of this, the existing institutions. Those are interconnected and have contributed to developing and sustaining the global nuclear order, which is unequal, exploitative, and hegemonic in the sense that it orders the conceptions of nuclear weapons and strategies, which legitimise the possession and control of great powers. In contrast, there exists the subaltern anti-nuclearism which emphasises violence and morality and claims the necessity of nuclear abolition. However, this agonistic contestation has resulted in the increasing polarisation of nuclear politics, which undermines required cooperation. Although many scholars recognise and problematise these discourses, there has not been an effective way to overcome them to achieve nuclear abolition yet. Rather, some scholars argue that academia has created an exclusive environment and reproduced the self-justification there. Despite a discussion over whether nuclear abolition

can be an absolute right, this is clearly not a desired figure of academia regarding its origin. When we still put nuclear disarmament as a global aspiration, the expected role of academia can be to bridge between hegemonic nuclearism and the subaltern anti-nuclearism, and also between humanitarian demand from the public and political practitioners.

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Understanding the French Political Situation

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In October 2025, *The Times* stated that "France is facing a crisis of democracy not seen since Charles de Gaulle"; this captures the depth of the political and institutional tensions currently affecting the country.[1] Far from being mere exaggeration, it reflects growing concern abroad, particularly in the United Kingdom, about France's ability to govern effectively amid mounting social divisions, parliamentary paralysis, and institutional deadlock. In recent years, France has been shaken by successive crises that have tested the resilience of its political system. The legacy of the Yellow Vest movement, the highly contested pension reform, the repeated use of constitutional tools such as Article 49.3, and the fragmentation of the National Assembly after the 2022 legislative elections have all contributed to a climate of democratic fatigue. The dissolution of the National Assembly in 2024, intended to restore political clarity, instead reinforced perceptions of instability and institutional blockage. As a central actor within the European Union and a key diplomatic and military power, France's political difficulties are increasingly viewed as a potential source of broader European uncertainty. In this sense, the French case is often seen as part of a wider democratic malaise affecting Western democracies, marked by declining trust in institutions, electoral volatility, and the

rise of protest movements and political extremes. Yet, despite the severity of current tensions, France is not facing a classic political or economic crisis. There has been no regime collapse or economic breakdown. Rather, the crisis appears primarily institutional, raising questions about how power is exercised and legitimized within a political system originally designed to ensure stability. Understanding this situation therefore requires a closer look at how the French political system works, why its mechanisms are now under strain, and how this compares with developments in other European democracies, notably the United Kingdom.

How the French Political System Works

The French political system is based on the institutions of the Fifth Republic, established in 1958 following the collapse of the Fourth Republic. The latter was characterized by chronic governmental instability, linked to parliamentary fragmentation and a weak executive. As Maurice Duverger has shown, this instability led to the creation of a system strongly centred on the head of state, often described as a "Republican Monarchy."[2] The institutional philosophy of the Fifth Republic is clearly expressed in Michel Debré's speech before the Council of State in 1958, which emphasized the need for a strong executive to ensure continuity and effectiveness in public action.[3] The President of the Republic occupies a central position, he appoints the Prime Minister, may dissolve the National Assembly, and holds significant prerogatives in foreign policy and defence. Since the introduction of the direct election of the president by universal suffrage in 1962, the office has enjoyed strong political legitimacy, clearly distinguishing it from the British Prime Minister. In the UK, executive authority rests primarily on parliamentary majority support. Parliament, for its part, retains an essential role in passing legislation and overseeing the government, but its action is framed by mechanisms designed to avoid the instability of the past. When the

president and the parliamentary majority are politically aligned, this situation is referred to as the '*fait majoritaire*'. Under such circumstances, government stability is reinforced and public action tends to be more effective.

Stability Now Under Strain

However, this institutional model has clear limits. The French political landscape has become increasingly fragmented, making the formation of stable parliamentary majorities particularly difficult. This situation largely results from the 2022 legislative elections, which deeply divided the National Assembly and deprived the president of a clear majority. According to Daniel Gaxie, this growing distance between rulers and the ruled is partly explained by often invisible mechanisms of political exclusion, which fuel a sense of democratic dispossession.[4] This mistrust has manifested itself through several major social movements, such as the Yellow Vest protests from 2018 onwards, followed by large-scale mobilizations against pension reform. These movements go beyond social demands alone; they express a broader challenge to the ability of institutions to represent and govern French society. Pierre Rosanvallon analyses these forms of mobilization as expressions of "counter-democracy," in which citizens exercise powers of oversight, criticism, and sanction over those in power.[5] Alongside this social contestation lies a persistent difficulty in governing. The president's inability to rally a stable majority has resulted in governance perceived as constrained and conflictual. In 2024, the dissolution of the National Assembly, widely viewed as a political failure, failed to restore the expected stability and instead reinforced the sense of institutional deadlock. A paradox thus emerges. The institutions of the Fifth Republic, originally designed to prevent the chronic instability of the Fourth Republic, now appear rigid in the face of a fragmented party system. As Philippe Bezes argues, current difficulties reflect

less a crisis of the State itself than a crisis of its capacity to govern effectively in a profoundly transformed political and social environment.[6] This succession of crises raises a central question: has France entered a state of permanent institutional crisis?

Comparison with the United Kingdom

It is now worth considering the similarities and differences between France and the United Kingdom. While France is characterized by a highly centralized state and a powerful executive, the British system is built on parliamentary sovereignty and a culture of compromise within the House of Commons. According to Jean-Louis Quermonne, French political culture tends to favour the personalization of power and more visible forms of conflict.[7] This situation echoes certain dynamics observed in the United Kingdom following Brexit, marked by a deeply divided House of Commons and a rapid succession of Prime Ministers. In both cases, instability does not signal an immediate economic collapse but rather a crisis in institutional functioning in the face of increasingly fragmented societies.

What Political Future for France?

France is therefore experiencing a deep institutional crisis. Nevertheless, concerns about the future remain strong. The rise of the far right, analysed notably by Nonna Mayer through electoral sociology, fuels fears of a political shift similar to those observed in other European countries.[8] More than a temporary disruption, the current situation invites reflection on the capacity of the institutions of the Fifth Republic to adapt sustainably to a fragmented political landscape, within a European context itself undergoing profound transformation.

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The Engine – A Political Poem

Written by: Nicholas Piran Green

Word count: 470

Act I

Once,

They dreamed of the end of masters and slaves,

Engels called it the dawn, Nietzsche, the circle, and Marx, the bane,

But the dawns froze, the circle tightened, and the ghost strayed to rule the worst,

All whilst, in the West, revolution was written in the dusk.

Its promise legible only in its ruins, ‘top “a gravel strewn bed” (Aggeler, 1954), under the light of indominable flames,

Here laughter reigned, sodden in tomorrow; salt in the winds, all dying to call out: “Witch”,

‘All along those living tatters’ remained.

Spirit,

In the West,

Regulation has replaced domination, and culture has replaced command.

Where the master, in death, is kept above it all, by the lasting insecurity, by the dread,

The wound of our dependency becomes the function of Westphalian society.

Unlike the rest, we stay calm as we all go round the bend, drunk on anonymity, we couldn’t

care less,

So, the world may march on, but from June to July, the night will be still and nature's carcass will lie,

Unsundered, the slave will have bested the master, untethered, the lord will kneel to the bondsman.

Act II

As, in their dying breath, the two immortals were never so bold and entitled. As of the spirit,

The End.

Yet, in a parliament of shadows,

The taxman laughs in riddles, steps to a tale as old as time,

The effect of drinking, drunk, looking upon a cracked mirror, wearing a rusted crown,

watching failed refractions sold in gold and silver.

Here, the faceless masses fall in dance, faceless still, lies in lines,

Their masks not worn but set into the bone,

Each step is a forgetting, each silence is a home.

Act III

Yet, in the stillness, Freud's revenant whispers: Wound, (1)

What you bury will not stay buried— It will rise, clothed in the rags of your own command,

and when you tire, on your bones it will dance,

'The forms disappeared and were no more than a dream,

A sketch that slowly falls onto the empty canvas',

SCENE.

And they called it progress, and still we wept,

The factories hummed hymns to the restless dead,

The commune became committees; the dream became decree.

From each according to their fear, to each according to their need,

Still, ghosts of past walk the corridors of death,

And muttered under their breath: “We gave them dawn, and they made flames.”

By Nicholas Piran Green, ode to Freud’s return of the repressed,

(1)

Lukan and the Light bearers

Capitalism has not drowned the most heavenly ecstasies, but ‘technology’ has,

The icy water of egotistical simulacra pools (The Communist Manifesto).

Collected under the struck symbol of the phallus, as blood bruises the objet petit.

Plato’s prisoners, ‘freed’, become the panopticon lost.

Blinded and broken, the children of men, ‘enlightened’, seen.

Russia's Wars of Prestige: Comparing Afghanistan and Ukraine

Written by: Milan van Soest

Edited by: Evie Somers

Word count: 2451

Continuities are observable in Russia's approach to war, namely in how prestige shapes Russia's interventions in neighbouring countries. Gotz and Staun write that Russia's long and naturally ill-defined borders alongside its experience of invasion, has produced a sense of entitlement to great power status and control over its immediate neighbourhood.[1] Tsygankov demonstrates that preoccupations with defending these geopolitically insecure borders meant that Russia sought recognition as a great power from its Western neighbours.[2] As Radchenko illustrates, Soviet leaders throughout the Cold War understood prestige as contingent on external recognition, principally from the United States, to legitimise their claim to superpower status.[3] Consequently, this shaped Russia's understanding of prestige, to be recognised as a legitimate great power as denoted by a sphere of influence, and has endured beyond the Cold War. As such, this essay argues that continuity in Russia's approach to war can be explained by prestige considerations, which dictate Russia must intervene in neighbouring countries to prevent the West from gaining a foothold. First, this essay will cover the Soviet Union's war with Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, which was motivated by prestige due to fears of betrayal by the US. The second part focuses on Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine, which formally began in 2022 after prolonged aggression since 2014, which was motivated by similar insecurities revolving around the loss of Russia's status after 1991.

Afghanistan, 1979-1989

In 1978, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in a coup, ultimately leading the Soviet Union to militarily intervene and support the new regime in Kabul in 1979. Gaddis suggested that this was motivated by communist expansionism by highlighting that the American defeat in Vietnam in 1975 had emboldened Moscow to expand its influence in the Third World.[4] However, this implies that the decision to intervene was a given as soon as a socialist party needed assistance, yet it was not quite as simple. The PDPA, as Halliday points out, had appealed to Moscow thirteen times for assistance, as the Kremlin initially did not want to invade.[5] Radchenko supports this assessment, highlighting that it was concluded by the triumvirate of Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, and Defence Minister Dmitry Ustinov that intervening militarily would only damage Soviet credibility among the Third World and worsen already strained relations with the United States.[6] Further endangering détente with the US, which had been the top foreign policy goal of General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, was thus seen to make Moscow's chances of achieving full recognition of its status from the US more distant.[7] Zubok differs slightly from Radchenko, arguing that the enfeebled Brezhnev's desire to preserve détente overruled the triumvirate's calls for intervention against Pakistani-backed conservative Islamist insurgency.[8] While these two accounts differ in who was responsible for deciding against intervention, the key point is that they reject the notion of ideologically-driven expansionism and demonstrate that the Soviet leadership initially did not want to invade due to concerns over prestige. As such, recognition of its status by the US was more important than spreading communist ideology.

If prestige-related concerns initially dictated non-intervention as Moscow's best course, the ousting of Afghan leader Mohammad Nur Taraki by Hafizullah Amin appeared to radically alter that calculus. Numerous sources indicate that Brezhnev's outrage and shock over Taraki's murder swayed him to act and remove Amin, who was considered unpredictable and uncooperative.[10] Consequently, Soviet leaders feared that Amin would abandon Moscow and thus deprive the USSR of a key regional ally.[11] One major concern emphasised by Zubok and Goldman was that a rogue Amin would lead Afghanistan to succumb to conservative Islamism from revolutionary Iran or US-aligned Pakistan, having a subsequent knock-on effect for Soviet Central Asia.[12] However, as stated above, this was clearly a concern before Amin's coup, suggesting that these concerns were not strong enough for intervention should Moscow preserve détente. Radchenko uses KGB reports of Amin's derisive remarks about Moscow and his desire for better relations with the US to demonstrate that the triumvirate saw his defection to the US as a genuine possibility.[13] Kalinovsky, crucially, points to the worsening of détente at this time, implying this influenced fears that the US was exploiting Afghanistan's instability to gain a foothold.[14] Thus, supporting Radchenko's point that Soviet leaders also feared that the prospects of Amin's betrayal also brought with it a distinct possibility that the US would station intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Afghanistan.[15] A US-aligned Afghanistan would be a denial of recognition by the US of the USSR's right to uphold a sphere of influence. Therefore, Moscow invaded due to fears that the US would utilise Afghan instability against the Soviets, which altered the Kremlin's threat perceptions to mean that intervention became necessary to uphold prestige.

Prestige further becomes evident when considering the nearly decade-long duration of the war, as a unilateral withdrawal would effectively guarantee a US-aligned or conservative Islamist Afghanistan on Soviet borders. The Soviet army was unable to hold ground, as its presence only galvanised the Afghan population, who, as Dibb notes, had an entrenched

hostility towards foreign invasion.[16] This was exploited by the US and regional anti-communist allies, such as Pakistan, who funded and armed the *mujahideen,* a broad coalition of resistance fighters from Afghanistan and other Muslim countries.[17] As such, Kalinovsky suggests prestige concerns dictated the war's length by pointing to Gromyko's belief that it would be dangerous to withdraw before achieving some written agreement between Afghanistan and the countries supplying the opposition.[18] Thus, prestige effectively locked the Soviets into the war, as a unilateral withdrawal would cause the regime in Kabul to fall, portraying Moscow as unable to support its allies and undermining prestige. Halliday supports this by demonstrating that Andropov, upon succeeding Brezhnev after he died in 1982, had repeatedly attempted to encourage the PDPA to broaden its support base to co-opt the opposition and create a unified Afghanistan.[19] This meant the most desirable Soviet outcome was a more neutral Afghanistan. The PDPA's inability to broaden its base demonstrated to Andropov that a political solution was impossible and that the only way to ensure Afghanistan did not fall into enemy hands was to win it militarily.[20] Ultimately, prestige also dictated the USSR's protracted war in Afghanistan by demonstrating that continuing was preferable to losing, which would enable a US-backed hostile regime.

Prestige also significantly shaped the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan as Mikhail Gorbachev, who succeeded Konstantin Chernenko after he died in 1985, sought prestige by withdrawing from Afghanistan. Radchenko argues that Gorbachev's new thinking was an attempt at securing recognition from the US by reframing the Soviet claim to global leadership around ideas of peace and disarmament.[21] Gorbachev viewed Afghanistan as the Soviets' 'bleeding wound' and sought a withdrawal as soon as possible to demonstrate his sincerity to the White House, and to secure a treaty on the reduction of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe.[22] This legitimised withdrawal as upholding Soviet prestige by showing a commitment to non-intervention and turning a new leaf. However, this did not

ensure withdrawal automatically, for one, KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze both feared the above-mentioned security implications of Islamic fundamentalists coming to power in Kabul.[23] Drozdova and Felter also denote the importance of Soviet prestige, that the regime they leave behind in Kabul is intact and stable, to avoid the impression of "running away.[24] Thus, prestige also dictated that Soviet terms for withdrawal must be conditional as appearing weak would portray Moscow as easy to extract concessions from. As a consequence, it would communicate to the US they need not recognise Moscow as an equal. Halliday adds that although Gorbachev initially resisted the US decision to keep supporting the *mujahideen*, Gorbachev's desperation to secure an arms control treaty amid a worsening economic crisis at home won out.[25] Therefore, the role of prestige as it created a strong new rationale for withdrawal but also prevented them from fully committing to avoid appearing weak until foreign and domestic pressures were too great.

Ukraine, 2014-2022, 2022-present

Russia's war against Ukraine is best understood as an attempt to reassert a perceived loss of prestige from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This logic first manifested in practice in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatist forces in the Donbas following the pro-Western Maidan Revolution.[26] These actions were a calibrated reassertion of prestige, designed to punish Ukraine's westward alignment while stopping short of full-scale war until 2022. Mearsheimer argues that the West is principally to blame for this war for provoking Russia by expanding NATO and the EU into former Soviet-controlled territory.[27] Indeed, Russia's President Vladimir Putin certainly echoes this view, famously

calling the Soviet collapse a ‘geopolitical catastrophe’, and invoked the West’s ostensible exploitation of Russia’s ‘paralysis of power’ when justifying invading Ukraine in 2022.[28] Thus, Mearsheimer supports Putin’s view that the West’s maximisation of its power against Russia has caused Russia to rationally respond to this threat.[29] However, this logic oversimplifies the issue because it downplays Russia’s role in NATO’s expansion. Conversely, while Sarotte acknowledges the West’s post-Cold War triumphalism and subsequent failure to include Russia as problematic, she demonstrates that a prevailing Cold War mentality dominated thinking on both sides..[30] Sarotte also stresses that Russia’s actions drove NATO expansion, with many in the West and Eastern Europe feeling threatened by Russia’s war in Chechnya and the 1993 constitutional coup, alongside its continued claims to great power status.[31] Consequently, Afghanistan and Ukraine illustrate a continuity in Russian strategic thinking, whereby prestige concerns caused Moscow to interpret changes on Russia’s periphery as a perceived challenge to great power status.

An important driver in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was the Kremlin’s conspiratorial worldview, in which perceived denial of status was interpreted as an existential threat. Kragh et al. demonstrates that conspiracy theories in Russia of a supposed US plan to encircle, dismantle, and occupy Russia are widely believed among Russian political elites.[32] These narratives depict American hegemony as inherently coercive and reliant on regime change, framing pro-democracy movements as Western-orchestrated coups.[33] D’Anieri also illustrates that Moscow viewed both the 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine as Western attempts of regime change, a perception reinforced by US actions such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[34] Crucially, Kragh et al. suggest this mindset is not simply a reaction to the Soviet collapse but the product of three centuries of geographical insecurity, producing an institutionally entrenched paranoia of genuine political developments in Ukraine.[35] As such, framing NATO expansion as the principal cause of the Ukraine war is misleading, as it

assumes Russia is making rational threat assessments and underplays how paranoia distorts elite perceptions. Sarotte is therefore right to note that while NATO enlargement marginalised Russian concerns, a more sensitive Western approach was never guaranteed to assuage such deeply rooted suspicions.[36] Consistent with Galeotti, Putin's pandemic-era isolation amplified the voices of hard-liners around him and created a belief that delay would cement Russia's encirclement and loss of influence.[37] This would explain why Russia invaded despite having already kept Ukraine from joining both NATO and the EU in 2014, as both prohibit nations with ongoing disputes.[38] Prestige, thus, fundamentally shaped Moscow's paranoia, as if the West sought to dismantle Russia; it was because it refused to recognise Russia's rightful status and sphere of influence. This logic also reveals continuity with Russia's approach to Afghanistan, where fears of a US-led encirclement also prompted an intervention to uphold prestige.

Moreover, rather than functioning primarily as a strategic buffer as Mearsheimer suggests, Ukraine occupies a central place in Russia's claims to international prestige.[39] Geographically, both Ukraine and Russia are situated on the Great European Plain, a flat stretch of land which Gotz and Staun highlight has been the source of Russia's numerous invasions that have posed an existential threat.[40] This has encouraged Russian elites to view influence over Ukraine as essential to preventing hostile penetration of the Russian heartland.[41] D'Anieri frames this dynamic as a security dilemma; Ukraine's efforts to enhance its security are interpreted in Moscow as a threat, prompting countermeasures that further destabilise relations.[42] A similar logic was visible in Afghanistan, where Soviet leaders interpreted Amin's coup as evidence of hostile encirclement, turning the intervention into a test of great power standing. Yet, Ukraine's importance to Russia extends beyond material security. It occupies a historical role as Russia's civilisational cradle, due to its common origins with the Kievan Rus, giving it symbolic significance. When Ukraine declared

independence in 1991, many within Russia regarded a future without Ukraine as inconceivable.[43] This sentiment was embodied in Putin's essay in 2021 about how Russians and Ukrainians were "one people", which subsequently framed Western encroachment in Ukraine as illegitimate.[44] These civilisational narratives are important for prestige as they justify Russia's claim to a recognised sphere of influence by casting dominance over Ukraine and being a great power as historical continuity. Similar with Afghanistan, although in less civilisational terms, a Western-oriented Ukraine directly challenges Russia's self-conceptions and compounds the loss of strategic influence, as well as reputational. While the perceived loss of Ukraine seemed far more damaging, Afghanistan shows a historical precedent.

Another important continuity with Afghanistan is that prestige is also keeping Russia locked into the war, preventing a unilateral withdrawal that would solidify Ukraine's Western alignment. Galeotti notes that Putin's 'special military operation' was intended to be a three-day operation to storm Kyiv, arrest the government and consolidate control of Ukraine, yet Russia has found itself bogged down in a nearly four-year-long protracted conflict.[45] As with Afghanistan, invading has only galvanised Ukraine against Russia and has produced the opposite effect to what it intended. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has clearly signalled Ukraine's resolve not surrender any Ukrainian territory to Russia and join NATO.[46] Moreover, as the invasion of Afghanistan killed détente and caused a major escalation and missile buildup in Europe, invading Ukraine has significantly damaged Russia's relations with the West and has led to increased militarisation in Europe.[47] The war has also revealed the poor state of Russia's army, with poor logistics and command structures preventing an effective takeover.[48] Moscow has also ruled out a surrender of Ukraine's southeastern territories that Russia annexed and continues to insist that Ukrainian membership of NATO would be a red line for Moscow.[49] As such, Russia has adjusted itself to adapt to a prolonged war that keeps Ukraine out of NATO, as they view a war of attrition as far more favourable

than losing.[50] Therefore, Afghanistan and Ukraine both illustrate continuity in how upholding prestige has caused Russia to get stuck fighting a war it cannot win militarily, yet cannot afford to withdraw from. Russia is unlikely to withdraw from Ukraine without security guarantees from Ukraine and the West, which would allow Russia to preserve face.

Conclusion

Continuity is visible in Russia's approach to war when one considers the role of prestige. Both Afghanistan and Ukraine demonstrate that continuity in Russia's approach to war can be explained by the need to uphold prestige, as these wars were intended to redress perceived losses of recognition for Russia's status. While prestige initially dictated that the USSR not to intervene in Afghanistan, the prospect of a US-backed government in Kabul signalled a denial of recognition for Moscow's equal status. Similarly, Russia's war in Ukraine was a response to deep-seated historical fears of encirclement that would follow a failure of recognition, rather than a rational retaliation to NATO expansion. In both cases, a major implication of Western encroachment was that it would give them a foothold to use against Russia, although unlike Afghanistan, Ukraine was far more symbolically important. In addition, the durations of both wars were also for similar reasons, as starting them created self-fulfilling prophecies that ruled out unilateral withdrawal and favoured a protracted war over losing. Ultimately, these cases are important as they illustrate a recurring theme that is likely to occur as long as Russian leaders equate great power status with the ability to enforce a recognised sphere of influence.

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