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EPIS REPORT ON PEACEKEEPING & CONFLICT PREVENTION



INTERVIEW WITH YARON BUSKILA & ERAN LAHAV

IDSF CEO & Head of the Middle East Department

The Rohingya Crisis

Why has China blocked attempts to invoke the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar? The failure to invoke R2P in response to the Rohingya crisis cannot be explained by humanitarian considerations alone, but must be understood through the lens of great-power politics and national interests. Humanitarian concerns are overshadowed by China's national geostrategic interests, as well as the US's restrained and increasingly selective engagement with the crisis.

Water Diplomacy and River Basin Organisations

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Editorial Team



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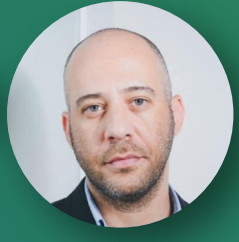

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EPIS Report on Peacekeeping & Conflict Prevention

Dear reader,

We are currently experiencing an all-time high in international conflicts since the Second World War. Frozen conflicts are thawing, new hostilities are beginning, and international peace efforts are declining.

That is why we are dedicating the second edition of the Peacekeeping & Conflict Prevention Report to case studies of conflict management. Together, we look at various conflicts around the world, examine conflict management measures and instruments, and ask ourselves: How effectively does conflict management influence conflict dynamics?

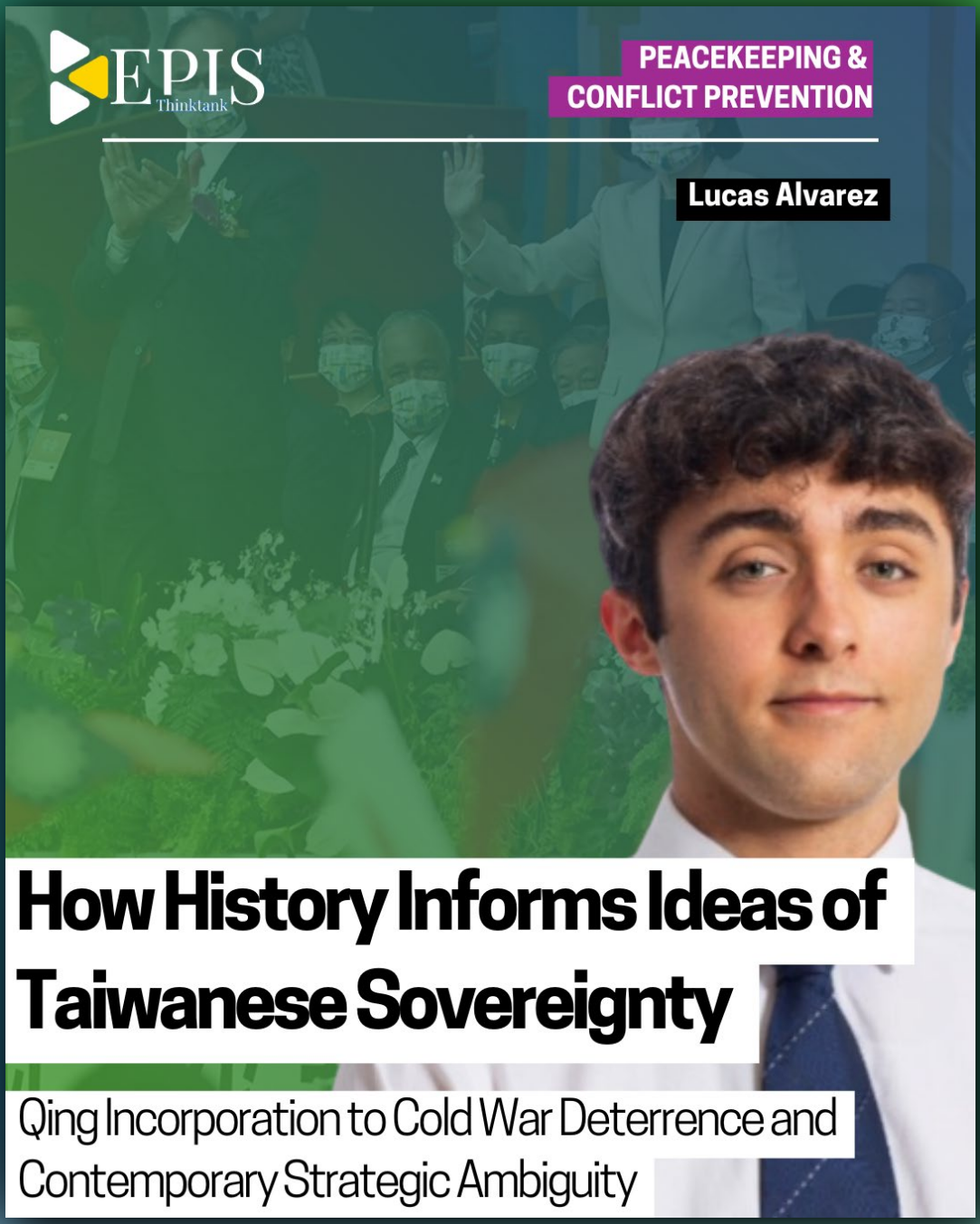
We look at Asia, the African continent, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. We examine initiatives by the United Nations and NATO, regional approaches, and practical instruments of conflict management. In doing so, we look at the history of the conflicts, assess their current situation, critically question which measures have been effective, and look to the future – always with the aim of making a constructive and critical contribution through our work.

With our report, we want to raise new ideas about ongoing conflicts. What drives us is the desire to use knowledge to open up spaces of possibility in which conflicts can be dealt with effectively and legitimate criticism of conflict management measures can be countered with constructive proposals for reform – rather than ending them altogether.

This requires a clear view, critical analysis, openness to new approaches and the courage to implement them. We therefore invite you to critically question our analyses, think ahead and work together to find new ways to maintain and restore international peace and security.

We wish you peaceful reading!

Paul Behne
EPIS Report Groups
Group Leader



About the Article

How have historical experiences shaped competing ideas of Taiwanese sovereignty, and why does this history continue to structure contemporary cross-Strait tensions? The article argues that Taiwanese sovereignty cannot be understood as a purely legal or contemporary political question. The persistence of the Taiwan question reflects the collision of historical memory, identity formation, and great-power rivalry in a multipolar international system.

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1. Introduction

Taiwan has acted as a point of resistance and retreat throughout Chinese History. Modern historical issues of conflict in the Sino-Taiwanese Strait have heavily informed regional security over the past 100 years, serving as a leitmotif for diplomacy and cooperative decision-making across the Sinosphere, affecting all in its sphere of influence, not just China and Taiwan. Recent events highlight the continued relevance of this pattern. As of the morning of the 29th December 2025, Beijing has conducted live-fire exercises in waters surrounding Taiwan, framed as a deterrent against separatist activity, shortly after the U.S. approved its largest arms transfer to Taipei to date, and Japan signalled its willingness to intervene should hostilities break out (Oliver Farry, 2025). These developments are not isolated and are part of a series of escalations that demonstrate the unresolved status of the Strait extends its strategic consequences well beyond the immediate cross-Strait relationship, implicating neighbouring states and major powers alike (Stephen Quillen, 2025).

2. Taiwan before 1945

To give context for pre-20th century relations, following the cessation of hostilities between Qing and Ming forces in 1683, the island of Taiwan was incorporated into the Qing imperial administration, which ruled China at the time. This incorporation was effected under the command of Admiral Shi Lang, whose naval forces prevailed over the remnants of the Ming-loyalist Zheng regime, known retrospectively as the Kingdom of Tungning (National Palace Museum, 2021). Formal annexation procedures were concluded in the spring of 1684 (Chinese Embassy to the Phillipines, 2024). For the next two centuries, the island's administrative status was that of a prefecture under the jurisdiction of Fujian Province. This arrangement persisted until a significant reorganisation in 1887, which elevated Taiwan to the status of a separate province, albeit one retaining a formal linkage to Fujian in its designation as Fujian-Taiwan Province (Australiasian Strategic Policy Institute, 2025). However, following the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 17th 1895, the Taiwanese were under Japanese rule until 1945, when the Qing dynasty gave Japan the Fujian-Taiwan Province (Monash University, 2024). As an island, it possessed a heterogeneous ethnic population, with the majority of people being Han Chinese, as well as having 16 other officially recognised tribes (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). This was due to a large migration of Han Chinese people from the 17th century onwards. Several languages were spoken in the region, but the most common were Mandarin, Taiwanese, Hakka, and Formosan (Liraz Postan, 2023). When Japan took over ruling, to help start on good terms, according to Article 5 of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, in the first two years of occupation, Taiwanese residents were allowed to choose their nationality, being given the option to stay under Japanese rule or emigrate to China (Treaty of Shimonoseki, 1895). This gave the Taiwanese some autonomy and say in the power transition, although many would have considered it to be a choice between the lesser of two evils. Small points like this demonstrate the complicated relationship Taiwanese individuals may have had with China, even before 1945. The Chinese were an ever-present part of their lives, history, and language, and when China makes points regarding this, such claims are often dismissed as imperialistic rhetoric, and in many cases, rightly so; they nonetheless draw upon genuine historical and cultural continuities that shaped Taiwanese experiences well before 1945. The following half-century of Japanese rule witnessed extensive programmes of modernisation and cultural assimilation, which fundamentally reshaped the island's infrastructure, economy, and society. This period concluded abruptly with Imperial Japan's surrender in August 1945, returning Taiwan to Chinese control and setting the stage for its entanglement in the impending civil conflict.

3. Chinese Civil War and the Birth of the Conflict

Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 fundamentally altered the political landscape within China, weakening the Nationalist government and reshaping the balance of internal power. Although Chiang Kai-shek continued to prioritise the suppression of Communist forces in the early 1930s, the external threat posed by Japanese expansion increasingly constrained his ability to do so (Harry S. Truman Library, n.d.). The outbreak of full-scale war with Japan in 1937 severely weakened the Nationalists, as Japanese forces occupied much of eastern China and inflicted widespread civilian casualties. Displaced from China's economic centres and increasingly alienated from the population, the Nationalist regime struggled to maintain effective resistance. In contrast, Communist guerrilla warfare in rural areas enhanced the CCP's legitimacy and popular support. During the later stages of the war, the United States provided aid to the Nationalists while simultaneously attempting to prevent a Communist victory through mediation. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, civil war quickly resumed, culminating in the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The outcome fuelled enduring debates in the United States over responsibility, foreign intervention, and the limits of American influence abroad (Harry S. Truman Library, n.d). Since the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Taiwan has occupied a contested position in East Asian politics. Following their defeat, the Nationalist government relocated to Taiwan, while the newly established People's Republic of China asserted sovereignty over the island and maintained its intention to reintegrate it into the mainland. This objective was constrained by the involvement of the United States, whose deployment of the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait in 1950, amid the outbreak of the Korean War (Office of The Historian, n.d.), combined with sustained diplomatic and military backing under the 1954 Mutual Defence Treaty (Yale Law School, 1957), significantly reduced the likelihood of a direct military assault by Beijing. Without U.S. intervention, it is hard to know what state the conflict would be in today, and if it would still even be on our minds as a contemporary issue.



Figure 1: Chronological overview of Taiwan's changing political and administrative status from 1683 to 1950. Summarizing key transitions, including Qing incorporation, provincial governance, Japanese colonial rule, post-1945 Chinese administration, and Cold War internationalisation, which together establish the historical background for the cross-Strait dispute discussed up to this point.

4. Cold War Internationalisation of the Conflict

With China's claimed right over the island being challenged and Taiwan's sovereignty in danger, relations were tested repeatedly during the 1950s. In 1958, the People's Republic of China initiated artillery attacks against the offshore islands of Jinmen and Matsu, capitalising in part on the temporary diversion of American attention during U.S. military operations in Lebanon (Britannica, 2024). The episode, commonly referred to as the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, was ultimately defused when the United States supplied and reinforced Nationalist garrisons stationed on the islands, signalling Washington's continued commitment to Taiwan's security. While large-scale confrontation was avoided, hostilities did not fully subside. Instead, both sides engaged in a prolonged and highly ritualised exchange of artillery fire on alternating days, a practice that showed the persistent volatility of the Strait without triggering outright war. This low-intensity military standoff endured for more than two decades and only came to an end in 1979, following Jimmy Carter's decision to normalise diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, acknowledge one China policy, and sever normal ties with Taiwan (Council of Foreign Relations, 2025). This episode also revealed the underlying logic of U.S. involvement in the Strait. American policy during the crisis was shaped by a dual objective of preserving the Chiang Kai-shek government in Taiwan while avoiding direct military confrontation with the PRC. Over time, however, U.S. policymakers, particularly within the Eisenhower administration, recognised that these aims rested on a strategic misreading of Beijing's intentions (Gregory Kulacki, 2020). As long as a sustained U.S. military presence remained in the region, the PRC showed little inclination toward launching a full-scale invasion of Taiwan. The crisis thus reinforced a pattern in which American deterrence functioned less as a response to imminent attack than as a stabilising force that constrained escalation on both sides.

Strategic ambiguity is a foreign policy doctrine in which a state deliberately avoids making explicit commitments about how it would respond to a specific contingency.

5. Diverging Political and Social Paths

The period between the second and third Taiwan Strait crises was characterised by a relative thaw in cross-Strait relations, marked by expanding economic and social exchanges despite the persistence of deep political mistrust. While the 1980s witnessed increased trade, investment, and limited people-to-people contact following the lifting of travel restrictions in 1987, these developments occurred alongside, rather than in place of, continuous strategic rivalry and unresolved questions of sovereignty (Peace Research Centre Prague, n.d.). These changes were driven less by reconciliation with Beijing than by domestic pressures for liberalisation and economic opportunity. This fragile growth was disrupted in the mid-1990s with the outbreak of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Tensions escalated in 1995 when the United States granted a visa to Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to Cornell University, an action Beijing interpreted as a violation of prior diplomatic understandings and a challenge to the "One China" principle (Britannica, 2024). In response, the People's Republic of China conducted a series of missile tests and military exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwanese ports, specifically Keelung and Kaohsiung, intended both to signal resolve and to deter perceived moves toward formal independence (Science Direct, 1999). The crisis culminated in 1996, as the United States deployed aircraft carrier battle groups to the region in a demonstration of deterrence and support for Taiwan's first direct presidential election (John C. Cooper, 1996). Although open conflict was avoided, the episode showed the fragility of cross-Strait stability and revealed how quickly symbolic political actions could escalate into perceived major security confrontations.

6. Contemporary Developments and Escalation

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, cross-Strait relations have been shaped by the simultaneous deepening of economic interdependence and the intensification of strategic rivalry as China expands as a global political and economic power. Taiwan's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2002, alongside that of the People's Republic of China, initially showed optimism that economic integration might temper political tensions (BBC, 2001). Trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges expanded rapidly, creating dense networks of trade across the Strait. Yet this economic convergence did not translate into political reconciliation. Instead, it coincided with the consolidation of a distinct Taiwanese political identity, particularly following the island's democratic consolidation in the early 2000s. Beijing's response has increasingly combined economic power with coercive signalling. The passage of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law codified the PRC's willingness to use "non-peaceful means" should Taiwan pursue formal independence, institutionalising the threat of force as a central component of cross-Strait relations (Mainland Affairs Council, 2005). In the past decade, this posture has intensified through frequent military exercises, airspace incursions, and naval operations designed to normalise pressure and erode Taiwan's strategic confidence. Concurrently, the United States has expanded its role as a security guarantor, deepening arms sales, enhancing military coordination, and reaffirming commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act. This triangular dynamic has heightened the risk of miscalculation, as deterrence increasingly relies on tacit signalling rather than dialogue. The result is a precarious mixed balance in which stability is maintained through managed tension, an arrangement that remains inherently fragile in the face of shifting regional power balances.

> **"Anti-Secession Law (2005) is a PRC statute that formalises Beijing's claim over Taiwan and legally authorises the use of force if Taiwan pursues formal independence, embedding coercion into law."**

7. Historical Interpretation and Debate

Scholarly interpretations of the Taiwan question meet along ideological and historical points. Some, like Odd Arne Westad (Odd Arne Westad, 2007), view the conflict as an unresolved civil war frozen by Cold War geopolitics; others, like Shelley Rigger (Wilson Centre, 2003), interpret it as a colonial legacy transformed by decolonisation and identity formation. From a realist perspective, Taiwan represents a strategic asset whose fate is determined by power balances rather than legal claims. Constructivist approaches, by contrast, emphasise the evolution of Taiwanese political identity as a decisive factor limiting prospects for reunification. What remains clear is that historical narratives themselves have become instruments of policy. Competing interpretations of sovereignty and continuity guide contemporary diplomatic posturing. The endurance of these narratives explains why the Taiwan issue remains resistant to conventional conflict-resolution mechanisms and why it continues to generate instability disproportionate to the island's geographic size. Ultimately, the persistence of the Taiwan question reflects the structural durability of competing historical and political logics that resist reconciliation. Competing claims to sovereignty are sustained not merely through material power, but through deeply embedded narratives that shape how legitimacy and authority are understood by each actor involved. Beijing's emphasis on historical reunification, Washington's strategic ambiguity, and Taipei's evolving democratic self-conception operate within distinct epistemic frameworks that are not easily reconciled through negotiation alone. As a result, the Taiwan issue endures not because of diplomatic indecision, but because it occupies a space in which resolution would require a fundamental reordering of regional power relations and political identities. Until such a transformation occurs, the question of Taiwan is likely to remain suspended between contestation and containment,

emblematic of the broader tensions that define the contemporary international order.

8. Future Resolutions

For a foreseeable resolution to exist, a global governance of sorts needs to be in place to regulate not only the contemporary challenges these nations face with one another, but the longstanding, complex, almost mythic history the island's status holds within Mainland China's legacy and culture. When power is split between could-be hegemonic powers, given time and resources, inherently, they will seek the means to protect their own posterity and sovereignty. China is one global leader in the current bilateral global power structure that is contesting US primacy; they have no reason to cede their claims on Taiwan, given that the only other major power that will and could counterweight this proportionally is the USA. Even then, US interest in Taiwan is nowhere near as great as that of China's, and the extent to which they would go to protect the state's sovereignty could be debated. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate a deepening U.S. commitment to the region: under the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, U.S. Army Special Forces have been deployed to Taiwanese amphibious command centres in Kinmen and Penghu, marking the first enduring American military presence on the island in more than four decades (Guy D. McCardle, 2025). This shift suggests that U.S. strategic engagement in the Taiwan Strait is no longer merely declaratory, but increasingly operational. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that China is one of the US's largest global trading partners (The Yale Review of International Studies, 2025). Meaning there is not much room for reactionary or immediate political decision-making. However, as we saw in the 1950s, Eisenhower's presence within the region made a huge difference in Chinese willingness to attack, showing that, at least historically, US regional involvement can have an impact on diplomacy. Whether that remains to this day is up for debate. Without a unilateral global governing power, only a certain extent of said global governance can exist in the 21st century, and because of that, we only see partial elements of it today. With heavily regional organisations like the UN and ASEAN, and ineffective international organisations like NATO, a truly amicable resolution to this conflict is not foreseeable without the cessation of either China or Taiwan. That being said, recent action in Venezuela under Trump's administration may be a point of validation for the Chinese government to act against Taiwan.

9. Conclusion

With both claiming historical entitlement and authority to the region, the important question of resolution depends on the Chinese willingness to resign from its encroachments, the possibility of external intervention, and Taiwan's preparedness to submit to Chinese authority. Two of which seem unlikely given the resignation seen from both states thus far and historically. The continued growth of China's global power suggests that any meaningful concession on Taiwan is increasingly unlikely, particularly as Beijing perceives reunification not merely as a strategic objective, but as a question of historical legitimacy and regime credibility. As China's economic and military capabilities expand, so too does its capacity to challenge the existing balance of power in East Asia, reducing the incentives for compromise while raising the costs of inaction for external actors. At the same time, Taiwan's deepening democratic identity and growing international visibility further entrench positions on both sides, narrowing the space for diplomatic manoeuvre. In this context, the persistence of the Taiwan issue reflects the structural reality of a multipolar world in which competing visions of order, sovereignty, and legitimacy collide without a clear mechanism for resolution.

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About the Article

The article examines how authoritarian collapse, elite division, and foreign proxies shape Sudan's war. Using neo-realist and political marketplace theories, it argues that state breakdown allowed external actors to transform internal struggles into a regionalized conflict fueled by resource networks. Lasting peace depends on dismantling the transnational economic networks sustaining violence, not just elite power-sharing.

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of large-scale conflict in Sudan in April 2023 has rapidly emerged as one of the most pressing humanitarian and geopolitical crises of the present decade. What began as a confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo („Hemedti"), has escalated into full-scale war involving intense urban combat, mass displacement, and economic disintegration (De Waal, 2019). Nearly 13 million people have been forced to flee their homes, while infrastructure and essential services have collapsed under the weight of sustained violence and governance breakdown (UNHCR, 2024b). Although the origins of the conflict are deeply rooted in Sudan's domestic political economy, particularly the militarization of elite competition and the legacy of authoritarian rule, external actors have played a critical role in shaping the course and intensity of the war. Countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and various Western powers have influenced the conflict through arms transfers, financial backing, diplomatic mediation, and control over economic networks (Makonye, 2023). Sudan has thus become a central arena in which regional rivalries and international power struggles are being contested through indirect engagement. This article examines the war in Sudan by placing it in a broader comparative context, focusing on how authoritarian regimes collapse, how ruling elites become divided, and how foreign powers become involved through proxy dynamics. After the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, there was hope for a transition to civilian rule (Berridge et al., 2022). However, weak transitional institutions and the continued influence of armed networks tied to political elites led to an unstable and competitive political system, often described as a political marketplace (De Waal, 2019). Using neo-realist theory and the political marketplace approach, this article argues that Sudan follows a pattern seen in other countries after authoritarian collapse, where the breakdown of state authority allows foreign actors to intervene and transforms internal power struggles into conflicts shaped by regional rivalries.

Political marketplace is a system where governance is transactional and elites buy or sell loyalties using cash, coercion, or resource rents rather than following institutional rules.

2. Historical Background

The roots of the conflict run deep in decades of authoritarian rule, elite fragmentation, and resource struggles. For thirty years, Omar al-Bashir governed through a hybrid system that blended military power, Islamist ideology, and patronage networks. Political authority was less a result of institutions and more of personal connections, violence, and control over resources (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019). During al-Bashir's rule, the Sudanese state heavily relied on coercive paramilitary forces, especially in peripheral regions like Darfur. The RSF trace their origins to the Janjaweed militias, which were mobilized by the regime to suppress rebellions in Darfur and to serve as proxies in contested regions (Kurtz, 2024). Over time, the RSF gained economic autonomy, controlling gold mines and trade routes (Kurtz, 2024; Abdelrahman, 2025). The government, after losing oil revenue through South Sudan's secession in 2011, pushed gold as a substitute source of revenue, however this opened opportunities for militarized actors to profit (Abdelrahman, 2025; Patey 2024). Meanwhile, tensions between the civilian and military components of the government deepened over how quickly reforms should take place and who would lead the transition once elections arrived. By early 2023, the uneasy power balance between the SAF and the RSF had reached a breaking point. Months of stalled negotiations over the integration of the RSF into the national army revealed deep mistrust between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Both sides began deploying troops

across Khartoum and other strategic areas, including Merowe in the north, in a tense standoff that the transitional authorities and foreign mediators could no longer contain (Assal, 2023). On 15 April 2023, open fighting erupted in Khartoum after RSF units seized key military installations and airports (Abdelaziz & Eltahir, 2023). Within hours, the confrontation escalated into one of the most destructive wars in Sudan's modern history (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The conflict quickly spread to Darfur, Kordofan, and other regions, exposing the fragile governance and fragmented security landscape of the country. "As of March 2025, only 16% of primary healthcare centers, 14% of hospitals, and 40% of sentinel surveillance sites remaining operational" (Alsoukhni et al., 2025, p. 2). The violence not only reflected an internal power struggle but also the structural failure of Sudan's transitional process, which had left competing armed elites entrenched within parallel economic and political systems (Assal, 2023).

3. External Engagement

The war that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 has drawn in a wide range of regional and global actors whose political, economic, and security interests have shaped the conflict's trajectory. Although the confrontation between the SAF and the RSF is rooted in domestic rivalries, external engagement has amplified and prolonged the conflict. Egypt has become a key ally of the SAF. Cairo's support is rooted in long-standing military cooperation and its concern for Nile Basin security, especially in relation to developments in Ethiopia. Egypt perceives Sudan's stability as crucial to its own water security and regional influence (Maher & Farid, 2025). In addition, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) plays a prominent economic role. Soliman & Baldo (2025) identify Sudan's gold sector as a critical revenue source for the RSF and notes that many gold exports pass through networks linked to the UAE. Moreover, investigations by Amnesty International have documented weapons transfers via the UAE to the RSF, in breach of international arms embargoes (Amnesty International, 2025). Saudi Arabia has sought a mediating role, most notably hosting the Jeddah talks aimed at civilian protection, thus balancing regional dynamics while pursuing its interest in Red Sea and Horn of Africa stability (Gabriel, 2025; Kiros, 2024). Neighboring states such as Chad and South Sudan have borne the humanitarian and security spill-over, dealing with massive refugee flows and cross-border instability (UNHCR, 2024a). The United States and the European Union have implemented sanctions and provided humanitarian assistance, yet their leverage appears limited compared with regional actors who engage more directly (Jost, 2024). Russia, and

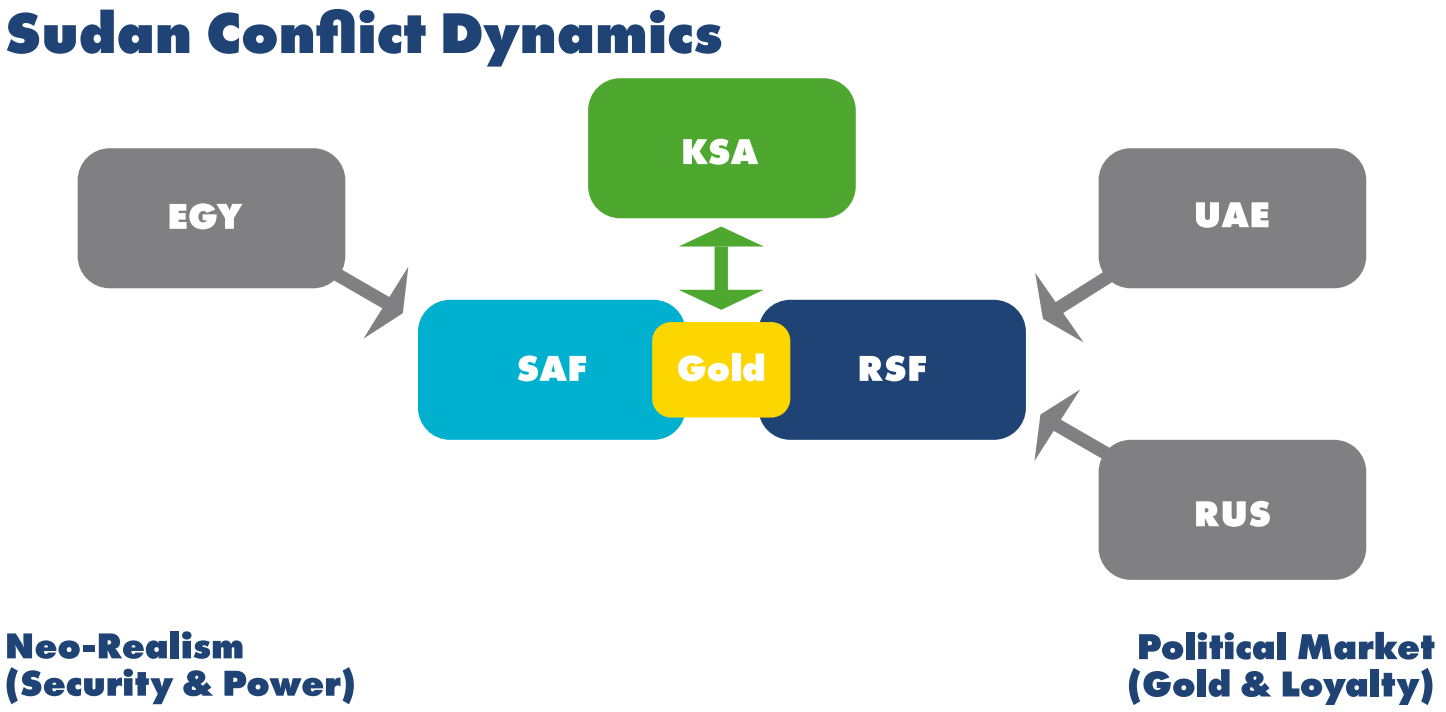

Figure 1: The 2023 Conflict Network

particularly the paramilitary network of the Wagner Group, has secured access to gold-mining concessions in Sudan and has supported factional actors thereby shaping the conflict through economic and security channels (Doxsee 2023; Larsen & Wivel, 2025). The United Nations remains focused on humanitarian coordination and monitoring (United Nations, 2024), but the multiplicity of external actors complicates any unified diplomatic solution. In summary, Sudan's war has shifted from being a purely internal conflict to one that is regionalized and internationalized. External actors intervene through gold markets, arms transfers, and diplomatic initiatives, thereby sustaining and influencing the conflict even while publicly advocating for peace. This entanglement of resource leverage, geopolitical competition, and fragmented state authority makes the conflict particularly resistant to resolution.

"In neo-realism, the international system is anarchic, states prioritize survival, and power balancing produces competitive behavior."

4. Theoretical Lenses

A neo-realist reading treats Sudan's war as a proxy arena shaped by regional security dilemmas and the pursuit of relative gains. In neo-realism, the international system is anarchic, states prioritize survival, and power balancing produces competitive behavior rather than reliable collective security (Waltz, 2010). Applied to Sudan, the alignments of Egypt with the SAF and of Gulf economic networks with RSF funding reflect strategic calculation over Nile security, Red Sea access, and regional influence rather than principled commitments to Sudanese governance. These dynamics are documented in analyses that trace how external patrons and markets have conditioned the conflict's incentives and raised the cost of de-escalation for domestic elites (International Crisis Group, 2025). From this perspective, Sudan's conflict appears not as an isolated civil war but as a predictable result of regional power competition in an increasingly multipolar setting. A complementary perspective is the political marketplace approach. Rather than seeing authority as institutional and rule-bound, this framework conceptualizes governance as a transactional market in which elites buy and sell loyalties with cash, coercion, and access to resource rents (World Peace Foundation, 2025). In Sudan, armed entrepreneurs developed parallel revenue bases in gold and cross-border trade, which sustained the autonomy of coercive organizations and eroded the monopoly of violence needed for institutional reform (De Waal, 2019). Thomas and De Waal (2022) show how wartime hunger and aid access are also mediated by these monetized patronage networks, making humanitarian outcomes contingent on pricing political loyalties rather than enforcing impersonal rules. Read together, neo-realism explains why external actors compete in Sudan, while the political marketplace framework explains why that competition is absorbed domestically through cashable loyalties rather than institutional bargains.

4.1. Comparative perspective: Libya after 2011

A useful comparison offers Libya after 2011. After the fall of Muammar al-Gaddafi, rival coalitions consolidated armed fiefdoms and sought external sponsors (Lacher, 2020). Over the 2019/2020 Tripoli campaign and beyond, Turkey, Egypt UAE, and Russia backed opposing coalitions with advisors, drones, and financing, while local commanders converted territorial control into negotiating leverage rather than institutional power building (International Crisis Group, 2020). The result was enduring fragmentation, institutional duality, and a stalled transition despite repeated diplomatic tracks. This pattern mirrors Sudan where external patrons amplify domestic rivalries, and elites transact power through marketized coercion rather than through state reform. Cross-case, the implication is that peace initiatives falter when regional balancing meets political marketplaces that reward continued fragmentation over credible commitments to institutional consolidation.

Conflict of 2023

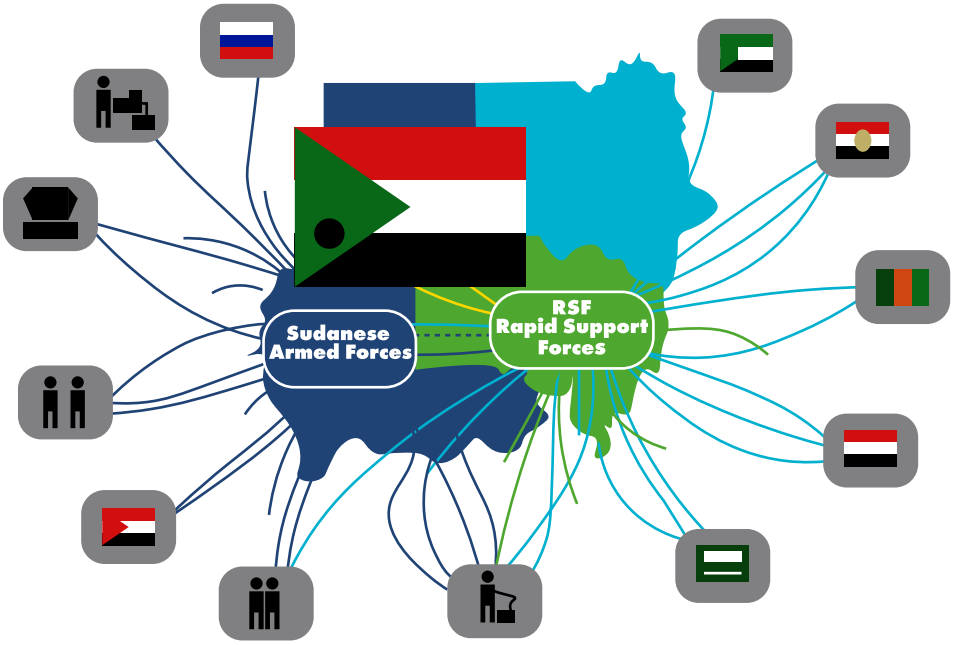

Figure 2: Sudan Conflict Dynamics

5. Conclusion

Sudan's ongoing conflict reveals how the breakdown of an entrenched regime can blur the boundary between domestic collapse and regional competition. The country's failed transition replaced one system of coercive control with another, leaving political authority fragmented among rival military and paramilitary elites. At the same time, external powers have pursued their own strategic and economic agendas by aligning with competing factions rather than supporting a unified diplomatic framework. The interplay between these internal fractures and external rivalries has deepened the crisis, turning a domestic struggle for power into a protracted regional confrontation that continues to obstruct any meaningful path toward stabilization. Furthermore, the persistence of Sudan's war reflects the limitations of contemporary international mediation. While efforts such as the Jeddah talks have sought to halt violence and protect civilians, they have largely treated the conflict as a political dispute among elites rather than as a symptom of deeper structural decay. Humanitarian interventions, though vital, remain disconnected from the political economy of war that sustains both the SAF and the RSF through control of gold, trade routes, and foreign financing. As a result, ceasefires have repeatedly collapsed because the incentives for war continue to outweigh those for compromise. In a broader sense, Sudan's trajectory exemplifies the fragility of post-authoritarian transitions in regions where power is personalized, institutions are weak, and external actors compete for influence. Ultimately, Sudan's conflict demonstrates the limits of externally driven state-building in a multipolar order where regional powers pursue overlapping but incompatible agendas. Durable peace will depend not only on negotiations among armed elites but also on constraining the transnational political marketplace that sustains them. This requires coordinated regulation of gold exports, enforcement of arms embargoes, and the reintegration of civilian actors into political processes that have long been monopolized by military and economic networks. Any sustainable peace in Sudan will require more than a redistribution of power among armed elites. It depends on dismantling the networks that link violence to profit, restoring civilian authority, and aligning regional diplomacy with genuine support for political reconstruction rather than proxy competition. In sum, Sudan is not an isolated failure of transition, but a warning sign of how regionalized authoritarian collapses can reproduce conflict economies when global governance remains divided.

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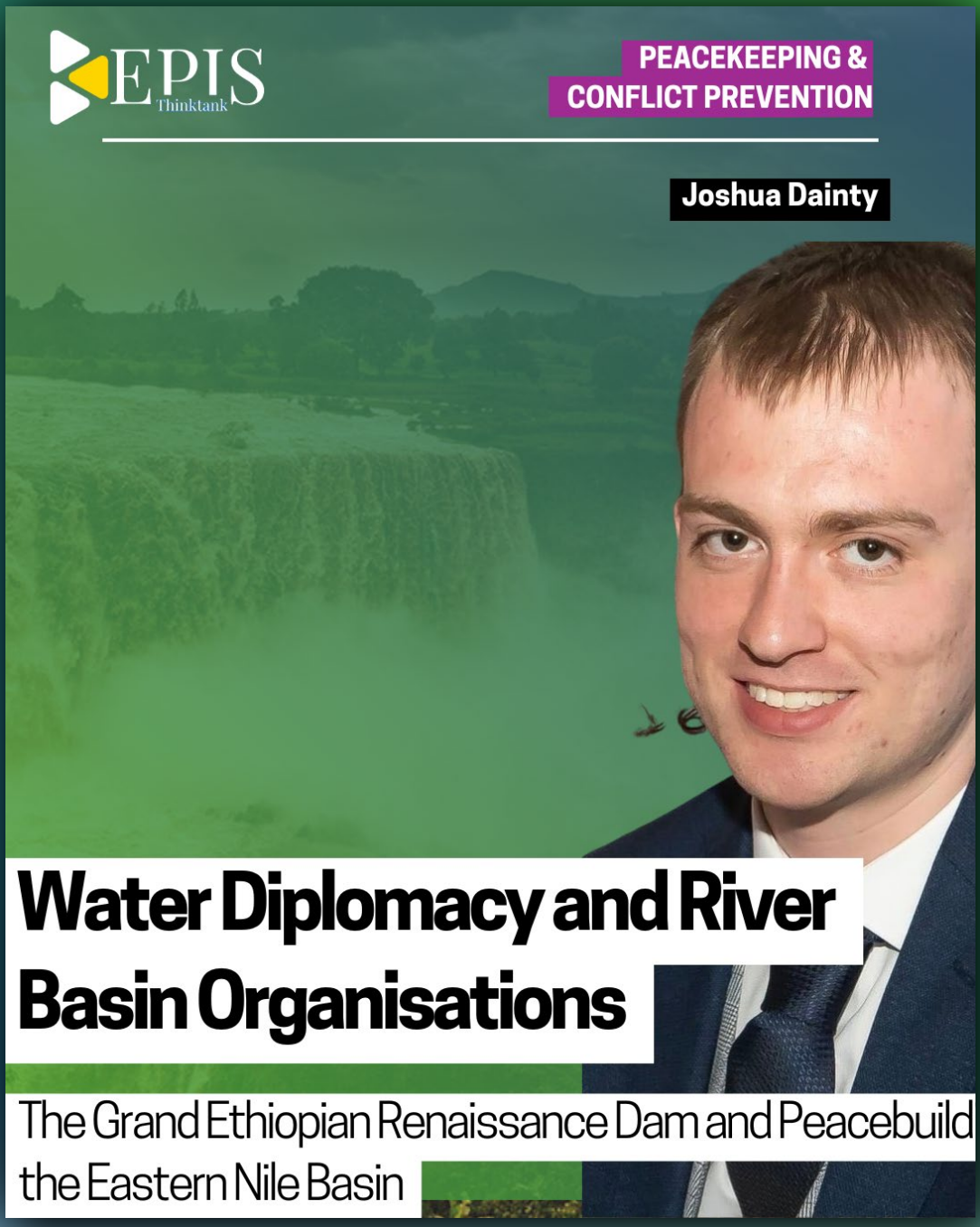

About the Article

As climate change and mega-infrastructure projects intensify competition over shared river basins, it is more important than ever before to explore the capacity and limitations of transboundary water governance in preventing hydropolitical conflict. This article asks how river basin organisations and technological innovations in hydrological modelling serve as peacebuilding measures in East Africa.

About the Author

Joshua Dainty is a student of Politics & International Relations with a strong academic interest in the intersection of economy, geography, and political violence, with a particular research focus on war zones deeply affected by civil conflict and instability. Joshua firmly believes in the potential for politics to provide careful and considered approaches towards the humane resolution of civil conflict.

1. Introduction to Peacebuilding

East Africa is presently experiencing a profound shift in the balance of hydropower along the River Nile. The Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), which finally entered into force in October 2024, marks a new chapter of transboundary water governance for the region. Meanwhile, the official opening of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in September 2025 has reshaped the geopolitical terrain on which questions of water rights, national security, and resource utilisation have long been contested. Within a month of its inauguration, Egypt has blamed surging floodwater levels and population displacement on this controversial water development project, with GERD now emerging as a major diplomatic faultline. Hydropolitical pressures on water availability, rising regional energy demands, and the compounding effects of climate change and environmental degradation add further urgency to these recent developments. This article examines various challenges facing the Eastern Nile Basin, a region increasingly defined by water stress. In doing so, it assesses the performance of river basin organisations in supporting peaceful Nile riparian relations, facilitating the equitable utilisation of shared water resources, and therefore mitigating hydropolitical conflict. Most importantly, this article asks whether data-driven mechanisms can meaningfully address power imbalances in the Eastern Nile Basin. Johan Galtung's (1975) distinction between negative and positive peace provides the theoretical foundations for a peacebuilding approach to conflict prevention. His writings draw attention to relations of power and violence between conflict actors, examining a broad typology of harms that may be inflicted in the course of conflict. Galtung identifies the uneven distribution of power as a form of structural violence, particularly when legal-political arrangements reinforce power asymmetries between actors (Parsons 2007). Applied to water diplomacy, Galtung's perspective on relations of dominance allows us to move beyond strict environmental determinism and invites us to consider the latent influence of structural violence on hydropolitical conflict. In the case of the Eastern Nile Basin, uneven allocations of waterflow and the unequal utilisation of freshwater resources may constitute forms of structural violence. In other words, water development projects are communications of structural power. These conditions render water availability politically salient, even in the absence of physical water scarcity. Conversely, a peacebuilding approach to conflict prevention requires embedding „peace structures" into existing legal-political infrastructure, where river basin organisations and transboundary water governance agreements provide the institutional space to peacefully negotiate divergent interests on water resource development. However, it remains an open question whether such arrangements provide the prerequisite conditions for transboundary cooperation in East Africa. The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) has historically failed to garner sufficient political support among Nile riparians, with poor trust weakening formal agreements. The trust-building and knowledge-sharing capacity of emerging technological innovations may fortify transboundary water governance against the threats posed by climate change and geopolitical tensions in East Africa (Döring and Kim 2025). Therefore, this article shall hold both institutional design and technological mechanisms to be essential in understanding the future of water diplomacy for the Eastern Nile Basin. Viewed through this analytical lens, the GERD and CFA will test whether transboundary governance can resolve long-standing hydropolitical disputes surrounding shared river basins.

2. Conceptualising Hydropolitics for the Eastern Nile Basin

Hydrology has long been recognised as a national security issue, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions where water stress may significantly constrain economic growth and development opportunities. Access to reliable water supplies underpins irrigation, hydropower generation, and inland navigation, while also providing the critical infrastructure necessary for sanitary drinking water and industrial, agricultural, and aquacultural

development. Consequently, water resources are framed as strategic assets within highly securitised political discourses. The impacts of inequitable utilisation on national security create the structural conditions under which resource inequities are weaponised as instruments of violence (Gleick 1993). The adverse effects of large-scale water development projects on shared river basins and underground aquifers are often central to hydropolitical disputes. Ownership of shared watercourses is a heavily securitised policy domain, with hydropolitical conflicts typically foregrounded by contested water rights under international law, with upstream legal-political demands for „equitable and reasonable" utilisation placed in direct contravention of historical rights involving downstream water allocations (Genderen and Rood 2011). Any water development project affecting the regularity, volume, and sedimentation of waterflows may produce serious ecological and economic costs for other riparians. The risk of conflict escalation is further inflamed by the absence of formal transboundary water governance agreements combined with poor regulatory enforcement capacity (Wolf 2007). Conceptions of human security emphasise freshwater availability as a national security issue, which sets the stage for hydropolitical analyses of shared water resource development. However, these analytical frameworks fail to account for how inequitable utilisation and domination are successfully normalised in transboundary water governance. Power asymmetries between riparian states make room for dominant actors to assert agenda-framing powers, secure access and control of freshwater resources, leverage bilateral ties and development objectives in the face of resource-related competition, and satisfy domestic demands almost entirely at the disadvantage of other riparians. To borrow a term from Zeitoun and Warner (2006), „hydro-hegemony" adequately describes how power is exercised by dominant actors and distributed between upstream and downstream Nile riparians. This seminal paper establishes how hydro-hegemony is communicated through various strategic practices, with the Nile Basin largely shaped by resource capture and active unilateralism expressed through hydraulic nationalism, research nationalism, technocratic centralisation, securitised discourses of water policy, and even covert action against riparians. Most importantly, hydro-hegemony demonstrates how the hydrogeological control of water resources is mobilised to structure power relations, which in turn influences the scope and intensity of hydropolitical conflict. Hydro-hegemony within transboundary river basins is neither fixed nor uncontested, but is dynamic and continually challenged by institutional and legal-political pressures. Whereas active unilateralism generally occurs in the absence of cooperative agreements and effective international law, counter-hegemony exists as a series of normative and institutional mechanisms that may offset existing dominative arrangements of inequitable utilisation (see: Ali 2025).



Figure 1: The River Nile

3. Water Stress and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Water stress exists when riparian states fail to meet resource demands, whether due to intentional obstruction or uneven allocation of water supply (Gleick 1993). Egypt invokes historical rights and fixed water allocations enshrined by the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement. Upstream states reject these provisions as a violation of riparian water rights, instead advocating for an international regime to replace colonial-era bilateral agreements, culminating in the ratification of the CFA (Ani et al. 2018). Spanning across eleven riparian states, the Nile represents one of the most geopolitically sensitive and hydrologically interdependent waterways on Earth. Ethiopia is home to the Nile's largest tributary by volume, the Blue Nile, which contributes over eighty-five per cent of total streamflow. With GERD now fully operational for hydropower generation, this hydraulic project will host the largest reservoir in Africa and increase Ethiopia's energy capacity. This significantly enhances Ethiopia's ability to address domestic energy shortages, with a majority of the Ethiopian population without reliable access to electricity (Matthews and Vivoda 2023). The implications for downstream riparians are huge. Dam construction poses an especially serious risk to Egyptian water security, with GERD predicted to affect Egypt's energy capacity, flood management, crop yields, agricultural deficits, unemployment, industrial production, and rural development rates (El-Nasher and Elyamany 2023; Hussain 2025; Mlambo and Masuku 2025). Water resources management is further complicated by climatic pressures on hydrological extremes, with increasingly unpredictable long-term forecasts of high-water and low-water variability that may disrupt existing streamflow patterns. East Africa is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change on water stress, where transboundary cooperation remains weak with precarious political support and riparian state fragility. Mega-infrastructure projects like GERD will play a pivotal role in the future of transboundary governance and water allocations (Amin et al. 2025). In the past, the African Union has expressed concerns over humanitarian costs associated with unilateral mega-infrastructure projects and the resulting weaponisation of shared river basins in hydropolitical conflict (Ani et al. 2018). In October 2025, the GERD dispute reached a new climax after severe flooding affected the Nile Delta, with Egypt's Ministry of Irrigation blaming Ethiopia's flagship water development project for exacerbating floodwater levels. GERD has already been implicated in record-breaking floods and mass displacement of several villages in Sudan's Bahri District. Hydropolitical conflicts surrounding dam construction are not without precedent, with the Aswan High Dam alone responsible for the forced resettlement of Nubian communities, affected waterflows and floodwater levels, disturbed disease ecologies, and economic dislocation. These dynamics constitute a form of structural violence, where active unilateralism disrupts water systems, damages livelihoods, and systemically exposes populations to social harms. Egypt's response to water stress along the River Nile is widely cited as a case of hydro-hegemony, characterised by resource capture and containment strategies wherein dominance is maintained via coercive, diplomatic, financial, and normative mechanisms. Centralised water management systems and securitised water policy leave little room for participatory reforms and transboundary cooperation (Azeez et al. 2025). Attempts to build mega-infrastructures on the Blue Nile are usually met with war rhetoric, with explicit threats of military force against Ethiopia a frequent fixture in domestic Egyptian politics (Tekuya 2020). Water stress in the Eastern Nile Basin also holds wider regional security implications, with Egypt's expanding military presence in Somalia increasingly considered a proxy operation for the GERD dispute (Tessema 2025). At its most fundamental level, the political impasse surrounding the GERD reservoir highlights a triangular antagonism between Egypt,

Hydro-hegemony within transboundary river basins is neither fixed nor uncontested, but is dynamic and continually challenged by institutional and legal-political pressures

Sudan, and Ethiopia. GERD simultaneously satisfies Ethiopia's domestic energy demands, provides opportunities to export cheaper energy to neighbouring riparians, but also holds the potential to negatively impact downstream livelihoods (Mlambo and Masuku 2025). Mega-infrastructure projects function as a counter-hegemonic mechanism and signal a departure from the status quo of downstream hydro-hegemony. Counter-hegemony in the Eastern Nile Basin is not limited to GERD, but is also found in river basin organisations and formal agreements which take agenda-setting powers away from hydro-hegemonic actors (Ali 2025). Together, these mechanisms shake the normative foundations of hydro-hegemony, creating the space for transboundary water governance. However, attempts to formalise water rights and cooperation only highlight the institutional gap that exists in East Africa, through which mega-infrastructure projects become contested faultlines of hydropolitical conflicts (Almesafri et al. 2024). Repeated third-party mediations hosted by the African Union and ad hoc bilateral engagements between Ethiopia and Egypt underscore the limits of water diplomacy and the demand for basin-wide regional cooperation (Ranjan 2024).

> **"Water development projects are communications of structural power. These conditions render water availability politically salient, even in the absence of physical water scarcity"**

4. Water Diplomacy and River Basin Organisations

River basin organisations, such as the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), are conceptualised as „peace structures" in both functionalist and constructivist terms. Transboundary water governance is hypothesised to generate spillover effects in other transnational policy domains, while the resulting socio-economic integration discourages the use of violence, thereby fostering peaceful riparian relations (Ide and Detges 2018). In the Eastern Nile Basin, this logic is complemented by the political appetite to institutionalise transboundary cooperation through knowledge-sharing and trust-building mechanisms as a means of conflict prevention (Ani et al. 2018). Amid the GERD dispute, Egypt and Ethiopia signed the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DoP), which provided a mutual framework for the equitable utilisation of Blue Nile waterflow and committed signatories to implement recommendations issued by the International Panel of Experts (Almesafri et al. 2024). However, the non-binding nature of DoP limited its capacity to guarantee information exchange and operational integrity concerning GERD, leaving water resources management politically contested. Certain institutional designs of river basin organisations are found to be more effective at managing hydropolitical conflicts. Data-sharing mechanisms establish the necessary conditions for cooperative planning and water resources management. Prior notification procedures ensure that mega-infrastructure projects meet the standards for equitable utilisation and that water resources development causes no significant harm to other riparians. Lastly, conflict resolution mechanisms facilitate the peaceful mediation of resource-related disputes (Zawahri 2025). These institutional designs may transform the GERD conflict by safeguarding against hydraulic and research nationalisms as well as mitigating the hydrological risks associated with poor-quality hydroclimatic data, such as sub-optimal irrigation and unpredictable floodwater levels (Bulti 2025). Information exchange informs basin-wide water resource development decisions on dam operation, crop cultivation, renewable energy, irrigation, and evaporation controls. These knowledge-sharing technological innovations may transform the GERD dispute from a zero-sum human security dilemma into a „win-win" scenario for riparians (El-Nasher and Elyamany 2023). The NBI was established in 1999 as a transitional international organisation for the implementation of basin-wide cooperation in East Africa. The ratification of the CFA was contingent on the progression of the NBI's political track, but with Egypt suspending its membership in 2010 and the stalling of negotiations, the NBI

adopted a much more lasting role in hydropolitical cooperation than previously intended. The organisation's Council of Ministers (Nile-COM), technical regional offices, and subsidiary action programmes provide formal governance structures that support intergovernmental dialogue and stakeholder engagement among local, national, and international actors (Okoth 2021). The NBI's technical track arguably plays an equally indispensable role that reinforces its institutional mechanisms. The Nile Basin Decision-Support System (NB-DSS) alone is responsible for maintaining a relational database including spatial, time series, and scenario data on hydrological objects, events, and variables such as reservoirs, canals, catchment hydrology, floodwaters, sediment yield, irrigated agricultural production, and rainfall among others (Papathanasiou 2016). The modelling of different scenarios through NB-DSS has enabled more coordinated decisions in water resource planning and even transboundary dam reservoir cascade management. Despite the diplomatic quandaries left unaddressed by the NBI's political track, a case can be made that these data practices constitute water diplomacy and even amount to peacebuilding (Kittikhoun and Schmeier 2021). NB-DSS shows how river basin organisations can operationalise peacebuilding through knowledge-sharing databases and transform hydropolitical conflict into data-driven coordinated water resource development. Integrated water resources management requires the bridging of all water sub-sectors both vertically and horizontally, meaning that it reconciles all competing sectoral interests and political demands through intergovernmental transparency and information exchange, as opposed to active unilateralism

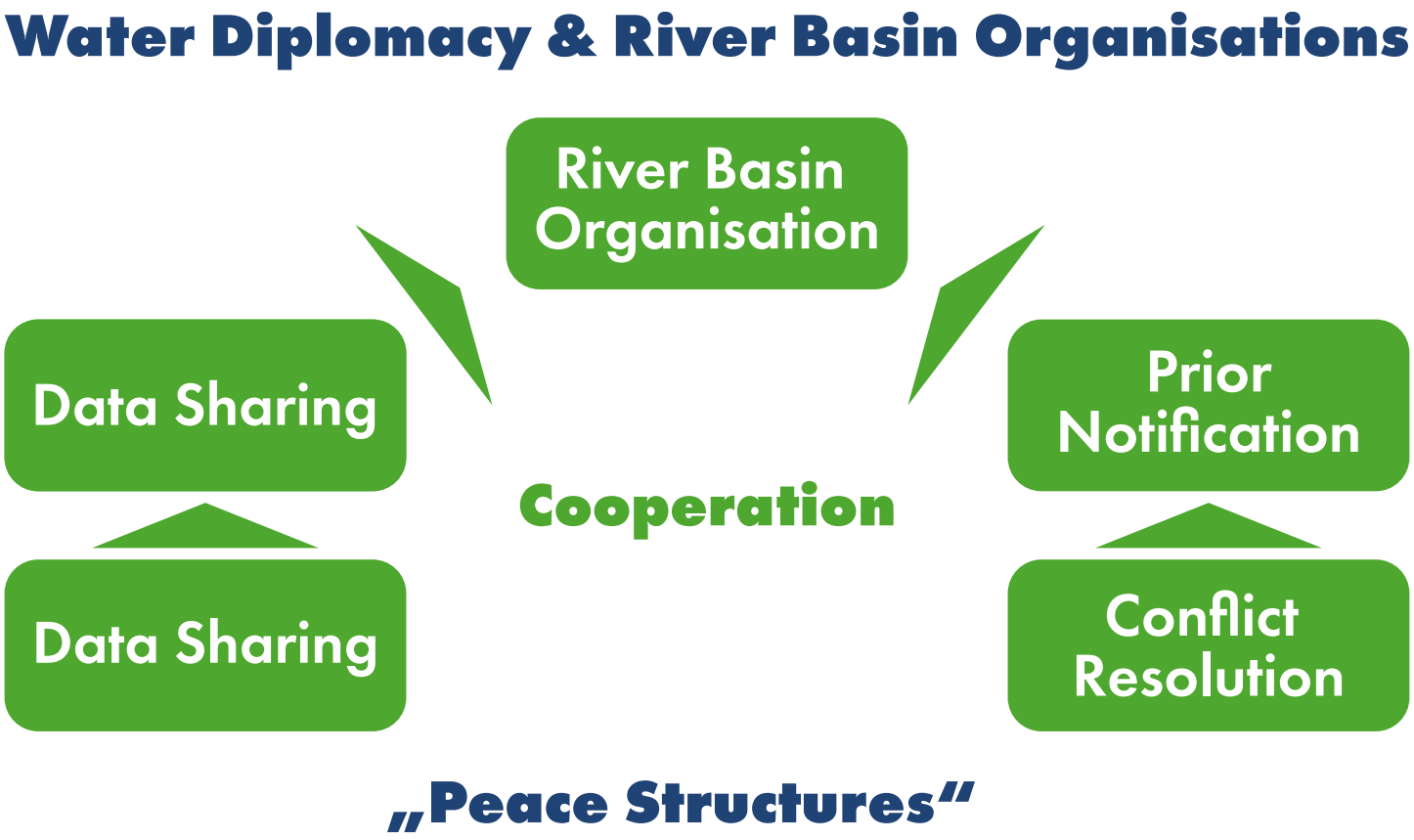

Figure 2: Water Diplomacy and River Basin Organisations

(Grigg 2008).

While NB-DSS serves as an operational backbone for hydropolitical peacebuilding in the Eastern Nile Basin, this overlooks several obstacles in the unique case of the GERD dispute that have yet to be resolved. The Egyptian-Sudanese Permanent Joint Technical Commission has rejected the CFA as incomplete and unrepresentative of basin-wide interests (Yihdego et al. 2025). Third-party interventions by the African Union and UN Security Council have so far been fruitless in reaching consensus on the filling of the GERD reservoir (Ranjan 2024). Basin-wide cooperation is also undermined by bilateral development

assistance being instrumentalised as a diplomatic tool in hydropolitical disputes, such as Egyptian diplomatic overtures to DR Congo in state reconstruction efforts at a critical stage in CFA negotiations (Roach et al. 2025).

5. Conclusion

Water diplomacy conclusively holds a place in future peacebuilding efforts in the Eastern Nile Basin. Hydropolitical conflicts over unilateral mega-infrastructure projects must be understood as communications of structural power, reinforced by the securitisation of water policy. As the hydrological effects of climate change and political constraints posed by state fragility unfold in East Africa, the institutional designs of river basin organisations that are most responsive to structural iniquities and power imbalances requires the continued attention of peacekeeping scholars.

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About the Article

Why has China blocked attempts to invoke the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar? The failure to invoke R2P in response to the Rohingya crisis cannot be explained by humanitarian considerations alone, but must be understood through the lens of great-power politics and national interests. Humanitarian concerns are overshadowed by China's national geostrategic interests, as well as the US's restrained and increasingly selective engagement with the crisis.

About the Author

Mareike Warmboldt holds a BA in International Studies from Leiden University and will begin the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programme in International Humanitarian Action in fall 2025. Her work focuses on conflict transformation, peacekeeping, and human rights, supported by hands-on experience with NGOs.

1. Introduction

Following the golden ages of interventionism in the 1990s, the decades after 9/11 were marked by a growing unwillingness to support military intervention. In light of current humanitarian crises, considerations of responsibility and morality regarding humanitarian interventionism are more relevant than ever. The case of Myanmar and its humanitarian crisis is an excellent example of the wider discourse surrounding humanitarian intervention and ultimately showcases the ineffectiveness of international mechanisms in protecting fundamental human rights. The persecution of the Rohingya religious minority in Myanmar is one of the biggest contemporary humanitarian crises. Due to a surge in violence, next to the denial of citizenship and thus, deprivation of rights to public services, almost a million Rohingyas were forced to flee to Bangladesh since August 2017 (Ibrahim and Nordin 2015, 4; Rahman and Akon 2020, 198). Myanmar is neglecting its responsibility to ensure the rule of law in order to protect its population's security, as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) stipulates in the principle of 'state sovereignty as a responsibility'. The UN Security Council (UNSC), the only organ in the UN with the authority to undertake military action, is responsible for implementing an R2P response, i.e., humanitarian military intervention. Unanimity among the five permanent members is a condition for such action. Despite reports accusing the Myanmar government of ethnic cleansing as well as calls for intervention because of an extremely high risk of genocide committed against the Rohingya, the UNSC has not yet invoked R2P due to vetoes of Russia and China (Ibrahim and Nordin 2015, 9). Therefore, the question arises why China has blocked attempts to invoke the R2P doctrine in the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. It is argued that humanitarian concerns are overshadowed by China's national economic and geostrategic interests. First, the preservation of internal stability through the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, China's long-term strategic interests in South Asia vis-a-vis India as a regional rival, and third, the maintenance and improvement of China's position relative to the US as the hegemon in the international system.

Under R2P, the primary duty to protect populations rests with the state itself, yet, the international community is expected to support states in realizing this duty.

2. History of the Conflict

Despite their status as the second-largest religious and ethnic minority in Myanmar and their long historical presence in Rakhine State, the Rohingya have consistently been denied recognition as citizens by the state. Although the most visible violence has intensified in recent years, persecution of the Rohingya represents a protracted and gradual process spanning several decades. Since the military first assumed power in 1962, state policies have become increasingly exclusionary and hostile toward the Rohingya population. Thegovernment institutionalized this exclusion by officially recognizing 135 ethnic groups while deliberately omitting the Rohingya, culminating in the 1982 Citizenship Law, which rendered them effectively stateless by classifying them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Kamal, Kaiser, Mariano 2024, 545). This legal misrecognition enabled severe restrictions on nearly all aspects of Rohingya life, including political participation, marriage, education, religious practice, and freedom of movement. Through state narratives portraying the Rohingya as a threat to national and Buddhist cultural identity, Myanmar authorities legitimized widespread discrimination and violence. Large-scale military operations, beginning with Operation Nagamin in 1978, involved the confiscation of identity documents, mass violence, and forced displacement, driving hundreds of thousands of Rohingya into neighboring countries. Similar patterns of persecution continued through the 1990s and 2000s, marked by arbitrary arrests, forced labor, sexual violence, and state-sponsored propaganda that fueled public

hostility. Violence escalated dramatically in 2012, when coordinated attacks by security forces and local actors killed hundreds and displaced over 140,000 Rohingya, with perpetrators protected by state-backed impunity (Kamal, Kaiser, Mariano 2024, 546, 549-551). The situation reached a critical point in August 2017, when Myanmar's military and allied extremist groups carried out systematic attacks involving mass killings, sexual violence, and the destruction of entire villages, forcing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee, primarily to Bangladesh, which now hosts over one million refugees (Choi 2025, 263-264). The UN has identified these actions as crimes against humanity with strong indications of genocidal intent. Conditions for the Rohingya have further deteriorated since the 2021 military coup, as economic collapse, rising prices, and renewed intercommunal violence since 2023 have triggered additional displacement and cross-border migration, underscoring the ongoing and unresolved nature of the crisis (Médecins Sans Frontières 2025; IOM and UNHCR 2025).

3. The Responsibility to Protect vs National Interests

R2P is a principle applied in situations of severe human rights violations, such as mass atrocities and ethnic cleansing, thus, it is triggered when a state is either unable or unwilling to protect its population or is itself responsible for committing such abuses. Under R2P, the primary duty to protect populations rests with the state itself, encompassing both its actions and failures to act, yet, the international community is expected to support states in realizing this duty. State sovereignty is therefore no longer absolute but is linked to the responsibility to uphold human rights and ensure human security (Islam, Muhibbullah and Ahmed 2023, 16). Despite this commitment, the implementation of R2P remains contentious. Concerns persist regarding potential violations of national sovereignty and the legitimacy of using military force for humanitarian purposes. Additionally, General Assembly resolutions supporting R2P are considered "soft law" and lack binding legal force, limiting enforceability. Furthermore, the limitations of the UNSC and the use of veto power make international mechanisms ineffective in protecting fundamental human rights (Islam, Muhibbullah and Ahmed 2023, 17). China has repeatedly used its veto power to block international action against Myanmar. In 2018, it obstructed efforts to adopt resolutions condemning Myanmar's military for alleged genocide, and in 2020, it prevented a joint UN statement responding to the International Court of Justice's measures on the Rohingya issue. Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, China again blocked a UNSC resolution addressing the worsening human rights situation. At the same time, China has continued to support Myanmar by offering political and economic alternatives amid Western sanctions, driven largely by its strategic, economic, and regional influence interests (Swadhin 2024, 6).

3.1 Internal Stability

While the US and many other states have condemned Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya, China has remained one of the few countries to openly support the Myanmar government. In 2017, China publicly endorsed Myanmar's military operations, framing them as a domestic response to extremism and reaffirming its willingness to assist Myanmar in maintaining stability and development. This stance is closely linked to its own domestic concerns over ethnic minority governance. By framing ethnic conflicts as internal security matters, China seeks to prevent international scrutiny that could set precedents affecting its policies toward groups such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans (Choi 2025, 277). Having created a similarly hostile environment for its Uyghur population, China is concerned about the spillover effect Western interference in Myanmar's internal affairs could have on its own crisis. Moreover, calls for the deployment of UN troops or international monitoring groups in Myanmar are perceived as an attack on Myanmar's territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Aung 2020, 26). This approach reinforces China's broader narrative that sovereignty and state security should take precedence over external human rights norms and "is deeply rooted in its long-standing foreign policy principle of non-interference" (Choi 2025, 273,

277). Defending Myanmar thus also strengthens China's domestic legitimacy and limits international criticism of its own minority policies. Beyond ideology, China's support for Myanmar reflects long-standing strategic and geopolitical interests. Since Myanmar backed China's entry into the UN in 1971, Beijing has encouraged its nonalignment and established close military and economic ties, particularly from the 1980s onward. This fraternal partnership helps China counter Western influence in Southeast Asia, protect regional stability on its terms, and consolidate its broader regional dominance (Choi 2025, 275, 277).

3.2 China's Long-Term Strategic Interests in South Asia

China's involvement in Myanmar is driven by a range of strategic interests, including border stability, energy security and access to the Indian Ocean. Beijing has played a major role in Myanmar's economic and military development, reflecting the country's importance to China's broader long-term strategic interests. China's deeper engagement in the US-led international economic system since its 'reform and opening up' program starting in 1978 makes it vulnerable to the possibility of exploitation of its dependence on foreign resources and markets (Friedberg 2018, 10). Therefore, China's multidimensional policies towards Myanmar aim to mitigate its dependency by establishing a 'two-ocean strategy' to secure its oil and gas supply. This strategy entails the building of international channels to the Indian Ocean through the development of the Great Yuan Passage as an alternative to the US-controlled Strait of Malacca as the only trade route to Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Currently, 80 percent of China's imported oil passes through the Malaccan Strait, making China highly vulnerable to attempts by the US to weaken and destabilize China through the use of sanctions and embargoes (Taufiq 2019, 82-83; Rahman and Akon 2019, 386). Therefore, Myanmar is vital for China's landlocked Yunnan province, as it provides a direct route to the Indian Ocean that would otherwise be unavailable. To support this objective, China has developed infrastructure projects such as the Ruili Development and Experimental Zone, which enhances cross-border trade

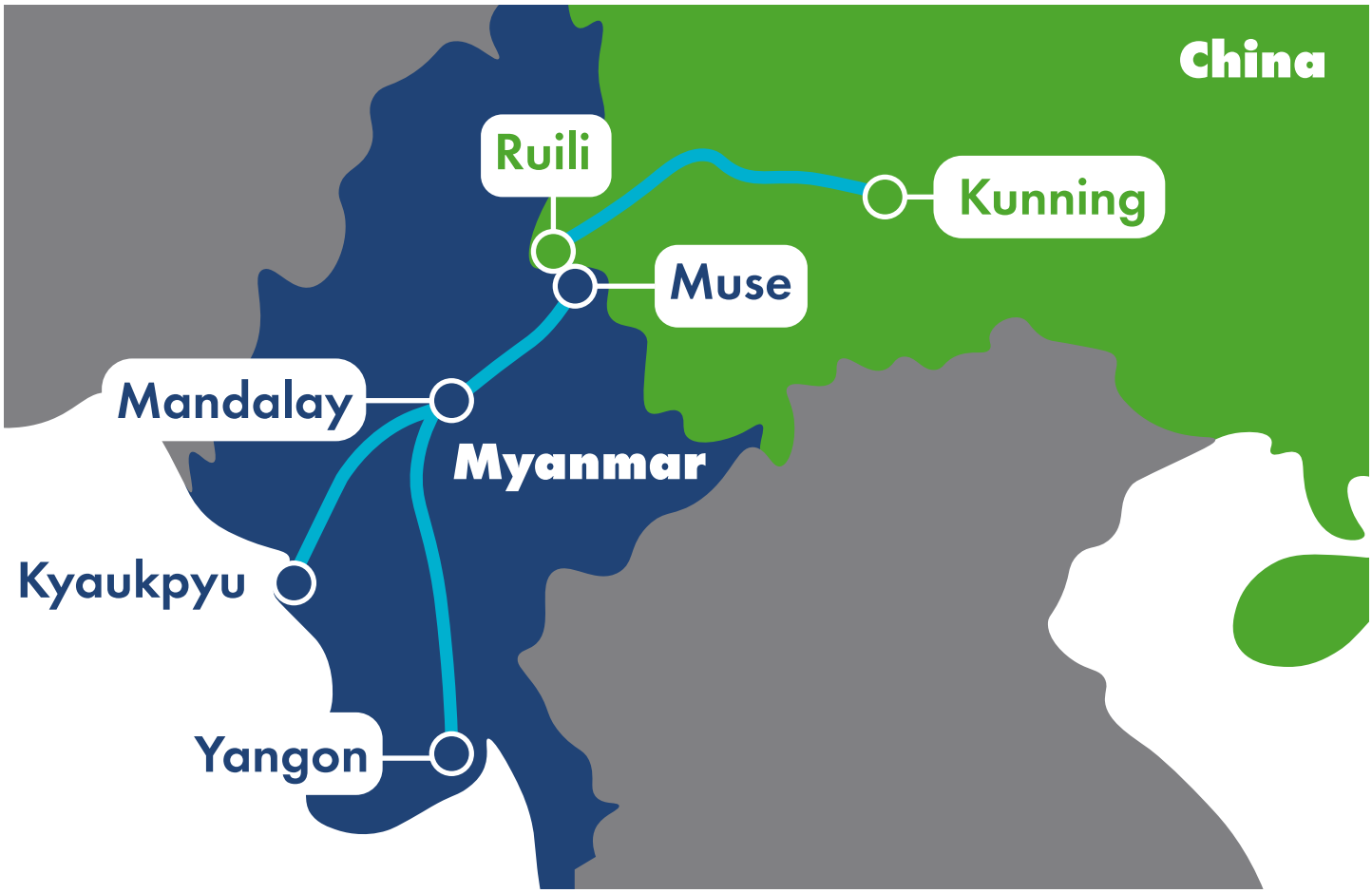

Figure 1. Planned China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (Bicker 2024).

and economic integration with Yunnan. Rakhine State holds particular strategic value due to its coastline along the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, offering China an alternative route that reduces reliance on the Strait of Malacca (Swadhin 2024, 5). As part of its "String of Pearls" strategy and the Maritime Silk Road announced in 2013 under the Belt and Road Initiative, China is developing the Kyauk Phyu deep-sea port and associated energy infrastructure, including extensive oil and gas pipelines linking western China to the port. China has made substantial financial commitments to these projects, investing billions of dollars in the Kyauk Phyu port and Special Economic Zone, with total investments in Rakhine State exceeding ten billion dollars. The projects' proximity to areas affected by the Rohingya crisis makes political stability in Myanmar essential for safeguarding Chinese investments and uninterrupted energy flows (Choi 2025, 275-276). By supporting Myanmar, China also presents itself as a champion of South–South cooperation while simultaneously attempting to achieve its strategic objective of becoming the regional hegemon (Choi 2025, 277).

China's approach to the Bay of Bengal is shaped by its rivalry with India. Seeking to counter India's longstanding regional influence, China has strengthened ties with South Asian states, including Myanmar, and used its involvement in the Rohingya crisis as a diplomatic balancing act (Obaidullah and Hossain 2024, 12). While publicly engaging in mediation efforts, Beijing has remained careful to protect its strategic investments and broader regional objectives. Alongside its political and economic support, China has pursued a form of humanitarian diplomacy, proposing a "three-phase solution" centered on ending violence, facilitating the return of refugees, and promoting long-term economic development in Rakhine State. This framework emphasizes cooperation between Myanmar and Bangladesh, promoting development as the primary solution to the crisis. This strategy allows China to alleviate aspects of the humanitarian crisis while simultaneously projecting itself as a responsible regional power committed to peace, stability, and development (Obaidullah and Hossain 2024, 14-15).

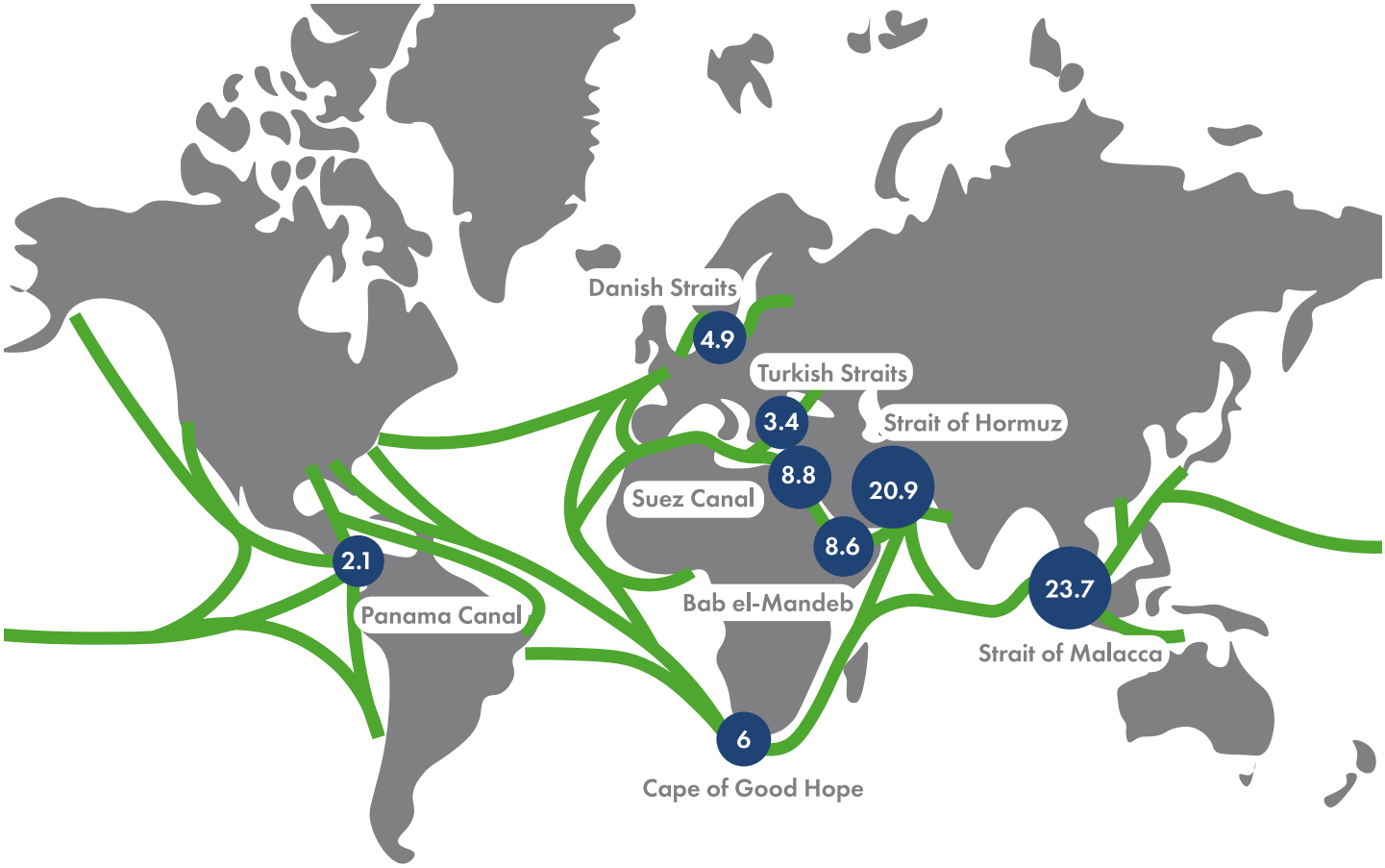

Figure 2. US Energy Trade through Maritime Oil Chokepoints (million barrels per day) in 2023 (EIA 2024).

3.3 Balance of Power: US-China Rivalry

Beyond its regional power competition with India, China's long-term strategic interest is to improve its position relative to the US and eventually replace the US as a global hegemon. The emergence of a hegemon in the global order requires three broad forms of control to regulate the behavior of other states. First, 'coercive capabilities to force compliance,' second, 'consensual inducements to incentivize it' and third, 'legitimacy to rightfully command it' (Doshi 2021). Since power is a zero-sum game, the most important variable shaping China's strategy is to weaken the US exercise of control and to take its place exercising control (Heywood 2014a, 63; Doshi 2021). Therefore, Myanmar is vital for its global expansionist ambitions, realized in strategies such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' connecting China with South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe, as a consensual inducement (Rahman and Akon 2019, 387). However, Myanmar is of strategic importance to the US as well, due to its location in the Indo-Pacific region that serves as a transport corridor for energy imports and exports, and its position as one of the fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia with abundant natural resources, making it attractive for increased engagement and investments (Aung 2020, 33; Rahman, and Akon 2019, 387). During the 2017 Rohingya crisis, the US response was restrained, with the Trump administration imposing limited sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act and avoiding a genocide designation. In its subsequent term, US engagement with the Rohingya crisis further declined, as sanctions on military-linked actors were quietly eased and support for pro-democracy forces was deprioritized, reflecting a shift in US priorities (Choi 2025, 270-272). Increasingly, the US approach has been shaped by strategic and economic concerns, particularly access to rare earth minerals. Myanmar is among the world's leading producers of heavy rare earths, which are critical for clean energy technologies and advanced defense systems. Despite being a major producer itself, the US remains heavily reliant on China, which dominates global processing. Thus, by mid-2025, the US explored engagement with both the junta and ethnic armed groups to access these resources, viewing Myanmar as a potential avenue to reduce reliance on China and counter its influence in Southeast Asia (Banerjee 2025). Simultaneously, China views the persistence of the crisis as an opportunity for the US to increase its presence in the Rakhine State, legitimizing its exercise of control "in the name of human rights and humanitarian support via the UN and international organizations" (Aung 2020, 23). Therefore, China desires to play a leading role in Myanmar's internal conflict, thereby minimizing the role of the US as an external power, aiming to, on the one hand, protect its investments in the country and push forward strategic projects of national interest and, on the other hand, promote its diplomatic role in the UN (Yhome 2019, 20). Taking a proactive role as a mediator between Myanmar and Bangladesh hampers the possibility of US interference in the conflict and thus decreases the US' ability to exercise control through consensual inducements or worse, its coercive capabilities in the form of humanitarian intervention via the UN. Moreover, it will endorse Chinese ambitions to promote its relations with the Muslim world by taking responsibility for mediating the conflict and promoting economic development in the Rakhine state. Support from Muslim countries is crucial for China to counter the US and the West as it gets more involved in international affairs and its role in the UN expands (Aung 2020, 24, 41).

> **"Beijing has played a major role in Myanmar's economic and military development, reflecting the country's importance to China's broader long-term strategic interests."**

4. Conclusion

The failure to invoke the Responsibility to Protect in response to the Rohingya crisis cannot be explained by humanitarian considerations alone, but must be understood through the lens of great-power politics and national interests. While the UN has identified the actions of the Myanmar government as crimes against humanity with

strong indications of genocidal intent, the R2P doctrine's implementation has been constrained by structural limitations within the UNSC that enable China to use its veto power to achieve its national interests. China's consistent obstruction of international action reflects its prioritization of sovereignty, internal stability, and long-term geopolitical and economic interests in the South Asia region and beyond, particularly in relation to energy security, regional influence, and the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, the US's restrained and increasingly selective engagement with the crisis underscores how humanitarian responses are subordinated to broader strategic rivalries, notably the intensifying competition with China. The Rohingya crisis illustrates the limitations of R2P in a multipolar world, where great-power rivalry and strategic interests continue to outweigh collective responsibility for the protection of vulnerable populations.

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About the Interview

How does the IDSF perceive the current security challenges in the Middle East? Israel's understanding in the region is strongly based on historical roots and innovative power. Its security is based on national resilience as a core capacity to address external threats, but also profits from the high-tech sector for military applications. According to IDSF, deradicalization is needed, and Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE or Bahrain are helpful partners to overcome the given hurdles.

About the Interviewees

Lt. Col. (Res.) Yaron Buskila is Operations Officer of the Gaza Division in the IDF reserves and CEO of Israel's Defense and Security Forum. He was responsible for many classified operations in the Westbank.

Eran Lahav is an IDSF researcher focusing on global Jihad and Iranian proxies and the founder of ‚'Mabaterror'', a terrorism research and analysis initiative. During his IDF service he served in the Intelligence Corps as an Analyst.

About the Interviewers

Kephi Alkalay is pursuing a masters of International Affairs at the Hertie School of Governance, specializing in international security. Her interests focus on middle power multilateralism, with particular attention to strategic investment and public-private partnerships as tools for infrastructure resilience amid great power competition.

Alisa Grunert holds a B.A. in PolSci & Sociology. She has more than 4 years of experience in Political Education & worked 3 years as a project manager in ESD. She finished a short time study program on the EU at CIFE, works in a Research Project on European Industrial Policy & instructs workshops on parliamentarism and ESD. In her Master's, she focuses on IR, especially security politics. She is a member of WIFIS & in the Board of MEF. Alisa aims to build bridges between IR research & society.

EPIS:

We are having an interview now with three different pillars, so we will start with some questions about your person, then would follow up with some institutional related questions and then current issues. So understanding that the military service is mandatory in Israel, how did you end up in your respective positions, within the military, and what was your intrinsic motivation to get into those positions?

Yaron Buskila:

So first of all, I started 24 years in the IDF, and I finished as a lieutenant colonel, and I'm still living [in the] reserves. So when you ask, how did I end up? I mean, how did it influence my opinions? Right?

EPIS:

Specifically your motivations.

Yaron Buskila:

First of all. You know that generally, serving in [the army] in Israel is mandatory. You know, we don't need the law in Israel [to force us to do this] - we have the willingness to serve in the IDF, because we are all aware of the threats against Israel. Everybody [is] growing up in Israel to understand that there is a threat around Israel, [that], the existence is not obvious. You have to serve in the IDF to ensure your security, of you, personally, your family and this nation. So for me, and I think for us, the people in Israel, they see serving in the IDF, first of all, as something that you are required or obligated to do... and a moral thing to do, to keep life and safety and prosperity ... you can't be successful economically or in education without the basic needs of security. And that's what motivates most of the Israelis to go into serving the army without serving by mandatory [enforcement].

EPIS:

And then specifically, we don't know the name of your unit, but specifically the decision to serve in the West Bank and your unit. Why did you choose this, as opposed to going into intelligence or the Paratrooper unit?

Yaron Buskila:

First of all, I chose to be a warrior, to go to [an] infantry unit because I felt that I had the ability to do that physically and mentally. And during my 24 years, I found myself in, usually in the combat units. I started as a combat soldier, and I finished as Secondary Lieutenant Colonel Battalion Commander and a Deputy of Brigade Commander. And I was involved in many intelligence units. So the question is not why I chose to be a combat soldier but really what motivated me to stay in the army as a career. For me, it never felt like a career. In Israel, the army is not for the money and ... every time I felt that I have the opportunity

to bring more impact - to the security of Israel. So if it's good for Israel, it's good for me to do that and I will take it.

EPIS:

And for you Eran - why did you choose your respective path within the military?

Eran Lahav:

Well, as Yaron said, it's actually mandatory and I didn't know what I wanted to do in the military service before joining the IDF. I was majoring in Arabic in school ... I had a very, very good teacher. He was a former Shin Bet [officer]. He was an old old man, but he was a very, very impressive guy, and he really taught us, not only the language, but also to understand that there is a story behind every word. You have it also in Hebrew as well and in German. And when you learn a language like this, it opens your mind, also for other things. At this time, I was already doing tests for the intelligence service for over a year. It was also with his recommendation I should do so ... and I joined the Intelligence force. I was an analyst for three years. I always remembered his words. He taught me the mindset of looking behind what is being said. So we were monitoring and checking and analyzing lots of very classified information. But it's not only just to understand what is the threat and how to stop it, but also to understand where it comes from. And I'm so grateful to this day, to this teacher. For me, it was also the ground [motivation] to continue in this field... I was working for a research institute, also as an analyst, about social media and I was monitoring radical jihadi forms. Back then, it was less on tiktok and Instagram but more on online forums, and it was just like two, three years after September 11. You understand how effective open source intelligence is. And this led me to other things I did afterwards. I was analyzing social media in Arabic and also how it's affecting their society but also Western society. And I kept on doing this, I opened my own initiative about monitoring terrorism but also from open sources. It's called MabaTerror. I was also working on public diplomacy to do Hasbara [Public Diplomacy] for Israel. I did it as a student. I was volunteering. I went with a delegation. It was very important to me that not just saying, okay, we are for Israel, and we believe in this cause. But why should you also believe in this cause? Because you need to understand what is going on on the other side. And this is like...it starts from when I was 16. I joined IDSF because I liked their values and what they were doing. So I took all my experience with monitoring [tracking] terrorism, and became a senior researcher. I am now leading the Middle East department, and we are doing lots of research papers, but I always remember my teacher in high school who told me to check the story behind every word that you read.

EPIS:

But how do you deal with the feelings of failure within the military? Because your feelings of failure are existential. It's not just about yourself, it's about the people you protect.

Yaron Buskila:

It's a good question. You can deal with part of that. I mean... you really feel, even if it's small responsibility, or even if it's big.. To be responsible for a person's life. This is the biggest responsibility a person can have. But part of that is to know how to deal with that in the right way, to understand that there are things you can do and things you can't do and to understand that sometimes the situation is much more complicated than what you hoped and you can't control everything in life.

EPIS:

So this is a slightly different topic, but we wanted to also ask you about the tech sector in Israel. Israel is often referred to as the startup nation, and also for the military, it plays a crucial role. From your perspective, which technological developments within the NBIC technologies like neuroscience, technologies, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science, do you consider the most relevant in the next generation warfare?

Yaron Buskila:

I'm [an] expert about military, not about general high tech, but I can tell you, first, that Israel became a high tech

society after the Jewish people came to Israel in the early 90s. Jewish people from Ukraine and Russia, who were strong in engineering, contributed to the biggest changes in Israel, when it comes to high tech. Secondly, sometimes the military's security needs are developed from solutions from private needs for example, in Gaza. You need technology that can find underground tunnel but originally its goal was to find oil or if you need satellites for communication. Or if you need satellite information to help in Africa - you use it next time in Africa for communications, where it's also needed. So because military needs are... you need very fast and very accurate technology to support human life. So usually all the best minds try to find a solution, and then you use it for another needs, for the private needs and companies and high tech and so on. And by the way, I saw that personally, because I was there in Gaza, the medical technology which is saving lives. Some of the people that I met after they get injured, they said, unfortunately, the medical high tech was so that it saved my life. Why do they say that? Because the technology is so effective that stay alive, but without [their] legs or hands. They have very bad life right now but they're still alive. They're suffering. So the medical technology, (i.e. the high tech) is very good... I met so many doctors that came from all over the world to take it back to their hospitals. And that's again... why we need bring a good solution.

The literal translation of Jihad is ,'effort'' or ,'struggle'' and refers to either personal spiritual growth or to militant action aiming to defend or expand Islamic territory. Some extremist groups use it to justify violence.

EPIS:

Just a follow up question, in military terms, as you both are also well connected with respective personnel within the military, which technological innovations, apart from the medical sector, do you think are very crucial for a successful military. Let's talk about nanotechnology, for example.

Yaron Buskila:

Yeah, of course. First of all, if that helps to finish war quickly, much quicker than without this technology. And especially, I don't know the exact percentage, or the exact number, but the IDF invested a lot of money into military [technology] , so it will be able to distinguish [better] between terrorists and those who are not terrorists. That's not easy in the battlefield. It's not easy in the battlefield to know who is a terrorist and who is not. So if you have the right technology, you can minimize the amount of people that can get injured because of this. You know, you're shooting bombs and bombs. You know, it's not like getting into a surgery room. It has a big effect. You want to eliminate only the terrorists, not the civilians, and we could do that and to secure Israel. [Author's Note: Even if civilians and terrorists might be distinguishable from each other, both have been killed in joint bombing operations, highlighting the entanglement of close living proximities between civilians and Hamas operatives in the densely populated area of Gaza.]

EPIS:

Can I just ask also for this, because we read your paper on Iran and Sudan, the influence within this of how to influence the global discourse on colonization, occupation and energy security as well. Do you see patterns in the way that Iranian forces seek to polarize society to other great powers, or to other powers who also, let's say, exist within a great power competition with the West? Because China has been accused of something similar.

Eran Lahav:

China, Russia as well and they are cooperating with this. I can tell you the first one I found with Iranian activity. It was also used by the Russians for example. I am not an expert on China. So for example, the Iranians were making a fake news website. Like a whole new website that resembles a news website in the US. And the Russians did it as well, also within the US. Normally it will be like one year before elections. And what was funny that the

Iranians did 2024. They were making a new website, and they were kind of like spreading different kind of articles about Trump and also about Kamala Harris before the elections. So you have also other countries doing this, and also that in Germany as well, and other European countries, Iran is very vividly, unfortunately, also in the UK. So this is kind of this activity, is not only Iranian. By the way, if we compare it to Hamas again, Hamas was trying to do this also with Israel. Hamas created a website that looked exactly like the Jerusalem Post. It was six months ago or a little bit more, and they were writing there as if the government didn't care about the hostages, and they [Israeli government] allowed troops to get into Gaza and to bomb [Gaza] without caring about it. They wrote it. People thought it was the Jerusalem Post, but then they found out that it was a different kind of website. [Author's Note: Even though this is discussed within misinformation and cyber-warfare tactics between Israel, Hamas, and Iranian-proxies, it is important to note that criticism of Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza, as indiscriminate towards Palestinian civilians and perilous to Israeli-hostage life, has been made by Israeli and international media.]

> **"It's not easy in the battlefield to know who is a terrorist and who is not. So if you have the right technology, you can minimize the amount of people that can get injured because of this."**

EPIS:

We know that under the reconstruction of Gaza, the idea is, you have part of this technocratic government that Yaron alluded to or mentioned. Much of the funders are Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, and the states of which you say, have these forces. How do you think this plays into education and narrative and state strategy and weakening of a society at its most macro and micro perspective? if these are the countries that are supposed to be financing this, and there they are. You mentioned that there is a quiet aspect of the quiet aspect of jihad, and they are supposed to be financing Gaza's reconstruction, and they are supposed to be viewing for a moderate, two state solution. Where are they? What is the nuance around this?

Eran Lahav:

Just to clarify we use the term Jihadi, there are different levels. I cannot go too deep in this, but Erdogan is not to be compared to. It's not Bin Laden, okay? It's not the same. So they believe in a certain kind of jihad, but jihad is a different kind of term to different kind of groups. So the thing is, it's not only Turkey, not only Qatar, which I think are too radical and will not be really good in order to eradicate their radicalization within the Palestinian society, but we also have countries that were part of Abraham accords. You take the Emirates, for instance, Bahrain - or Saudi Arabia, which is not part of Abraham Accords, - but we were about to establish normalization. These countries, they are opposed to Muslim Brotherhood. So they are non radical countries as for today, and they can help and besides finances, they can change the education system. It's a long process. It's not going to be flipped in one day, not even two years or whatever, or a decade. I think we lost a generation there. We need to aim for the next one. But it's a beginning, because if you think about this, you remember there was an Arab Spring in 2011 and they were trying to build like democratic structures into countries that were not used to it. And we saw what happened. So if I'm trying to push on them with my values, my principles, with democratic principles and structure, it wouldn't work. Obviously, this needs to be someone it needs to be in Arabic. It needs to be someone which is closer to the ties than Israel or the international community. So it cannot be, let's say, an international force that will control it. It cannot be a European force. That's my perspective. It should be an Emirati Organization, any kind of board cooperated with Saudi Arabian. Maybe this would be to make the first round in order to make the basics to start eradicating the localization anti-semitism from the system. But it's a long process.

EPIS:

Thank you so much.

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About the Article

What will happen when UNIFIL leaves Lebanon after years of peacekeeping? UNIFIL has been an important anchor of stability in the region. However, the mission failed to achieve its mission objective: The restoration of international peace and security. The Withdrawal will leave a power vacuum with and an uncertain future for an already fragile region.

About the Author

Paul Behne holds a M.A. in War and Conflict Studies from the University of Potsdam (DE). His research focuses on Middle Eastern security, international relations, and strategic analysis. With experience advising governmental and international organizations, Paul is motivated to bridge the gap between policy planning and field operations.

1. Introduction

The withdrawal of UNIFIL marks the end of a painfully long 'interim mission' and the beginning of an uncertain course that is no longer controllable or predictable. The direction Lebanon will take is up to its government, the numerous states that have always exerted influence on this small country and, finally, the Lebanese people. This is precisely why the announced end of UNIFIL is not a technical mission management procedure, but a political decision. It removes an international presence, observation and communication instrument from an already fragile border area without a robust replacement for the implementation logic of UNSCR 1701 yet in hand. UNIFIL was never designed to enforce peace; however, for decades it has been an anchor of stability in a border conflict without a viable peace process (Behne, 2023).

A Mission under a Charter VII Mandate is entitled to use coercive measures to fulfil its mission objectives– including military force.

2. Background

UNIFIL has been present in Lebanon as a peacekeeping mission since 1978. In response to Operation Litani, during which the Israeli Defence Forces occupied parts of Lebanese territory to counter attacks by Palestinian armed groups, the mission was established by UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 425 and 426 (UN Security Council, 1978a, 1978b). The mission's objectives were to monitor the withdrawal of the IDF, restore international peace and security, and support the effective authority of the Lebanese government in the south of the country. UNIFIL was unable to persuade the IDF to withdraw completely, nor was the mission able to restore the Lebanese government's effective control over South Lebanon. The result was further military clashes, ongoing instability along the Israeli-Lebanese border and, ultimately, the July War of 2006, following which UNIFIL's mandate was significantly expanded (UN Security Council, 2006). The aim of this second phase of the mission was to achieve the mandate objectives formulated in 1978 and in UNSCR 1701 from 2006 under changed political and military conditions. UNSCR 1701 gave UNIFIL a more robust mandate, without however turning it into a Chapter VII mission (UN Security Council, 2006). Since then, UNIFIL has been supporting the Lebanese government in stabilising South Lebanon, but does not replace it. The strategic core of the mandate lies in the gradual implementation of a 'long-term solution', including the establishment of a weapons-free zone south of the Litani River (with the exception of the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL), the containment of arms deliveries, mine clearance and the resolution of outstanding border and sovereignty issues. It is noteworthy that Hezbollah, as a key non-state actor, is not explicitly mentioned in the mandate, which structurally limits the political and operational focus of the mission (UN Security Council, 2006). At the latest with the war between Hamas and Israel following the events of 7 October 2023, the conflict along the Blue Line escalated once again. The relative stability that had previously existed was massively disrupted. Fighting between Hezbollah and Israel increased significantly, while UNIFIL had little room for manoeuvre within its mandate to actively counteract this and had to largely limit itself to observation, documentation and de-escalating communication (UN Secretary-General, 2024).

3. How Effective Is UNIFIL?

The effectiveness of a UN peace operation could be summed up very simply: either it fulfils the objectives of its mandate or it does not. UNIFIL has not succeeded in bringing a permanent end to the fighting in South Lebanon and has therefore not achieved the objectives of its mandate in the narrow sense. However, the reality is much more complex. A UN peace operation is not an intervention that enforces stability by any means necessary. Rather, it should be understood as a catalyst that supports the parties to

the conflict in facilitating a peace process. The scope of action of a mission depends largely on the willingness of the parties to the conflict and, in particular, on the ability and political will of the host nation – in this case Lebanon – to actively support the mission's objectives. If this willingness to pursue peace is lacking, the scope of action by UN missions is usually limited – as is the case with UNIFIL (Behne, 2023). This structural limitation is further exacerbated in the Lebanese context by weak and fragmented statehood. Practical power relations and hybrid constellations of actors shape the security reality more strongly than formal state authority. Against this backdrop, mandate fulfilment is not a binary category. In peacekeeping research, effectiveness is correspondingly controversial; the concept of 'impact' is often more analytically viable than a narrow logic of success/failure (cf. Behne, 2023; Fortna, 2008). While UNIFIL may appear ineffective in terms of formal mandate objectives, positive effects can certainly be observed at the micro and meso levels. Through continuous patrols, monitoring of the Blue Line, the Tripartite Mechanism as the only institutionalised channel of communication between the parties to the conflict, and smaller humanitarian projects in South Lebanon, UNIFIL has been able to contribute to stabilising the conflict dynamics over many years (Behne, 2023). In addition, there are passive effects that are often underestimated: the economic influence of the mission, the sense of security among the local population created by the presence of the blue helmets, and the international attention maintained by the participation of numerous troop-contributing countries. These factors account for a significant part of the actual impact of peace operations (Behne, 2023). UNIFIL thus failed to achieve its mandate objectives, but did manage to establish anchors of stability within its limited scope. These could not prevent the war after the events of 7 October 2023, but they did help to limit the escalation of the ensuing conflict – in particular through presence, observation and de-escalating communication in a politically deadlocked environment (cf. UN Secretary-General, 2024).`

> **"Rather, it should be understood as a catalyst that supports the parties to the conflict in facilitating a peace process."**

4. The Withdrawal: Decision and Context

In Resolution 2790, the UN Security Council announced that this would be the last extension of UNIFIL's mandate. The mandate runs until 31 December 2026, followed by a structured withdrawal planned within one year (UN Security Council, 2025). This decision implies that the implementation or at least the management of UNSCR 1701 is considered sufficiently guaranteed even without UNIFIL – whether by Lebanese actors, alternative international arrangements or deterrence logic along the Blue Line. Given the escalation dynamics since 7 October 2023, this assumption poses a considerable political risk. This decision comes at a critical juncture in Lebanese politics. With Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister and Joseph Aoun as President, a new political leadership took office in early 2025 with the aim of re-establishing a functioning government after years of institutional paralysis. In its first year in office, the government was able to expand its influence in South Lebanon with the support of UNIFIL, which was also linked to a temporary weakening of Hezbollah as a result of the war. However, the window of opportunity is narrow. Parliamentary elections are already scheduled for May 2026 – a decisive moment that will show whether the new government can consolidate its ability to act or whether there will be a return to the political deadlock that characterised previous years (L'Orient Today, 2026). The announcement of UNIFIL's withdrawal comes at this fragile stage. Why the decision to withdraw has been taken at this particular point in time, after more than 45 years of mission, remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that the withdrawal will leave an economic, political and military vacuum. The Lebanese Armed Forces have so far been largely unable to ensure effective control in South Lebanon on a permanent basis. For the international community, the withdrawal also means the loss of key eyes and ears along the Blue Line. The information situation will deteriorate, and

international attention to the conflict is likely to decline – with potentially destabilising consequences.

5. What Now?

The end of UNIFIL does not mean the end of UNSCR 1701. The international community's objectives along the Israeli-Lebanese border remain unchanged, and various follow-up options are being discussed. In addition to an unlikely revival of UNIFIL with a modified mandate, the idea of a UN observer mission with a reduced military profile is also being considered. This would strengthen monitoring and accountability, but at the same time abandon the military buffer function that is central to Israel. Options outside the UN framework are also being discussed. An EU mission could take on individual tasks, such as the monitoring of the territorial waters of Lebanon. France or other states could become more strongly engaged bilaterally, for example through existing capacity-building initiatives such as the German contribution to the development of maritime surveillance capabilities. Essentially, however, no new mission will be established without the consent of the Lebanese government. It remains to be seen whether a viable replacement arrangement will be found by the termination of UNIFIL operations at the end of 2026. Ultimately, it will be crucial to understand UNSCR 1701 not only as a text, but as a practical approach to conflict resolution. This moment marks a crossroad for South Lebanon, the Lebanese state and regional stability as a whole.

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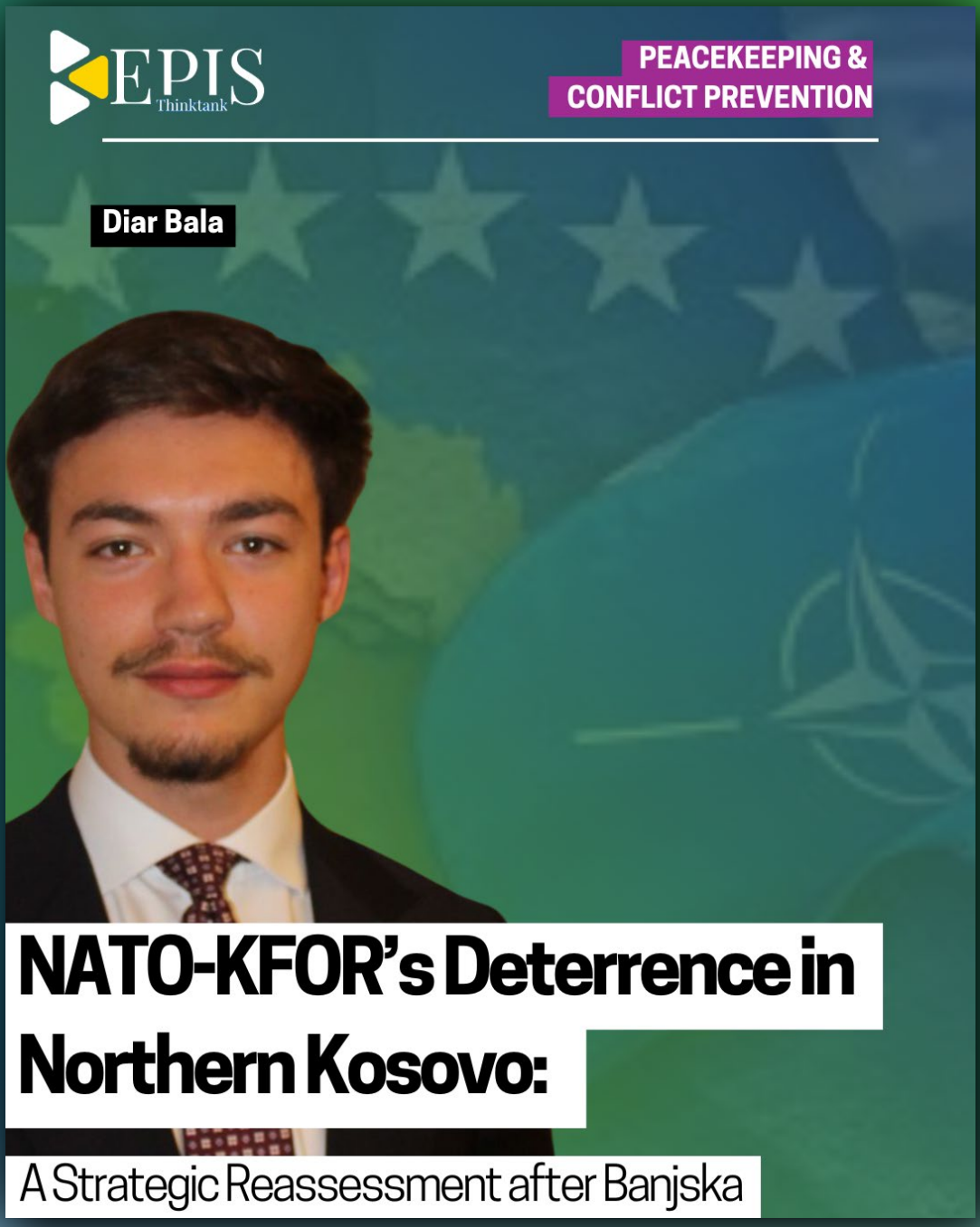

About the Article

Is KFOR well-equipped to address and confront the threats Kosovo faces? Main Argument: KFOR's mandate must either be expanded or reviewed, and a gradual transition to self-sufficiency for Kosovo must be initiated. This would mean improving the KSF's capabilities and ensuring it becomes an interoperable NATO-standard light army. Conclusion: Urgent need for Kosovo's security framework to evolve and become self-sufficient, ideally through modernising and transforming the KSF.

About the Author

Diar Bala is a BSc Political Science and International Relations student at University College London (UCL). Born and raised in London, his parents fled the war from Kosovo in 1998-1999 and settled in the United Kingdom. Diar Bala is an active member of the diaspora in the UK, engaging with the Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo in London as well as working together with MPs at the UK Parliament. His work primarily focuses on geopolitical stability and security, in particular the Western Balkans where he analyses the importance of NATO in maintaining stability.

1. Introduction

This report briefly examines NATO-KFOR's peacekeeping role in Kosovo and its success in helping shape a post-war society and tackling Kosovo's state-building challenges. It also assesses NATO-KFOR as an effective peacekeeping instrument within its limits, while arguing that NATO-KFOR either needs reform to better address the ongoing threats facing Kosovo and its institutions or should begin a transition to the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF). The Kosovo Force (KFOR) is a NATO-led peacekeeping force and the third security responder in Kosovo. KFOR, under the NATO umbrella and authorised by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244, entered Kosovo on June 12, 1999 (KFOR, 2025) at a time when its population was facing a grave humanitarian crisis. NATO-KFOR's objectives in Kosovo are primarily security-focused, aiming to deter and prevent renewed hostilities and to establish a safe and secure environment as well as freedom of movement for all citizens of Kosovo (NATO, 2018). NATO-KFOR is widely regarded as one of the more successful peacekeeping missions to date and has maintained relative stability and peace in Kosovo. As the third security responder in Kosovo, KFOR has maintained the hard-won peace to a relatively strong degree, responding swiftly to security incidents, ensuring freedom of movement for all citizens, and working closely with the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) and the Kosovo Police (KP). However, the NATO-KFOR mission has come under scrutiny since 2022 for not deterring and preventing Serbian aggression towards Kosovo, which has destabilised the wider region and has led to the injury of many KFOR personnel serving in Kosovo (Koha, 2025). Therefore, this report will argue that while KFOR has done well to maintain a relative degree of peace and stability in Kosovo, it requires serious reform to equip itself better to address the threats it faces or to initiate a transition to the KSF, which will be primarily responsible for responding to security events in Kosovo.

2. Contextual Background

Historical accounts suggest that the inhabitants of Kosovo were Albanian when Serbia annexed it in 1912 (Ceku, 2024). Serbian claims over Kosovo date back to the thirteenth century, with the establishment of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Kosovo, the subsequent Battle of Kosovo in 1389, and the defeat of the Serbs against the Ottoman Empire. Between 1912 and 1914, Montenegro expropriated 55,000 hectares of Albanian land and transferred it to 5,000 Montenegrin settlers (Malcolm, 1998, p. 53). Kosovo then became a part of Yugoslavia in 1929. After WW2, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was established with Josip Broz Tito as its head, who ruled until he died in 1980. Kosovo's status was an 'autonomous province' within Serbia until the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution upgraded its status to a de facto constituent Republic, enjoying almost equal rights. In 1986, Slobodan Milosevic, regarded as the architect of the wars of the 1990s, became the President of the Serbian Communist Party. In 1989, Milosevic rose to become the President of the state Presidency of Serbia 1989 and in 1990, the Serbian Government revoked Kosovo's autonomy, which it had received under the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution. In response, the Albanian deputies of the Provincial Assembly, which had been dissolved in 1989 by the Serbian government, met underground and declared the 'Republic of Kosova' a sovereign and independent state on 22 September 1991, where over 99% of voters and 114/123 Albanian deputies voted in favour of independence with a turnout of 87%. The Serbian Government continued to rescind the rights of the Kosovo Albanians and sought to return Kosovo's status to 1912, when it was annexed by Serbia. Resistance began in the 1990s, with Kosovo Albanians converting private homes and facilities into universities and medical institutions. While many were fired from their workplaces and replaced by Serbs, a united society began to form and metastasise until 1997, when this passive resistance was eventually replaced with an armed one. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began

conducting small-scale organised attacks against Serbian military and police assets in Kosovo, declaring its intention to achieve independence from Serbia. Serbia's crackdown was disproportionate, immediate and brutal. From 1998-99, Serbian paramilitary and military forces were responsible for massacres, indiscriminate killings and the displacement of over 800,000 Kosovo Albanians in what was regarded as a systemic ethnic cleansing campaign directly authorised by Milosevic. The conflict ended after a 78-day aerial bombing campaign launched by NATO on 24 March 1999, which saw Serbian forces withdrawing from Kosovo in June 1999 and the subsequent deployment of KFOR on the ground. KFOR was authorised by UNSC Resolution 1244 and initially comprised 50,000 strong. Kosovo was placed under the temporary administration of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) from June 1999 to February 2008. On 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence and was recognised immediately by the US, the UK, and many other Western partners. On 22 July 2010, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued its advisory opinion on Kosovo, declaring that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence was not in breach of international law, reaffirming Kosovo's independence. Today, over 121 countries recognise the Republic of Kosovo's independence.

The Kosovo Force (KFOR) is a NATO-led peacekeeping force and the third security responder in Kosovo. KFOR, under UNSCR 1244, entered Kosovo on June 12, 1999.

2. North Kosovo as a Significant Flashpoint

The North of Kosovo, which comprises four Serb-majority municipalities of Leposavić, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Zvečan, is home to nearly half of Kosovo's Serb minority with a total population of 50,000, where 90% of this are Serb inhabitants and the rest Albanian. These four municipalities, or 'the North', are included as part of Kosovo's internationally recognised borders; they were under Serbian control for pretty much a quarter of a century. The North has operated under a system of dual sovereignty, maintained at an uneasy equilibrium between Serbia and Kosovo, and each municipality has two official websites, one for each system. Residents can get both Kosovo and Serbian personal documents (Crisis Group, 2024). While this system of dual sovereignty maintained the peace to a certain extent for 25 years, Pristina became determined to reassert Kosovo's sovereignty over the four municipalities and close Serbia's foothold in the North. Since 2021, the government, led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti, has dismantled Serbian-run structures in the North. Starting in 2021, a dispute over license plates arose, with Kurti demanding that Serb residents change their plates when entering Kosovo. Serbs protested, barricades were erected, and police were deployed to control protests. Following EU-US mediation, the police withdrew, and a compromise was reached that allowed citizens to cross with stickers on their plates. Kosovo then targeted smuggling routes, resulting in resistance and injuries in July 2022. Currently, Pristina claims no illegal Serb structures remain (Svecla 2025: AP News, 2025). However, after the dismissal of police commander Nenad Djuric for refusing to enforce measures against Serbian plates, Northern Serbs resigned from government roles in November (International Crisis Group, 2023), including all four Serb mayors and 10 Serbian MPs. Following local elections in April 2023, 4 Albanian mayors were elected amid low turnout due to Kosovo Serb boycotts. The QUINT, including France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the U.S, condemned these elections and urged Pristina to reintegrate Kosovo Serbs. On May 29, a mob of Serbian protesters clashed with KFOR, throwing rocks and explosives at the NATO cordon and the Albanian mayors. Protesters demanded the withdrawal of Kosovo Police Special Forces and the resignation of elected Albanian officials. Reportedly, over 90 KFOR soldiers were injured, with 2 Hungarians requiring leg amputations, after Serbian mob attacks (Reuters, 2024). PM Kurti's Kosovo government maintained authority over the North despite EU-US pressure.

3. The Banjska Attack

The most serious escalation in Kosovo-Serbia tensions occurred in September 2023 when a clash between Kosovo's forces and Serb paramilitaries resulted in four deaths, including one Kosovo Police Sergeant and three Serbian gunmen. Approximately 90 heavily armed Serb gunmen and fighters infiltrated northern Kosovo, killing a Kosovo Police Sergeant, with an anti-personnel remote-controlled mine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Diaspora, 2023; Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2025). Kosovo Special Police and Military Units were deployed. At the same time, the Serb militia barricaded themselves inside an Orthodox Monastery in an apparent attempt to frame the Kosovo Police as aggressors against Serb heritage in northern Kosovo, seemingly aiming to depict the Serbs of Kosovo as a persecuted minority (UNMIK Media Observer, 2023). The Kosovo Government released footage showing Milan Radoicic, Vice-President of the Serbian List political party, leading the armed militia in attacks on the Kosovo Police (Radio Free Europe, 2023). An official report released by the Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora describes this in more detail: 'The location of the Monastery and the way the operation was planned and executed leaves no doubt that calculating fatalities in the course of a police operation against the terrorists at a monastery of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosova, were meant to contribute to the pretext for a military intervention to allegedly save endangered Serbian citizens of Kosova and pilgrims from Serbia'



Figure 1: 1: Guesthouse, where the first paramilitary group settled. 2: Drone footage from the same location showing Milan Radoicic, VP of the Srpska Lista Party. 3,4: Thermal drone footage showing several paramilitaries in two marked areas.

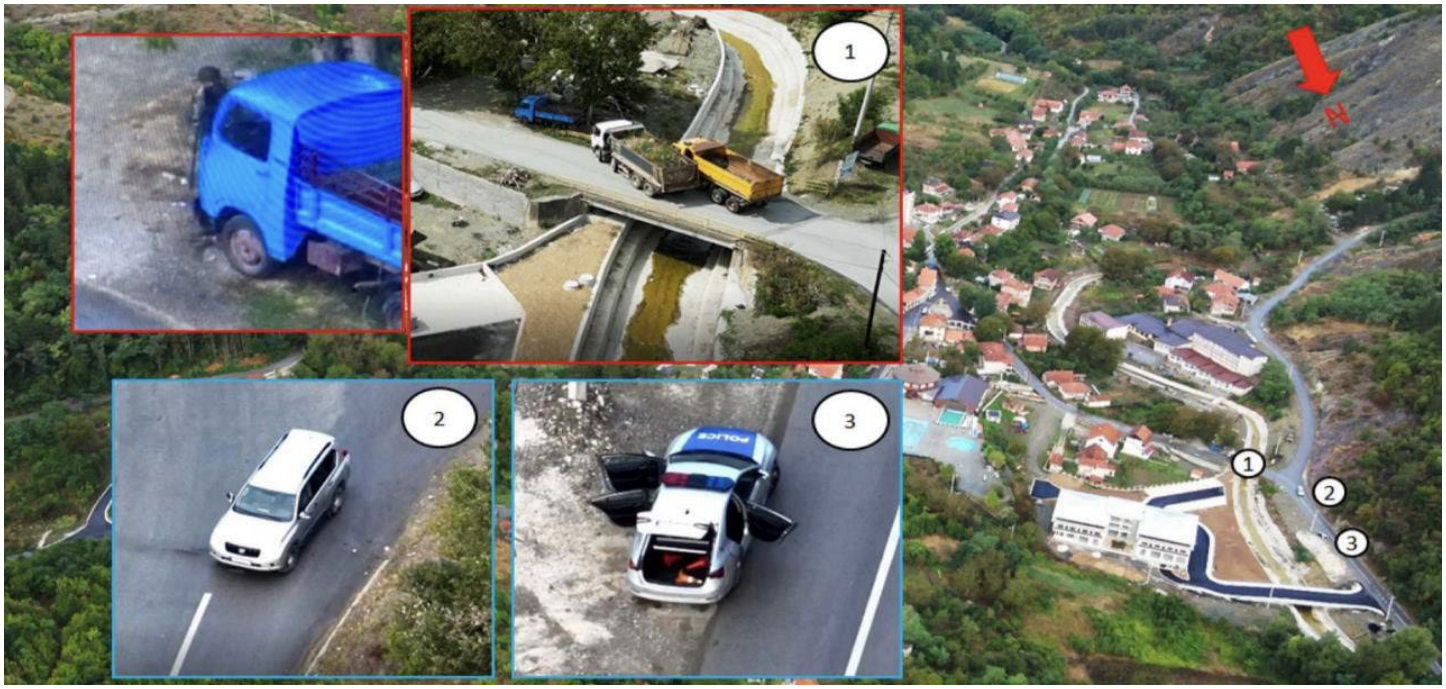

Figure 2: 1: Roadblock set up on the bridge with trucks: Paramilitary hiding with a 'Zolja' grenade launcher. 2,3: Vehicles of the attacked KP teams.

KFOR's failure to serve as an effective tool for both interstate and intrastate deterrence highlights the urgent need to either adapt to the rapidly evolving security situation in Kosovo or initiate a transition process whereby the KSF becomes the primary guarantor of Kosovo's security. As the third security responder in Kosovo, KFOR cannot effectively deter all threats it encounters or those faced by Kosovo. Nevertheless, it can enhance its capabilities and support the Kosovo Police and the KSF in their operations. KFOR's inability to prevent the protests during the May 2023 attacks revealed a critical weakness. KFOR was insufficiently prepared to confront attackers and disperse the protesters directly. While KFOR's role is to prevent inter-ethnic tensions from escalating, it operates within a framework of strategic ambiguity, given the political repercussions that KFOR and Kosovo would face if KFOR were to take decisive action against a particular group. For example, KFOR's apparent reluctance or fear of using force has serious consequences not only for KFOR itself but also for both Serbs and Albanians residing in Kosovo. In May 2023, KFOR responded in a purely defensive manner, counterbalancing rather than acting as a peace enforcer, creating the impression that violence against KFOR personnel could occur without consequences, provided there were no critical injuries or fatalities. KFOR's response to the Serbian mob's aggression should have been more assertive in May 2023, including arrests, an expanded and reinforced cordon and the display of force using anti-protest equipment or other coercive measures. In June 2023, Ristuccia stated that NATO "plans to face any kind of circumstances" but stressed that "there is no military solution and that the only solution is a political decision to de-escalate tensions," reflecting KFOR's strategic ambiguity and political limitations. KFOR's limited reaction to unprecedented violence in Kosovo since 1999 during the May 2023 events exposed its difficulties in acting as a significant deterrent against Serb aggression. This situation could have been avoided if political conditions had permitted the KSF or KP to respond to the Serbian mob. The use of military-grade equipment and the coordinated plan to seize control of the Northern Part of Kosovo across 37 locations in September 2023 signified KFOR's failure to deter the Banjska attack and to act

> **"The responses to the May 2023 assaults on KFOR personnel and the September 2023 Banjska attack seem to operate within a framework of strategic stability rather than a longer-term operational standard"**

decisively in deterrence. In July 2023, Alicia Kearns MP, then Chairwoman of the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee, warned about weapons smuggling from Serbia into Kosovo via ambulances and their concealment in Serbian Orthodox Church buildings in the North, publicly urging KFOR to broaden its mandate and address the issue. KFOR's response was limited; it dismissed the allegations and reiterated that its mission is to maintain peace rather than enforce authority. However, KFOR's primary goal remains deterring renewed conflict and safeguarding overall security in Kosovo, which might have been better served by acknowledging the concerns raised by British Parliamentarians two months before the Banjska attack. The responses to the May 2023 assaults on KFOR personnel and the September 2023 Banjska attack seem to operate within a framework of strategic stability rather than a longer-term operational standard—more focused on containment and restoring the status quo rather than adopting a more effective approach, which would require a stronger mandate or transferring responsibility to the KSF.

4. Policy Recommendations

- 1. A Stronger KFOR Mandate
- 1.1. KFOR's mandate should be reviewed and updated if necessary and if the political context allows.
- 1.2. Enhance KFOR's capacity to conduct effective deterrence; KFOR needs an improved deterrence mechanism through increased joint patrols with the KP and the KSF and more explicit rules of engagement.
- 2. Enhance Operational Readiness
- 2.1. KFOR must conduct scenario-based training operations resembling the May 2023 protests and the September 2023 Banjska attack.
- 2.2. KFOR must continue conducting live-fire exercises to adapt its troops to critical situations.
- 3. Improve Intelligence & Situational Awareness (ISR)
- 3.1. KFOR must continue to monitor hybrid threats and integrate ISR assets, including drones, sensors, and other unmanned systems, to provide commanders with better real-time situational awareness.
- 3.2. KFOR must share these with the KP and the KSF to ensure smooth communication and seamless operations.
- 4. Prepare for a smooth transition of power to the KSF.
- 4.1. KFOR must remain the third security responder and the primary guarantor of peace while the KSF transitions into a full-fledged army.
- 4.2. A political agreement between Kosovo & Serbia, and then subsequently KFOR and the KSF, rescinding the 2013 Agreement, which would allow the KSF to operate in the North of the country without explicit approval from the KFOR Commander.
- 4.3. The KSF's path to NATO must be accelerated, including its membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the development of a Membership Action Plan (MAP).
- 4.4. KFOR must focus on training the KSF to operate military systems & equipment, including Black Hawk helicopters and Javelin anti-tank missiles, to fulfil a territorial defence mandate.

5. Conclusion

Recent security developments in Kosovo, particularly in the northern part of the country, have revealed the limited effectiveness of once-strong, proven deterrence tools such as KFOR. The nature of the threat to Kosovo has broadened to include non-state actors and other forms of hybrid aggression. At the same time, direct physical assaults remain a possibility – as seen in the Banjska at-

tack. This display of hostility highlights the urgent need for Kosovo's security framework to evolve and become self-sufficient, ideally through modernising and transforming the KSF into a professional defensive force capable of responding to security incidents across the country and aligned with NATO standards. Although this may seem idealistic given the current political climate and strained relations between Kosovo and Serbia, reviewing KFOR's mandate could help close the security gap and address some concerns. Alternatively, increased cooperation between KFOR and the KSF could be a feasible measure, provided it is acceptable to Serbia—particularly if the KSF is granted a mandate to protect the Serb minority. KFOR will remain in Kosovo for the foreseeable future, but it must shed political constraints or enable the KSF to develop into a professional force to maintain the hard-won peace and security in Kosovo.

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About the Article

How effective is the EU as an external actor in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict? The EU's normative ambitions and soft power engagement are constrained by political divisions, lack of hard security tools, and competition from Russia, Turkey, and the US. While politically meaningful, EU efforts remain strategically limited; its credibility depends on unity, stronger security engagement, and coordinated partnerships.

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1. Introduction

The South Caucasus has emerged as a significant area for the European Union (EU) regarding European security, connectivity and geopolitical influence. The region, located at the crossroads of Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Central Asia, has been vital for energy transit, trade routes and the overall stability across the EU's eastern flank. Europe's economic resilience and security interests are intertwined with stability in the South Caucasus, which the EU had pointed out in the connectivity strategy, especially in light of alternative transport and energy routes to bypass Russia. (European Commission, 2021) Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has failed Moscow's abilities to act as the main security guarantor in the South Caucasus. Multiple analyses by the International Crisis Group point out that Russia's declining influence has created a geopolitical vacuum, opening room for new external actors for engagement in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, including the EU (International Crisis Group, 2025) However, the EU has sought to position itself as a more assertive geopolitical actor via frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership and the Global Gateway, so as to boost connectivity, economic integration and conflict prevention. This ambition has been indicated in the EU's growing diplomatic involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which had repeatedly escalated into large-scale violence, most notably in 2020 and again in 2023 (De Waal, 2003) This article examines the historical evolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict before analysing the EU's engagement as an external actor, with a particular focus on mediation efforts under the Brussels Track. It analyses why these initiatives have resulted in limited consequences, especially when compared to alternative mediation frameworks dominated by Russia and the United States (US). The analysis uses the conceptual distinction between a "Trilateral Path" (EU-Russia-US involvement) and the "Trump Road"- representing episodic, power-driven US mediation and indicating how competing geopolitical approaches have constrained EU's effectiveness.

Capability-expectations gap:
the difference between what an actor is expected to achieve and what it can realistically deliver in international affairs.

2. History of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict's roots are found in ethnic, territorial and political tensions emerging from the late Soviet period. Nagorno-Karabakh, a dominantly ethnic Armenian enclave located in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, became a point of escalation as Soviet authority weakened in the late 1980s. In 1988, the regional parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to unify with Armenia, causing mass protests, ethnic violence and population displacement. (De Waal, 2003) After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the tensions escalated into the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994). The Armenian forces gained control over Nagorno-Karabakh, creating a de facto Armenian-controlled entity with no international recognition. A ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia in 1994 froze the conflict without any resolving prospects. It established a fragile status quo, by militarization and failed negotiation efforts under the OSCE Minsk Group framework. (Cornell, 2001) This status quo was diminished in 2020, when Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. With Turkish military support and advanced drone warfare, Azerbaijan regained significant territories lost in the 1990s. The Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the conflict after six weeks, introducing a Russian peacekeeping contingent for monitoring the ceasefire and securing the Lachin Corridor – the crucial linking point between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. (International Crisis Group, 2025) However, the post-2020 circumstances turned out to be unstable. Azerbaijan challenged the ceasefire

framework between 2022 and 2023, blocking the Lachin Corridor and restricting humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh. Several international organizations warned that the blockade was creating a humanitarian crisis undermining the Armenian population. (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In September 2023 Azerbaijan launched a military offensive effectively diminishing the remaining Armenian political structures in Nagorno-Karabakh. The authorities announced their dissolution and the Armenian population fled to Armenia. This marked the de facto end of Nagorno-Karabakh of that form and gave victory to Azerbaijan. (Reuters, 2023) These developments have weakened Russia's regional authority. Its inability or unwillingness to prevent renewed tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulted in damaging its credibility as a security guarantor in the South Caucasus. Russia's declining influence with the ongoing war in Ukraine has created a geopolitical vacuum, opening room for new external actors for further engagement in the region, including for the EU. (SCEEUS, 2023)

3. EU Engagement: Peacekeeping, Mediation and Conflict Prevention

The EU's engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has historically been shaped more by its broader neighbourhood policies rather than a conflict-focused strategy. Between 1990s and early 2000s, the EU remained as an insignificant political actor in the region, mainly referring to the OSCE Minsk Group. The Union's early engagement were followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), aiming to promote closer political, economic and regional cooperation without offering any hard security guarantees. (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015) Under these frameworks, both Armenia and Azerbaijan were treated as partners being involved in cooperative formats rather than as parties to an active conflict. While the EU supported confidence-building measures, it lacked the mandate and the political will to act as a core mediator itself. This approach reflected the EU's long-standing preference for soft power instruments



Figure 1: South Caucasus, Source: https://caspian-alpine.org/the-trump-route-in-the-post-conflict-architecture-of-the-south-caucasus/

and its reluctance to challenge Russia's dominant role in the South Caucasus. (Manners, 2002) The limitations of this posture became clear during the Second-Nagorno Karabakh War in 2020, when the EU played no role in neither crisis management nor ceasefire negotiations. The Russian-brokered trilateral agreement was formed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, emphasizing Russia's decisive role. (International Crisis Group, 2025) The EU's absence has exposed a significant gap between its ambitions and operational capacity. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, its role as a mediator declined, creating vacuum space for the EU for further engagement. This was emphasized with the launch of the Brussels Process, led by Charles Michel bringing Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders for EU-facilitated talks. European Council readouts concluded these meetings as confidence-building platforms focusing on connectivity, border delimitation and just peace treaty negotiations than coercive mediation. (European Council, 2023) In institutional terms, the EU's engagement has been supported by the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus, enhancing stability and supporting conflict resolution. Moreover, the EU established the European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023 deployed on the Armenian side of the border. It is tasked to observe, report and contribute to confidence-building, avoiding any military role. (European External Action Service, 2023) Throughout this period, the EU has attempted to balance its neutrality claim with its normative agenda, focusing on democracy, rule of law and regional connectivity under the Global Gateway. These efforts were constantly challenged by Azerbaijan, as it viewed EU engagement, especially EUMA, as politically biased and Armenia criticizing the EU for insufficient security guarantees. Considering this crowded mediation environment, the article conceptualizes the "Trump Road" as a symbol of competing frameworks. Unlike the EU's institutional diplomacy, the US engagement has been characterized by transactionalism, speed and selective involvement. Adding Russia's coercive leverage and Turkey's support for Azerbaijan, they have constrained the EU's ability to act as a credible and dominant external actor in the region.

4. Impact and Challenges of the EU's Engagement

The EU's limited effectiveness in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict indicates incompliance between its normative ambitions and geopolitical constraints. It considers itself to be a peace-building actor focusing on international law and multilateralism, but lacks necessary hard power tools to enforce agreements or deter renewed violence. This discrepancy relates to Christopher Hill's "capability-expectations" gap, remaining highly relevant in the South Caucasus context. Nevertheless, internal divisions between EU member states further undermine the EU's ability to be represented with one voice in external relations in this matter. France has taken a more open pro-Armenian position, while other member states, for example, Hungary, have prioritized economic ties with Azerbaijan. This weakens the EU's credibility as an actor and complicates the formulations of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. (HIIA, 2025) The EU also faces competition from other external actors. Russia continues to have military leverage, whereas Turkey's support for Azerbaijan gives it direct influence over the region. The EU's overreliance on diplomacy and monitoring limits its deterrence capacity. Therefore, the EU's credibility among other regional actors remains unstable. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been criticizing the EU for either political biasness or fragile security guarantees. Although the EU has deployed substantial soft power tools, including humanitarian aid, mediation dialogues and sanctions diplomacy, they have not been effective in the conflict based scenarios. The EUMA assessment clearly indicates that. On the one hand, the mission has been successful in enhancing

> **"The EU's capability-expectations gap shows its soft power and normative ambitions are limited by internal divisions, lack of hard security tools, and rival powers."**

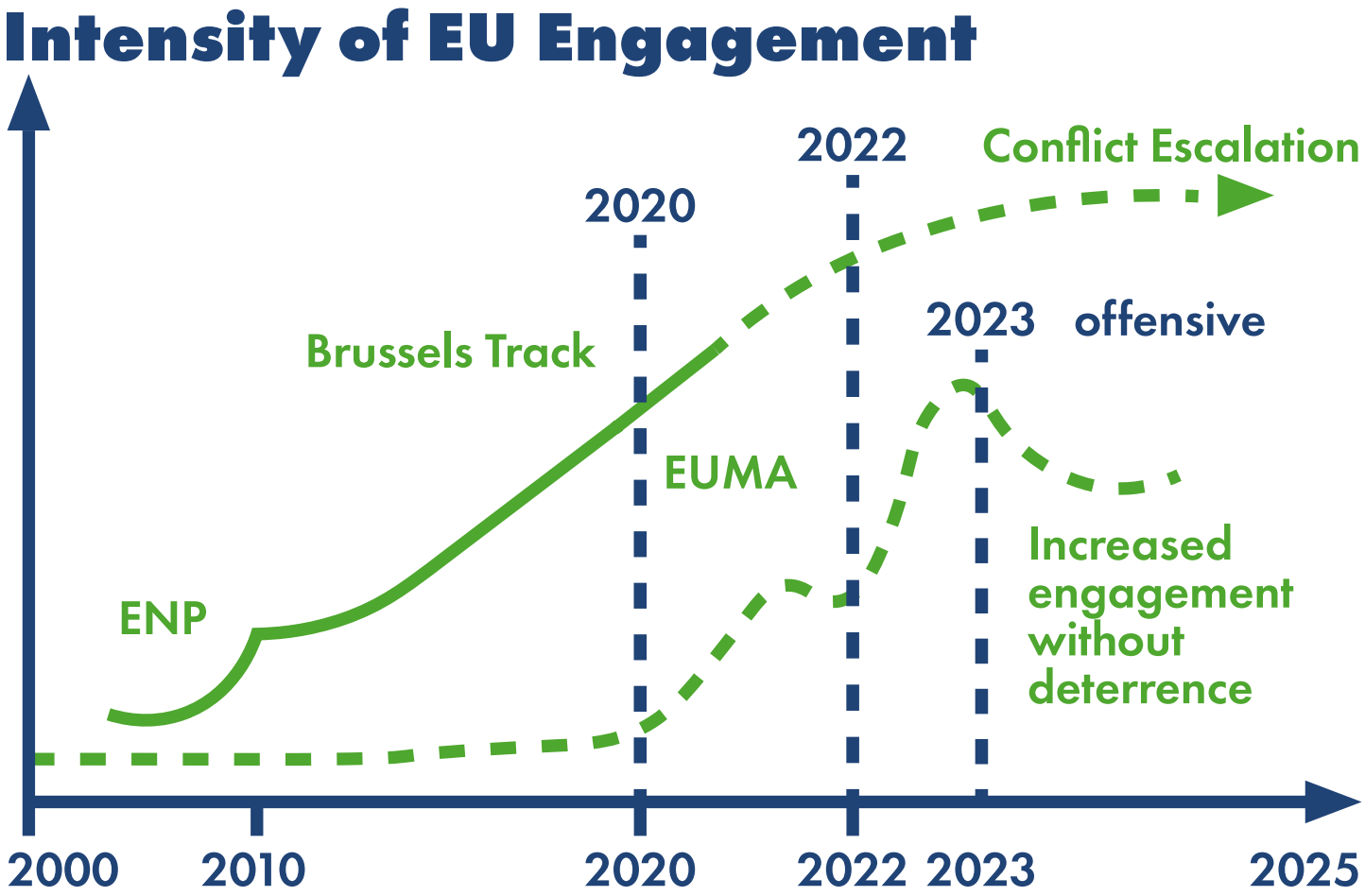

Figure 2: EU Engagement

situational awareness, increasing international attention and symbolizing the EU's long-term commitment to Armenia's security concerns. On the other hand, its civilian nature and lack of enforcement authority have proved it to be ineffective in deterring escalation, especially during the crisis. Therefore, EUMA carries a symbolic weight, emphasizing the EU's struggle to transform its soft power into hard power capabilities. The EU's Joint Communication "The European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region" (JOIN(2025)135) emphasizes that Armenia-Azerbaijan relations are no longer treated as just a neighbourhood conflict, but as part of a Black Sea-South Caucasus-Central Asia connectivity and security system. The document frames the Black Sea as a geostrategic bridge between Europe and Asia, considering strategic transit routes for energy resources and critical raw materials. Russia's war against Ukraine has required the EU to coordinate a more robust response to the security challenges in the Black Sea region. The strategy names Armenia and Azerbaijan among key partner states in the Black Sea region and emphasizes that the EU will pursue peace and stability in the South Caucasus, particularly the normalization of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and the swift signature of a peace treaty. It also ties the region to Global Gateway and a Connectivity Agenda linking Europe to Central Asia through the South Caucasus. The infrastructure corridors and supply-chain resilience are core instruments of EU regional power, however, mostly civilian and economic rather than hard-security guarantees. (European Commission, 2025) This matters because the EU's mediation posture is now competing directly with alternative corridor routes supported by other great powers. Recent Armenia-Germany's announced strategic partnership agenda notes that after a Washington summit hosted by US President Donald Trump, an agreement was reached to create a route connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenian territory, with implementation connected to a new TRIPP Company that would develop rail, road, pipelines and fibre optics. As a result, the connectivity becomes a new form of diplomacy: corridors are presented as peace dividends, but they also have an influence over transit governance and security responsi-

bilities, faster than what the EU can deliver. (OC Media, 2025) At the same time, the EU Black Sea strategy directly links regional resilience to hybrid threats (cyber-attacks, disinformation/FIMI) and proposes security-adjacent tools (e.g., maritime security coordination), while also stressing enlargement dynamics-mentioning that the EU's role is increasing with accession negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova, and that Georgia's EU trajectory remains relevant "should the country revert to the EU path." Moreover, Armenia is indicating more and more aspirations on its path to the EU membership alongside Georgia. Armenia's European path is directly dependent on Georgia's accession process, due to the regional geopolitics. Therefore, EU engagement is expanding in vision of the Black Sea, connectivity and resilience, but its credibility in Armenia-Azerbaijan still hinges on whether it can pair investment-and-dialogue with real security leverage and sustained political unity. (European Commission, 2025)

5. Conclusion

The EU's engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict identifies a broader pattern in EU external action: high normative ambition compounded with limited political delivery. Throughout the post-2020 period, the EU has sought to position itself as a stabilising external actor by way of promoting dialogue, international law, and economic connectivity. This aligns with the EU's self-perception as a normative power, highlighting mediation, institutional architecture and long-term integration over coercive instruments. (Manners, 2002) However, in the South Caucasus such a normative posture was always ineffective facing the hard real-life security challenges. The EU's failure as an external actor stems from using structural weaknesses as a security provider. As demonstrated in Sections 2 and 3, the Union had been diplomatically active through the Brussels Process, the EUMA and the inclusion of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations in the broader Black Sea strategic framework. However, these efforts have neither prevented escalation, nor have changed the goals of local actors. This outcome emphasizes what Christopher Hill conceptualised as the capability-expectations gap: The EU generates expectations of peacebuilding whereas its instruments cannot fully meet them (Hill, 1993). The EU has continuously overrelied on soft power tools – dialogue facilitation, monitoring, economic incentives and legal frameworks – without any hard security guarantees. The EUMA enhances transparency and political plurality but lacks deterrent capacity. In contrast to traditional peacekeeping operations, they neither impose costs on violations nor protect civilians in the moments of crisis. Therefore, EU presence has remained more symbolic, emphasizing that EU engagement is politically meaningful but strategically limited. The TRIPP unites this imbalance in a meaningful way. Whereas the EU pursued a slow approach rooted in multilateralism, other actors promoted more decisive frameworks. Russia relied on military presence, even though its credibility was weakened after 2022. Turkey had a direct influence on the process through its strategic relations with Azerbaijan. The US engaged periodically, but with effective diplomatic tools – especially with the Washington-hosted talks and connectivity initiatives between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Those competing frameworks had a decisive impact on the geopolitical climate in the South Caucasus much faster than the EU diplomacy could respond. Internal EU disunity further weakened the process. Diverging member-state positions, between those prioritizing values-based engagement and those focusing on energetical or strategic partnerships, undermined the overall EU credibility and neutrality. Without one political line, EU diplomacy struggled to have a decisive influence neither on Armenia nor on Azerbaijan, emphasizing its inconsistent character. Especially in a region such as the South Caucasus, perceived unity itself is a form of power, and its absence can cause severe costs. However, the conclusion is not that the EU has been irrelevant. On the contrary, the EU remains uniquely positioned to shape the region's geopolitics, through integration dynamics and connectivity relevance. The EU's Black Sea Strategic Approach highlights peace and stability in the South Caucasus in a wider framework of enlargement and resilience. Armenia's deepening relations with the EU and Georgia's European aspirations give the EU the necessary platform to increase

regional transformation by gradual integration and economic connectivity. (European Commission, 2025) The EU can establish itself as a credible stabilizing actor in the region only if it pursues its diplomatic initiatives with three mutually reinforcing objectives

- First, the EU must strengthen its engagement in the South Caucasus via the security nexus more- through closer cooperation with NATO, more effective tools of CSDP and firmer commitments to deterrence.

- Second, the Union must improve internal unity, emphasizing that member-state positions should be speaking with one voice in the South Caucasus region.

- Third, the EU should continue strategic coordination with the United States and regional partners, cooperating on connectivity projects and mediation tools.

Without these changes, the EU risks remaining a secondary actor in the South Caucasus, overshadowed by other more assertive actors. The EU has a great potential with cooperating those actors to transform its normative power to more assertive power aiming for further regional stability.

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About the Article

Under what political conditions does peace mediation contribute to genuine conflict transformation? The article argues that peace mediation loses its normative core and political effectiveness when it is instrumentalized as coercive, interest-driven diplomacy. Sustainable peace mediation requires clearly drawn normative boundaries that strictly separate facilitative process support from political control.

About the Author

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1. Introduction

The erosion of the concept of "mediation" in international politics is not a merely semantic problem. It reflects a deeper political shift. Where mediation is increasingly practised and justified as power-based deal diplomacy—the pursuit of strategic interests through pressure, threats, or imposed concessions—it loses its normative core. This development became particularly visible in the foreign policy of the Trump administration, which openly framed "peacemaking" as an instrument of transactional advantage. Such an approach does not merely misuse mediation; it fundamentally distorts it. The damage extends beyond individual cases, undermining the political credibility of mediation as an instrument of conflict transformation. When mediation is perceived as a vehicle for asymmetric power projection, it becomes unpredictable and unattractive for conflict parties. Third actors lose their role as trusted process facilitators, and mediation is no longer understood as a protected space for genuine compromise, but as a continuation of conflict by other means. The consequences are structural. Even well-intentioned mediation efforts that follow are likely to encounter suspicion, resistance, or strategic manipulation. The inflationary and politically distorted use of the term thus weakens the prospects of mediation far beyond specific contexts. In its substantive sense, peace mediation refers to the support of conflict parties in negotiating political solutions under their own responsibility, facilitated by a third party. It often begins long before formal negotiations, through discreet contacts, the opening of communication channels, and the careful exploration of possible formats for dialogue. It extends from structuring complex negotiation processes to accompanying sensitive implementation and reform phases following political agreements. Its instruments range from facilitative support and process advice to the provision of technical expertise—always process-oriented, never substitutive. Peace mediation is not a neutral technique. It is a political practice in its own right. Its legitimacy does not derive from power, but from recognition. It rests on the acceptance of its role by the conflict parties, the protection of confidential communication spaces, and the capacity to manage asymmetric interests in ways that preserve political ownership. Where the projection of power is disguised as mediation and serves concealed self-interest, mediation loses its central purpose: enabling a shift from confrontation to cooperative problem-solving. While targeted pressure may occasionally help overcome stalemates, once pressure replaces process, it generates dependency, resistance, and political pseudo-solutions. The fragile and often short-lived outcomes of power-driven peace initiatives over the past decade offer ample evidence of this dynamic.

Peace mediation:
the effort by a third party accepted by all fractions to facilitate the resolution of conflict through voluntary formal or informal negotiations and dialogue.

2. Political Preconditions and Structural Ambivalences

Mediation presupposes political conditions that it cannot create itself. In early phases of peace processes, mediation is often informal. Contacts are explored, channels tested, and red lines cautiously probed. This phase requires discretion, flexibility, and a willingness to move beyond formal positions. Especially in highly polarized or fragmented conflicts, it is here that the possibility of a transition from violence to dialogue is first assessed. At the same time, mediation depends on political recognition of its role. Mandates may originate from conflict parties, international organizations, or hybrid arrangements; their formal source matters less than their political acceptance. Where such recognition is absent or ambiguous, mediation is easily perceived as covert intervention. In such contexts, even methodologically sound mediation may be interpreted as manipulation. Across all

phases of a peace process, mediation can play a supportive role—accompanying transitions, clarifying contested interpretations, or facilitating guarantees by third parties. Its political limit is reached, however, when it begins to replace responsibility rather than enable it. Mediation that anticipates outcomes undermines the very foundation on which it rests. Mediation is inherently selective. It primarily engages actors who hold, or are likely to acquire, decision-making and veto power. This selectivity is politically unavoidable, yet normatively problematic. An overly narrow focus on political or military elites risks eroding legitimacy; an excessive expansion of participation formats may obstruct negotiations or depoliticize them. Balancing effectiveness and inclusion is therefore not a technical challenge, but a political judgement. Mediation becomes particularly problematic when third parties pursue their own economic or geopolitical interests. In such cases, the boundary between mediation and intervention blurs. Trust erodes, and mediation loses its function as a protected space for autonomous compromise-building.

> **"When mediation is perceived as a vehicle for asymmetric power projection, it becomes unpredictable and unattractive for conflict parties."**

3. Trust, Confidentiality, and Power Asymmetries

Confidentiality is not a procedural detail but a political precondition of effective mediation. It enables conflict parties to reconsider positions, test options, and introduce flexibility without immediate domestic or reputational costs. When this protective function is breached—through leaks, media exposure, or strategic instrumentalization—room for manoeuvre contracts, and mediation loses its exploratory character. In contemporary practice, confidentiality is under increasing pressure. Mediation processes operate in a tension between legitimate demands for transparency and the necessity of protected communication. This tension becomes particularly acute when mediators are themselves powerful political actors. Information obtained in confidential settings may then—deliberately or inadvertently—feed into broader strategic positioning. Even the perception of such use can irreversibly damage trust. Trust, therefore, is not a matter of individual integrity alone. It is the product of political and institutional conditions. It requires clear role separation, credible safeguards, and a willingness to forego short-term political gains in favour of long-term process stability. Where these conditions are absent, mediation risks degenerating into symbolic accompaniment of power politics rather than a meaningful political process.

4. Role Clarity Versus Political Control

Peace mediation is conceived as assistance to self-help. Its purpose is to enable communication and decision-making without relieving conflict parties of political responsibility. This constitutes both its distinctive strength and its central institutional challenge. Mediation must allow proximity without capture and exert influence without assuming control. Once third parties begin to dictate substance, impose timelines, or define outcomes, mediation turns into intervention. Apparent success under such conditions rests on external control rather than internal acceptance. Agreements reached in this manner are inherently fragile; they endure only as long as the intervening power remains willing and able to enforce them. The authority of mediators derives from legitimacy, not coercion. When power is used to impose preferred outcomes, mediation loses its normative foundation. International organizations and states face a structural dilemma in this regard: while they possess substantial power resources, they must strictly separate these from their mediating role if mediation is to remain credible. Sustainable peace does not emerge from externally imposed solutions, but from the gradual assumption of political responsibility by the conflict parties themselves.

5. Effectiveness, Illusions, and Political Responsibility

Peace mediation rarely produces spectacular breakthroughs. Its contribution lies in the gradual transformation of political conditions: preparing actors for negotiation, clarifying interests, reducing misperceptions, and opening realistic decision-making spaces. This work is incremental, time-consuming, and politically difficult to communicate—but indispensable. The growing institutionalization of mediation has enhanced professionalism and availability, but it has also fostered problematic expectations. Mediation is increasingly treated as a controllable instrument expected to deliver predictable results. This technocratic illusion misreads the political nature of violent conflict. Where mediation is embedded in rigid timelines or political success narratives, its effectiveness diminishes. Mediation can support political processes, but it cannot substitute for them. Structural drivers of conflict—such as social inequality, territorial arrangements, security governance, or economic power distribution—require political decisions and long-term institutional change. Mediation may open spaces and accompany transitions; it cannot replace politics itself.

6. Conclusion: Drawing Normative Boundaries

Peace mediation is not a panacea. Its effectiveness depends on political conditions beyond its control. Precisely for this reason, clear normative boundaries are essential. Where mediation is employed as a limited, process-oriented, and politically sensitive instrument, it can make a substantive contribution to the transformation of violent conflict. Where it is instrumentalized as a tool of power, symbolic politics, or the avoidance of political responsibility, it not only fails—it undermines the future credibility of mediation as such.

EPIS BASICS:

Blue Helmets, Yellow Tape

In EPIS Basics, our authors explain basic knowledge of international foreign affairs and security policies. This encompasses basic theories, organisations and events This series is presented in depth here in the magazine. You can also find other smaller contributions on our Instagram page

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Blue Helmets, Yellow Tape: UN Armed Peacekeeping Personnel

Across eleven peacekeeping missions, approximately 60,000 UN Blue Helmets are currently deployed. The most recent mission is MINUSCA, where 14,400 military personnel have been protecting civilians and preserving order in the Central African Republic since 2014. As the leading global peacekeeping force, why are there no Blue Helmets in regions like Gaza and Ukraine?

Who are the Blue Helmets?

The Blue Helmets are the military personnel under the authority of the United Nations. Their name is derived from their light blue helmets indicating their status as UN peacekeepers. This distinct color easily distinguishes them from armed personnel of other actors.

The Purpose of "Soldiers Without Enemies"

The core mission of the Blue Helmets is to protect civilians from threats. They monitor border disputes, provide security in conflict and post-conflict zones, and respond to crises as mandated by the UN Security Council. Fundamentally, the peacekeepers must not interfere in the internal affairs of a conflict. As objective facilitators of peace, they aim to help each party control and resolve the conflict rather than act autonomously to impose solutions.

How are Blue Helmets Deployed?

Peacekeeping personnel are allocated and deployed when required by missions mandated by the UN Security Council. Peacekeeping missions are normally enacted with the consent of all parties in a conflict. If the Security Council mandates a mission but does not have the consent of all parties, it may invoke Chapter VII Article 42 of the UN charter to allow deployment without full consent. An example of this was UNMIK, the 1999 peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. The charter prohibits a standing reserve, so personnel are allocated as needed. When a Security Council resolution authorises the deployment of Blue Helmets, individual UN member states voluntarily contribute personnel. The national composition of the Blue Helmets requires the consent of all stakeholders.

The Blue-Grey Area

The UN and its Blue Helmets are not universally regarded as a force of good. Critics have accused peacekeeping missions of neocolonialism and operational misconduct. Some scholars argue that the Blue Helmets reinforce a liberal global order rooted in Western norms and traditions. Consequences include perpetuating racial hierarchies and normalising international intervention. The professional background and nationality of the Blue Helmets has also been cited as contributing to partiality and ideologically driven practices. More concretely, reports of misconduct have documented allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers. Such misconduct is prohibited by the UN, as reflected by a "zero tolerance" policy. Efforts such as mandatory training on misconduct and internal investigations demonstrate the UN's stance, but have not fully resolved the problem. The requirement for consent by all stakeholders alongside these criticisms and scandals have further inhibited more widespread deployment of the Blue Helmets.

Consent and Constraints

UN peacekeeping is far from perfect and significant reforms remain necessary. Though Blue Helmets are unlikely to deploy to conflicts such as Ukraine, they aim to set global standards for international peacekeeping missions by providing security in post-conflict zones.

Further Reading Recommendation

UN Department of Public Information. (1990). The Blue Helmets : a review of United Nations peace-keeping. The United Nations Digital Library. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/105742?v=pdf


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