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Principles of Publication

At a time when U.S. ambitions for a unipolar world order have lost their appeal, a new order is taking shape thanks to the multipolarization of world politics and the acceleration of cooperation between developing countries, rejecting the globalism of imperialist states. Under these conditions, the new agenda of global cooperation should respond to the needs and aspirations of developing countries seeking joint development and solidarity under the guidance of public-driven projects. In particular, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) -put forward in 2013 by Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China- provides a suitable opportunity and a sound foundation for the implementation of this new agenda of global cooperation.

BRI is an epoch-making move to re-implement the concept of the Silk Road, which dates back 2,000 years, to a time when China was immensely contributing to global prosperity and the development of trade and cooperation. The revival of this concept entails a much more comprehensive approach that also incorporates rail and sea transport, and digital systems.

BRI proposes to bring together over 60 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America –together accounting for nearly half of the world's gross domestic product– for prosperity and development at the initiative of China. Unlike the Western-centered world order, BRI seeks peaceful collaboration for improving global trade and production towards common goals for humanity. It firmly rejects crude imperialist exploitation. Two thousand years ago, the Silk Road was a conduit for the flow of gunpowder, spices, silk, compasses and paper to the world. Today, it offers artificial intelligence, quantum computers, new energy and material technologies, and space-age visions to developing countries. In addition, the New Silk Road provides incentives and opportunities for the development and implementation of bio-economic schemes in stakeholder countries against the threat of climate change and other environmental threats that bring the entire ecosystem to the brink of extinction.

Türkiye has a significant role –real and potential– in accelerating South-South cooperation. Türkiye is conveniently located as Asia's farthest outpost to the West. It assumes a critical position as a pivotal country on BRI's North-South and East-West axes. However, China's development and BRI's contribution to the future of humanity have remained to a large extent underrecognized and superficially evaluated in Turkish academia, media, and politics. This is mainly because Türkiye's academics, media professionals, and policy makers have been observing China using Western sources. In the same manner, China and BRI's other potential partners have been viewing Türkiye through a Western lens.

BRIQ has committed itself to developing an in-depth understanding of the present era, with a particular emphasis on the new opportunities and obstacles on the road to the New Asian Century.

BRIQ assumes the task of providing direct exchange of views and information among Chinese and Turkish academics, intellectuals, and policy makers. In the meantime, this journal will serve as a platform to bring together the intellectual accumulation of the whole world, especially developing countries, on the basis of the Belt and Road Initiative, which presents a historic opportunity for the common future of humanity.

BRIQ is also devoted to publishing research and other intellectual contributions that underline the transformative power of public-driven economies, where popular interests are upheld as the basic principle, ahead of individual profit. The fundamental tasks of BRIQ are to demonstrate how BRI can contribute to the implementation of this public-driven model, and to help potential BRI partners -including Türkiye- to realize their real potential.

BRIQ stands for the unity of humanity and a fair world order. It will therefore be a publication for the world's distinguished intellectuals, especially those from Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas: the defenders of a new civilization rising from Asia on the basis of peace, fraternity, cooperation, prosperity, social benefit and common development.



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BRIQ features a broad range of content, from academic articles to book reviews, review essays, interviews, news reports, and feature articles.

The Editorial Board can issue calls for papers for special issues and invite authors to contribute manuscripts; however, it also welcomes unsolicited submissions.

Submissions are invited in English or Turkish. All submissions are to include a short biography (150-word limit) and should be sent as Microsoft Word attachments to briq@briqjournal.com Articles or other content that have been previously published or are under review by other journals will not be considered for publication.

BRIQ follows American Psychological Association (APA style, 7th edition, <https://www.apastyle.org>) and uses American English spelling.

BRIQ applies a double-blind review process for all academic articles.

Academic articles should be between 5000 and 9000 words in length, including abstracts, notes, references, and all other content. Please supply a cover page that includes complete author information, and a fully anonymized manuscript that also contains an abstract (200-word limit) and five keywords.

Book reviews should not exceed 1,000 words; review essays covering two or more works can be up to 3,000 words.

News reports consisting of brief analyses of news developments should not exceed 1,500 words; feature articles combining reporting and analysis can be up to 3,500 words.

Please contact the Editorial Board for interview proposals.

EDITORIAL

A New Era in West Asia

The Erosion of Hegemony and the Rise of Regional Agency

The international landscape that emerged from the US-Israeli attack on Iran has become one of the most important indicators of the profound transformation in the balance of power, not only in West Asia but across the world. The aim of the attack was to prevent Iran from remaining a regional power, re-establish US-Israeli superiority, and bring West Asia back under the security framework defined by Washington. Yet the outcome was the opposite. The direct intervention of the United States demonstrated that its military superiority alone was insufficient to determine regional outcomes. Israel's aggression, rather than uniting the countries of the region along the US-Israeli line, strengthened the tendency of these countries to determine their own security and future themselves.

These developments are manifestations in West Asia of the major shift in the balance of power in the world. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the weakening of its influence in Iraq, the failure of its attempt to partition Syria, and the failure of Israel's plans for regional hegemony are all part of the same process.

At the foundation of this transformation lies a profound change in the world economy. The centers of production and accumulation in the world economy are shifting; the relative superiority of the capitalist centers over the world economy is eroding; and, as a political consequence, the old hierarchical structure of the imperialist system is being shaken. The struggle of the imperialist centers to preserve their superiority in the world economy is deepening their contradictions with the developing world while also sharpening competition among themselves.

One consequence of this is the differentiation within the Atlantic camp in its approach to the developing world. Differences of interest between the United States and Britain, Germany, and France are deepening. Countries occupying lower positions within the Atlantic system are also able to develop positions that differ from Washington's line. While the necessity for the imperialist centers to act jointly against the developing world is becoming increasingly pressing, competition among them is pulling them away from a common position and deepening their contradictions.

The developing world states, despite the competition and differences of interest among them, are increasingly coming together under these conditions in the areas of common development, security, and cooperation, despite having different political systems and on the basis of sovereign equality.

These conditions are enabling the countries of West Asia to develop more independent choices regarding their own security and regional relations. Saudi Arabia's development of strategic relations with China while maintaining its relations with the United States, and its preservation of normalization with Iran; Turkey's development of security cooperation with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, while at the same time deepening its relations with China and Russia, demonstrate the efforts of the countries of the region to free themselves from the imperialist centers. What is at issue here is not the replacement of one external power by another, but the ability of states with different systems to establish areas of common interest concerning their own security and development on the basis of sovereign equality.

A new order has not yet been fully established in West Asia. The military and economic power of the United States remains significant, and differences of interest among the countries of the region persist. Yet the old order no longer functions as it once did. The shift in the balance of power in the world is creating the objective conditions for nation-states to strengthen their independence against imperialist hegemonism. The countries of West Asia are also demonstrating greater agency in determining their own security and future. The Mecca Agreement, signed on August 7, 2026, is a concrete expression of this agency.

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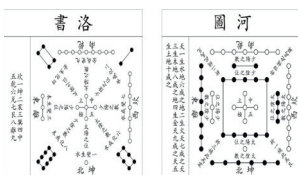
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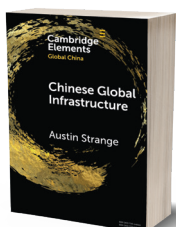
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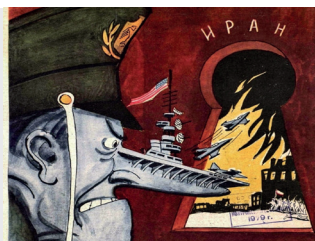
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Saudi Arabia's Complex Cultural Hedging Between the U.S. and China



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ABSTRACT

This research examines Saudi Arabia's strategic use of cultural instruments as a sophisticated form of hedging amid intensifying U.S.-China great-power rivalry and the Kingdom's Vision 2030 diversification agenda. Drawing on hedging theory, the study conceptualizes "complex cultural hedging" as a deliberate, state-orchestrated strategy that simultaneously cultivates and balances American and Chinese soft power influences without aligning with either. Four core objectives drive Saudi cultural hedging: responding to China's rise and the rise of multipolarity; forging long-term cultural and strategic ties with Beijing; reducing the historical dominance of U.S. cultural influence; and preserving Saudi national identity and Islamic values through selective adaptation. The analysis operationalizes this strategy across six dimensions: language and education; cultural institutions and food diplomacy; media visibility; air connectivity and mobility; scientific and cultural cooperation; and emerging digital sectors, including gaming, e-sports, animation, and sports diplomacy. Empirical findings from 2020–2026 reveal five key characteristics of the hedging strategy: multi-dimensional, complementary, dual, dynamic, and asymmetric. Riyadh sustains deep, elite-level ties with the United States while accelerating volume and mass exposure with China, thereby maximizing autonomy and projecting a distinctive, soft, middle-power culture rooted in moderated Islamic values. The study concludes that cultural hedging represents a low-risk, but high-legitimacy, extension of traditional hedging, transforming great-power cultural competition into a strategic asset for middle powers navigating multipolarity.

Keywords: China, complex cultural hedging, hedging strategy, Saudi Arabia, US.

Introduction

SAUDI ARABIA'S PLEDGE TO ACHIEVE Vision 2030 signaled its commitment to adapting to the changing dynamics of the international system. This grand project was unveiled in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and was envisioned after Saudi leaders realized that the Kingdom's overdependence on the oil and hydrocarbon markets had become a major liability (Vision 2030, 2021). Among the vision's key themes were instituting a thriving economy, establishing a vibrant society, and forming an ambitious nation (Vision 2030, 2021). The Kingdom envisioned a

revitalized form of governance that would enable all stakeholders to succeed, especially through supportive business environments, investments in education, and a prosperous future.

Although traditionally aligned with the United States, KSA's changing cultural dynamics reflect a hedging strategy between China and the United States. This strategy stems from a need to respond to China's growing influence as a global power. Other objectives include building long-term cultural and strategic investments with Beijing through initiatives such as the 2025 China-Saudi Year of Culture, the expansion of Mandarin education, and joint heritage projects (Aldhobaib, 2025).

Hedging also gradually reduces the historical dominance of American cultural influence in education, media, and entertainment while mitigating the risks posed by variable U.S. commitments. Finally, the undertaking preserves Saudi Arabia's national identity and core Islamic values through selective adaptation under Vision 2030, ensuring that foreign inflows align with Arab-Islamic norms. KSA's dual-track cultural engagement is a sophisticated form of hedging executed through soft power instruments (Algamendi, 2025; Vision 2030, 2021). Its influence is paramount, as it has helped Riyadh reduce its exposure if commitments by one great power abruptly shift. These endeavors pinpoint KSA's strategic autonomy and its cultural positioning as a low-risk, high-return domain for geopolitical diversification.

Among the GCC countries, KSA is increasingly becoming prominent as a middle power. This phenomenon has sparked interest among IR scholars, with some shifting their study and application of hedging theory from East Asia and ASEAN countries to Saudi Arabia (Thomas, 2025; Yao, 2025). China's rising foothold in the Middle East and the U.S.' declining influence in the region have largely contributed to this inquiry. In their investigations, political scientists largely focus on the Kingdom's diversification of its oil market, participation in China-led initiatives, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, and continued reliance on the United States as the primary security guarantor (Thomas, 2025). The study of how Riyadh simultaneously engages with and balances between the two countries to maximize autonomy and minimize risk, however, reveals a significant gap in its exploration of the cultural dimensions of hedging behavior.

There are few comprehensive studies evaluating how KSA is leveraging soft power instru-

ments, such as educational exchanges, language programs, joint cultural years, heritage diplomacy, tourism promotion, and global entertainment events, to cultivate alternative reservoirs of influence and goodwill with both the United States and China. Consequently, the strategic logic, operational mechanisms, and comparative intensity of Saudi cultural engagement with Washington and Beijing remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing and analyzing complex cultural hedging as a distinct and increasingly central component of Saudi Arabia's overall hedging strategy in relation to the United States and China.

This study argues that Saudi Arabia engages in complex cultural hedging by integrating elements of both American and Chinese soft power to strengthen its national identity and global cultural ties. This balancing act allows Saudi Arabia to maintain strategic autonomy while embracing global cultural currents.

Literature Review

Hedging Theory and Middle Powers

In recent years, geopolitical researchers and IR scholars have shown increased interest in applying hedging theory. Middle power hedging is a useful analytical lens for examining how middle powers (e.g., Saudi Arabia) can position themselves between two great powers without being either an explicit balancer or a bandwagoner. According to Kuik (2021), hedging falls somewhere in between the traditional strategies of balancing (building military or alliance capabilities to counter a perceived threat) and bandwagoning (aligning oneself with the preponderant state to gain advantages). Scholars, such as Kuik and González-Pujol,

agree that hedging combines a series of policies, including economic and political gains, that are generally mixed in their objectives, while attempting to minimize risk in an internationally uncertain environment. Hedger states will diversify their relationships with different countries; seek to develop mutually beneficial economic and diplomatic relations with each rival; and prepare contingency plans in case one country's actions become unpredictable (González-Pujol, 2024). By doing so, hedgers maintain their independence, protect against becoming involved in a conflict between the two superpowers, and benefit from the two superpowers' competitive efforts at the same time.

In the context of the shifting U.S.-China rivalry, hedging is particularly relevant for those seeking to navigate the transition in the global order.

The existing literature on hedging has primarily focused on Southeast Asia, with major scholars examining the behavior of states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Wong, 2025; Yao, 2025). In these spheres, the focus has been on how these states respond to China's growing economic and military influence as US dominance in the region diminishes. However, most of these middle powers still rely on their security guarantees (Yao, 2025). This region has, for years, been affected by major factors in IR, including colonization by European powers, civil wars, regional and boundary disputes, and limited material capabilities, which have made non-alignment a critical need. While this literature is effective and critical to understanding hedging, some scholars have raised questions about the general applicability of its findings in other regions. Stakeholders



Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda for economic and social transformation is reshaping the country's traditionally US-aligned orientation, while providing the basis for its hedging strategy between China and the United States (Photo: Soul of Saudi, 2025).

argue that most studies have been conducted in a single region. Given the differences in definition and conceptualization, scholarship must be diversified to other regions where the influence of both China and the U.S. is felt (Telci & Rakipoğlu, 2021). Considering that the aforementioned factors have historically sidelined the ASEAN region and that most of them are not resource-rich, their approach to hedging is primarily rooted in economic and security interests, leaving other important areas of hedging unexplored. Expanding the studies to the Gulf could address these gaps and provide a more important context for the behaviors of middle powers. These countries are resource-rich, and their alignments with China and the U.S. take different approaches that warrant deeper analysis and exploration. Saudi Arabia is the most prominent example of hedging strategies in the Gulf region. The Kingdom executes a sophisticated version of hedging that goes far beyond just remaining neutral.

The Kingdom is developing a deep dependence on the United States for national security (through arms agreements and joint defense arrangements), while establishing new economic and cultural ties with China (Qin & Razali, 2025).

Saudi Arabia's complex hedging is characterized by five interconnected dimensions that distinguish it from more general forms of hedging. First, Saudi Arabia's hedging practice is multi-do-

main. The Kingdom engages in hedging simultaneously across all four of the primary policy areas of national security, economics, diplomacy, and culture, instead of using hedging in only one domain (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). By taking a multi-domain approach, the KSA can ensure that any positive outcome in one policy area offsets any vulnerability in another. Second, Saudi Arabia's hedging is complementary. The Kingdom is developing a deep dependence on the United States for national security (through arms agreements and joint defense arrangements), while establishing new economic and cultural ties with China (Qin & Razali, 2025). This relationship creates a situation in which the Kingdom receives "added value" from the two superpowers rather than making a zero-sum choice between them.

Third, the strategy is dual. The nation sustains a longstanding quasi-alliance with Washington rooted in historic oil-for-security arrangements, while cultivating a comprehensive strategic partnership with Beijing that has gained prominence since the early 2020s (Thomas, 2025). Fourth, Saudi hedging is dynamic, reflecting an evolving trajectory. Historically weighted toward reliance on the United States as the primary external guarantor, the Kingdom has progressively elevated China's importance in response to perceived shifts in U.S. regional commitment and Beijing's growing global influence (Qin & Razali, 2025). This temporal dimension underscores adaptability to changing power distributions.

Finally, the strategy is asymmetric rather than equidistant. Riyadh calibrates engagement pragmatically according to specific needs: prioritizing depth, quality, and elite-level ties with the United States, while favoring breadth, volume, and mass-scale interactions with China. This deliberate tilt optimizes returns and risk management without

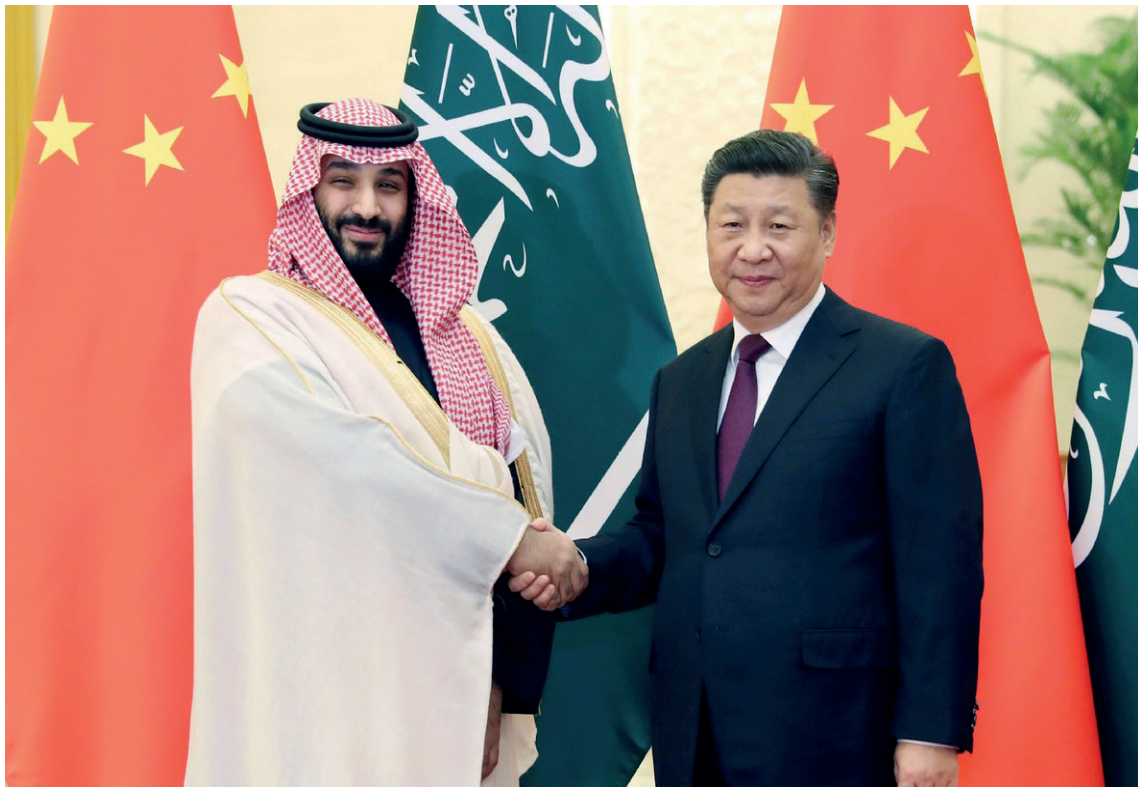
pursuing perfect balance. Together, these five dimensions inform KSA's complex hedging. They enable the Kingdom to turn great-power competition into a strategic opportunity, boosting autonomy and influence in a multipolar era. By extending hedging principles across multiple domains and over time, Saudi Arabia positions itself not as a passive bystander but as an active shaper of its international environment.

While scholars have explored, though not exhaustively, the dimensions of KSA's behavior in its interactions with the U.S., these interactions have essentially focused on security and economic needs. Other domains, like cultural hedging, remain underexplored. This leaves an analytical gap

regarding how the Kingdom manages competing soft-power influences and whether this is a deliberate dimension of its broader hedging strategy.

Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Constructivist Identity

Countries and States should have an established strategy to maintain their security and ensure their survival in an often chaotic international order. This survival is, at most times, guaranteed through a State's perceived power. Among social scientists, power is defined as the probability that an actor (within a social relationship) can carry out their will despite resistance (Raimzhanova, 2015).



President Xi Jinping meets with Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, capital of China, Feb 22, 2019 (Photo: Xinhua, 2019).

In such a situation, the qualities, resources, and capabilities of the said actor are stronger than those of the other actors. Through power, actors can secure binding obligations within the system they operate in, and these obligations are legitimized when the actors involved share the same goal or the weaker power presumes negative sanctions from the powerful actor. In international politics, the power struggle is always the immediate aim, and power politics are the core of how States perceive the world around them. IR scholars often describe power as hard, often demonstrated through military power, territorial acquisition, imperialism, and domination (Gallarotti, 2022). Power can also be soft, referring to nonmilitary forms such as culture, ideology, and institutions, which have attracted increased interest as the international framework changes (Raimzhanova, 2015). Soft power manifests as a State's ability to persuade other States to do what it wants without conflict or the need for military force (Wagner, 2014).

Culture and cultural influence fall in the category of soft power as conceptualized by Joseph Nye in 1990 (Dutta, 2025; Raimzhanova, 2015). The Middle States have, in recent times, turned to culture to persuade or attract other powers. In these lenses, such countries assert their influence in world affairs by serving as positive role models or by earning the admiration and trust of other nations. The success of soft power lies in the legitimacy of a nation's actions or programs. There are several mechanisms States can use to leverage culture as soft power. To start, public diplomacy and communication are major mechanisms through which governments engage in strategic communication via media, educational exchanges, and digital platforms to influence foreign publics (Çiçek, 2022).

Through this strategy, such governments can enhance their image and engage in international dialogue.

Soft power also entails cultural influence, in which nations spread their values and identity through films, songs, and international brands (Alyakhri & Al-Btoos, 2025). Humanitarian efforts, including aid and disaster relief, demonstrate soft power by building goodwill and strengthening diplomatic ties. States may leverage their scientific and educational successes to influence other countries through knowledge sharing and the creation of personal and professional networks.

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tional institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), are also important tools for a country to enhance its international standing and diplomatic leverage (Cimino-Isaacs & Fefer, 2021; Columbia SIPA, 2024). Besides projecting soft power, these mechanisms illustrate the most essential requirement for that prediction. Whether a country uses its culture, media, academia, or international norms, each mechanism must demonstrate legitimacy that attracts other actors in the international system and persuades them to emulate its influence.

One of the most critical tools of soft power is cultural diplomacy. It is defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and oth-

er aspects of culture among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding” (U.S. Department of State, 2005). It involves deliberate efforts by governments to promote national culture abroad through exchanges, exhibitions, educational programs, and global events, thereby building long-term relationships and enhancing national branding (Algamendi, 2025). Cultural diplomacy fosters people-to-people ties, counters negative stereotypes, and creates mutual understanding, often proving more sustainable and less provocative than economic or military tools (Alyakhri & Al-Btoos, 2025). It can amplify a nation's attractiveness by showcasing its heritage, arts, and contemporary creativity, while facilitating economic gains such as tourism and investment.



Cultural diplomacy is one of the most important instruments of soft power
(Image: Created by BRIQ, 2026).

The constructivist approach to international relations, as proposed by Alexander Wendt, offers valuable insights into how States craft and project their identities in the global arena. According to Wendt, identity is not simply a reflection of a State's material interests, but is actively constructed through interactions with other States (Mengshu, 2020). This process involves the use of soft power and cultural diplomacy, in which States leverage cultural and ideological tools to define themselves and shape others' perceptions. Soft power theory, cultural diplomacy, and identity formation are important for understanding cultural influences, but the current literature has failed to integrate them into hedging frameworks. Specifically, soft power projection has been explored unidirectionally, with one state projecting influence on others, while omitting the bidirectional balancing acts in the face of competing external influences.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy in the Literature

In studying Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the formation of identity, existing scholarship has adopted a broad, multidisciplinary approach. The literature shows that KSA continues to do all that is necessary to shape its identity as a modern global player while maintaining deep Islamic values, which can be trusted to take the mantle as the leader of the Islamic world (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). While this identity is important with the Kingdom being the seat of the two holiest muslim sites, its leaders continuously strive to chase modernization and a seat at the global stage actively. Scholarship reveals intentional strategies towards this, particularly public and cultural diplomacy. To communicate to the outside world, KSA continues to leverage state-run

media institutions such as Al Arabiya. The kingdom also engages in global cultural initiatives to communicate its identity. (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025) Saudi Arabia has also invested heavily in educational and cultural programs aimed at advancing its vision of modernization and development, such as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which sends thousands of students abroad to study (Hilal & Denman, 2013). These efforts are strategically designed to foster a positive image of Saudi Arabia in both the Western and Eastern worlds, positioning the kingdom as a global cultural hub, with strong ties to both the U.S. and China.

Over the last few decades, China's rise and continued global influence have prompted scholars to examine its impact on national identities. Saudi Arabia's scholars highlight the alignment of KSA's Vision 2030 with China's Belt and Road initiative and how this has impacted KSA's identity, soft power, and diplomacy (Vision 2030, 2021).

Given the bidirectional nature of soft power, scholarship has situated KSA's identity within the influence of both the U.S. and China. The U.S. has been the dominant power in the Gulf region for decades, and KSA, as a major ally, has been influenced by American soft power. Through institutions such as universities, media networks, and cultural exchanges, the U.S. has exerted consid-

erable influence on Saudi Arabia's cultural landscape (Algofaili & Rashed, 2023). Programs such as the Fulbright Scholarship and the presence of American universities in the kingdom have fostered closer cultural ties between the two nations (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Moreover, Hollywood's influence on Saudi cinema and the recent lifting of the ban on foreign cinematic content reflect the ongoing cultural exchange between the two. However, the literature shows that Saudi Arabia has been careful in managing its relations with the U.S. and has been actively strategizing to balance this influence with its values and identity.

Studies on Saudi-U.S. relations indicate that cultural cooperation, especially in education and entertainment, plays a key role in enhancing diplomatic ties, while also reflecting the king-

dom's cautious approach in aligning too closely with Western values. Over the last few decades, China's rise and continued global influence have prompted scholars to examine its impact on national identities. Saudi Arabia's scholars highlight the alignment of KSA's Vision 2030 with China's Belt and Road initiative and how this has impacted KSA's identity, soft power, and diplomacy (Vision 2030, 2021). Scholarship highlights a recognizable and growing framework for cultural diplomacy, with China establishing Confucius Institutes in Saudi Arabia and promoting joint academic partnerships (Liang, 2021). Saudi students are increasingly seeking education in China, particularly in fields such as engineering, technology, and Chinese language studies, further strengthening bilateral cultural ties.



Academic cooperation between Saudi and American universities constitutes an important dimension of the cultural ties between the two countries. Saudi Minister of Education Yousef bin Abdullah Al-Benyan and U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Michael Ratney at the opening of the Saudi-US Higher Education Partnerships Forum, Riyadh, November 20, 2024 (Photo: Saudi Ministry of Education, 2024).

Saudi Arabia is also involved in Chinese cultural events, such as the Chinese New Year celebrations, and has supported Chinese cinema in the kingdom. The collaborative film productions, such as the Saudi-Chinese co-production, are a key example of cultural diplomacy aimed at fostering mutual understanding between the two nations. As China continues to expand its influence in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's cultural ties with it are likely to deepen, further complicating its balancing act between the U.S. and China.

Despite the growing body of research on Saudi Arabia's soft power and cultural diplomacy, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly concerning the comparative data on U.S. and Chinese cultural influence in Saudi Arabia. The literature continues to focus on economic and military hedging and has failed to establish cultural and public diplomacy within this context. The literature also identifies the individual influences of China and the U.S., analyzing them independently rather than through the lens of a deliberate balancing logic that structures these relationships. There is a need for scholars to conceptualize cultural hedging in the context of KSA's construction of its national identity and strategic management of competing external influences. Further research is needed to explore how cultural exchanges, media, and educational initiatives serve as instruments of Saudi Arabia's broader geopolitical strategy, allowing the kingdom to maintain a neutral stance in a highly polarized global order.

Conceptualizing Cultural Hedging

Cultural hedging is the major focus of this research. It is therefore important that the study formally define its analytical boundaries and

clarify how it will advance existing theoretical approaches in IR. This analysis conceptualizes cultural hedging as a deliberate strategy by a middle power to simultaneously cultivate, balance, and instrumentalize the soft-power influence of two competing superpowers across several cultural domains. This strategy entails avoiding full alignment with either of these powers, positioning the executing middle power to maximize its strategic autonomy, navigate ideological risks, and project independent cultural identities rooted in its national values.

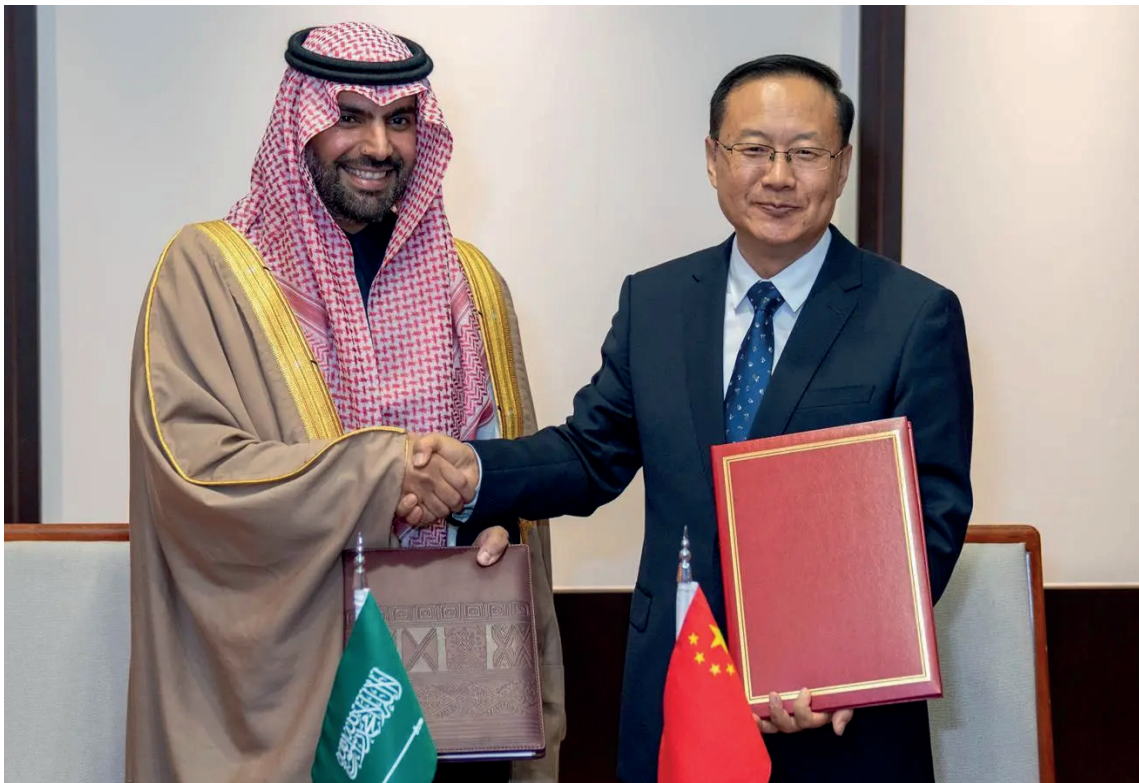
Cultural hedging is a new concept in the analysis of international relations, as it differs from the other types of hedging explored in literature. Major IR scholars, such as Kuik Cheng-Chwee, approach hedging through the lenses of security or economic dimensions. By bringing cultural hedging into the fold, one can extend their analysis of state behavior into unexplored dimensions, including language programs, media framing, educational exchanges, mobility flows, and cultural institutions.

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approach hedging through the lenses of security or economic dimensions. By bringing cultural hedging into the fold, one can extend their analysis of state behavior into unexplored dimensions, including language programs, media framing, educational exchanges, mobility flows, and cultural institutions. Complex cultural hedging also steers the study of state behavior away from the concept of omni-enneshment. Goh, among other authors, has introduced this concept, especially in the study of Southeast Asian countries' behavior toward the United States and China. This approach entails these states trying to entangle these powers in complex webs of inter-

dependent economic and diplomatic relations to influence or forestall aggressive intentions (Goh, 2005). Complex cultural hedging takes a different approach, deviating from constraint and focusing on strategic value extraction from both competing powers.

This analysis deliberately introduces the “complex” dimension of hedging, as the intended behavior cuts across multiple domains, including language, media, science, mobility, and food culture. The strategy is also intentionally asymmetrical, as middle powers such as KSA deliberately calibrate their hedge to extract different types of value from the major powers.



Saudi Arabia and China are developing cultural exchange as a strategic dimension of their bilateral relations. Saudi Minister of Culture Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan Al Saud and Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism Sun Yeli at the signing ceremony of the executive program for the Saudi-China Cultural Year 2025, Beijing, October 17, 2024 (Photo: Saudi Press Agency [SPA], 2024).

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

The study employs a mixed-methods explanatory design that systematically combines quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative components establish the measurable scale, growth rates, and comparative intensity of Saudi cultural engagement with the United States and China. In contrast, qualitative components reveal the strategic intent, official framing, and deliberate balancing that characterize complex cultural hedging. The integration of both methods provides a more complete picture than either could achieve alone.

The analysis is structured around the original concept of Complex Cultural Hedging, defined as Saudi Arabia's state-orchestrated strategy to simultaneously cultivate and balance cultural influences from two competing great powers without fully aligning with either. This framework operationalizes hedging across five concrete dimensions: (1) language and education, (2) cultural institutions and food diplomacy, (3) media and cultural visibility, (4) aviation connectivity and mobility, and (5) cultural and scientific cooperation. These dimensions are directly tied to Vision 2030's cultural openness pillar and serve as observable indicators of geopolitical maneuver.

Quantitative data is collected from official and international institutional sources covering 2020–2025: Saudi Ministries of Education and Culture (for language programs, Confucius Institutes), airline schedules (passenger flows), Scopus/Web of Science (co-authored publications), UNESCO and bilateral announcements (cultural and scientific agreements), and Google Maps/TripAdvisor listings (restaurant and fast-food chain expansion). Qualitative data comprise official documents (Vision 2030 reports, Ministry of Culture statements,

bilateral cultural-year agreements) and media content from state-aligned outlets (Al-Arabiya, Saudi Press Agency), as well as CGTN Arabic, VOA Arabic, and related coverage.

Quantitative analysis uses descriptive statistics, year-on-year growth rates, and comparative visualizations (tables, bar charts, line graphs) to highlight asymmetries and trends across the five dimensions. Qualitative analysis applies manual thematic coding to official statements and media texts, identifying recurring themes such as strategic ambiguity, selective adaptation, and narrative parallelism. Findings from both streams are triangulated in side-by-side tables and narrative synthesis to demonstrate how measurable cultural expansion serves deliberate hedging objectives.

Analysis and Findings

China's influence on KSA's language and education is evident in the number of educational institutions teaching Mandarin programs or curricula. Confucius Institutes are hallmark tools China uses to promote the Chinese language and culture. The first institute was inaugurated in July 2023 at Prince Sultan University, while a second operational one is at the University of Jeddah (Chaziza, 2023; Xinhua, 2023). Saudi schools also integrate Mandarin programs with the government's 2025 education plans, stating that over 102,000 students would learn Mandarin by 2029, with 56,000 learning it in 2025 as part of its win-win strategy to promote cultural exchange and enhance communication with China (Aboutine, 2024; Xinhua, 2025b). As of the second quarter of 2025, the total number of students studying Chinese in Saudi public education schools had reached about 56,000. This number is possible through the integration of Mandarin



Chinese language education constitute a growing dimension of linguistic and cultural exchange between Saudi Arabia and China. A Chinese language class for Saudi students at the Wisdom House Chinese Education Institute in Jeddah, October 20, 2024 (Photo: Su Yunhua/Nanfang+, 2024).

programs into Saudi Universities such as King Khalid University (2024), King Saud University (for language, history, and culture), and Jeddah University.

The influence of the U.S. on Saudi language and culture is evident through the Fulbright program. As the flagship educational exchange program between the countries, sponsored by the U.S., enables Saudi Academics and professionals to access U.S. universities, while U.S. experts are sent to engage with universities and cultural institutions (U.S. Mission Saudi Arabia, 2022). As of 2025 November, the number of Saudi students in the U.S. was approximately 15,000. English-language institutions in Saudi Arabia are also heavily influenced by America, with notable schools including The American International School of Jeddah (AISJ), The American School Dhahran (ASD), and the American International School

Riyadh, which enhance academic partnerships and promote Western values (Thomas Keith Independent School, 2025).

Curriculum reforms also point to a change in the English Foreign Language approach, with a mandatory communicative curriculum adopted nationwide since 2019. With digital/critical-thinking additions in 2023–2025 and in higher education, Saudi Universities were instructed to adopt the approach of the now-renowned English department, which delivers academic graduate and postgraduate programs and teaches English courses to students at the institutional level. 2019 also saw changes in the curriculum, with boys' secondary schools in Riyadh and Jeddah. Dammam was introduced to the Chinese as a third language, and this has been reflected ever since, especially with Vision 2030's growing demand for bilingual education.

Table 1: Indicators of Linguistic and Academic Engagement in Saudi Arabia: U.S. vs. China

Aspect	China's Influence	United States' Influence
Main Soft-Power Tool	Confucius Institutes	Fulbright Program
Key Institutions in KSA	Prince Sultan Univ. (2023), Univ. of Jeddah	AISJ, ASD, American Int'l School Riyadh
University Programs	Mandarin at King Khalid, King Saud, Jeddah Univ.	English departments mandatory; grad/postgrad in English
Student Numbers	56,000 learning Mandarin in public schools	15,000 Saudi students in U.S.
Curriculum	Mandarin as 3rd language since 2019; fast expansion	English mandatory since 2019; critical-thinking upgrades
Flow Direction	Mostly inward (teaching in KSA)	Two-way exchanges
Strategic Goal	"Win-win" cultural ties with China	Mutual understanding & Western values

Compiled by the authors.

Table 1 compares American and Chinese soft-power tools in Saudi education, detailing key programs, student numbers, and strategic goals for language learning and academic exchange as of 2025.

Saudi Arabia's engagement with China in video games and esports focuses on access to the mobile market, operational expertise, and infrastructure partnerships. In 2023, Savvy Games Group invested \$265 million in Tencent-backed VSPO, becoming its largest external shareholder to expand mobile esports tournaments and events in the Kingdom (Daniels, 2023). Chinese titles dominate the Saudi market, claiming 37 of

the top 100 most profitable games, while Saudi Arabia ranks among the top 10 foreign markets for Chinese games (Iqtait, 2025). Bilateral ties deepened with esports-strengthening agreements signed during a 2024 ministerial visit. Giga-projects, such as Qiddiya's esports district and NEOM's AI gaming hub, actively invite Chinese tech firms and Tencent to serve as a strategic partner for the Esports World Cup, reinforcing people-to-people and economic linkages.

Saudi investments in U.S. gaming entities prioritize IP ownership and content innovation. PIF-backed Savvy Games Group, with a \$38 billion endowment, acquired Scopely for \$4.9

Table 2: US and Chinese Game Strategies in Saudi Arabia

Aspect	U.S. Engagement	Chinese Engagement
Investment	\$38B fund; Scopely \$4.9B; EA \$55B (2025)	\$265M in VSPO
Focus	IP ownership; stakes in major publishers	Mobile esports; tournaments; infrastructure
Market Role	Western innovation; NGES targets (\$13.3B GDP, 39k jobs)	37/100 top games; top-10 market; 2024 accords
Key Partners	Global acquisitions	Qiddiya/NEOM; Tencent (EWC)

Compiled by the authors.

billion and holds significant stakes in Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, and Take-Two Interactive (Goswami, 2023; Jaiswal, 2023). A landmark \$55 billion consortium-led acquisition of Electronic Arts was announced in 2025, poised to reshape global industry dynamics (Electronic Arts, 2025). These moves secure cutting-edge Western technology and creative pipelines, aligning with the National Gaming and Esports Strategy's ambition to contribute \$13.3 billion to GDP and create 39,000 jobs by 2030 while establishing Saudi Arabia as a global hub (PwC, 2024).

This table contrasts Saudi Arabia's gaming strategy: major U.S. investments target IP ownership and industry control, while engagements with China focus on mobile market access, esports infrastructure, and operational partnerships for mass-scale growth.

Saudi Arabia's PIF has sought to engage with the U.S. on sports, and since 2017, it has invested over \$170 billion. The most notable investment in sports was the LIV Golf series, which challenged the U.S.-based PGA Tour and eventually merged with it (Schenker, 2023). The PIF has

also demonstrated interest in American football events and Formula 1 hosting, which was announced in a 10-year deal worth over \$50 million (Bulos, 2024). The Kingdom uses lobbying firms to secure its influence in sports and also uses broadcasting through Saudi-owned football clubs.

China's influence on Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a soft power tool is evident in joint statements issued at the 2022 Saudi-Chinese summit that emphasize sports partnerships and cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022). Collaborations include football infrastructure, youth academies, and strategic alliances for Asian football.

Collaborations are also evident in film production, with Chinese entities signing MoUs with the Saudi Film Commission since 2022. In 2025, Manga Productions entered into a strategic partnership with Bilibili, a Chinese entity, to stream Saudi anime series in China, distribute selected Chinese animated titles in Saudi Arabia, and produce a first-ever joint short film collection (Manga Productions, 2025).

Table 3: Saudi Arabia’s dual approach to film and animation

Aspect	U.S. Influence	Chinese Influence
Exhibition & Infrastructure	AMC Theatres JV; IMAX expansions	CineWaves China office (2023); ORI Group partnerships
Production Deals	Stampede Ventures multi-film pact (\$350M slate)	Manga-Bilibili 2025: streaming, MENA distro, joint shorts
Content Distribution	PIF backing Paramount Warner bid (2025 financing)	Ne Zha 2 Arabic premiere (2025); Saudi Film Commission MoUs
Animation Focus	Indirect via Japanese co-productions (e.g., The Journey)	Co-productions (ORI); Bilibili CAPSULES joint model

Compiled by the authors.

The findings also reveal engagement with co-production, including ORI animation and Arabic-dubbed Chinese films like *Ne Zha*. KSA’s top film distributors, like Cinewaves, have become more open to partnering with China. In 2023, it announced the opening of a physical office in China, with a business model of production, distribution, and talent cultivation (Vivarelli, 2023).

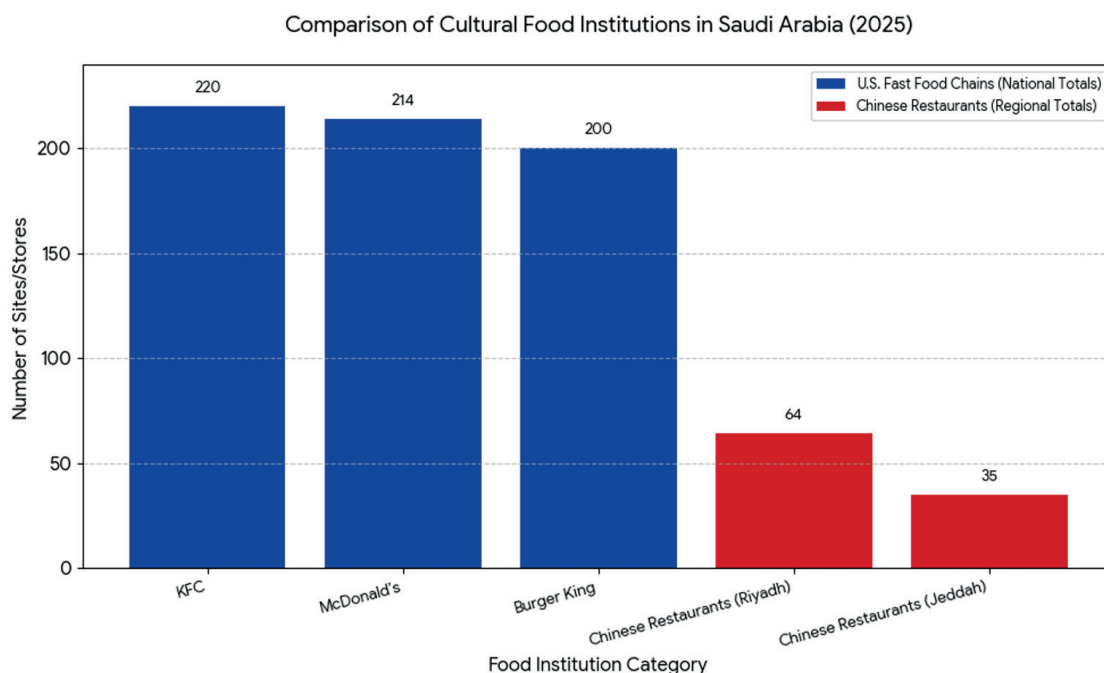
Saudi Arabia’s cultural hedging in films and animation balances U.S. Hollywood influence with emerging ties elsewhere. Post-2018 cinema ban lift, partnerships with U.S. firms like AMC Theatres (joint venture for chains, IMAX expansions to 18 screens) and Stampede Ventures multi-film deals (e.g., *Chasing Red*, *Fourth Wall* dominate exhibition and production). PIF-backed financing supports major Hollywood bids. Animation sees indirect U.S. links via Japanese co-productions, Manga Productions, and Toei to produce *the Journey*, while direct U.S. co-productions remain limited, prioritizing

prestige access over deeper alignment.

This table illustrates Saudi Arabia’s dual approach in film and animation: leveraging U.S. influence for high-value exhibition infrastructure and major production deals, while cultivating Chinese partnerships focused on co-production, content distribution, and market access.

Data from 2020–2025 indicate a robust expansion in food-related cultural institutions in Saudi Arabia, reflecting Vision 2030’s emphasis on tourism and experiential economy. As of 2025, Saudi Arabia ranks first in the growth rate of the Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) sector. American fast-food chains have become ubiquitous symbols of Western consumer culture, with steady outlet growth in urban centers like Riyadh and Jeddah, including McDonald’s (214), Burger King (200), and KFC (220). Meanwhile, Chinese restaurants have seen a more dynamic surge, particularly in the wake of enhanced bilateral ties. As of October 2025, the Riyadh region had hosted 64 Chinese restaurants, includ-

Figure 1: Comparative Scale of Food Diplomacy: U.S. QSR Chains vs. Chinese Restaurants in Saudi Arabia (2025)



Compiled by the authors based on data from Arora (2025).

ing 41 single-owner operations and 23 operated by larger brands. In Jeddah, there are over 30 Chinese restaurants, including Baytoti, China Hut, and Royal Chinese.

Figure 1 contrasts the presence of American fast-food chains (e.g., McDonald's with 214 outlets) against Chinese restaurants (e.g., 64 in Riyadh), illustrating asymmetric growth in cultural food influences under Vision 2030.

Media coverage from 2024–2025 across American and Chinese outlets reveals a patterned portrayal of Saudi relations: U.S. media emphasize security pacts, arms deals, and economic investments as foundational to long-standing

alliances, often framing them within broader regional stability and countering Iranian influence. Chinese media, conversely, highlight diplomatic milestones, economic synergies with Vision 2030, and cultural exchanges as symbols of mutual prosperity and multipolar harmony. Saudi state media and government-aligned platforms maintain a posture of equidistance, using parallel language to amplify positive narratives from both powers while curating content to underscore “active neutrality.” This approach is evident in state broadcasts, social media, and press releases, where coverage volume on bilateral events is roughly balanced.

During the 2025 Trump-MBS meeting, the American Media, particularly CNN Arabic, extensively reported on the high-stakes meetings. The main focus, however, was on security deals such as a \$142 billion arms deal, the transfer of advanced fighter jets, Riyadh’s nuclear ambitions, and U.S. access to rare earth metals. Other themes include the Khashoggi murder, the Abraham Accords, and the transfer of mil-

itary technology. U.S. media frame Saudi-U.S. relations as security partnerships and strategic benefits for both. Chinese media coverage of Saudi-China relations is comprehensive. In 2025, CGTN Arabic reported on Saudi-China relations through cultural lens, including the spring festival fair in January, which marked the launch of the China-Saudi Arabia Year of Culture. Coverage highlighted multidimen-

Table 4: Comparative Media Presence for China and the United States in Saudi Arabia

	American Media (CNN/VOA Arabic) Focus on Saudi-U.S. Relations	Chinese Media (CGTN Arabic) Focus on Saudi-China Relations
Primary Frame	Conditional Security/Transactional (Emphasis on risk, leverage, and policy pressure).	Stable Development/Mutually Beneficial (Emphasis on opportunity, respect, and growth).
Core Components	Military Deals, Geopolitics (Iran/China rivalry), Oil/Energy Security, Technology Transfer (security-focused).	Economic Investment (BRI), Tech/AI Cooperation, Cultural Exchange, Non-interference principle.
Values Focus	High & Critical: Human Rights, Khashoggi, Democracy, Regional Policy Alignment (Abraham Accords).	Low & Positive: Sovereignty Respect, Non-interference. Values are framed via cultural exchange.
Geopolitical Context	Indispensable Security Anchor; partnership often stressed/challenged.	Economic Counterweight; constructive, non-interfering diplomatic presence.
2025 Example	Focus on \$142B Arms Deal, Nuclear Ambitions, and Khashoggi Murder shadow.	Focus on Cultural Year, Spring Festival Fair, and expanding strategic cooperation.

Compiled by the authors based on CGTN, 2025; CNN Arabic, n.d.

sional cultural displays, art, performances, and festivals, as bridges for people-to-people ties, aligning with 35 years of diplomacy and Vision 2030's openness. CGTN also covered comprehensive strategic partnerships in 2025 during Chinese Vice President Han Zheng's visit to Saudi Arabia, noting expanding practical cooperation in strategic fields and increased people-to-people and cultural exchanges to lift the China-Saudi Arabia comprehensive strategic partnership.

This table (Table 4) contrasts U.S. and Chinese media framing of relations with Saudi Arabia, highlighting differences in primary narrative focus, core coverage themes, and values emphasized in 2025 reporting.

The government-affiliated media (such as the Saudi Press Agency - SPA) manages its relations with China and the U.S. by compartmentalizing its coverage, emphasizing different thematic areas for each superpower. The core

media narrative seeks to replace the image of a dependent client state with that of an autonomous middle power that dictates the terms of its partnerships. In the U.S., it presents the benefits of cultural and soft influences by portraying U.S. engagement through the lens of modernization, high-tech security, and elite collaboration. In China, the media frames the country as a reliable, results-oriented partner in massive economic transformation, strategically using cultural diplomacy to solidify this bond.

The table summarizes how Saudi state media compartmentalizes coverage of U.S.-Chinese relations, aligning each partnership with distinct value propositions and strategic objectives.

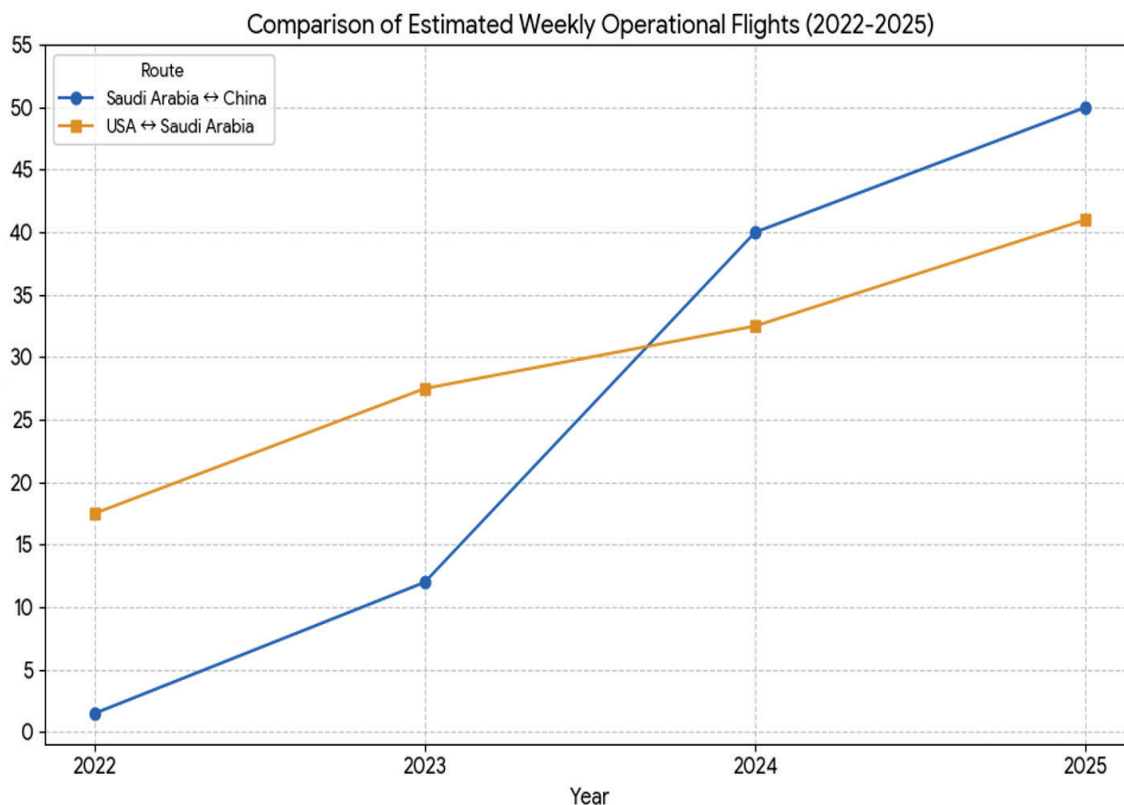
Air connectivity data from 2022–2025 demonstrate a marked acceleration in Saudi Arabia's aviation links with both the U.S. and China, aligning with Vision 2030's tourism and diversification goals.

Table 5: Saudi Government Media Narratives

Partnership	Media Focus (Value Proposition)	Goal in Media Narrative
U.S. Relations	Security & Strategic Technology	Maintains the essential defense umbrella and access to advanced Western knowledge while signaling internal autonomy.
China Relations	Economic Development & Soft Power	Secures long-term economic development and a reliable customer/investor for Vision 2030, all framed by a principle of mutual respect.

Compiled by the authors.

Figure 2: Comparison of estimated weekly operational flights between Saudi Arabia and both China and the United States



Compiled by the authors using data from Aviation360 Team (2024), Momondo (n.d.), and Simple Flying (2024).

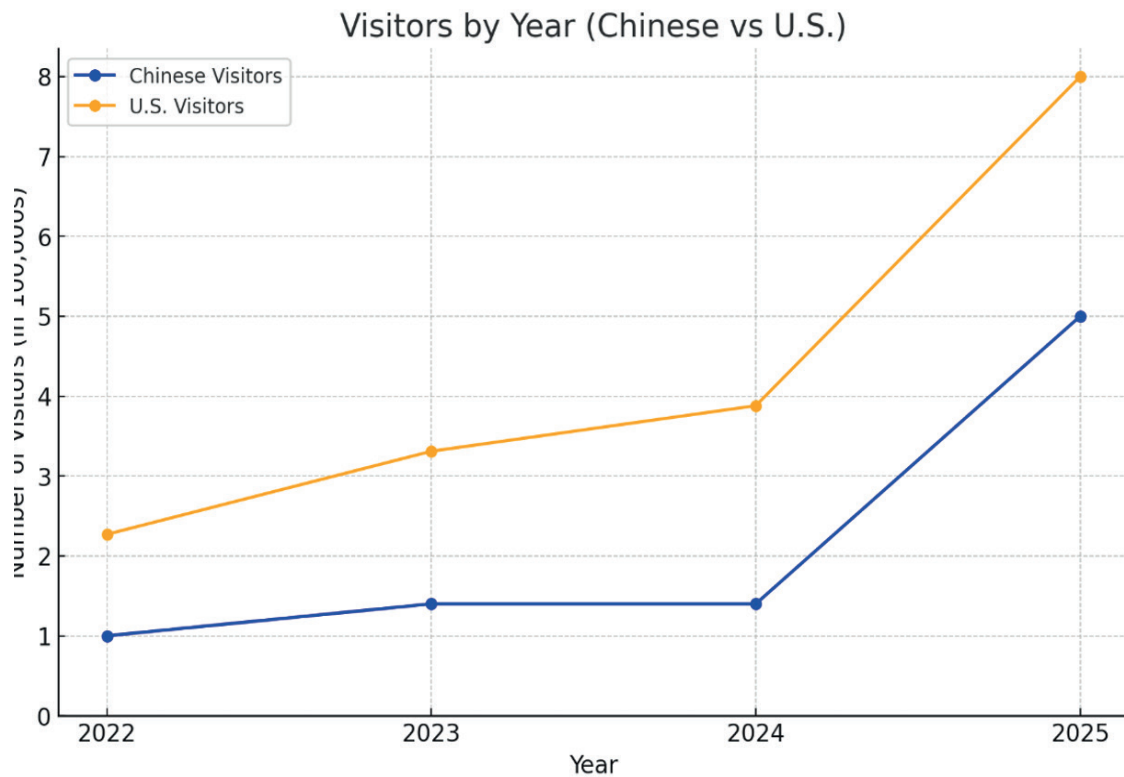
The results in the above graph show a significant increase in Saudi-China air routes, with direct flights expanding from 1 weekly in 2022 to over 45 weekly by November 2025. The airlines responsible for these flights are Saudia, Air China, and China Southern. Regarding the number of passengers, the number of travelers from China to Saudi Arabia is expected to exceed 500,000 in 2025, up from Q3 projections of 350,000, which is 350,000 more than in 2024 and 400,000 more than in 2023 (Xinhua, 2025a).

A look at Saudi-U.S. flight routes shows an in-

crease from about 20 flights per week in 2022 to more than 45 in 2025, especially during the summer and peak Hajj periods. The biggest airline on this route is Saudia, which has also applied for extra routes. In 2024, the U.S.-Saudi Arabia air route carried approximately 388,000 bilateral passengers, rising to an estimated 800,000 in 2025.

The number of tourists from both China and the U.S. in Saudi Arabia has risen steadily over the last four years. The table below compares tourist numbers from both countries in these years.

Figure 3: A comparative line graph for Chinese and U.S. visitors between 2022 and 2025



Compiled by the authors using data from Aviation360 Team (2024), Simple Flying (2024), Xinhua News Agency (2025), and Sabq (2025).

This line graph in Figure 3 compares the rising trends in tourist arrivals from China and the United States, highlighting the sharp increase in Chinese travelers.

Cultural and scientific cooperation between Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and China from 2020 to 2025 demonstrates a balanced yet differentiated approach to exchanges, with the U.S. leading in established scientific research partnerships and China in emerging cultural initiatives. On student exchange programs focused on the U.S, the Fulbright program facilitates considerable exchanges

annually, including U.S. Scholars, English Teaching Assistants, and Fulbright/KAUST Graduate Awards supporting Saudi master's students in STEM at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). In exchanges with China, a July 2025 report showed 174 Saudi students studying in Chinese colleges, comprising 43 self-funded students and 131 scholarship recipients. Chinese students are also enrolled in Saudi Arabian institutions, with 688 enrolled as of July 2025, some of whom are supported by the 477 annual scholarships Saudi Arabia offers to Chinese Students.

**Table 6: Comparative Indicators of Saudi Arabia’s Educational and Cultural Exchanges:
U.S. vs. China (2025)**

Indicator (2025)	U.S. Focus	China Focus
Student Exchanges (Annual)	5 annual Fulbright/KAUST awards	174 (scholarships; target 800 by 2028)
Total Students Abroad	15,000 Saudis in U.S. for 2025	174 Saudis in China; 688 Chinese in KSA
Cultural Infrastructure	Fulbright Program	2 Confucius Institutes; 56,000 Mandarin learners
Tourism Arrivals (Mobility Indicator)	800,000	500,000
UNESCO-Supported Exchanges	Joint faculty visits via KAUST ties	Intercultural dialogue training (AlUla)

Compiled by the authors based on Benaim (2025), U.S. Fulbright Program (n.d.), and Xinhua (2025b).

Tourism trends in 2025 indicate that cultural diplomacy with tourists from both China and the U.S. has steadily risen year-on-year since 2022. Educational mobility between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. remains skewed toward the U.S., with about 15,000 Saudis studying there. For China, educational mobility includes hybrid programs at KSU and PKU, with 56,000 domestic Mandarin learners supporting outbound flows.

Saudi Arabia is expanding its cultural and scientific engagements with the U.S. and China in multiple ways. U.S. collaborations emphasize long-term scientific research and educational exchanges, with established partnerships yielding high-impact outputs in energy, space, and STEM fields. Chinese initiatives, accelerated by the 2025 Cultural Year, focus on heritage

preservation, archaeological joint ventures, and emerging academic ties, fostering cultural diplomacy.

The two countries are engaging in heritage restoration and archaeological research. In 2025, a five-year agreement established a structured cooperation mechanism to conduct research projects jointly and systematically catalog cultural materials. This agreement was signed by the China-Arab Cultural and Tourism Cooperation Research Center (CACTCRC) and Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Culture as part of the China-Saudi Arabia Year of Culture. Notable partnerships are restoration at AlUla and Diriyah sites. Cultural exchanges are also evident in MoUs between Chinese and Saudi Arabian learning institutions. Such MoUs include the

Table 7: Comparative Cultural and Scientific Collaborations (2020–2025)

Aspect	With China	With the U.S.
Primary Focus	Cultural Heritage & Soft Power	Advanced Science & Core Technology
Key Areas	Archaeology, Film Co-Production, Language Institutes	Energy R&D, Space Exploration, University Networks
Institutional Forms	Joint Cultural Centers, Media MoUs, University Institutes	Endowed Academic Chairs, Government Space Agreements, Research Consortia
Strategic Objective	Diversify cultural influence and build alternative soft power partnerships.	Maintain technological access and secure expertise for economic diversification (Vision 2030).

Compiled by the authors based on Aramco Americas (2022), Saudi Gazette (2025), Saudi Press Agency (2025), and Yang and Knowles (2019).

King Abdulaziz University's (KAU) Chinese Culture and Science Institute, in collaboration with the Chinese language institute in Jeddah, to promote China-Saudi cultural exchange through cultural events, scientific exhibitions, and advanced Chinese language courses, as well as collaborative research projects between the two institutions.

The collaboration is centered on scientific cooperation, with specific examples such as the Aramco-Stanford partnership, which endows a professorship in Earth sciences and supports joint R&D for sustainable energy futures. The findings also reveal a trilateral King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM)-Aramco-Stanford collaboration, which has published reports on complex reactive fluids and

engaged in academic discussions on sedimentation and the reservoir properties of barchan dunes. They are also engaged in space research and cooperation through the 2024 U.S.-Saudi Aeronautics and Space Agreement, which enables joint space science projects and lunar exploration. By embedding its next generation of scientists and engineers within top U.S. research ecosystems, Saudi Arabia cultivates essential expertise and fosters enduring academic networks, creating a stable, knowledge-based link that persists through geopolitical shifts.

Table 7 highlights the distinct primary areas of Saudi cooperation with China (cultural heritage, soft power) and with the U.S. (advanced science and technology), including key institutional forms and strategic objectives.

Table 8: Primary Data Sources and Methodological Notes

Dimension	Key Claim	Primary Source	Notes
Language & Education	56,000 Mandarin learners (2025)	Saudi Ministry of Education via Arab News (2024); China.org.cn (Dec 2025)	Confirmed figure per Q2 2025 official count; 102,000 target by 2029 is ministerial projection
Language & Education	~15,000 Saudi students in U.S.	U.S. Embassy Riyadh; Fulbright/KAUST data (Nov 2025)	Approximate figure from embassy reporting
Gaming & Esports	\$265M VSPO investment	Esports Insider (Feb 17, 2023); Reuters (Apr 5, 2023)	Confirmed via company announcement
Gaming & Esports	37/100 top games Chinese titles	Near East Policy Forum (Dec 4, 2025)	Based on revenue rankings reported by NEPF citing Sensor Tower data
Gaming & Esports	\$55B EA acquisition	EA investor relations press release (announced Dec 2025; accessed Jan 7, 2026)	Announced deal; subject to regulatory approval
Air Connectivity	~500,000 Chinese visitors (2025)	Simple Flying (Nov 2024); Aviation360 (Apr 2024)	Q3 2025 projection extrapolated from route expansion data; treated as estimate
Air Connectivity	~50 weekly U.S. flights (2025)	Momondo route data (Dec 9, 2025)	Includes seasonal Hajj-period peaks
Food Diplomacy	McDonald's 214, KFC 220, BK 200 sites	Restroworks Industry Report (May 2025)	Outlet count from industry database
Food Diplomacy	64 Chinese restaurants in Riyadh	Google Maps/TripAdvisor search (Oct 2025)	Author-verified count; 41 independent, 23 chain
Science Cooperation	KFUPM-Aramco-Stanford collaboration	Aramco Americas press release (Dec 2022); Stanford Daily (Apr 2019)	Ongoing partnership confirmed via institutional sources
Science Cooperation	2024 U.S.-Saudi Aeronautics Agreement	Saudi Press Agency (SPA), specific article: Saudi Space Agency Signs Agreement with NASA, accessed Dec 9, 2025	Government-to-government agreement

Compiled by the authors.

Research Findings and Discussion

From the empirical findings, it is clear that KSA is pursuing a state-sanctioned hedging strategy that shifts from the traditional security and economic domains into the cultural space. With its position in the GCC and history of relations with major powers, KSA has redefined foreign influence through deliberate strategies that maximize its autonomy without compromising national identity.

The basis of KSA's complex cultural hedging lies in managing both U.S. and Chinese ideological influences. The U.S. continues to offer the preferred pathway for elite formation and scientific excellence: approximately 15,000 Saudi students studied in American universities in 2024–2025, sustained by the Fulbright program and KAUST partnerships that embed Western critical-thinking paradigms. Within the Kingdom, there is a notable focus on Mandarin classes, as evidenced by the presence of over 50,000 domestic learners and Confucius Institutes. The Kingdom, however, frames the need for Mandarin classes as a tool to enhance its economy, without acknowledging their political value. Through the strategy, KSA is positioned to balance liberal Western values with the efficiency of China's model, all while ensuring these values do not upend its domestic ideologies.

In its cultural hedging, Vision 2030 is the central filter for all foreign cultural inflows, explicitly subordinating them to "Saudi characteristics" and Arab-Islamic identity. Language is a perfect example of a selective adaptation strategy, with English compulsory from primary school through higher education institutions. It is, however, considered a second language, with Arabic being the first language and largely used in religious and civic education. The adoption of Mandarin as a third language is also framed as a tool for China-Saudi

Arabia win-win cooperation and for tapping into BRI opportunities, rather than for cultural assimilation. Vision 2030 thus allows KSA to transform potentially disruptive foreign cultural inflows into controlled, identity-compatible assets and to position itself as a strategic middle soft-power culture. In food culture and cuisine diplomacy, the explosive growth of American quick-service restaurants demonstrates Western consumer modernity. These chains are located in urban hubs and cater to KSA's youth demographic, which is insistent on speed, personalization, and casual socializing. Chinese restaurants offer exotic authenticity and allow individuals in Saudi Arabia to experiment with new dishes, aligning with China's emphasis on collective exchange over individualism without threatening halal norms. This dual engagement in consumer culture reinforces a hedging strategy, where both are welcomed as revenue generators for economic diversification under the tourism pillar and as sources of soft-power goodwill, without endorsing either model's values in full.

The findings in culture and entertainment reveal a sophisticated dual-track strategy: Saudi Arabia leverages Chinese partnerships for market scale and infrastructure (e.g., mobile esports, distribution networks), while engaging with the U.S. for intellectual property, creative capital, and prestige (e.g., acquiring major studios, Hollywood deals). This allows the Kingdom to simultaneously build mass appeal in China and secure high-value global influence in the West, directly fueling its ambition to become a middle soft-culture power by controlling both the platforms and the content of modern entertainment.

Media strategy reinforces the posture of active neutrality. Saudi state-aligned outlets such as Al-Arabiya and the Saudi Press Agency consistently frame the U.S. as a historic strategic partner.

China, on the other hand, is portrayed as a comprehensive strategic partner, and both countries are accorded almost equal coverage. The Saudi Media is also selective on the topics it can discuss for each country. It avoids discussions on critical narratives such as the death of Khashoggi and the ensuing tensions between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. after the incident. For China, the Saudi media avoids Uyghur-related stories or other internal affairs in China. The result is a domestic public opinion that overwhelmingly prefers a balanced approach.

Mobility patterns provide the clearest expression of the strategy. Direct flight capacity to and from China exploded between 2022 and 2025, delivering an estimated 500,000 Chinese visitors in 2025. U.S. routes, while growing more modestly to approximately 50 weekly flights, continue to attract higher-value traffic, including elite students, business executives, and long-term residents. The asymmetry is intentionally crafted by Saudi Arabia, ensuring that China supplies volume and future-oriented mass exposure, while the United States retains primacy in depth and human capital formation. Combined with a total of 30 million international arrivals in 2025, these flows demonstrate that people-to-people diplomacy has become the most dynamic frontier of Saudi foreign policy.

Despite its sophistication, Saudi Arabia's cultural hedging strategy and the resulting middle soft-power culture carry significant risks. Most evident are ideological tensions with liberal values such as individualism, gender mixing, and secular critique, which directly clash with the Chinese state-led model of collective discipline and political conformity. Although both are officially depoliticized through selective adaptation, prolonged exposure could cause unease, impacting the grand strategy. There is also a high chance of unaddressed or unevenly distributed domestic resistance. Conser-

vative segments, including religious scholars and tribal elders, continue to view American cultural imports as the primary threat to Islamic identity. At the same time, Chinese influence is often perceived as economically utilitarian and therefore less corrosive. This could create the perception that the hedge tilts eastward, potentially alienating pro-Western elites and triggering renewed social-conservative mobilization.

The Saudi government, the architects of Vision 2030, and hedging strategies also need to strategize on how to manage perceptions. When cultural openness is overly instrumentalized, as in state-orchestrated fusion festivals or rapid Mandarin rollouts, younger Saudis and international observers may dismiss it as "soft-power washing," undermining the desired image of organic moderation. Another risk is that success hinges on cultural elites and public opinion. Religious authorities, intellectuals, and social-media influencers retain veto power over what is deemed acceptable. Any major incident, such as a high-profile controversy involving Western entertainment or Chinese labor practices, could rapidly shift public sentiment and force retrenchment. Sustaining the hedge, therefore, demands continuous, delicate calibration between openness and the preservation of identity.

Conclusion

Evidence from the study on Saudi Arabia's complex hedging strategy challenges the prevailing focus of hedging scholarship on trade balances, arms procurement, and base access. The Kingdom's strategic leveraging of Vision 2030 institutions, selective adaptation mechanisms, and dual-track cultural diplomacy acts as a lower-risk, higher-legitimacy domain for diversifying great-power exposure. By cultivating parallel relations and goodwill with Washington

and Beijing, Riyadh mitigates the uncertainties of U.S. retrenchment and Chinese assertiveness. Also, it strengthens domestic legitimacy among a youth population hungry for global engagement. In an era of intensifying U.S.–China competition, Saudi Arabia's cultural hedge therefore represents a pioneering adaptation. It transforms soft power competition into a strategic asset, creating a middle-ground soft power culture rather than a liability, thereby securing greater maneuvering room while preserving the Kingdom's core identity. On autonomy, Riyadh derives maximum benefit from both superpowers without subordinating itself. Future research should examine emerging digital arenas, streaming platforms, anime co-productions, esports partnerships, and AI collaboration frameworks, as the next frontier of complex cultural hedging, where soft-power competition is likely to intensify. 🌸

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Power Transition and Geoeconomic Connectivity in Eurasia on the 55th Anniversary of Türkiye-China Diplomatic Relations



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ABSTRACT

This article examines Türkiye-China diplomatic relations on the 55th anniversary of their establishment through the lenses of power transition, geoeconomic connectivity, and economic interdependence. Its central question is whether Türkiye remains primarily a transit country within Eurasian production and logistics networks integrated with China, or whether it has made measurable progress toward becoming a joint production hub. The study is based on a structured qualitative document analysis covering 1971-2026. Official policy documents, Türkiye's foreign trade data, World Bank corridor reports, investment announcements, and peer-reviewed studies are compared using indicators of logistics capacity, the technological composition of trade, foreign direct investment, local value added, and technology transfer. The findings show that Türkiye's logistical position has strengthened, but its production-hub function has not become institutionalized. In 2023, Türkiye exported USD 3.3 billion to China, imported USD 44.98 billion, and recorded a trade deficit of USD 41.7 billion. Chinese foreign direct investment stock was approximately USD 9 billion, further demonstrating the persistence of trade asymmetry. The World Bank projects that Middle Corridor freight volume could reach 11 million tonnes by 2030 if the necessary measures are implemented. The article operationalizes the distinction between a transit country and a joint production hub through measurable indicators and links connectivity's stabilizing effects to balanced interdependence, institutionalization, and positive expectations about future cooperation. Türkiye currently occupies an intermediate position dominated by its transit function; transformation depends on investments that generate local sourcing, joint R&D, technology transfer, and exports to third-country markets.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, geoeconomic connectivity, Middle Corridor, power transition, Türkiye-China relations.

Introduction

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM IS UNDERGOING a multilayered transformation in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, as economic, technological, and geopolitical changes unfold simultaneously. China's growing weight in global production, trade, finance, and technology ecosystems has also helped make Asia one of the principal centers of the global system. Rather than a linear shift in which one center replaces another, this trend points to a more plural order in which several centers of power exert influence simultaneously. The 55th anniversary of diplo-

matic relations between the Republic of Türkiye and the People's Republic of China (1971-2026), therefore, provides a meaningful historical threshold for assessing how this systemic change has been reflected in bilateral relations.

The trajectory of relations can be summarized through four turning points. Diplomatic relations were established on August 5, 1971; contacts diversified from the 1980s onward as both countries pursued policies of economic opening; relations were elevated to the level of "strategic cooperation" in 2010; and a memorandum on aligning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the Middle Corridor was signed in 2015.

Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022, growing political and logistical risks along the Northern Corridor through Russia made the Middle Corridor—running through the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye—more visible (Atlı, 2013; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016; Ülgen & Umarov, 2024).

The literature on Türkiye-China relations reveals, from different perspectives, the tension between diplomatic rapprochement and economic asymmetry. Existing studies show that the discourse of strategic cooperation has not translated into a balanced partnership in trade and investment, that Türkiye has sought to expand its room for autonomy through relations with China while preserving its ties with Western institutions, and that the complementarity between the Middle

Corridor and the BRI remains conditional (Hussain, 2021; Öniş & Yalikul, 2021; Tekdal, 2024). Nevertheless, few studies evaluate power transition, connectivity, the technological composition of trade, the quality of investment, and the peace-stability relationship within a single analytical model. This fragmentation in the literature makes it difficult to test clearly the conditions under which expanding trade and infrastructure investment generate productive capacity and balanced interdependence.

This article addresses the following question: Does Türkiye remain merely a “transit country” within Eurasian production and logistics networks integrated with China, or is it becoming a “joint production hub” through technology transfer, joint R&D, local value added, and reciprocal investment? The answer is not inferred from iso-



The Middle Corridor connects China and Europe through Central Asia and Türkiye and integrates with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Map: Valdai Club, 2023).

lated indicators such as geographical location or total trade volume. The transit-country position is operationalized as progress in freight volume, transit time, and corridor capacity, accompanied by weak linkages to production, technology, and local sourcing. The joint-production-hub position, by contrast, is operationalized through measurable contributions of foreign direct investment to manufacturing, R&D, local sourcing, and exports to third-country markets.

The study makes an original contribution at three levels. First, it examines the 55-year relationship by combining diplomatic periodization with geoeconomic indicators. Second, rather than treating the Middle Corridor's geopolitical significance as an automatic economic success, it measures its transit and production functions separately. Third, it develops the "new peace perspective" not as an established theory, but as a conditional analytical framework that brings together the literatures on commercial peace, complex interdependence, and weaponized interdependence. In doing so, it distinguishes official discourse on "common development" from data-based analytical assessment.

Theoretical Framework and Position in the Literature

Power transition theory explains change in the international system not merely through the absolute growth of a single state, but through the different rates at which the relative economic, technological, and military capabilities of major actors develop. According to Gilpin (1981), shifts in the distribution of power alter the costs and benefits of existing rules and create pressure for systemic adaptation. China's rise is significant in this context; however, China's economic size

does not imply that a multipolar order will necessarily be peaceful or China-centered. Power transition generates competition over technological standards, financing, critical inputs, and transportation networks, as well as opportunities for cooperation. This study, therefore, treats China's rise not as the normative declaration of a "new paradigm," but as a systemic variable that redistributes options and constraints across Eurasia.

Geoeconomics, the second theoretical component, explains how states use trade, finance, investment, technology, and infrastructure to pursue strategic objectives. In Luttwak's (1990) account, the logic of competition persists, but the instruments increasingly assume an economic character. Within this framework, a port, railway, or digital network is not merely technical infrastructure; it is also a source of power that shapes market access, costs, standards, and relations of dependence. Connectivity refers to the capacity of these instruments to function together within geographical, institutional, and digital networks. The analysis of corridors must therefore encompass customs harmonization, financing conditions, data sharing, logistics services, and production clusters in addition to the physical route itself.

The interdependence literature explains the dual character of connectivity as a source of both cooperation and vulnerability. According to Keohane and Nye (2012), economic and institutional networks create mutual sensitivity and costs among actors, but those costs may be distributed unevenly. Farrell and Newman (2019) developed the concept of "weaponized interdependence" by showing how actors that control central network nodes can transform advantages in information and access into instruments of coercion.

This approach demonstrates why growth in trade volume alone should not be treated as evidence of partnership. In Türkiye-China relations, the trade deficit, technological dependence, and the sectoral distribution of investment shape the distribution of bargaining power as much as they shape the benefits of connectivity.



For Türkiye, if logistical access is supported by production linkages, local value added, export capacity, and bargaining power may increase. If connectivity remains limited to a transit function and one-sided dependence deepens in critical technologies and inputs, economic networks may narrow Türkiye's strategic room for maneuver.

Although the literature on Türkiye-China relations addresses different dimensions of these theoretical debates, it generally concentrates on a single level of analysis. Atlı (2018) and Tekdal (2024) examine Ankara's relations with China in the context of foreign-policy diversification and strategic autonomy. In contrast, Öniş and Yalikhun (2021) emphasize the gap between political rapprochement and asymmetric economic outcomes. Işık and Zou (2019) study security cooperation, while Hussain (2021) analyzes the elements of complementarity and competition in the BRI-Middle Corridor relationship. Duan and Aydın (2024) demonstrate the effects of the two countries' historical state- and nation-building processes on bilateral relations.

The present study does not reject these contributions; rather, it integrates them around productive capacity, logistical performance, and a conditional mechanism of stability.

The explanatory chain of the theoretical model is constructed as follows: Changes in the global distribution of power intensify states' efforts to seek influence through economic networks and corridors. At the same time, geoeconomic investments create new connections; they may distribute gains and vulnerabilities unevenly. For Türkiye, if logistical access is supported by production linkages, local value added, export capacity, and bargaining power may increase. If connectivity remains limited to a transit function and one-sided dependence deepens in critical technologies and inputs, economic networks may narrow Türkiye's strategic room for maneuver. Balanced investment, joint institutions, and positive expectations about future cooperation, by contrast, may contribute to stability by increasing the costs of disagreement.

This model generates three analytical expectations. First, if transport capacity expands while production-oriented investment and technology transfer remain limited, Türkiye will occupy a transit-dominant position. Second, if foreign direct investment generates local sourcing, R&D, skilled employment, and exports to third countries, a transition toward a joint production hub may be identified. Third, if economic relations remain markedly asymmetric, the pacifying effect of connectivity will be constrained; its potential to produce stability will increase as reciprocity, institutionalization, and positive expectations that cooperation will continue grow stronger. The findings are interpreted based on these expectations.

The model also draws a clear distinction among official discourse, policy outputs, and economic

outcomes. Expressions such as “strategic cooperation,” “common development,” and “alignment” indicate the parties’ intentions and the political framing they assign to the relationship; they do not, by themselves, constitute evidence of complementarity, local development, or balanced interdependence. Policy outputs are observable steps such as a signed memorandum, an established working group, or allocated financing. Economic outcomes, by contrast, are sought in realized freight volumes, investment, local sourcing, R&D, and export indicators. Distinguishing these three levels prevents normative expectations from being conflated with realized outcomes and places the discourse-implementation gap in Türkiye-China relations at the center of the analysis.

Method, Data Sources, and Analytical Criteria

The study is based on a structured qualitative document analysis covering the period 1971-2026. Document analysis requires written materials produced for different purposes to be systematically selected, evaluated, and interpreted under thematic categories (Bowen, 2009). This design was chosen because it enables the 55-year historical trajectory to be compared with indicators of bilateral trade, investment, and transportation within a common framework. The study does not conduct a statistical test of causality; instead, it assesses the correspondence between theoretical expectations and observed indicators through triangulation across sources.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on July 4, 2024, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit held in Astana, Kazakhstan (Photo: CGTN, 2024).

The source base consists of four groups. The first includes official documents concerning the establishment of diplomatic relations, the 2010 strategic-cooperation decision, the 2015 alignment memorandum, connectivity, and mediation activities. The second comprises the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs' bilateral trade series, the World Bank's Middle Corridor models and project-financing data, and investment announcements by the Investment Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. The third group consists of peer-reviewed articles and academic books, while the fourth includes data-based reports by research institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment and SWP. Official documents are used to identify actors' policy objectives and announced figures; academic studies are used to assess those claims critically and comparatively.



The source-selection criteria were direct relevance to the topic, institutional or academic reliability, traceability of the data-production method, and temporal coverage.

The source-selection criteria were direct relevance to the topic, institutional or academic reliability, traceability of the data-production method, and temporal coverage. For trade data, the official Turkish series based on the general trade system was used as the reference; different national series were not combined in a single table due to potential discrepancies with China's mirror statistics. Future figures for the

Middle Corridor were classified not as realized outcomes but as World Bank model projections conditional on investment and efficiency measures. Information on the capacity, employment, and R&D components of the BYD investment was likewise coded as announced targets rather than realized technology transfer.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the documents were coded chronologically into the periods 1971-1989, 1990-2009, 2010-2021, and 2022-2026. Second, their content was divided into the themes of power transition, geoeconomic connectivity, trade and technological asymmetry, investment and production cooperation, political constraints, and the peace-stability mechanism. Third, the research question was assessed using the criteria in Table 1; wherever possible, official data, international organization reports, and academic interpretations were compared for the same claim. This procedure reduces the risk of presenting official discourse on "common development" as an analytical finding.

During coding, the date, document type, institutional producer, period covered, principal claim, and indicator used were recorded for each document. Quantitative claims were divided into three categories: "realized data," "announced target," and "model projection." For example, the 2023 foreign-trade figures constitute realized data, the BYD facility's planned capacity of 150,000 vehicles is an announced target, and the projection that the Middle Corridor could reach 11 million tonnes by 2030 is conditional. Where sources differed, a comparable series within the same statistical system was preferred, and alternative figures were not merged. Evidence that challenged the research question was retained alongside supporting findings; for this

Table 1. Indicators Used to Distinguish a Transit Country from a Joint Production Hub

Dimension	Indicators	Analytical interpretation
Logistical function	Freight volume, time, railway/port capacity, border and customs bottlenecks	Capacity growth alone strengthens the transit function; it does not demonstrate the existence of a production hub.
Trade structure	Export-import balance, product composition, share of machinery- and technology-intensive groups	The continued combination of raw-material exports and technology-intensive imports indicates structural asymmetry.
Investment and production	Chinese FDI stock, greenfield investment, local sourcing, export-oriented capacity	The transition toward a joint production hub strengthens as production linkages and local sourcing increase.
Technological capacity	Joint R&D, patents/licenses, engineering capabilities, realized technology transfer	The criterion is realized and measurable output, not an announced target.
Institutional resilience	Joint working groups, transparency, dispute resolution, diversification, and risk management	Balanced and institutionalized interdependence reduces the risk that economic networks will become instruments of coercion.

Compiled by the authors.

reason, the corridor's limited share of China-Europe trade and the lack of technology-transfer data were not excluded.

The method has two limitations. First, regular and comparable open data on the local-sourcing ratios of Chinese investments, firm-level R&D expenditure, and bilateral patent production are limited. The absence of data is therefore interpreted not as evidence that technology transfer has never occurred, but as an indication that the production-hub claim has not yet been verified through transparent indicators. Second, the World Bank's 2030 corridor estimates are based on a broader regional model that includes Türkiye and cannot be treated as precise country-level outcomes. These limitations are explicitly acknowledged in the findings section.

Historical Trajectory of Relations

The first period, extending from diplomatic recognition in 1971 to the late 1980s, was one of cautious normalization. Türkiye's recognition of the People's Republic of China was closely tied to Cold War conditions and to changes in China's representation at the United Nations. Bilateral relations were initially conducted through limited diplomatic contacts; in the 1980s, trade and official visits increased as economic opening accelerated in both countries (Atlı, 2013; Duan & Aydın, 2024). The relationship lacked a strategic framework during this period; the principal achievements were mutual recognition and the establishment of regular diplomatic contact.

The second period, from 1990 to 2009, was marked by economic relations expanding more rapidly than political relations. The end of the Cold War, China's integration into global production networks, and the further opening of the Turkish market to foreign trade expanded bilateral commerce. Türkiye's exports to China, however, did not diversify at the same pace, and the import imbalance persisted. This period established the basic structural pattern that would become more pronounced in later years: despite stronger political contacts and growing trade volume, Türkiye's share of the Chinese market and China-originated productive investment in Türkiye remained limited (Dilek et al., 2019; Öniş & Yalikul, 2021).

The third period began with the elevation of relations to "strategic cooperation" in 2010 and acquired an institutional connectivity dimension through the 2015 alignment memorandum. The memorandum of November 14, 2015, provided a political and legal basis for cooperation between the BRI and the Middle Corridor in road, railway, and port connections (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). This development does not mean that all elements of the two initiatives were automatically integrated. Route priorities, financing, technical standards, and local development objectives require bargaining and coordination as much as they do complementarity (Hussain, 2021).

The fourth period, beginning after 2022, has been characterized by the growing importance of geopolitical risks and supply-chain security. The Russia-Ukraine War and sanctions against Russia increased the risk premium for transportation along the Northern Corridor, drawing greater attention to the Middle Corridor as an alternative, diversifying route. During the same period, US-China technological competition and the Eu-

ropean Union's policies to reduce China-related economic risks complicated the room for maneuver available to Türkiye as a NATO member and participant in the EU Customs Union. The 55-year relationship is therefore better understood not as a linear rapprochement but as a selective partnership in which diplomatic cooperation, economic asymmetry, and security constraints are managed simultaneously (Tekdal, 2024; Ülgen & Umarov, 2024).

This periodization reveals both continuity and change in bilateral relations. The continuity lies in Türkiye's desire to diversify its economic relations with China and to offset the trade deficit through investment; this objective has persisted from before 2010 to the present. Change is evident in the instruments of the relationship: strategic cooperation was added to the initial agenda of diplomatic recognition and trade after 2010, corridor alignment after 2015, and supply-chain resilience and productive investment after 2022. Nevertheless, greater institutional density does not mean that interdependence has become symmetrical. While the official page on political relations emphasizes strategic cooperation and high-level contacts, the economic series shows a persistent deficit (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). This gap constitutes the central analytical tension of the 55-year relationship.

Power Transition and Geoeconomic Connectivity: The Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor

China's rise over the past quarter century has rested on an accumulation of capabilities that extend beyond production scale. Advanced manufacturing, energy and digital infrastructure, research and development, logistics, and develop-

ment finance have increased China's weight in international economic networks. Although this transformation gives China greater influence over regional rules and connections, it does not mean that all outcomes are determined unilaterally by Beijing. China's rise unfolds through the interaction of identity, interdependence, and regional strategy, while partner countries' regulatory capacities and national priorities significantly shape outcomes (Liu, 2010; Rolland, 2017).



China-Europe trade crossing the Caspian is expected to account for only about 1% of total China-EU trade in 2030. This finding shows that the corridor is valuable primarily for regional trade and supply-chain diversification rather than as a single route capable of replacing global maritime transport.

Announced in 2013, the BRI is a multidimensional policy framework encompassing ports, energy networks, financing, digital connectivity, cross-border production relations, and land and maritime transportation routes. The initiative's official discourse emphasizes common development and mutual benefit; analytically, however, outcomes vary depending on project selection, debt sustainability, procurement transparency, local employment, environmental impacts, and production linkages. The World Bank (2019) emphasizes that lower transport costs can generate

gains in trade and income, but that these gains will not be distributed evenly without complementary reforms and risk management. The BRI should therefore be reduced neither to an infrastructure project alone nor presented as a model that automatically produces inclusive development.

Türkiye's vision for the Middle Corridor refers to a multimodal network through which freight originating in China and Central Asia reaches Europe via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway, Marmaray, and Türkiye's railway and port connections are major components of this network. The corridor offers a complementary opportunity for diversification alongside the northern route through Russia and maritime shipping. However, maritime crossings, differing rail gauges, port transshipment, border delays, unpredictable tariffs, and incompatible digital documentation increase transport time and cost. Geographical shortness, therefore, is not equivalent to operational superiority (Hussain, 2021; Ülgen & Umarov, 2024).

The World Bank's (2023) model projects that, if the necessary infrastructure investments and efficiency measures are implemented, freight along the Trans-Caspian Middle Corridor could approximately triple relative to 2021, reaching 11 million tonnes by 2030, while travel time could be reduced by half. The same report states that, without these improvements, demand would remain 35% below the projection. More importantly, China-Europe trade crossing the Caspian is expected to account for only about 1% of total China-EU trade in 2030. This finding shows that the corridor is valuable primarily for regional trade and supply-chain diversification rather than as a single route capable of replacing global maritime transport.

Tangible investment in physical capacity is important for removing bottlenecks on the Turkish section of the corridor. In December 2024, the World Bank approved USD 660 million in financing for the Eastern Türkiye Middle Corridor Railway Development Project. The project aims to electrify and modernize the 660-kilometer line between Divriği, Kars, and the Georgian border, with the potential to increase annual freight capacity from approximately 750,000 tonnes to 20 million tonnes (World Bank, 2024). The approved financing amounts to USD 660 million. Planned capacity, however, is not realized traffic volume; unless border crossings, Caspian ports, and infrastructure in neighboring countries are improved simultaneously, investment in a single rail segment will not increase corridor performance to the expected extent.

Strategic alignment between the BRI and the Middle Corridor, therefore, depends on three conditions. First, infrastructure investment must be complemented by common operating standards for customs, tariffs, data sharing, and timetables. Second, increased transit volume should generate value-added services in Türkiye, including storage, maintenance, insurance, financing, and digital logistics. Third, logistical flows should be linked to local production by creating manufacturing and export clusters along the corridor. If these conditions are not met, Türkiye's geoeconomic importance may increase while its economic returns remain limited to transit fees and a narrow range of logistics services.

In evaluating the corridor, the narrative of a "China-Europe land bridge" must also be distinguished from its regional-development function. In the World Bank model, most future volume derives not from transit between China and Europe, but from regional trade among Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, and Europe (World Bank, 2023). This is not a weakness from Türkiye's perspective; rather, it shows

that measuring the corridor's success solely by the number of China-Europe containers is too narrow an approach. Türkiye's principal gains may arise through improved access for Anatolian production centers to markets in the Caucasus and Central Asia, logistics and processing activities in the eastern provinces, port-rail integration, and the capacity to generate return cargo. Because insufficient return cargo increases the movement of empty wagons and containers and reduces cost advantages, export diversification is also a corridor policy.

Structural Asymmetries and the Transition from a Transit Country to a Joint Production Hub

The central problem in Türkiye-China economic relations is not simply the size of trade, but its imbalance and the composition of trade. According to the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.-a), Türkiye exported USD 3.3 billion to China in 2023, imported USD 44.98 billion, recorded a total trade volume of USD 48.3 billion, and ran a trade deficit of USD 41.7 billion. In 2025, exports remained at USD 3.3 billion, while imports rose to USD 49.6 billion and the deficit to USD 46.3 billion. The ratio of exports to imports was only approximately 7.3% in 2023. This persistent gap points to a structural asymmetry that temporary exchange-rate movements cannot explain.

Product composition makes the technological dimension of this asymmetry visible. Türkiye's principal exports to China include marble and travertine, metal ores, chromium, copper, iron, zinc, and boron products. Imports from China are led by telephones, automatic data-processing machines, electronic communications equipment, compressors, and converters (Republic of Türki-

ye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.-a). Based on International Trade Center data, Yılmaz (2022) calculates that electrical machinery and equipment (SITC 85) and machinery and mechanical appliances (SITC 84) accounted for 51.6% of Türkiye's total imports from China during 2018-2020. Türkiye's exports, by contrast, were concentrated in natural resources and products with lower levels of processing. The deficit, therefore, reflects not only a monetary imbalance but also a qualitative difference in technological specialization.

Some of the machinery, electronic components, and capital goods imported from China are used as inputs in production processes in Türkiye. It would therefore be inaccurate to interpret all imports as final consumption or as a "loss of domestic production." The critical question is how much local value added, exports, and

technological learning these imported inputs generate in Türkiye. Publicly available bilateral and firm-level data do not consistently reveal this relationship. Policy assessment, therefore, requires a framework that measures the contribution of intermediate and capital goods to local design, engineering, supplier development, and export capacity, rather than focusing exclusively on reducing imports.

Foreign direct investment data likewise reveal the gap between trade volume and production integration. According to Ülgen and Umarov (2024), Chinese foreign direct investment stock reached approximately USD 9 billion by the end of 2023. Since 2002, 1,197 Chinese capital companies have been established in Türkiye, accounting for approximately 0.6% of all internationally capitalized companies in the country.

Table 2. Indicator-Based Assessment of the Research Question

Indicator	Current finding	Effect on position
Logistics capacity	USD 660 million railway project and planned capacity increase from 750,000 to 20 million tonnes	Strongly supports the transit function; completion and corridor-wide coordination remain pending.
Corridor volume and time	Conditional projection of 11 million tonnes and a halving of travel time by 2030; approximately 1% share of China-EU trade	High regional importance, but a limited share of global transit.
Trade and technological composition	USD 41.7 billion deficit in 2023; SITC 84 and 85 accounted for 51.6% of imports in 2018-2020	A pronounced asymmetry that weakens the production-hub thesis.
Foreign direct investment	Approximately USD 9 billion in stock at the end of 2023; 1,197 Chinese-capital companies	Some production linkages exist, but they remain limited relative to the scale of trade.
R&D, technology, and local value	The BYD case includes R&D and production targets; realized data on local sourcing, patents, and transfer are not yet available	Transition potential exists, but the characteristics of a verified joint production hub have not yet emerged.

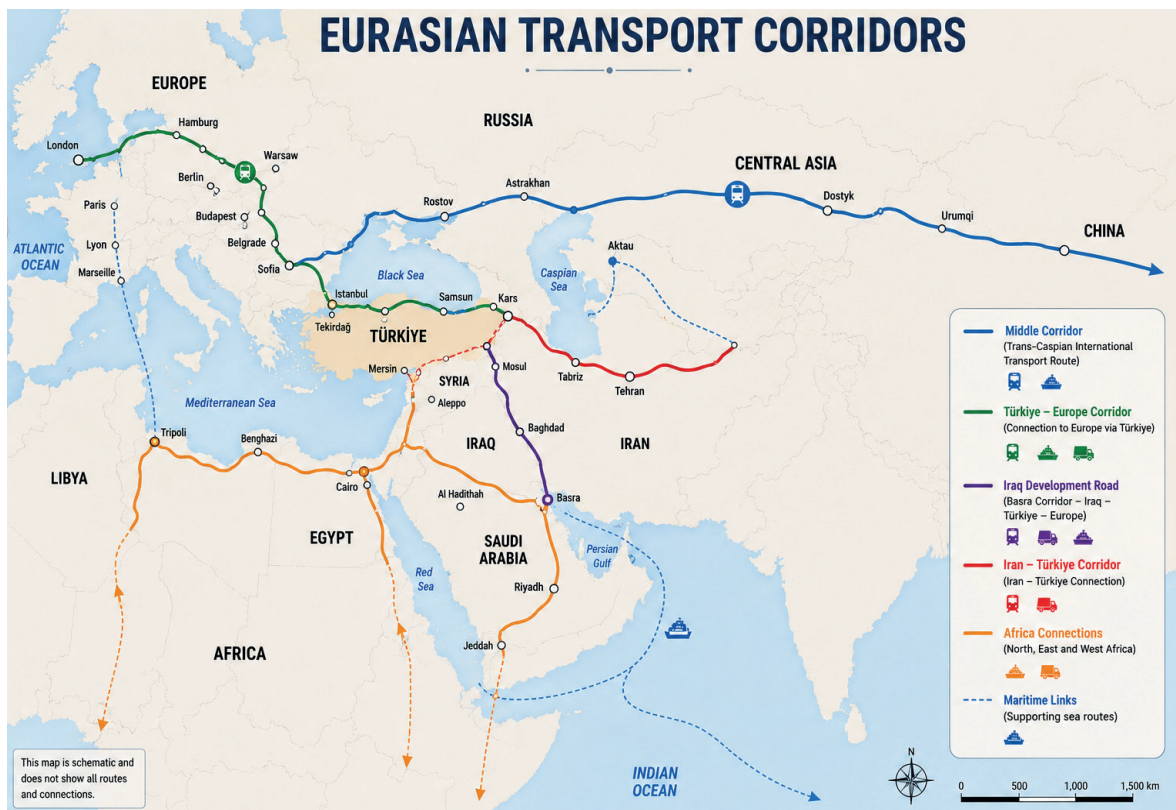
Compiled by the authors.

Although Chinese investment is visible in strategic sectors such as finance, energy, telecommunications, port operations, and infrastructure, export-oriented manufacturing investment remains too limited in scale to offset the large trade deficit. Investment stock alone must also not be taken as evidence of technology transfer or local value added.

The approximately USD 1 billion investment agreement signed with BYD in July 2024 is an important test case for the transition from a transit function to a production function. According to the announcement, the project plans an electric and plug-in hybrid vehicle plant in Manisa with an annual capacity of 150,000 vehicles, a sustainable-mobility R&D center, and up to 5,000 direct jobs; production is targeted to

begin by the end of 2026 (Investment Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024). These are not realized outputs, however, but targets announced in the agreement. The investment's effect on Türkiye's emergence as a joint production hub should be measured through the local-sourcing ratio, components and patents developed in Türkiye, R&D expenditure, skilled employment, export share, and Turkish firms' participation in BYD's global supply network.

Local value added and technology transfer should not be used interchangeably. Local value added refers to the economic value created in Türkiye through wages, purchases of local inputs, taxation, logistics, and service activities. Technology transfer requires the transmission of production knowledge, design capa-



Eurasian transport corridors: Türkiye's connections with Europe, Central Asia, China, the Middle East, and Africa (Map: Prepared by BRIQ based on data from the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure on Türkiye's connectivity and international transport corridors, 2026).

bilities, intellectual property, or advanced engineering practices to institutions and employees in Türkiye. An assembly plant may generate high employment and substantial purchases of local services, but technology transfer may remain limited if key components are imported and design decisions remain abroad. Conversely, a smaller R&D partnership may produce long-term technological effects through patents, licensing, or specialist training. Investment volume, local value, and technological learning should therefore be monitored as separate indicators in assessing a joint production hub.

Taken together, the indicators place Türkiye between a pure transit country and an institutionalized joint production hub, but in an intermediate position dominated by the transit function. Railway investments and the Middle Corridor's growing visibility strengthen its logistical advantage. The persistently high trade deficit, the division between raw-material exports and technology-intensive imports, the relatively limited scale of productive investment, and the lack of public data on realized technology transfer, however, show that the characteristics of a joint production hub have not yet been demonstrated. Geography is a necessary precondition, but it is not itself a transformation of production.

The first axis of policy solutions is exports and market access. Türkiye's exports to China should be diversified toward higher-value-added fields such as processed minerals, machinery and automotive components, medical technology, chemicals, food, and digital services. Compliance with health and technical standards in the Chinese market, product-specific protocols for agricultural and food products, e-commerce channels, and distribution partnerships can support this objective. Success should be monitored not only by export value but also by the number of new products, the share of processed goods, service exports, and durable market access.

The second axis is the quality of investment. Incentives should be tied not only to the amount of capi-

tal, but also to indicators such as the local-sourcing ratio, R&D expenditure, skilled employment, joint patents, engineering training, export capacity, and environmental performance. Joint ventures and supplier-development programs can facilitate Turkish firms' participation in the global value chains of Chinese companies. If public support is calibrated to realized production and technological outputs rather than to announced capacity, the gap between investment volume and development impact can be reduced.

The third axis is data and institutional monitoring capacity. An annual "economic partnership performance framework" could be published under the Türkiye-China Joint Working Group. The framework should monitor the trade balance, the technological intensity of products, the share of greenfield investment, local sourcing, joint R&D and patents, skilled employment, exports to third countries, and the corridor's time-cost performance. Aggregated indicators that protect firm confidentiality would allow investment agreements to be assessed in terms of public benefit and reciprocity.

Türkiye's Strategic Balancing Role and Its Limits

Türkiye's role in Eurasia arises from the combination of its geographical position, institutional ties, and diplomatic capacity. Its location at the intersection of the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean—together with its NATO membership, Customs Union with the EU, position in the Organization of Turkic States, and responsibilities for Black Sea security—enables Türkiye to engage simultaneously with different centers of power. These characteristics do not make Türkiye the "sole" actor capable of stabilizing the power transition in Eurasia. More cautiously, Türkiye may be regarded as one of several actors capable of making a limited but significant contribution through transportation, crisis diplomacy, and regional networks.

The first limit on this balancing capacity is the US-China strategic competition. Advanced technologies, telecommunications, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and investment in critical infrastructure are increasingly treated as matters of security policy. Türkiye's NATO obligations and regulatory integration with the EU market may impose constraints on technological cooperation with China regarding data security, export controls, competition, and standards alignment. At the same time, treating all Chinese investment as a security threat would also constrain opportunities for production and the green transition. A workable strategy should be based not on a claim of equidistance among actors, but on sector-specific risk assessment, supply diversification, and transparent investment screening (Tekdal, 2024; Ülgen & Umarov, 2024).

The second limit is the social and political significance of the Uyghur issue in Türkiye. The Uyghur diaspora in Türkiye, cultural and historical ties, and human-rights debates make it difficult to separate Ankara-Beijing relations entirely from other economic issues. A persistent difference remains between Beijing's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs and Türkiye's social sensitivities. Ignoring this issue will not build trust in the relationship; high-level dialogue, consular access, open communication about cultural and religious rights, and the protection of the diaspora's safety are necessary to keep the disagreement manageable (Öniş & Yalikhun, 2021; Ülgen & Umarov, 2024).

The third limit is the possibility that economic networks may become instruments of coercion. Dependence on a single supplier at critical nodes in telecommunications, finance, energy, or transportation can give the actor at the center of the network disproportionate power over information and access (Farrell & Newman, 2019). For Türkiye, the trade deficit and dependence on China for certain technological inputs require a balance between short-term cost advantages

and long-term resilience. Open procurement, cybersecurity audits, interoperable standards, source diversification, and contractual dispute-resolution provisions can reduce this risk. Strategic balancing should mean measuring and managing dependencies, not denying them.

The economic sustainability of Türkiye's balancing role also depends on whether its Western and Asian connections are framed as mutually exclusive alternatives. Europe remains Türkiye's largest export market and regulatory reference point, while China is important for technology, capital goods, financing, and access to Asian markets. Pursuing these two orientations simultaneously requires that Chinese investments comply with EU competition, environmental, and product-safety standards; that goods produced in Türkiye meet Customs Union rules; and that security consultations with allies be held on sensitive technologies. Successful balancing will arise not from making institutional commitments ambiguous, but from coordinating cooperation with different partners around clear rules and national industrial objectives.

A New Peace Perspective and Sustainable Cooperation

In this study, the "new peace perspective" is used not as an established, independent theory in the international relations literature but as an integrative analytical framework for assessing Türkiye-China relations. The concept does not limit peace to the absence of armed conflict between states; it jointly considers the contribution of balanced economic interdependence, sustainable development, institutionalized connectivity, and uninterrupted diplomatic dialogue to predictability. This approach draws on Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace, Keohane and Nye's (2012) framework of complex interdependence, and debates on commercial peace.

According to the commercial-peace approach,

deepening economic relations may increase the opportunity costs of conflict and diplomatic rupture. O Neal and Russett (1997) provide evidence that reciprocal trade can reduce the probability of interstate military conflict. This outcome, however, is not unconditional. Barbieri (1996) shows that intense dependence may increase the risk of dispute when the nature and symmetry of economic ties are not taken into account. In Copeland's (1996) trade-expectations approach, the decisive factor is not merely current trade volume, but expectations about whether mutually beneficial trade will continue in the future. Farrell and Newman (2019), meanwhile, demonstrate that asymmetric networks may be used for sanctions, surveillance, and access restrictions.



The USD 41.7 billion deficit in Türkiye-China relations in 2023 and the technology-intensive composition of imports directly engage this boundary condition. The new peace perspective is therefore not a deterministic proposition that “trade guarantees peace,” but rather a conditional claim that interdependence, managed through balanced and reliable institutions, can reduce the risk of conflict.

The causal mechanism underlying the new peace perspective comprises four links. First, balanced trade, reciprocal investment, and joint production increase the costs of political rupture for both sides. Second,

transportation and production networks increase the number of firms, workers, local governments, and expert communities that benefit from the continuation of the relationship. Third, joint working groups, data sharing, and dispute-resolution mechanisms reduce misperception and uncertainty. Fourth, mediation and crisis diplomacy keep communication channels open during periods of political disagreement. Connectivity contributes to stability only through these institutional and diplomatic intermediate mechanisms.

The mechanism's boundary conditions are symmetry, institutionalization, diversification, and positive expectations about the future. If the trade deficit continues to grow, dependence on critical inputs remains one-sided, investments fail to generate local benefits, security dilemmas intensify, or economic networks are used for political coercion, greater connectivity may not produce greater peace. The USD 41.7 billion deficit in Türkiye-China relations in 2023 and the technology-intensive composition of imports directly engage this boundary condition. The new peace perspective is therefore not a deterministic proposition that “trade guarantees peace,” but rather a conditional claim that interdependence, managed through balanced and reliable institutions, can reduce the risk of conflict.

China's Global Development, Global Security, and Global Civilization Initiatives present an official discourse on global governance that emphasizes development, sovereignty, dialogue, and cultural diversity. The Global Civilization Initiative was announced in 2023, centered on the principles of respect for the diversity of civilizations, mutual learning, and people-to-people exchange (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). These documents reveal Beijing's policy preferences and legitimizing discourse; they do not constitute independent empirical evidence that the initiatives produce peace in practice. Their significance for Türkiye-China relations depends on testing concrete investment and diplomatic mechanisms against the criteria of reciprocity and transparency.

Türkiye's complementary contribution lies in its capacity for mediation and facilitation. Following the "Mediation for Peace" initiative launched by Türkiye and Finland within the United Nations in 2010, the Group of Friends of Mediation was established; Türkiye has hosted the Istanbul Mediation Conferences since 2012 (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). During the Russia-Ukraine War, the talks in Antalya and Istanbul, and the Black Sea Grain Initiative launched on July 22, 2022, showed that Ankara could open limited, functional areas of cooperation between the parties. The Joint Coordination Center in Istanbul brought together representatives of Russia, Ukraine, Türkiye, and the United Nations (United Nations, 2022). These initiatives did not end

the war; they temporarily facilitated communication and the provision of specific public goods.

The Türkiye-China connection is clear at this point, but conditional. If alignment between the BRI and the Middle Corridor generates joint production, local sourcing, and predictable transportation, the number of actors benefiting from the continuation of the relationship will increase. Regular economic consultation, crisis communication, customs and data standards, the settlement of investment disputes, and inter-university research networks may reduce uncertainty. If trade asymmetry deepens, the Uyghur issue remains a suppressed source of tension, or if technological networks generate one-sided coercive power, connectivity may produce vulnerability rath-



In Türkiye-China relations, the combination of economic reciprocity, institutionalized connectivity, and sustained diplomatic dialogue may enable interdependence to become a mechanism for reducing the risk of conflict (Illustration: The Daily CPEC, 2025).

er than stability. The contribution of the new peace perspective to bilateral relations depends on combining China's investment and production capacity with Türkiye's connectivity and diplomatic instruments within a balanced, measurable, and institutionalized partnership.

For the framework to be monitored empirically, claims about peace and stability must be tied to measurable intermediate outcomes. The continuation of regular high-level and technical meetings, the resolution of trade disputes through predictable mechanisms, the operation of joint crisis protocols during corridor disruptions, a more balanced distribution of economic benefits, and the preservation of communication channels despite political disagreements are positive indicators. Conversely, sudden trade restrictions, unilateral imposition of standards, making access to critical networks conditional on political demands, investments that fail to generate local benefits, and social sensitivities that interrupt diplomatic communication are signs of failure. These observable outcomes transform the concept of "new peace" from a normative aspiration into a set of analytically testable propositions.

Conclusion

This study has assessed the stage reached in Türkiye-China relations on the 55th anniversary of diplomatic ties by distinguishing between a "transit country" and a "joint production hub." The research question has a clear answer: Türkiye currently occupies an intermediate position in which the transit function predominates. The Middle Corridor and railway investments in Türkiye increase the country's logistical importance, but geographical position and transport capacity alone do not create a joint production hub. Such a transformation requires China-originated investments to generate local sourcing, joint R&D, realized technology

transfer, skilled employment, and exports to third countries.

Three principal findings support this conclusion. First, exports of USD 3.3 billion, imports of USD 44.98 billion, and a deficit of USD 41.7 billion in 2023 demonstrate the pronounced trade asymmetry in the relationship. Second, the fact that machinery and electrical-equipment groups accounted for 51.6% of imports from China during 2018-2020, alongside Türkiye's raw-material-intensive exports, reveals a gap in technological specialization. Third, although Chinese investment stock of approximately USD 9 billion at the end of 2023 and BYD's production and R&D plan indicate transition potential, realized local value added and technological outputs do not yet substantiate the claim that Türkiye is a joint production hub. The World Bank's projection of 11 million tonnes for the Middle Corridor in 2030 is likewise a conditional regional opportunity; the expected share of approximately 1% of China-EU trade reveals the corridor's limits.

The article's theoretical contribution is to integrate power transition and geoeconomic connectivity through production indicators and a conditional peace mechanism. The new peace perspective does not treat trade and infrastructure as automatic peace-producers; instead, it identifies a balanced distribution of economic benefits, positive expectations for the continuation of future cooperation, institutionalized dispute resolution, and supply diversification as necessary conditions. At the policy level, priority should be given to annual performance indicators, local sourcing and R&D requirements in investment incentives, customs and digitalization alignment, and transparent management of technological risks. Green transformation, electric mobility, renewable energy, the digital economy, and university-industry cooperation are the principal fields through which logistical proximity may be converted into a production partnership.

The study's limitations are the irregularity of firm-level data on local value added, joint patents, technology transfer, and investment performance, and the fact that the 2030 corridor figures are model projections rather than realized data. Document analysis reveals mechanisms and indicator patterns within the relationship, but it does not measure the magnitude of causal effects. Future research should compare the effects of local sourcing, R&D, and exports using Turkish Statistical Institute (TURK-STAT) microdata, UN Comtrade product-level series, firm surveys, and case studies of Chinese investments in Türkiye. Once such data are available, it will be possible to test more precisely over time whether Türkiye has moved from a transit-dominant intermediate position to a joint production hub. Such monitoring would also enable regular assessment, after the 55th anniversary, of whether the relationship is moving from discourse to measurable production outcomes. 

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China-Arab Cooperation under the Digital Silk Road Framework: A Case Study of Jordan



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ABSTRACT

The Digital Silk Road (DSR), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, offers partner countries strategic opportunities in telecommunications, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, e-commerce, and smart cities. This paper examines China-Arab cooperation under the DSR framework through a case study of Jordan, located at the crossroads of the Levant, the Gulf, and North Africa. Drawing on literature analysis, official reports, the study finds that Chinese companies, particularly Huawei and ZTE, have played a significant role in upgrading Jordan's digital infrastructure, expanding network coverage, and cultivating local talent through ICT training programs. The cooperation also faces challenges, including data security concerns, regulatory misalignment, skills shortages, and geopolitical pressures. The paper argues that, with improved digital governance, stronger legal frameworks, and strategic investment, the DSR can accelerate Jordan's digital transformation, enhance its economic resilience, and reinforce its position as a regional digital hub, thus fostering sustainable and mutually beneficial China-Arab cooperation.

Keywords: China-Arab cooperation, digital infrastructure, Digital Silk Road, digital transformation, Jordan.

Introduction

THE RAPID ADVANCEMENT OF DIGITAL technologies is driving countries toward greater connectivity and economic transformation. Against this background, China advanced the idea of digital connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The policy foundations of the Digital Silk Road (hereinafter referred to as the DSR) can be traced to the 2015 Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, jointly issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce, which called for the development of cross-border communication networks and the advancement of an "Information Silk Road". (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015) The

concept of the DSR was formally introduced by President Xi Jinping at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, marking its official establishment as a key component of the BRI (Xi, 2017). The DSR aims to promote digital connectivity, technological cooperation, and innovation-driven development among partner countries. It covers a broad spectrum of sectors, including telecommunications infrastructure, 5G, data centers, cloud computing, AI, e-commerce, smart cities, satellite navigation, and digital governance. Geographically, it spans Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, with notable partners including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Oman. The initiative is particularly significant for Middle Eastern nations, which have made digital transformation a strategic pillar of their national development.

Jordan is strategically located at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Recognizing the importance of digital transformation for economic diversification and competitiveness, the country has identified it as a national development priority through *the Jordan Digital Economy Strategy 2021–2025*. The strategy seeks to accelerate digital infrastructure development, expand digital government services, strengthen digital skills, foster innovation and entrepreneurship, and increase the digital economy's contribution to national growth (Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, 2021). With its advanced digital technologies and extensive experience in digital infrastructure development, China has become an important partner for Jordan in advancing this agenda (Senate of Jordan, 2026).

The Digital Silk Road is seen as a mechanism for bridging the digital divide in developing countries by leveraging advanced digital technologies and expertise from China (Arsentyeva, 2024; He & Zhou, 2024). Within the framework of China-Arab cooperation, relevant studies often highlight the mutual benefits of this partnership. Arab countries, including Jordan, are embracing digital transformation to diversify their economies and improve public services.

Existing research has extensively analyzed the Belt and Road Initiative and its geopolitical, eco-

nomic, and social implications. As digital technologies play an increasingly important role in the global economy, the DSR has gradually become a new focus of academic attention (Brown & Burjanadze, 2020; Oreglia & Zheng, 2024). Early literature mainly focused on the conceptual definition of the DSR, its national-level objectives, and the types of digital infrastructure projects involved (Shen, 2018), emphasizing its role in promoting digital infrastructure construction, increasing internet penetration, and facilitating digital trade (Heeks et al., 2024). The DSR is seen as a mechanism for bridging the digital divide in developing countries by leveraging advanced digital technologies and expertise from China (Arsentyeva, 2024; He & Zhou, 2024). Within the framework of China-Arab cooperation, relevant studies often highlight the mutual benefits of this partnership. Arab countries, including Jordan, are embracing digital transformation to diversify their economies and improve public services.

China's involvement in developing digital infrastructure and emerging digital solutions across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has also attracted increasing scholarly attention (Dahdal & Abdel Ghafar, 2025). Research indicates that Chinese companies, particularly Huawei and ZTE, have played a significant role in telecommunications networks, data centers, and smart city solutions in North Africa. (El Kadi, 2024) Taking Egypt and Algeria as illustrative cases, both governments are investing considerably in upgrading their network infrastructure. Egypt's internet penetration rate rose from 29% in 2009 to 72% in 2020, while Algeria reached 63% in the same year. Mobile penetration stands at 110% and 105.8%, respectively. This rising demand has driven Huawei and ZTE to expand their local presence: Huawei employs

roughly 1,000 staff in Egypt and about 500 in Algeria, with a localization rate of 70% in both countries; ZTE Algeria has approximately 200 in-house employees and 500 outsourced workers, with a similar proportion of local hires. As a signature project, the Huawei-AFGO-Tech joint venture mobile phone factory in Algiers, launched in 2019, has a monthly production capacity of 15,000 units, representing a concrete manifestation of the Digital Silk Road in North Africa (El Kadi, 2024).

In addition, Huawei has established ICT academies in cooperation with several Jordanian universities to cultivate digital talent and support the country's digital transformation (Al-Ahliyya Amman University, 2025; The Jordan Times, 2019; Yarmouk University, 2024).

The existing literature on Jordan has addressed its strategic importance in the Middle East (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2026) and its digital transformation efforts (Almajali, Thuneibat, & Qatawneh, 2025). However, few studies have systematically examined the China-Arab Digital Silk Road cooperation framework through a detailed case study of Jordan. Jordan represents a particularly valuable case for analysis because it is among the Arab countries that have actively pursued digital transformation through initiatives such as the Jordan Digital Economy Strategy 2021–2025 and the Economic Modernization Vision. At the same time, Jordan has developed extensive digital cooperation with China, particularly in telecommunications infrastructure, digital skills development, and technology transfer.



The DSR aims to promote digital connectivity, technological cooperation, and innovation-driven development among partner countries (Photo: CGTN, 2021).

Moreover, unlike resource-rich Gulf states, Jordan is a resource-constrained developing country whose digital transformation relies more heavily on international cooperation and external technological support, making it a useful case for assessing the developmental impact of the Digital Silk Road on Arab developing countries. Therefore, a more in-depth investigation is needed regarding specific projects, overall trends, and the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the DSR on Jordan's digital landscape.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research method, with case study analysis as its core, to examine the practice of the China-Arab Digital Silk Road cooperation framework in Jordan. The case study approach is suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena in their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). It helps to holistically understand the interaction between DSR initiatives and Jordan's digital transformation efforts.

Data for this study are drawn from four types of secondary sources: (a) academic literature on the Belt and Road Initiative, the Digital Silk Road, China-Arab relations, and Jordan's digital economy; (b) official reports and policy documents from government agencies (e.g., China's Ministry of Commerce, Jordan's Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship) and international organizations (e.g., World Bank); (c) news articles and media reports from reputable outlets; and (d) corporate reports and press releases from Chinese ICT companies operating in Jordan, including Huawei and ZTE. These sources were triangulated to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

The Digital Silk Road Initiative and China-Jordan Cooperation

Since its official proposal in 2017, the Digital Silk Road has evolved from a concept of digital infrastructure connectivity into a comprehensive framework encompassing technology standards, platform ecosystems, and data governance. For Jordan, the DSR offers not only access to advanced digital technologies but also a strategic pathway to accelerate its national transformation agenda. The alignment between China's digital cooperation vision and Jordan's domestic strategy has laid the foundation for deepening bilateral engagement. Understanding this evolving relationship requires a closer look at the DSR's global expansion, Jordan's own digital strategy upgrades, the country's specific needs as a partner, the institutionalization of China-Jordan cooperation, and recent project-level developments.

The Evolving Concept of the Digital Silk Road and Its Global Context

The DSR is a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, reflecting China's commitment to promoting global digital connectivity and cooperation. It has been in development for over a decade. Its scope extends far beyond early infrastructure construction, encompassing land and submarine cables, 4G/5G networks, artificial intelligence, data centers, cloud infrastructure, smart cities, fintech, cross-border e-commerce, cybersecurity systems, and even nanotechnology and quantum computing (Cai et al., 2025).

In terms of global reach, by the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2023, China had signed over 200 cooperation docu-

ments on the joint construction of the Belt and Road with 152 countries and 32 international organizations, covering nearly 80 percent of United Nations member states (Wang & Wang, 2023). Within the DSR framework, China's Bei-Dou Navigation Satellite System has achieved extensive global coverage, and Chinese telecommunications firms, led by Huawei, have played a foundational role in expanding mobile network infrastructure across Africa (Dahdal & Abdel Ghafar, 2025; Gordon & Nouwens, 2022). In contrast to the early phase of China's overseas engagement, which was dominated by state-owned enterprises undertaking large-scale infrastructure projects, the current wave of digital initiatives is increasingly driven by private Chinese companies, including Huawei, Alibaba,

ZTE, Tencent, and Hikvision (Dahdal & Abdel Ghafar, 2025; Gordon & Nouwens, 2022; Hussain et al., 2024). Chinese firms have also been actively involved in digital infrastructure projects globally, including data centers and cloud nodes (Gordon & Nouwens, 2022).

The Digital Silk Road is not limited to hardware exports. In recent years, China's cooperation model has gradually expanded from building digital infrastructure and providing hardware and technical services to exporting digital models and platforms, and even participating in shaping global internet governance architectures (Stanford HAI, 2025). Chinese open-source AI models have gained significant global traction, with Alibaba's "Tongyi Qianwen" series emerging as one of the world's largest providers of open-source AI systems.



Within the DSR framework, China's Bei-Dou Navigation Satellite System has achieved extensive global coverage (Photo: Xinhua, 2024).

This indicates that the Digital Silk Road is moving toward more advanced technical standards and governance concepts (Chosun Ilbo, 2026).

As the Digital Silk Road (DSR) continues to deepen, American academia has also begun to view the initiative through a strategic competition lens, regarding it as both an instrument for China to advance its geostrategic objectives and a significant challenge to U.S. geopolitical advantages and digital dominance.

As the DSR continues to deepen, American academia has also begun to view the initiative through a strategic competition lens, regarding it as both an instrument for China to advance its geostrategic objectives and a significant challenge to U.S. geopolitical advantages and digital dominance. Against this backdrop, the U.S. government issued the Artificial Intelligence Action Plan in 2025, which directly responds to the DSR by pledging to “counter Chinese influence in international governance bodies,” strengthen enforcement of AI compute export controls, and export the “American AI stack,” including hardware, software, and standards to allied nations as an alternative to Chinese technology (The White House, 2025). The U.S. AI strategy is widely seen as a direct response to China’s digital expansion, largely for two reasons: first, the DSR is reshaping the global geopolitical landscape and chal-

lenging existing U.S. dominance; second, competition between China and the United States in the technology sector, particularly in digital technologies, continues to intensify (Feng, 2025). This strategic deployment in the AI field also indirectly underscores the growing influence of the DSR in the global digital governance landscape.

The Iterative Upgrading of Jordan’s Digital Transformation Strategy

Jordan’s digital transformation has evolved through successive policy phases, each building upon prior frameworks (Al-Jaghoub & Westrup, 2003). After completing the “Jordan 2025 Vision” and the “National Digital Transformation and Implementation Plan 2021–2025,” the government approved a new strategy for 2026–2028 at the end of 2025 (Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, 2025). According to the official document, the strategy aims to build a secure, digitally capable state that leverages next-generation technologies to drive economic growth and social development. Its core pillars include citizen-centered services, seamless digital journeys, proactive government delivery, data-driven decision-making, and digital inclusion. The strategy lists 57 projects covering areas such as full digitization of government services, digital identity, the Sanad application, data governance, digital health and education, cybersecurity, 5G, open data, a green digital economy, and emerging technologies, to be implemented in phases over three years (Khaberni, 2025).

Compared with earlier policies that focused on discrete ICT infrastructure projects, the most notable change in the new strategy is the integration of digitalization into a broader governance

and economic modernization agenda. This shift reflects a new policy logic: successful digital transformation depends not only on technological inputs but also on the coordinated alignment of institutional factors, including administrative reform, legal frameworks, human resources, and budgetary systems. Concretely, the strategy introduces a “digital-by-design” principle, requiring that digital logic be embedded in public service processes from the initial design stage, rather than retrofitting digitization onto existing paper-based procedures. At the implementation level, the strategy establishes systematic monitoring mechanisms, including a set of sec-

tor-level main indicators and numerous sub-indicators, with designated agencies regularly assessing progress. The strategy also lists seven national enablers: advanced data technologies, secure digital payment systems, cybersecurity frameworks, 5G and fiber-optic networks, digital identity solutions, government platforms, and skilled digital human capital. These enablers are highly interdependent; for example, the effectiveness of digital identity systems depends on robust cybersecurity and data governance. The core innovation of this institutional design is that it advances these enablers as an integrated whole rather than in isolation (MoDEE, 2025).



Jordan's digital transformation has evolved through successive policy phases, each building upon prior frameworks (Illustration: mozon-tech, n.d.).

This shift from a “project-driven” to a “system-driven” approach provides a more stable institutional foundation for Jordan to attract external technology cooperation and investment than earlier frameworks did.

On the one hand, they seek to maintain long-standing strategic and economic relations with the United States and Europe; on the other hand, they aim to diversify their technological partnerships through engagement with China under the Digital Silk Road (DSR), thereby gaining access to additional sources of digital technology, investment, and market opportunities.

At the regional level, Jordan’s digital transformation interacts in complex ways with China’s Digital Silk Road (DSR). In contrast to Western countries that have imposed bans on Chinese telecommunications equipment providers, most Middle Eastern and North African governments have not followed suit and continue to cooperate with Chinese suppliers, largely due to their demand for cost-effective digital infrastructure, technology-transfer opportunities, and pragmatic development priorities. DSR-related digital infrastructure projects are rapidly connecting the region’s economies with China’s 5G networks, data centers, and cloud platforms—these places Jordan and other re-

gional countries in a distinctive geopolitical position. On the one hand, they seek to maintain long-standing strategic and economic relations with the United States and Europe; on the other hand, they aim to diversify their technological partnerships through engagement with China under the Digital Silk Road (DSR), thereby gaining access to additional sources of digital technology, investment, and market opportunities. Rather than choosing between competing powers, these countries seek to maximize the benefits derived from both sides while preserving their strategic autonomy. Consequently, how to strike a dynamic balance among these objectives has become a key policy challenge for Jordan’s decision-makers (Dahdal & Abdel Ghafar, 2025). The institutional maturity of Jordan’s current strategy, namely its capacity to integrate governance mechanisms, human capital development, and policy coordination, provides a better basis for managing this balance than the fragmented policy systems of the past. However, it should be noted that advantages in institutional design do not automatically guarantee implementation outcomes. Drawing on the literature on digital governance, digital sovereignty, and geopolitical competition, this study argues that whether this institutional potential translates into actual cooperative results depends on three interrelated factors: the consistency of implementation and the efficiency of cross-ministerial coordination, Jordan’s ability to safeguard its digital sovereignty and maintain vendor diversification in negotiations, and the trajectory of great-power geopolitical competition. The coming years will be a critical period for observing whether Jordan can truly benefit from the DSR while mitigating related risks.

Jordan's National Characteristics and Demand for Digital Partners

Jordan is located in the heart of the Middle East, bordered by Syria to the north, Iraq to the east, Saudi Arabia to the south, and Palestine to the west. It sits at the intersection of the Levant, the Gulf, and North Africa, serving as a strategic corridor linking major regional economies. This unique geographical position not only makes it a natural node for regional flows of goods and capital but also positions it to become a regional data hub in the digital domain.

In terms of its national structure, Jordan has several distinctive features. First, it is relative-

ly poor in natural resources but rich in human capital. The information and communications technology sector accounts for about 12 percent of Jordan's GDP (The Jordan Times, 2021), a relatively high level in the Arab region, and the country is widely regarded as one of the important centers for software development, outsourcing, and IT services in the Middle East. Second, its population is young and digitally literate, with an internet penetration rate exceeding 90 percent and very high smartphone usage (Digital Watch Observatory, 2025). This provides a broad user base and market space for the development of the digital economy. Third, a remittance-based economy coexists with brain drain.



The information and communications technology sector accounts for about 12 percent of Jordan's GDP (Illustration: Jordan News Agency, 2026).

Approximately 50 percent of Jordan's potential workforce works abroad, and the country has long faced a serious talent loss problem (Commercial Office of the Embassy of China in Jordan, 2019). At the same time, Jordan has cultivated a large pool of overseas technical talent, creating favorable conditions for talent return and knowledge transfer.

Under pressure to diversify the economy in the post-oil era, the Jordanian government has, in recent years, made ICT and the digital economy core pillars of its national development strategy (MoDEE, 2025). However, constrained by a limited domestic market, insufficient investment in research and development, and a structural mismatch between supply and demand for high-tech talent, Jordan still faces many obstacles to advancing its comprehensive digital transformation. These characteristics constitute the internal driving force behind Jordan's active pursuit of external digital partners.

Consolidation and Institutionalization of the China-Jordan Digital Cooperation Framework

China has become an important partner for Jordan in advancing its digital development, leveraging its technological strengths and extensive experience in key areas of digital transformation, including 5G networks, cloud computing, e-commerce platforms, and smart city solutions. From Jordan's perspective, the solutions offered by Chinese companies are not only competitively priced but also capable of rapid deployment. This aligns well with the practical requirements of a developing economy like Jordan, which has limited fiscal space and seeks to upgrade its infrastructure at a relatively low cost.

Against this backdrop, strategic understand-

ing and institutionalized cooperation between the two countries have continued to deepen. At the high-level policy coordination level, China and Jordan established a strategic partnership in 2015 and, in 2019, signed a memorandum of understanding to jointly build the Belt and Road Initiative, explicitly listing the digital economy as a priority area for cooperation. At the global multilateral level, both China and Arab countries have expressed their commitment to strengthening digital partnerships. During the China-Arab Cultural Dialogue held in Dubai in 2025, the China Internet Development Foundation formally proposed four cooperative initiatives to create a "more dynamic, more sustainable, and more inclusive new ecosystem for China-Arab digital cooperation". The initiatives cover areas such as digital content creation platforms, regular dialogue on AI ethics and governance, cooperation in digital public welfare, and mechanisms for youth innovation exchange (CRI Online, 2025). Progress on these multilateral frameworks has provided more stable and predictable institutional guarantees for bilateral China-Jordan digital cooperation.

The "2026 World Mayors Dialogue · Xi'an" event held in Xi'an in April 2026, with cities from the League of Arab States as main guests (Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, 2026), focused on core topics such as "roots of civilization and smart governance" and "green transition and digital intelligence renewal," exploring ways to effectively translate national-level strategic consensus into practical cooperation at the local and city levels. The event brought dialogue to the frontiers of smart city operations, smart manufacturing production lines, and world cultural heritage sites, showcasing the practical experience of Chinese cities in digital governance and providing actionable reference models for China-Jordan cooperation at the sub-national level.

China-Jordan digital cooperation is shifting from project-driven to institution-driven, forming a three-tier institutional system encompassing multilateral frameworks, bilateral agreements, and local cooperation. This continuously consolidated institutional foundation provides solid policy guarantees and mechanisms to deepen bilateral cooperation in the digital domain further.

Recent Developments in Chinese Enterprises' Participation in Jordan's Digital Construction

Cooperation between China and Jordan in digital infrastructure is no longer limited to traditional telecom equipment trade. It has gradually

expanded into areas such as smart government, smart education, smart healthcare, smart energy, and smart finance. Some Chinese companies are also changing their business models: in the past, they mainly sold hardware to Jordan; now, they are beginning to provide integrated digital solutions. This suggests that their role in the Jordanian market is shifting from external technology suppliers to long-term digital transformation partners.

In cloud computing and data centers, Chinese involvement is deepening as well. By building cloud infrastructure, deploying AI applications, and investing in data centers, these companies are gradually establishing a foothold in the Middle East's digital ecosystem.



In the memorandum of understanding signed by China and Jordan in 2019 to jointly build the Belt and Road Initiative, the digital economy was identified as a priority area of cooperation. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with King Abdullah II of Jordan in Amman, Jordan, Dec 15, 2025 (Photo: China Daily, 2025).

Amman aims to become a regional data hub, and Chinese firms' capabilities in cloud computing and data centers fit well with that ambition. This alignment not only facilitates cooperation in data storage and processing but could also help Jordan better participate in regional data flows and the data-value chain. For Jordan, improving data center and cloud capacity is an important foundation for realizing its vision of becoming a digital services hub, and Chinese technology exports are playing a catalytic role in this process.

Breakthroughs in fintech have extended China-Jordan digital cooperation from traditional infrastructure into areas more directly related to people's lives, such as inclusive finance and digital payments.

In the area of talent development and university cooperation, some tangible progress has been made in recent years. Chinese companies have established long-term partnerships with several Jordanian universities to run ICT training programs jointly. These collaborations usually include curriculum development, teacher training, and industry certification – moving away from one-off technology transfer toward systematic capacity building. Starting from one or two pilot projects, they have expanded to cover more higher-education institutions, forming a complete talent development chain from classroom teaching to industry certification. This model helps alleviate the shortage of

high-skilled digital talent that Jordan faces in its digital economic development, while also providing Chinese firms with the human capital needed for their long-term local presence. In addition, Chinese companies' performance in Jordan's fintech sector has been recognized by the local market, and their technical capabilities have received positive feedback in industry awards. Breakthroughs in fintech have extended China-Jordan digital cooperation from traditional infrastructure into areas more directly related to people's lives, such as inclusive finance and digital payments.

The activities of Chinese enterprises in Jordan follow a fairly clear evolutionary path: starting with communications network infrastructure, then expanding to digital platforms and vertical applications, and further extending to talent development and standard alignment. This suggests that China-Jordan digital cooperation is moving beyond conventional hardware trade toward a broader framework encompassing the digital economy, talent development, technical standards, and digital governance. At the institutional level, the basis of bilateral cooperation is gradually shifting from individual projects to more systematic coordination and alignment. With the ongoing development of multilateral frameworks such as the China-Arab Summit and regional digital governance forums, this cooperation is likely to enter a phase that emphasizes institutional coordination, mutual recognition of technologies, and sustainable development. How deep and how far this process goes, of course, will also depend on the two sides' ability to sustain dialogue and coordination on data governance, technical standards, industrial policies, and related issues.



Jordan Investment Minister Tareq Abughazaleh participated in the opening of the China International Supply Chain Expo (CISCE) in Beijing on June 23, 2026, highlighting Jordan's investment opportunities (Photo: Jordan News Agency, 2026).

Opportunities and Challenges

The practice of China-Arab Digital Silk Road cooperation in Jordan presents both opportunities and challenges. These challenges are not solely technical or economic. Still, they are shaped by broader geopolitical dynamics that influence technological choices and regulatory frameworks in the context of major power competition (Dahdal & Abdel Ghafar, 2025). A systematic understanding of both challenges and opportunities is therefore essential for maximizing the benefits of the DSR while effectively managing potential risks.

Opportunities

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) offers Jordan a significant opportunity to accelerate its digital

transformation. Chinese firms bring advanced technology, substantial investment capacity, and experience in rapid deployment, which can help Jordan upgrade its digital infrastructure in key areas such as high-speed networks, cloud computing, and data centers within a relatively short timeframe. This acceleration effect is important for Jordan to remain competitive in the global digital economy and to achieve the targets set out in its national digital strategy.

Digitalization is also a core driver of economic growth. By improving digital connectivity and fostering local digital industries, the DSR can stimulate new economic activities, create employment, and help Jordan reduce its reliance on traditional sectors. Enhanced cross-border digital trade, for instance, opens up wider international markets for Jordanian small and medium-sized enterprises, thereby strengthening overall economic resilience.

Jordan's own economic modernization program, announced in early 2026, has listed the digital economy as one of its eight key driving sectors, further confirming the central role of digitalization in the national economic strategy.

By early 2026, cooperation between Chinese companies and several Jordanian universities had entered substantive operational stages, with courses covering routing and switching, cybersecurity, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence.

Another important dimension is knowledge transfer and talent development. China's involvement in Jordan's ICT sector extends beyond hardware construction to include systematic investment in human resources. Training programs run in cooperation with Chinese firms equip Jordanian youth with valuable skills in emerging technologies, helping address the country's need for a skilled digital workforce. Such knowledge transfer not only helps build local technical capacity but also lays a talent foundation for the long-term sustainability of digital initiatives. By early 2026, cooperation between Chinese companies and several Jordanian universities had entered substantive operational stages, with courses covering routing and switching, cybersecurity, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence.

As a key node country in the DSR, Jordan is well positioned further to consolidate its role as a regional digital hub. By improving digital con-

nections with China and other Belt and Road partner countries, Jordan can facilitate broader regional integration, cross-border trade, and cultural exchange, becoming an important node in a wider digital network. This status can, in turn, attract more foreign direct investment and promote the development of regional digital cooperation mechanisms. The Central Asia Internet Governance Forum, launched in April 2026, with its theme "Digital Silk Road: From Isolation to Connectivity and Digital Integration", indicates that regional multilateral frameworks are incorporating hub countries such as Jordan into a broader digital cooperation agenda.

Finally, deep cooperation with Chinese technology companies gives Jordan access to cutting-edge technologies and innovative digital solutions. Such external technological input can stimulate local innovation ecosystems, encourage investment in research and development, and contribute to a more dynamic, technology-intensive industrial system. In frontier areas such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and fintech, the demonstration effects of China-Jordan cooperation projects can help attract more entrepreneurs and capital to the Jordanian market. The virtual assets law and blockchain technology policy approved by Jordan at the end of 2025 provide clearer institutional guidance for business innovation.

Challenges

Despite the significant opportunities, China-Jordan Digital Silk Road cooperation faces several challenges that require close attention.

Data security and privacy protection. Under the DSR framework, data flows have increased substantially, making issues of data security, pri-



vacy protection, and data sovereignty more prominent. Jordan has enacted relevant data protection laws, but the details of enforcement and rules for cross-border data flows still need improvement. Some international concerns have been raised about the security of Chinese equipment; such trust deficits need to be addressed through transparent technical audits and joint security mechanisms. In recent years, Jordan has issued a data governance framework policy and has gradually built an institutional system covering data classification, cross-border transfer auditing, and privacy impact assessment. Nevertheless, balancing digital economic development with personal data protection remains an issue that requires continuous coordination between the two.

Consistency of regulatory frameworks and governance standards. China and Jordan differ

in technical standards, cybersecurity regulations, and market access for digital services. For instance, their respective cybersecurity classification protection standards differ in certain control measures from internationally accepted standards; the legal validity of electronic signatures and contracts also requires cross-border coordination. These differences may lead to increased compliance costs or technical integration barriers in actual cooperation. In accordance with the principle of respecting each other's legal systems, both sides should gradually narrow standard gaps through bilateral consultations and technical committees, and explore mutual recognition arrangements.

Debt sustainability and financial transparency. Large-scale digital infrastructure projects related to the DSR often involve substantial investment.

Although China's loan terms are often more flexible than those of Western financial institutions, Jordan still needs to carefully assess the long-term financial burden of each project. Ensuring transparency in financing arrangements and properly designing repayment schedules are crucial to preventing the accumulation of sovereign debt risks. Jordan's current public debt as a share of GDP remains relatively high. While expanding digital infrastructure investment, it should adhere to the principles of living within its means and phased implementation.

Although the DSR aims to promote digital connectivity, significant disparities in digital access persist across regions, income groups, and between urban and rural areas in Jordan.

Domestic digital divide and inclusive development. Although the DSR aims to promote digital connectivity, significant disparities in digital access persist across regions, income groups, and between urban and rural areas in Jordan. Without targeted policy interventions, improvements in digital infrastructure may first benefit urban and developed areas, thereby widening existing inequalities. Some large cities have already taken the lead in deploying next-generation mobile communication trial networks, while broadband coverage in remote rural areas remains low. Jordan's national digital transformation strategy has listed "digital

inclusion" as one of its core pillars and has set universal service targets. Achieving truly inclusive development will require comprehensive measures, including educational outreach, terminal subsidies, and the decentralization of public services.

Addressing the above challenges requires proactive, forward-looking policies, transparent and efficient governance mechanisms, and a balanced approach to international partnerships on Jordan's part. By carefully managing opportunities and risks, Jordan can fully realize its digital transformation goals under the DSR framework while effectively safeguarding its national interests and digital sovereignty.

Conclusion

The China-Arab Digital Silk Road cooperation, as exemplified by Jordan, constitutes an important and evolving dimension of bilateral relations. This study shows that the DSR offers substantial opportunities for Jordan to accelerate its digital transformation, promote economic growth, and enhance human capital. Chinese enterprises, particularly leading telecommunications companies such as Huawei and ZTE, have played a key role in upgrading Jordan's digital infrastructure and advancing talent development. These cooperative efforts are well aligned with Jordan's national digital strategy and have made tangible contributions to its vision of becoming a regional digital hub.

At the same time, the analysis reveals several challenges that need to be actively addressed to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of China-Jordan DSR cooperation. Issues such



Jordan's national digital transformation strategy has listed "digital inclusion" as one of its core pillars and has set universal service targets (Photo: TechAfricanews, 2026).

as data security, regulatory coordination, geopolitical sensitivities, and debt sustainability must be carefully managed through sound governance frameworks. The potential risk of widening domestic digital divides also deserves close attention.

In summary, the China-Arab Digital Silk Road cooperation, with Jordan as a case study, holds considerable potential for mutual benefit. By strategically seizing opportunities and proactively responding to challenges, China and Jordan can build a more resilient, sustainable, and

mutually beneficial digital partnership. Such a partnership will not only promote economic and social progress on both sides but also contribute to regional stability and the diversification of global digital governance. Future research could further examine the micro-level impacts of DSR cooperation in Jordan, including its actual effects on empowering small and medium-sized enterprises in their digital transformation, and conduct cross-period comparative analyses to provide more refined empirical evidence for deepening China-Arab digital cooperation.

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The Paradox of Peak Palestinianism: Transatlantic Public Opinion, Strategic Realism, and the End of the Two-State Solution



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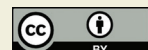
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ABSTRACT

The period after October 7, 2023, has opened a striking gap between transatlantic public opinion and the strategic calculations of Western and Gulf Arab governments. Polling across the United States and Western Europe records historic lows in support for Israel and unprecedented sympathy for Palestinians, alongside a wave of state recognitions that brought the total to 157 of 193 UN member states by September 2025. However, this rhetorical apotheosis of “Palestinianism” has coincided with - and arguably accelerated - the material extinction of any plausible path to Palestinian statehood. Drawing on recent polling and strategic analyses of the June 2025 Twelve-Day War and the degradation of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” and engaging sympathetically with the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, this article argues that strategic convergence among Washington, Jerusalem, and the Gulf monarchies operates on a different plane from public sentiment. Record settlement expansion, Palestinian Authority delegitimation, the destruction of Hamas, the decapitation of Hezbollah, the collapse of the Assad regime, and strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities point toward an emerging Israeli regional hegemony underwritten by quiet Gulf-Israeli security cooperation. Transatlantic Palestinianism thus functions less as a political program than as a performative identity practice, decoupled from Arab state interests. Peak rhetorical embrace coincides with material impossibility.

Keywords: Abraham Accords, Iran, Palestinianism, transatlantic relations, two-state solution.

Introduction

In the final week of September 2025, on the margins of the eightieth session of the United Nations General Assembly, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, and Portugal joined the lengthening register of states formally recognizing Palestinian statehood. France became the first permanent member of the Security Council to extend such recognition. By the close of the session, 157 of 193 United Nations member states - approximately 81 percent of the international community - had endorsed Palestinian sovereignty in some form (Beres, 2025). At precisely

the same political moment, however, the Israeli Cabinet was secretly approving a record number of new settlements in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian Authority commanded the support of less than ten percent of Palestinian polling respondents, Hamas had been functionally destroyed as a military force, Hezbollah’s leadership lay in graveyards, the Ba’ath regime in Damascus had collapsed, and the Islamic Republic of Iran was reeling from coordinated American and Israeli strikes on its nuclear infrastructure that had begun three months earlier (International Crisis Group, 2025; The Soufan Center, 2025; Mahmoudian, 2025).

This article begins from the proposition that this constellation of events is not a paradox to be resolved but a structural feature of contemporary international politics that demands theoretical articulation. The simultaneous expansion of rhetorical sympathy for Palestinians across transatlantic publics and the foreclosure of the material conditions necessary for Palestinian statehood are not coincidental. They are, rather, mutually constitutive elements of a broader reconfiguration of regional and international order. Drawing on recent polling data, the secondary literature in international security and Middle East studies, and engaging sympathetically with arguments advanced by contributors to the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, this article advances three interlocking claims.

The claim is rather that the rhetorical apotheosis of Palestinianism and the material foreclosure of statehood are co-occurring and mutually legible features of a single reconfiguration of regional and international order, and that situating them within a common interpretive frame clarifies the logic of each.

First, transatlantic public opinion on Israel has undergone a historically unprecedented negative shift since October 7, 2023, with measurable consequences for diplomatic posture and

electoral politics in numerous Western democracies. Second, this shift has not derailed-and in important respects has accelerated-the strategic convergence of the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Arab monarchies in confronting Iran and its regional proxies. Public sentiment and strategic calculation increasingly operate on distinct planes. Third, the rhetorical phenomenon I term “transatlantic Palestinianism”-the elevation of solidarity with the Palestinian cause into a constitutive marker of progressive political identity-has reached its apex precisely as the material possibility of Palestinian statehood has reached its nadir. The peak of one trajectory marks the end of the other.

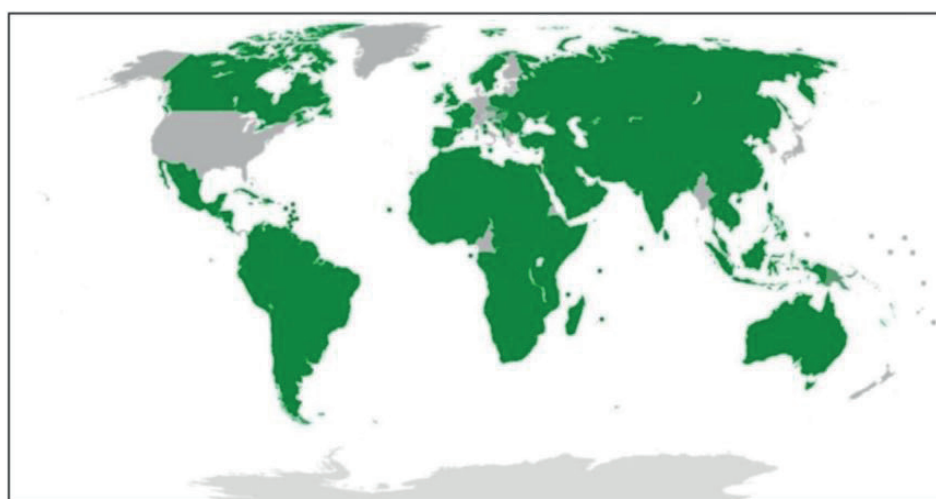
In framing these claims, the article extends sympathetically the analytical thrust of contributors to the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune (hereafter JST) who have argued that the two-state solution, far from being temporarily embattled, has been structurally extinguished by the conjunction of Palestinian rejectionism, Israeli political consolidation, Gulf strategic pragmatism, and the collapse of the Iran-led regional resistance project (Beres, 2025; Huberman, 2024; Mandelbaum, 2024; Wertman, n.d.). Where this article departs from purely policy-oriented analysis is in situating the rhetorical phenomenon of Palestinianism within a theoretical frame that highlights its function as a performative identity practice rather than a political program. This function paradoxically reinforces rather than challenges the structural foreclosure of Palestinian statehood.

A word on the status of the argument is in order at the outset. The analysis offered here is interpretive and structural rather than causal-inferential. It does not claim that transatlantic public discourse causes the deterioration of conditions

for Palestinian statehood, nor that the two trajectories stand in a causal relationship that could be established through an inferential test. The claim is rather that the rhetorical apotheosis of Palestinianism and the material foreclosure of statehood are co-occurring and mutually legible features of a single reconfiguration of regional and international order, and that situating them within a common interpretive frame clarifies the logic of each. Where the article speaks of the rhetorical practice as accompanying, coinciding with, or being implicated in the foreclosure of statehood, these formulations should be read in this structural and interpretive register rather than as assertions of unidirectional causation.

The article proceeds in five parts. Part 2 develops a conceptual framework for understanding transatlantic Palestinianism as a political-rhe-

torical phenomenon distinct from Palestinian nationalism in its indigenous register and from the Arab state's interest in the Palestinian cause. Part 3 surveys recent polling evidence on the transatlantic shift in public opinion, with attention to generational and partisan polarization. Part 4, the article's central analytical contribution, examines the strategic convergence of the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states against Iran from October 2023 through early 2026. Part 5 engages sympathetically with the JST argument that the two-state solution has structurally ended, drawing out implications for the wider transatlantic relationship. A concluding section reflects on the article's implications for the broader theme of strategic fragmentation in the Western alliance system, the organizing concern of this special issue.



As of September 22, 2025, the State of Palestine is formally recognized by at least 155 of the 193 United Nations member states (Photo: IMEMC, 2025).

Research Design, Analytical Approach, and Sources

A word on method is in order. This article is an interpretive, qualitative study rather than a hypothesis-testing or predictive one. Its aim is explanatory and theory-building: to render intelligible a puzzling conjunction - the simultaneous intensification of transatlantic sympathy for Palestinians and the material foreclosure of Palestinian statehood - by situating it within the concepts of symbolic politics and performative identity. The research design is accordingly interpretive and abductive, moving between empirical evidence and conceptual framing in the tradition of interpretive political science and critical international relations scholarship. It does not claim to establish causal relationships through controlled comparison; it offers instead a theoretically disciplined reading of a contemporary configuration.

Analytically, the argument proceeds through three complementary moves. First, it assembles and interprets quantitative public-opinion data as evidence of an aggregate attitudinal shift, reading polling series descriptively rather than treating them as independent causal variables. Second, it undertakes a form of critical discourse analysis, attending to how the vocabulary of “Palestinianism”-decolonization, settler colonialism, apartheid, genocide-functions performatively within transatlantic progressive milieus. Third, it triangulates these two registers against strategic and policy analyses of regional events, so that claims about the divergence between public sentiment and state behavior rest on the convergence of independent bodies of evidence rather than on any single source.

The analysis draws on three kinds of sources, each used for a distinct purpose. Public-opinion evidence is taken from established survey organizations, including the Pew Research Center, Gallup, YouGov, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and national polling instruments in Europe. Strategic and policy analyses are drawn from research institutions and think tanks, among them the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Chatham House, the International Crisis Group, the Soufan Center, and the Stimson Center, and from the commentary of the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, which is engaged both as evidence of a distinctive analytical position and as an interlocutor whose argument the article extends. Conceptual and historical claims are grounded in the peer-reviewed scholarly literature in Middle East studies, settler-colonial studies, and international relations theory, supplemented by primary documents, including the International Court of Justice’s January 2024 order and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s reports. Two limitations follow from this design and are acknowledged at the outset: the reliance on English-language sources, which may under-represent Arabic- and Hebrew-language debate, and the provisional character of any analysis of very recent events, whose longer-term significance remains open to revision.

Palestinianism as a Transatlantic Political-Rhetorical Phenomenon

The term “Palestinianism” has a contested intellectual genealogy. Edward Said deployed it in his 1970 essay, “The Palestinian Experience.” He elaborated it in subsequent writings to denote a positive political and cultural movement built on

the reassertion of Palestine's pluralistic history (Said, 1979). In subsequent academic usage, the term has been employed to designate the constellation of values, beliefs, traditions, and historical memory underwriting Palestinian nationhood as a counter-Zionist political project (Franks, 2009). For this article, however, I am concerned with neither Palestinian nationalism in its indigenous register nor Palestinianism as a positive cultural-political project animated by Palestinians themselves. Rather, I employ the term in a more restricted sense to designate a distinctively transatlantic political-rhetorical phenomenon: the elevation of solidarity with the Palestinian

cause into a constitutive marker of progressive political identity in Western democracies, particularly among younger cohorts and university-educated populations, since October 7, 2023.

This transatlantic Palestinianism has several distinguishing features. First, it operates at a high level of rhetorical generality, frequently invoking universalist categories such as decolonization, anti-imperialism, settler colonialism, apartheid, and genocide while remaining notably unconcerned with the specific institutional, demographic, and territorial questions that any actual Palestinian state would have to address (Busbridge, 2018; Lustick, 2019; Wolfe, 2006).



Palestinian families are forced to flee from Nasr due to the ongoing Israeli attacks in Gaza City, Gaza on September 21, 2025. Photo: VCG, 2025).

Second, it exhibits limited engagement with the political programs and stated preferences of actually existing Palestinian political actors—the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the various factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization—treating these institutional realities as either invisible or as morally compromised stand-ins for an idealized “Palestinian people” who can be invoked without specification. Third, it is increasingly decoupled from the actual interests and policies of Arab states, including those that bear most directly on the Palestinian question. Fourth, it functions performatively as a marker of in-group identity within transatlantic progressive milieus, generating significant social consequences for nonconformity that operate independently of the substantive policy debates the rhetoric ostensibly addresses (Hersh & Royden, 2023; Zacher & Shemla, 2024).

Not that Western publics have come to view Israel more critically (which is well-documented), but that this critical view has produced no corresponding strategic reorientation by Western or regional governments, and that the rhetorical practice itself appears to be implicated in the dynamic it ostensibly opposes.

Two brief illustrations make these indicators more concrete. The first is the campus mobilization register. The “Day of Resistance” toolkit circulated by National Students for Justice in Palestine in the

days after October 7, 2023 framed events overwhelmingly through the universalist vocabulary of liberation, decolonization, and settler-colonial rupture—describing the breaching of the Gaza perimeter as the puncturing of “the facade of an impenetrable settler colony”—while offering no account of the governance arrangements, territorial boundaries, security guarantees, or institutions of political representation that any Palestinian polity would require (National Students for Justice in Palestine, 2023). The second is the register of institutional resolution. The divestment referendum passed by 76 percent of the Yale student body in December 2024 (Grether, 2024) exemplifies a broader genre of campus measures organized around the moral grammar of complicity, apartheid, and divestment, in which the operative demand is the severing of the invoking institution’s material entanglements rather than any specification of the political order to be constructed in Israel-Palestine. In both registers, the discourse foregrounds universal moral categories and largely brackets the institutional questions—borders, sovereignty, security, representation—on which the realization of its stated aspirations would depend. This is precisely the property that distinguishes transatlantic Palestinianism, in the restricted sense employed here, from the programmatic nationalism of Palestinian political actors themselves.

This characterization is not intended to deny the depth of moral concern animating much pro-Palestinian sentiment, nor to dismiss the genuine humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza that has produced widespread revulsion across Western societies. The evidence that Israeli military operations in Gaza have produced devastating civilian harm is overwhelming, and the legal and ethical questions raised by these operations have rightly generated substantial scholarly and judicial scrutiny (International

Court of Justice, 2024). My analytical claim is rather that transatlantic Palestinianism, as a discursive formation, exhibits properties that distinguish it from earlier patterns of Western engagement with the Israel-Palestine conflict and that these properties are themselves objects of political-sociological inquiry.

Several features of the contemporary moment warrant emphasis. The framing of Israel as a settler-colonial project, formerly confined to specialist academic literatures, has migrated into mainstream public discourse at a notable pace (Busbridge, 2018; Khalidi, 2020; Wolfe, 2006). The genocide framework, advanced by South Africa in its International Court of Justice filing of December 2023 and by numerous human rights organizations, has been adopted by majorities of citizens in several European states; recent surveys indicate that approximately 62 percent of Germans believe that Israeli operations in Gaza constitute genocide (Königshofen & Schmid, 2025). The apartheid framing, advanced authoritatively by Human Rights Watch in 2021, Amnesty International in 2022, and the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem in the same period, has likewise become widely diffused (Amnesty International, 2022; B'Tselem, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Each of these frameworks contains significant analytical content and has generated substantial academic debate (NGO Monitor, 2022; Pedersen, 2023). However, each also functions in the contemporary discursive environment as a marker of political alignment, with adoption signaling identification with a particular political-cultural formation.

What is striking about the contemporary diffusion of these frameworks is their capacity to coexist with-and indeed flourish alongside-the systematic foreclosure of the political conditions that would allow their stated objectives to be realized. Calls for Palestinian self-determination, justice, and state-

hood escalate in volume and visibility precisely as the institutional capacity of Palestinian political actors collapses, as Israeli settlement expansion accelerates, as the Gulf states quietly deepen security cooperation with Israel, and as the regional balance of power tilts decisively against Iran and its proxies. This is the paradox the article seeks to explain: not that Western publics have come to view Israel more critically (which is well-documented), but that this critical view has produced no corresponding strategic reorientation by Western or regional governments, and that the rhetorical practice itself appears to be implicated in the dynamic it ostensibly opposes.

A useful theoretical analogy may be drawn from the literature on “symbolic politics” in international relations, which describes how states and publics may invest considerable resources in performative commitments that are decoupled from operational policy (Kaufman, 2001; Wendt, 1999). Transatlantic Palestinianism functions in this register: as a discursive practice whose primary effects are the constitution and reinforcement of in-group political identity, with strategic consequences for the actors invoked in the discourse that may run counter to the discourse’s stated aspirations. The wave of state recognitions of Palestine in September 2025 illustrates the dynamic. As Beres (2025) argues in JST, recognition by 157 states does not, in international legal terms, constitute the existence of a Palestinian state in the absence of the territorial, institutional, and demographic conditions specified in the 1933 Montevideo Convention. The proliferation of recognitions thus operates in significant part as a symbolic transaction within and among recognizing states-a marker of moral position-taking that does not produce the political object it appears to invoke.

The Transatlantic Public Opinion Shift

The empirical evidence for a historically significant shift in transatlantic public opinion against Israel since October 7, 2023, is substantial and converges across multiple polling instruments and methodological approaches. This section reviews the principal findings, with attention to the partisan and generational cleavages that structure the shift and to the cross-national variation across Western Europe.

Because the surveys canvassed here employ several distinct attitude measures that are not directly interchangeable, it is worth distinguishing them at the outset. At least four measures recur: (a) favorability toward Israel as a country; (b) comparative sympathy for Israelis versus Palestinians; (c) evaluations of the proportionality or justification of specific Israeli military operations; and (d) support for the two-state solution as a preferred outcome. These measures can move in different directions—support for the two-state framework, for

Table 1 summarizes the principal surveys drawn upon in this section, the dates and countries they cover, and the specific attitude each measures.

(Principal transatlantic public-opinion surveys on Israel-Palestine, October 2023–2026).

Survey (source)	Date	Country / region	Attitude measured	Key finding
Silver et al. (2024); Silver (2026)	2022–Apr 2026	United States	Favorability toward Israel	Favorable view 55% (2022) → 41% (Feb 2024) → 37% (Apr 2026); “very unfavorable” ~10% → 28%
Brenan (2025)	Feb 2025	United States	Comparative sympathy (Israelis vs. Palestinians)	Sympathy for Israelis 46% (25-year low); for Palestinians 33% (record high)
Vigers (2026)	2026	United States	Sympathy / two-state support	Israelis no longer lead Palestinians in sympathy (a first); two-state support 57%
Smeltz & El Baz (2025)	2025	United States	Warmth rating (0–100)	Israel warmth 50 (near half-century low); among Democrats 41
Smith (2025)	May 2025	6 Western European states	Net favorability; operation proportionality	Net favorability –44 (Germany) to –55 (Spain); only 6–16% judged Gaza operations proportionate
Bertelsmann Stiftung	2025	Germany	Favorability toward Israel	Favorable view 46% (2021) → 36% (2025)
ZDF (2025); Königshofen & Schmid (2025); Stolz (2025)	2025	Germany	Justification of operations; genocide perception; arms exports	76% deemed military action unjustified; 62% “genocide”; 51% opposed arms exports
Silver (2025)	Spring 2025	24 countries	Views of Israel and Netanyahu	Negative across nearly all surveyed nations
Brenan (2025)	2025	United States	Net sympathy for Israel by generation	+46 (Boomers) to +32 (Gen X) to –2 (Millennials)
Marist Poll (2023)	Oct 2023	United States	Support for U.S. backing of Israel	48% of Gen Z/Millennials vs. 83% of Boomers
Telhami (2025)	Aug 2025	United States	Sympathy among young Republicans	24% of Republicans 18–34 vs. 52% of those 35+

Compiled by the author.

instance, as an ideational preference, has remained high or even recovered, even as favorability toward Israel has fallen to record lows-and care is therefore required in comparing them across countries and over time. Table 1 summarizes the principal surveys drawn upon in this section, the dates and countries they cover, and the specific attitude each measures.

The American Trajectory

Pew Research Center polling indicates that the share of Americans holding a favorable view of Israel declined from 55 percent in 2022 to 41 percent in February 2024 and 37 percent by April 2026 (Silver et al., 2024; Silver, 2026). The share holding a “very unfavorable” view of Israel nearly tripled across this period, from approximately 10 percent in 2022 to 28 percent in 2026. Confidence in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reached 27 percent in the April 2026 survey, with 59 percent of respondents expressing no confidence in his leadership. Critically, the negative shift extends across both major parties: in the most recent surveys, majorities of adults under fifty in both the Democratic and Republican parties rate Israel and Netanyahu negatively (Silver, 2026).

Gallup’s annual World Affairs survey reveals shifts of comparable magnitude. The share of Americans expressing greater sympathy for Israelis than Palestinians fell to 46 percent in February 2025, the lowest level recorded in twenty-five years of tracking (Brenan, 2025). By 2026, Israelis no longer led Palestinians in American sympathies—a historic first in the polling series. The share of Americans expressing greater sympathy for Palestinians reached 33 percent in 2025, an all-time high. Notably, support for the two-state solution returned to 57 percent in 2026, near the record of 58 percent recorded in 2003, suggesting that the public erosion of support for Israeli

policy has not been accompanied by abandonment of the two-state framework as the preferred ideational solution (Vigers, 2026)—even as this article will argue, the material conditions for that solution have been systematically extinguished.

The partisan polarization evident in these data is historically unprecedented. Among Democrats, 59 percent expressed greater sympathy for Palestinians than Israelis in the 2025 Gallup survey, the first majority of any partisan group ever recorded as more sympathetic to Palestinians. The Israel favorability gap between Democrats and Republicans reached 35 points in the most recent Pew data, and the gap on support for a two-state solution reached 44 points in the most recent Gallup data, both representing the widest partisan divides in the history of these series. However, even Republican support for Israel has eroded: the 2026 Gallup survey recorded a 15-point decline in Republican favorability toward Israel from the previous year to 69 percent, the lowest figure in more than two decades of polling (Vigers, 2026).

Smeltz and El Baz’s (2025) survey provides a useful synthesis: Israel’s warmth rating among Americans reached 50 on a 100-point scale, the lowest figure recorded in nearly half a century of Council polling. Among Democrats, the warmth rating fell to 41, the first time the rating has fallen below the midline of the scale since the Council began tracking in 1978.

The European Trajectory

The European pattern shows even more pronounced negative shifts. YouGov’s EuroTrack survey of approximately 8,600 respondents across six Western European countries in May 2025 found net favorability toward Israel at record lows in every country surveyed: –44 in Germany, –46 in the United Kingdom, –48 in France, –52 in Italy, –54 in Denmark, and –55 in Spain (Smith, 2025).

Favorability ratings ranged from 13 to 21 percent across the six countries, while unfavorable ratings ranged from 63 to 70 percent. Only between 6 and 16 percent of respondents in any country believed that Israeli operations in Gaza had been proportionate. The share expressing greater sympathy for the Israeli side ranged from 7 to 18 percent, the lowest or joint-lowest figures in five of the six countries since October 7, 2023.

Germany's case warrants particular attention, given the centrality of the relationship with Israel to postwar German political identity. The Bertelsmann Stiftung (2025) reported that the share of Germans holding favorable views of Israel fell from 46 percent in 2021 to 36 percent in 2025. Approximately 76 percent of Germans surveyed by ZDF (2025) believed Israeli military action to be unjustified; 62 percent believed Israeli actions in Gaza constituted genocide (Königshofen & Schmid, 2025); and 51 percent opposed continued German weapons exports to Israel (Stolz, 2025). Among Germans under 40, the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2025) reported that 40 percent favored a reduction in Germany's relations with Israel—a finding without precedent in the postwar German polling record.

The Pew Research Center's spring 2025 24-country survey confirmed that views of Israel and Netanyahu were negative across virtually all surveyed nations, with 58 percent of Israelis themselves reporting that they believed their country was not respected internationally (Silver, 2025). The cross-national pattern of negative shift is sufficiently uniform across Western Europe to suggest that the underlying drivers operate at the level of the transatlantic system rather than reflecting nationally idiosyncratic political dynamics.

Generational and Institutional Dimensions

The generational structure of the shift in public opinion is among its most striking features. Net sympathy for Israel in Gallup's historical data ranges from +46 among Baby Boomers to +32 among Generation X to −2 among Millennials. NPR/PBS/Marist polling in October 2023 found that 48 percent of Generation Z and Millennial respondents believed the United States should publicly support Israel, compared with 83 percent of Baby Boomers (Marist Poll, 2023). Among Republican voters aged 18 to 34 in University of Maryland/YouGov polling in August 2025, only 24 percent expressed greater sympathy for Israelis, compared with 52 percent of Republicans aged 35 and older (Telhami, 2025). A Carnegie Endowment survey of early 2025 found that a plurality of Generation Z respondents who voted for Vice President Harris in 2024 felt most connected to Palestinians (Chivvis & Morganbesser, 2025).

Institutional manifestations of the shift have been correspondingly significant. The Princeton Bridging Divides Initiative (2024) recorded approximately 3,700 Israel-Palestine demonstration events in the United States since October 7, 2023, with approximately 1,150 encampment-related demonstrations at 150 colleges across more than 35 states. More than 3,000 individuals were arrested or detained in connection with these protests. Similar mobilizations occurred at 34 British campuses and at universities across Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Belgium (Princeton Bridging Divides Initiative, 2024). The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement registered substantial institutional gains: approximately 160 BDS measures were considered at more than 70 American colleges in 2024, with approximately 60 passing; the Yale student body voted 76 percent in favor of divestment of the university's 41 billion dollar endowment from weapons manufacturers in December 2024 (Grether, 2024).



People participate in a pro-Palestinian protest in Rome, Italy, on Sept. 22, 2025. (Photo: Li Jing/Xinhua, 2025).

These mobilizations have generated significant electoral effects. The British Labor Party lost four parliamentary seats to pro-Palestine independent candidates in the July 2024 general election. In Germany, Die Linke nearly tripled its membership to approximately 123,000, with substantial influxes of younger voters identified with pro-Palestinian positions; meanwhile, the Alternative für Deutschland repositioned itself, somewhat paradoxically given its origins, as a defender of Israel and of Jewish life in Germany, generating the political configuration that scholars have analyzed under the rubric of “horseshoe theory” in studies of German political attitudes toward Israel (Zacher & Shemla, 2024). In the United States, the Democratic Party’s 2024 presidential campaign was complicated by the “uncommitted” movement in the primary process, which secured 13 percent of the vote in Michigan in protest of the Biden administration’s Israel policy.

The wave of state recognitions of Palestine in September 2025 represents the most significant institutional outcome of this shift. The United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, and Portugal joined Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Andorra, and San Marino in extending recognition during the eightieth UN General Assembly session. France’s recognition was particularly significant as the first by a permanent member of the UN Security Council. By the close of the session, 157 of 193 UN member states recognized Palestine, including 14 of the 19 Group of Twenty members and, for the first time, three Group of Seven members (Beres, 2025). However, as the next section will demonstrate, this rhetorical achievement has been accompanied by and has not impeded the strategic developments that have rendered the political object of recognition increasingly chimerical.

Strategic Realism: The U.S.–Gulf–Israel–Iran Convergence

If the empirical record of transatlantic public opinion is one of unprecedented negative shift, the empirical record of regional strategic developments tells a markedly different story. From October 2023 through early 2026, the United States, Israel, and the principal Gulf Arab monarchies have advanced a strategic agenda whose central organizing principle is the containment, weakening, and rollback of Iranian regional influence. This agenda has produced military and political results of historical magnitude: the destruction of Hamas as a military force, the decapitation of Hezbollah, the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in Damascus, the systematic degradation of Iran's broader "Axis of Resistance," and the direct American and Israeli military strikes on Iranian nuclear infrastructure in June 2025 and February 2026. These developments have proceeded despite, and to a significant extent in defiance of, the negative public opinion trajectory documented in the previous section. They form the empirical basis for the article's central claim that strategic calculation in the present transatlantic-regional system operates on a plane meaningfully distinct from public sentiment.

The Twelve-Day War and the Striking of Iranian Nuclear Infrastructure

The June 2025 Israel-Iran war, designated the Twelve-Day War in subsequent Israeli usage, represents the most significant direct interstate confrontation in the modern Middle Eastern strategic environment. The proximate trigger was the International Atomic Energy Agency's determination on June 12, 2025, that Iran was in non-compliance with its nuclear safeguards obligations-the first

such formal determination since 2005-together with reporting that Iran possessed sufficient uranium enriched to 60 percent for the production of approximately nine nuclear warheads (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2025a, 2025b). The strategic context, however, was the systematic degradation of Iran's regional position over the preceding 20 months and the corresponding judgment in Jerusalem and Washington that the window for direct military action against the Iranian nuclear program had opened (Rodgers, 2025; Shapiro & Waldo, 2026).

Operation Rising Lion, launched by Israel on June 13, 2025, deployed more than 200 fighter aircraft in coordinated strikes against approximately 100 targets, including the Natanz and Fordow nuclear facilities. A simultaneous covert operation by Mossad killed approximately 30 Iranian generals and 9 nuclear scientists in the opening hours of the campaign, including Major General Hossein Salami, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Mohammad Bagheri, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces (Shapiro & Waldo, 2026). Iranian retaliation on June 15 produced ballistic missile strikes on Israeli population centers, including Bat Yam, Rehovot, and Tel Aviv, killing 9 Israelis and wounding approximately 200; an Iranian strike on an Israeli hospital was widely condemned as a war crime.

On June 22, 2025, the United States entered the conflict directly through Operation Midnight Hammer. Seven B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, supported by approximately 125 additional aircraft, delivered 14 GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrators-the 30,000-pound bunker-busting weapons whose first operational use occurred in this strike-against the Fordow and Natanz nuclear facilities (Rodgers, 2025). President Trump declared in the immediate aftermath that Iran's key nuclear



Supporters of Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah carry his pictures, following his killing in an Israeli airstrike in Beirut's southern suburbs, in Saida, southern Lebanon on September 28, 2024. (Photo: CGTN, 2024).

enrichment facilities had been comprehensively destroyed. A ceasefire took effect on June 24, ending the principal phase of the conflict after twelve days of combat that produced more than 600 Iranian and 29 Israeli fatalities. Prime Minister Netanyahu declared that Israel had eliminated the existential nuclear threat from Iran.

The strategic significance of the Twelve-Day War lies less in any definitive resolution of the Iranian nuclear question—assessments of which remain contested, with leaked Defense Intelligence Agency analysis suggesting setbacks of months rather than years and the disposition of Iran's 400-kilogram stockpile of 60-percent enriched uranium uncertain (Rodgers, 2025)—than in the demonstration of a degree of operational

coordination and strategic alignment among the United States, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies that is without close historical precedent. Israeli strike packages transited Saudi airspace; Bahraini, Emirati, and Saudi air-defense assets engaged Iranian missiles and drones; and the wider regional architecture of bases, intelligence-sharing, and logistics operated as a unified system of containment against Iran (Foreign Policy, 2026). When massive Iranian protests in January 2026 destabilized the regime, follow-on operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion in February 2026 produced the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on the first day and strikes against more than 15,000 targets across Iran—the most extensive air campaign in the post-1945 record.

The Degradation of the Axis of Resistance

The Twelve-Day War was preceded and enabled by the systematic dismantling of the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” across the period from October 2023 to early 2025. The most spectacular operation in this campaign was Israel’s September 17, 2024, “pager strike,” in which thousands of Mossad-modified pagers exploded simultaneously across Lebanon, killing 42 and wounding more than 4,000 Hezbollah operatives and supporters (The Soufan Center, 2025). Ten days later, on September 27, the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah by an Israeli airstrike employing more than eighty bunker-busting munitions decapitated the organization’s political and military leadership. Nasrallah’s designated successor, Hashem Safieddine, was killed on October 3. The Century Foundation’s subsequent assessment characterized the campaign as having broken Hezbollah’s military capacity and eviscerated its leadership through a combination of technological superiority, intelligence penetration, and operational ruthlessness (Ali-Khan & Cambanis, 2025).

Hamas suffered comparable degradation. Ismail Haniyeh, the organization’s political bureau chief, was assassinated in Tehran in July 2024; Yahya Sinwar, the senior Gaza-based military leader and architect of the October 7, 2023, attacks, was killed by Israeli forces in Gaza in October 2024. Mahmoudian (2025) assessed that Hamas had been functionally dismantled as a military force by the close of 2024, retaining significant political and ideological reach but lacking the organizational coherence and military capability to project regional influence.

The most consequential strategic shock to the Iranian regional architecture came on December 8, 2024, with the collapse of the Ba’ath regime in Damascus following an eleven-day offensive by Hayat

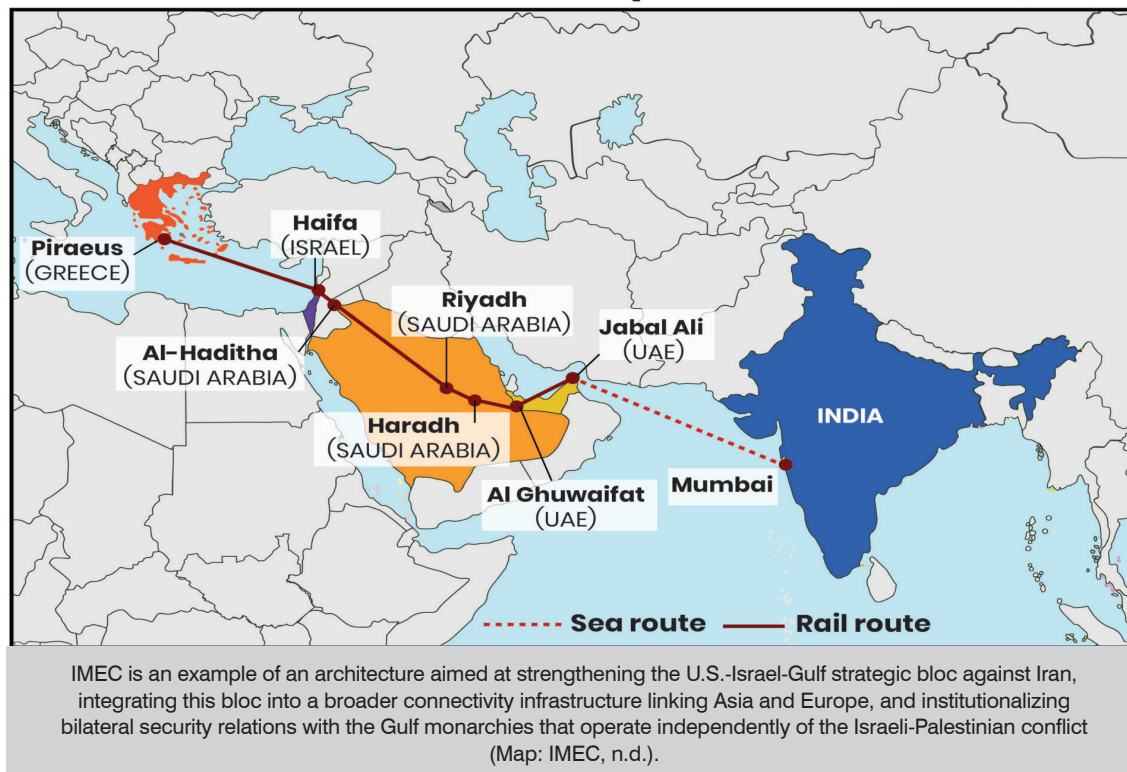
Tahrir al-Sham. Mahmoudian (2025) characterized the loss of Syria as the evaporation of billions of dollars in Iranian investment and the closure of Iran’s premier gateway to the Arab world. Iranian access to Hezbollah was now contingent on the goodwill of an HTS government in Damascus that had made clear its hostility to the Iranian project; the logistical pipeline through which Iran had sustained its Lebanese ally for four decades was severed almost overnight.

Of the principal proxy actors comprising the Axis of Resistance, only the Houthis in Yemen retained substantial operational coherence by 2025, and even there, the Israeli strike on Sanaa in August 2025 killed twelve of the sixteen senior figures of the Houthis’ government (The Soufan Center, 2025). The Iraqi Shi’a militia constellation, the smaller Iranian-aligned formations in Syria, and the various political-paramilitary affiliates across the broader region all suffered substantial setbacks across this period. Mansour et al. (2025) offered a useful corrective by noting that the Axis of Resistance had demonstrated significant adaptive capacity in earlier periods and that obituaries for the Iranian regional project should be issued with caution. The cumulative effect of the developments cataloged here, however, is the most substantial reordering of the regional balance of power against Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

The Resilience and Quiet Expansion of the Abraham Accords

The Abraham Accords framework, established in 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, has demonstrated remarkable resilience across the post-October 7 period. No signatory has severed diplomatic relations with Israel despite the political pressure generated

India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)



by the Gaza war; the operational architecture of bilateral cooperation has deepened in numerous concrete respects (Makovsky, 2025). The United Arab Emirates ratified a bilateral customs agreement with Israel in April 2025; Elbit Systems concluded a \$2.3 billion defense contract with the Emirati government in December 2025; and Morocco signed a substantial artillery contract with Elbit and participated in joint exercises with Israeli forces during African Lion 202. The Accords welcomed two new signatories in late 2025: Kazakhstan in November and Somaliland in December. Syria's post-Ba'ath government under Ahmad al-Shar'a declined to join despite American encouragement (Makovsky, 2025; The Heritage Foundation, 2026).

The economic substrate of the Accords has ex-

panded substantially. Trade between Israel and the United Arab Emirates rose from approximately tens of millions of dollars annually before 2020 to roughly 3 billion dollars in 2023, and Bahrain's trade with Israel grew approximately ninefold across the first seven months of 2024 (Makovsky, 2025). Security cooperation has intensified even as public diplomacy has contracted. Foreign Policy's (2026) assessment of the Twelve-Day War documented three distinct postures across the Gulf states: a restraint-oriented posture by Qatar and Oman; an active balancing posture by the United Arab Emirates, which proved willing to participate covertly in military operations against Iran; and a hedging posture by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, which assisted the war effort while maintaining public ambiguity.

The Iranian retaliation phase exposed the limits of formal neutrality: Iranian strikes targeted oil and gas facilities, airports, and civilian infrastructure across all six Gulf Cooperation Council states, demonstrating that the Gulf monarchies could not extricate themselves from a confrontation in which their geographic position made them unavoidable participants.

The disjuncture between the public rhetoric of Gulf solidarity with the Palestinians and the operational reality of Gulf-Israeli security cooperation is among the most analytically significant features of the contemporary regional order.

The disjuncture between the public rhetoric of Gulf solidarity with the Palestinians and the operational reality of Gulf-Israeli security cooperation is among the most analytically significant features of the contemporary regional order. As reported in *The Atlantic*, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman privately acknowledged to Secretary of State Antony Blinken in January 2025 that his personal investment in the Palestinian cause was minimal, but that domestic political pressure required public affirmations of commitment (Foer, 2024). This admission, while embarrassing to the Saudi government when reported, captures a structural feature of the regional politics: the Gulf monarchies maintain rhetorical investments in Palestinian statehood that operate at significant remove from their actual strategic calculations, which are organized around containing Iran, securing Amer-

ican security guarantees, and deepening economic integration with Israel and the broader Western system.

Szalai's (2025) comparative analysis of Gulf state United Nations Security Council speeches from 2020 through 2024 confirmed this pattern empirically: while support for Palestinian statehood remained a central rhetorical theme, the Abraham Accords and the strategic shock of October 7 produced significant alterations in Gulf strategic narratives toward greater accommodation of Israeli regional security concerns and away from the previous discursive primacy of the Palestinian cause.

The Saudi-Israeli Trajectory

The trajectory of Saudi-Israeli normalization—the central remaining ambition of the Abraham Accords project—has been more complicated. Public Saudi positions hardened substantially after October 7. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman publicly affirmed in September 2024 that the Kingdom would not establish diplomatic relations with Israel in the absence of a Palestinian state, and Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan declared in October 2024 that normalization was off the table. Saudi Arabia subsequently joined Norway in launching the Global Alliance for the Two-State Solution in September 2024, a diplomatic initiative endorsed by approximately ninety states (Bunzel, 2025; Guzansky, 2026).

Behind these public positions, however, the operational record of Saudi-Israeli cooperation has continued to deepen. Saudi military helicopters reportedly intercepted Iranian drones during the June 2025 war (Zaken, 2025); the Washington Post documented expanded military coordination among Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates with Israel

during the Hamas war (Kenner, 2025). The Trump administration's May 2025 Riyadh visit resulted in a \$142 billion arms sale and a \$600 billion Saudi investment package, all without any Saudi commitment to Israel normalization (Hellyer, 2025).

Bunzel's (2025) assessment captured the analytical paradox: the principal incentive that had driven Saudi interest in normalization-the shared fear of Iranian aggression-had receded substantially with the degradation of the Iranian position, reducing the strategic urgency of formal diplomatic relations even as the operational substance of cooperation deepened (Bunzel, 2025). Guzansky (2026) reached a similar conclusion, noting that Riyadh now identified more risks than opportunities in formal normalization while continuing to expand *de facto* coordination. Hellyer (2025) observed that Washington had front-loaded sensitive technology cooperation, high-end defense sales, and upgraded security assurances without obtaining any Saudi commitment on normalization. This pattern suggests the United States itself has come to view formal normalization as less strategically necessary than the substantive bilateral relationships that have emerged in its absence.

The Trump Administration and the Architecture of Regional Hegemony

The return of the Trump administration in January 2025 produced a marked acceleration of the strategic dynamics described above. The administration's February 2025 "Gaza Riviera" proposal, developed by Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner, and Aryeh Lightstone, projected at 112 billion dollars over a decade, was opposed by 62 percent of Americans in subsequent polling and rejected by all Arab governments approached on the question

of Palestinian displacement (Baroud, 2025). Ambassador Mike Huckabee's May 2025 visit to the West Bank settlement of Shilo and his prior characterizations of Palestinian identity as a political construction signaled the administration's alignment with the Israeli right-wing consensus on territorial questions. Beyond the headline-generating proposals, the substantive policy architecture has been organized around three principal objectives: consolidating an American-Israeli-Gulf strategic bloc against Iran, integrating this bloc into broader connectivity infrastructure linking Asia and Europe, and institutionalizing bilateral security relationships with the Gulf monarchies that operate independently of the Israel-Palestine question.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, agreed at the September 2023 Group of Twenty summit and pursued with renewed intensity by the second Trump administration, exemplifies this architecture. The corridor's projected route, from India through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel to European markets, institutionalizes the regional integration initiated by the Abraham Accords and creates infrastructural realities that progressively foreclose alternative configurations (Roche, 2025; Szalai, 2025). The I2U2 framework-the quadrilateral grouping of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States-has likewise advanced through high-level dialogue in New Delhi in April 2025 and a Modi address to the Israeli Knesset in February 2026 that explicitly invoked I2U2 and IMEC as organizing frameworks for the regional order. For Szalai (2025), these initiatives offer the Gulf states the opportunity to consolidate their roles as connectivity hubs linking Asia, the Middle East, and Europe-a structural inducement for continued cooperation with Israel that operates independently of the Palestinian question.

The aggregate effect of these developments is the emergence of a regional order in which Israeli military supremacy, American security guarantees, Gulf economic integration, and the systematic exclusion of Iran from the regional architecture form a self-reinforcing system. The political space for Western governments to translate the public opinion shifts documented in Section 3 into substantial policy reorientation has been constrained by the strategic imperatives of containing Iran, maintaining the Gulf relationships, and securing the connectivity infrastructure on which significant economic interests depend. Public opinion has shifted; strategic calculation has not. The two have come to operate on increasingly disjoint planes.

Three concrete instances from the period under review crystallize this decoupling. First, at the very moment of the September 2025 recognition wave, when the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, and Portugal extended recognition of Palestinian statehood, the operational architecture of Gulf-Israeli security coordination and the IMEC connectivity project continued to advance without interruption, the recognitions registering as a symbolic transaction that left the strategic order untouched. Second, Saudi Arabia's public sponsorship of the Global Alliance for the Two-State Solution, launched with Norway in September 2024 and endorsed by some ninety states, coincided with the deepening of de facto Saudi-Israeli coordination, including the reported interception of Iranian drones by Saudi assets during the June 2025 war and the conclusion of the May 2025 Riyadh arms and investment package that proceeded without any Saudi commitment on normalization (Hellyer, 2025; Zaken, 2025). Third, and most starkly, the German case juxtaposed a public majority persuaded that Israeli operations in Gaza constituted genocide

with a governmental posture anchored in the doctrine of Israeli security as *Staatsräson*—that placed Germany within the European blocking minority preventing Union-level sanctions on Israel (Königshofen & Schmid, 2025; Stolz, 2025). In each instance, symbolic or public support for Palestinian statehood coexisted with—and did not disrupt—continued strategic coordination, the empirical signature of the decoupling this section has traced.

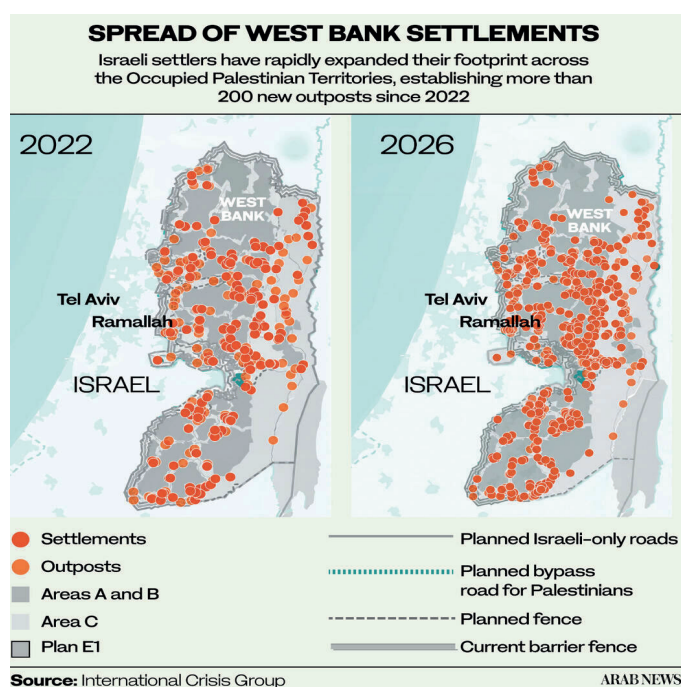
The End of the Two-State Solution: Extending the JST Argument

The cumulative implication of the developments examined in the previous sections is that the two-state solution—the organizing framework of international diplomacy on the Israel-Palestine conflict for more than half a century—has structurally ended as a realistic political possibility. By “structurally ended” I mean neither a merely temporary infeasibility nor an irreversibility guaranteed for all future time, but rather that the institutional, territorial, and demographic prerequisites of a two-state settlement have been undermined to a degree that renders such a settlement politically unattainable for the foreseeable future absent a transformation of the underlying conditions—a stronger claim than that the framework is deeply weakened but a weaker one than that its revival is permanently and irreversibly foreclosed. The argument is thus one of structural foreclosure under prevailing and reasonably foreseeable conditions rather than of impossibility for all time. This claim has been advanced with increasing analytical force by contributors to the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune across the post–October 7 period (Beres, 2025; Huberman, 2024; Mandelbaum, 2024; Schueftan, n.d.; Wertman, n.d.), and it con-

verges with conclusions reached independently by scholars of varied political commitments including Lustick (2019), Barnett, Brown, Lynch, and Telhami (2023), Thrall (2017), Baconi (2018), and O'Malley (2015). This section extends the JST argument sympathetically by integrating its policy-oriented analysis with the empirical record assembled in the preceding sections.

The case for the structural end of the two-state solution rests on several mutually reinforcing developments. First, the demographic and territorial realities on the ground have made a geographically coherent Palestinian state increasingly difficult to construct. The settler population in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, reached 529,455 by December 2024, with approximately 700,000 settlers including East Jerusalem (Israel Policy Fo-

rum, 2025; Peace Now, 2025). The Israeli government advanced 28,872 settlement housing units in 2024, representing an increase of approximately 250 percent over the 2018 baseline (European External Action Service, 2025). The number of settlements and outposts reached 210 in 2025, up from 141 in 2022, an increase of nearly 50 percent in three years. In 2024, the Israeli government declared approximately 24,258 dunams (about 6,000 acres) as state land, equivalent to roughly half of all such declarations since the Oslo Accords (European External Action Service, 2025). The Israel Policy Forum (2025) projected that 2025 would prove the largest year of construction approvals in the history of the settlement enterprise, exceeding the cumulative approvals of the preceding five years.



In 2024, the Israeli government declared approximately 24,258 dunams as state land, equivalent to roughly half of all such declarations since the Oslo Accords (Graphic: Arab News, 2026).

The territorial trajectory is one dimension of a broader hardening of the Israeli position across all of the final-status issues that the Oslo framework had deferred for negotiation—territory and settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, and the very question of Palestinian statehood—and it is this cumulative shift, rather than settlement expansion alone, that has hollowed out the two-state solution. In Jerusalem, the trajectory has moved from the studied ambiguity of the Oslo period toward the consolidation of exclusive Israeli control: the United States relocated its embassy to Jerusalem in 2018, recognizing the city as Israel’s capital, and successive Israeli governments have treated a unified Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty as non-negotiable, foreclosing the shared or divided capital that every serious two-state blueprint had presupposed. On refugees, Israeli governments have hardened from the conditional formulas entertained at Camp David and Taba toward a categorical rejection of any Palestinian right of return, a position now advanced as a precondition rather than as a subject of negotiation. On statehood itself, the shift has been the most consequential: where the Oslo-era Israeli mainstream at least nominally accepted an eventual Palestinian state as the horizon of the process, the Knesset voted overwhelmingly in July 2024 to reject the establishment of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan under any circumstances, and the governing coalition has embraced the language of sovereignty and annexation over the West Bank (International Crisis Group, 2025). Each of these shifts has moved the operative Israeli position further from the parameters that have defined two-state diplomacy since Oslo, eroding the framework not only through facts on the ground but also through the progressive withdrawal of one of its two indispensable parties from its foundational premises.

Second, the institutional capacity of Palestinian political actors to constitute a viable state has collapsed. The Palestinian Authority, governing the West Bank under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas, who at age 90 has remained in office since 2005 on an expired four-year mandate, commands the support of approximately 6 percent of polled Palestinians, with 80 percent calling for his resignation (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2025). Hamas, governing Gaza until its operational dismantling in 2024, drew 29 percent support to Fatah’s 18 percent in the same survey. However, it lacks the institutional machinery and international legitimacy to function as a state-constituting actor. As a recent Third World Quarterly analysis has documented, the post–October 7 period has been characterized by the Palestinian Authority’s flawed expectations and failed leadership—a structural delegitimation that further diminishes the prospects for any reconstituted political authority capable of governing a Palestinian state (Iqtait, 2025).

The disjuncture between the public rhetoric of Gulf solidarity with the Palestinians and the operational reality of Gulf-Israeli security cooperation is among the most analytically significant features of the contemporary regional order.

Third, the regional and international political conditions that historically sustained two-state diplomacy have been substantially transformed. The Arab states most directly invested in the Palestinian

question-Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf monarchies-have demonstrated through both their public diplomacy and operational behavior that their strategic priorities lie elsewhere. The Crown Prince's private acknowledgment to Secretary Blinken (Foer, 2024) that his personal commitment to the Palestinian cause is limited captures a broader pattern in which the Gulf states have substantially decoupled their strategic calculations from the Palestinian question. The Trump administration's February 2025 Gaza proposal, however unrealistic in its specifics, signaled a fundamental transformation in American policy away from the bipartisan two-state consensus that had structured American engagement with the conflict since the early 1990s.

The JST analysis articulates this conjunction with particular clarity. Beres (2025) argues that recog-

nition by 157 states does not constitute Palestinian statehood in the absence of the Montevideo Convention conditions: a defined territory, a permanent population, an effective government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. None of these conditions obtains in the West Bank, Gaza, or any combined territorial configuration under contemporary circumstances. Huberman (2024), writing in the immediate aftermath of October 7, characterized the assault on Israeli civilians as having destroyed the residual public trust necessary for political concessions and rendered the pursuit of Palestinian statehood under prevailing conditions "dangerous" from an Israeli security standpoint. Wertman (n.d.) characterized the Palestinian Authority's historical failure as the inability to transition from a revolutionary movement to a state-building enterprise.



April 18, 2024: The United States vetoed a draft resolution recommending Palestine's full membership in the United Nations, blocking its bid for full UN membership (Cartoon: Carlos Latuff/Global Times, 2024).

Mandelbaum (2024), reviewing Pipes's *Israel Victory*, summarizes the underlying analytical claim: the Israeli policy of conciliation across the Oslo period failed because Palestinian political actors interpreted it as evidence that rejectionism was producing strategic returns, generating a structural dynamic in which each Israeli concession amplified rather than diminished Palestinian commitment to maximalist goals.

This structural analysis converges, notwithstanding its different political valences, with the conclusions reached by scholars in varied analytical traditions. Lustick (2019) argues that the political reality between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River is already a one-state reality—a single political entity governing the territory—and that the persistence of two-state rhetoric obscures rather than addresses the operative political situation. Barnett et al. (2023) report that 60 percent of academic specialists in Middle Eastern politics describe the situation as a one-state reality with structural inequality. Thrall (2017) argues that the persistence of the two-state framework in Western policy discourse functions to defer the substantive resolution of the conflict indefinitely while permitting the ongoing erosion of Palestinian rights. Baconi (2018, 2024) characterizes the two-state solution as an unjust and impossible fantasy. O'Malley (2015) characterizes it as a delusion. Cordesman (2023) describes contemporary diplomatic efforts to revive the two-state solution as zombie diplomacy.

The convergence of these analyses across markedly different political starting points—JST contributors writing from a generally pro-Israeli perspective; Lustick, Thrall, and Baconi writing from positions sympathetic to Palestinian rights—lends substantial weight to the claim that the two-state solution has structurally ended as a realistic po-

litical possibility. What divides these analyses is not the empirical assessment of viability but the normative response to the assessment: JST contributors generally accept the resulting configuration as a strategic given. At the same time, the Lustick-Thrall-Baconi tradition advocates a pivot to frameworks of equal rights within a single political unit. The empirical record assembled in this article suggests that the JST analysis better captures the operative political reality: the strategic configuration that has emerged in the post-October 7 period is being institutionalized at a pace and scale that render alternative political projects increasingly chimerical.

It is in this context that the rhetorical apotheosis of transatlantic Palestinianism acquires analytical significance. The wave of state recognitions, the proliferation of campus mobilizations, the diffusion of settler-colonial and apartheid frameworks, the South African International Court of Justice case, and the broader cultural elevation of Palestinian solidarity into a marker of progressive identity all proceed against the backdrop of a strategic reality in which the political object of these mobilizations—a viable Palestinian state—is being foreclosed at unprecedented speed. The peak of one trajectory marks the end of the other. The rhetorical practice does not, on this reading, alter the strategic trajectory; rather, it coexists with the structural foreclosure in a way that furnishes a symbolic register within which Western publics and elites alike can maintain investments in the two-state solution while declining to take the political risks that any serious effort at its realization would now require. Whether this coexistence also operates causally, whether, that is, the availability of the symbolic register actively eases the political path of foreclosure, is a further question that the interpretive design of this article does not purport to settle.

Conclusion: Strategic Divergence and the Future of the Western Alliance

This article has argued that the post-October 7 period has produced a structural divergence between transatlantic public opinion on Israel-Palestine and the strategic calculations of Western and Gulf governments. The empirical evidence for the public opinion shift is unambiguous: across the United States and Western Europe, support for Israel has reached historic lows, sympathy for Palestinians has reached historic highs, partisan and generational polarization has reached unprecedented levels, and institutional manifestations of pro-Palestinian sentiment—from campus mobilizations to state recognitions of Palestine—have proceeded at a pace and scale without recent precedent. The empirical evidence for strategic convergence is equally unambiguous: the United States, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies have, across the same period, accomplished the destruction of Hamas, the decapitation of Hezbollah, the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in Damascus, the systematic degradation of the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance, and the direct military striking of Iranian nuclear infrastructure—a cumulative strategic accomplishment without close parallel in the recent regional record.

The implications of this divergence for the broader theme of strategic fragmentation in the Western alliance system, the organizing concern of this special issue, are substantial. First, the divergence between public opinion and strategic calculation is not a contradiction to be resolved through democratic accountability but a structural feature of the contemporary system that has proven remarkably durable. The political space for Western governments to translate public opinion shifts into substantial policy reorientations has

been constrained by the strategic imperatives of Iran containment, Gulf security cooperation, and integration into the IMEC and I2U2 connectivity architectures. The German case is paradigmatic: a public majority believing that Israeli operations in Gaza constitute genocide (Königshofen & Schmid, 2025) coexists with a parliamentary resolution affirming Israeli security as *Staatsräson* and a German role in the European blocking minority that has prevented Union-level sanctions on Israel.

This constrained political space is distributed unevenly across the transatlantic alliance, and the differences bear directly on the question of who, if anyone, retains the capacity to advance a two-state settlement. The strategic interests of the United States and those of its European and other transatlantic partners are not identical. Washington is the system's security guarantor: it underwrites Gulf defense, brokers and arms the normalization architecture, sustains the IMEC and I2U2 frameworks, and possesses the coercive and inducement leverage over Israeli military aid, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic cover at the Security Council that any external actor capable of altering Israeli policy would need to wield. Its interests are correspondingly bound up with the containment of Iran and the consolidation of the regional bloc, objectives that a renewed push for Palestinian statehood does not advance and might complicate. The European states, together with Canada and Australia, occupy a different position. Their publics have moved furthest against Israeli policy, and their governments have deployed the instruments available to them—recognition, support for the International Court of Justice proceedings, and threatened restrictions on trade and arms—but these are largely symbolic and declaratory instruments.

Lacking the security-guarantor role, the defense-industrial entanglement, and the direct leverage over the parties that the United States commands, and internally divided (the German blocking posture being the clearest instance), the European and other transatlantic states possess neither the unilateral capacity nor the collective cohesion to convert their publics' preferences into a viable two-state outcome. The result is a structural asymmetry: the actor with the greatest capacity to move the parties has the least interest in a two-state settlement, while the actors with the greatest declared commitment to it lack the capacity to deliver it.

Its interests are correspondingly bound up with the containment of Iran and the consolidation of the regional bloc, objectives that a renewed push for Palestinian statehood does not advance and might complicate. The European states, together with Canada and Australia, occupy a different position.

Second, the rhetorical phenomenon I have characterized as transatlantic Palestinianism has proven structurally compatible with the underlying strategic configuration rather than disruptive of it. The wave of state recognitions of Palestine, the proliferation of legal and rhetorical frameworks critical of Israel, and the cultural elevation of Palestinian solidarity into a marker of progressive identity have not impeded-and in some respects have facilitated-the consolida-

tion of an American-Israeli-Gulf strategic bloc whose operational behavior is decoupled from the substantive content of these rhetorical mobilizations. The disjuncture between the symbolic and operational registers is not a transient phenomenon but an institutionalized feature of the system.

Third, the structural end of the two-state solution - a conclusion reached, with different normative inflections, by analysts across the political spectrum - forecloses the diplomatic framework that has organized international engagement with the Israel-Palestine conflict since the late 1980s. The political and intellectual challenge of this foreclosure is substantial. It will require, on the Israeli side, a confrontation with the long-term political and demographic implications of governing a population in the absence of either a partition agreement or the extension of equal political rights. It will require, on the Palestinian side, a reckoning with the structural exhaustion of the statehood political program and the development of alternative frameworks for political mobilization. It will require, on the international side, a reckoning with the disjuncture between the rhetorical commitments that continue to organize formal diplomatic discourse and the operational realities that have rendered those commitments increasingly chimerical.

For the broader transatlantic alliance, the divergence documented in this article portends significant turbulence. The strategic convergence of the United States with the Gulf monarchies and Israel has been achieved at the cost of substantial alienation of younger and progressive constituencies across the Western democracies. European governments confront the difficult task of managing public opinion without translating it into substantial policy reorientations or compro-

mising the strategic relationships and economic interests on which they depend. The reconfiguration of transatlantic relations in the era of war and strategic fragmentation-the organizing theme of this special issue-extends beyond the headline questions of NATO burden-sharing, Ukraine policy, and Trump-era unilateralism to encompass this deeper structural question of how democratic publics and strategic establishments will continue to coexist in conditions of widening divergence.

The Iranian dimension of the contemporary regional reordering deserves particular emphasis as a closing observation. The Twelve-Day War and its aftermath represent a strategic accomplishment of substantial magnitude: the comprehensive degradation of an Iranian regional position built over four decades. However, this accomplishment has proceeded against, rather than in concert with, the trajectory of transatlantic public opinion. The political costs-domestic delegitimation, the narrowing of the political base supporting the strategic configuration, the alienation of younger cohorts-are substantial and may, over the longer term, complicate maintenance of the configuration. For the present, however, the operative reality is one in which strategic calculation has proceeded along a trajectory significantly disjoint from public sentiment, in which the rhetorical apotheosis of Palestinianism has coincided with the structural foreclosure of Palestinian statehood, and in which the post-October 7 reordering has been accomplished in defiance of, rather than in concert with, the visible movements of transatlantic opinion. This is the configuration with which scholars and policymakers concerned with the future of the Western alliance system, and the regional order it has historically underwritten, will have to reckon. 🌸

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Mao Zedong's Dialectical Understanding: Critique of Economic Determinism, the Political Subject, and the Chinese Intellectual Tradition



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ABSTRACT

This study examines Mao Zedong's understanding of dialectics and its political implications. It evaluates Mao's thought through three principal dimensions: his critique of economic determinism and bureaucratic-technocratic socialism, his emphasis on the constitutive role of the masses in political struggle, and his engagement with China's traditional intellectual heritage. Mao's dialectical approach is examined comparatively in relation to Stalin's interpretation of historical materialism. The findings show that Mao's understanding of dialectics departs significantly from the classical Soviet approach centered on the economic base by emphasizing the role of culture, ideology, political struggle, and mass mobilization in social transformation. This perspective underpins his concept of the mass line, according to which socialism depends not only on the development of the productive forces but also on the active political participation of the masses. The study further argues that Mao's dialectical thought emerged through the interaction of the Chinese intellectual tradition and Marxist theory, while his effort to accelerate revolutionary transformation through social contradictions generated a tension between traditional Chinese dialectics and the modern revolutionary-progressivist worldview. Consequently, Mao Zedong Thought offers an original theoretical framework for understanding economic determinism, the political subject, and social transformation.

Keywords: dialectics, Mao Zedong, Mao Zedong Thought, mass line, political subject, traditional Chinese thought.

Introduction

MAO ZEDONG'S UNDERSTANDING OF dialectics was shaped by both classical Chinese and modern Western philosophical traditions; however, it developed fundamentally through his political practice. For this reason, it cannot be understood independently of the political and social struggles of his time. Mao did not treat dialectics merely as a method or as a guide for understanding material conditions. Rather, he continuously reformulated and reproduced his dialectical perspective through his own revolutionary experience. Although the relationship he established between theory and practice

enabled him to transcend the limits of dogmatism, it also encouraged a tendency toward excess, leading him to assume the role of a philosopher-king who claimed the capacity to direct the dialectical process itself. As a revolutionary figure forged in extraordinary historical circumstances, Mao came to regard all historical periods as potential opportunities for reproducing the conditions of revolutionary exceptionality. In this respect, one may observe a radical manifestation of the modern belief that reality can be consciously constructed—a worldly political theology that, at certain points, departed from the more restrained insights of classical dialectical wisdom.

Another important dimension of Mao's dialectical thought is the significance he attributed to the superstructure, far beyond that accorded by many Marxist-Leninist thinkers, and his related emphasis on the decisive role of the masses in political struggle. In this regard, Mao may be considered, alongside Antonio Gramsci, one of the most important Hegelian Marxist revolutionaries of the twentieth century.

Xi Jinping's call to confront political and moral decline in China not through liberal Western values but through a synthesis of Marxism and traditional Chinese virtues closely resembles Mao's own attempt to draw simultaneously upon Marxist dialectics and classical Chinese dialectical traditions.

Beginning in 1937, Mao's writings on dialectics also constituted a direct theoretical engagement with Joseph Stalin. Stalin's support for Mao's opponents during the factional struggles within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as his sharp criticisms of Mao's theoretical outlook, played a decisive role in shaping this confrontation. Through his critique of Stalin's dialectical framework, Mao simultaneously laid the intellectual foundations for ideas that would later inform his theory of the Soviet Union's "capitalist restoration."

A further target of Mao's writings on dialectics was the intellectual and party elite who, in his view, remained detached both from China's clas-

sical intellectual heritage and from the realities of material production. These ideas would later become foundational to the development of what came to be described as "socialism with Chinese characteristics," namely, a socialist model shaped by China's own historical and social conditions.

Mao's dialectical thought possesses deep roots and resonates with the practical life experiences of the Chinese people, as ancient Chinese sources profoundly nourish it. Consequently, his dialectical perspective transcends mechanical understandings—chief among them Stalin's—that focus exclusively on structure and function. Instead, it is anchored in a foundation that emphasizes the agent-structure relationship and finds its ultimate expression in the mass line. Nevertheless, because Mao embraced the progressive historical narrative of Enlightenment thought and modern political ideologies regarding the cognition and construction of truth, he fell into the illusion that he could direct the dialectical process. This misconception played a definitive role in the excesses of both the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

At first glance, revisiting Mao Zedong Thought at a time when China has become the world's leading engine of productive-force development and a dominant actor in the global economy may appear anachronistic. However, contemporary China itself has demonstrated that economic development alone is insufficient. Through Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign and his interventions in elite circulation within the CCP, the Chinese leadership has emphasized that the Party's vanguard role and the state's capacity to allocate resources effectively cannot be sustained without continuous political and cultural struggle against corruption and bureaucratic degeneration. As Huhe et al. (2022) have noted, cam-

paigns directed against “flies,” “tigers,” and other powerful networks within the Party apparatus reflect this concern. In this respect, Mao’s dialectical thought and political practice remain a legacy that deserves careful examination. Xi Jinping’s call to confront political and moral decline in China not through liberal Western values but through a synthesis of Marxism and traditional Chinese virtues closely resembles Mao’s own attempt to draw simultaneously upon Marxist dialectics and classical Chinese dialectical traditions (Xi, 2023). On the fiftieth anniversary of Mao’s death, the most enduring and potentially renewable aspect of Mao Zedong Thought for contemporary China lies in the possibilities its dialectical perspective offers for understanding political practice, social transformation, and ideological struggle.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on historical-comparative analysis. Its primary sources consist of Mao Zedong’s writings and speeches on dialectics, philosophy, and politics, together with Stalin’s works on historical materialism. These are examined alongside relevant primary and secondary literature. Mao Zedong’s understanding of dialectics is analyzed comparatively within the contexts of Soviet Marxism and the Chinese intellectual tradition, with particular attention to conceptual continuities, divergences, and their political implications. Through this approach, the study explores how Mao Zedong reinterpreted the relationship between economic determinism, the political subject, and social transformation.



Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, and other Party and State leaders pay tribute to Comrade Mao Zedong at the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in Beijing on the 130th anniversary of the birth of Mao (Photo: China Daily, 2023).

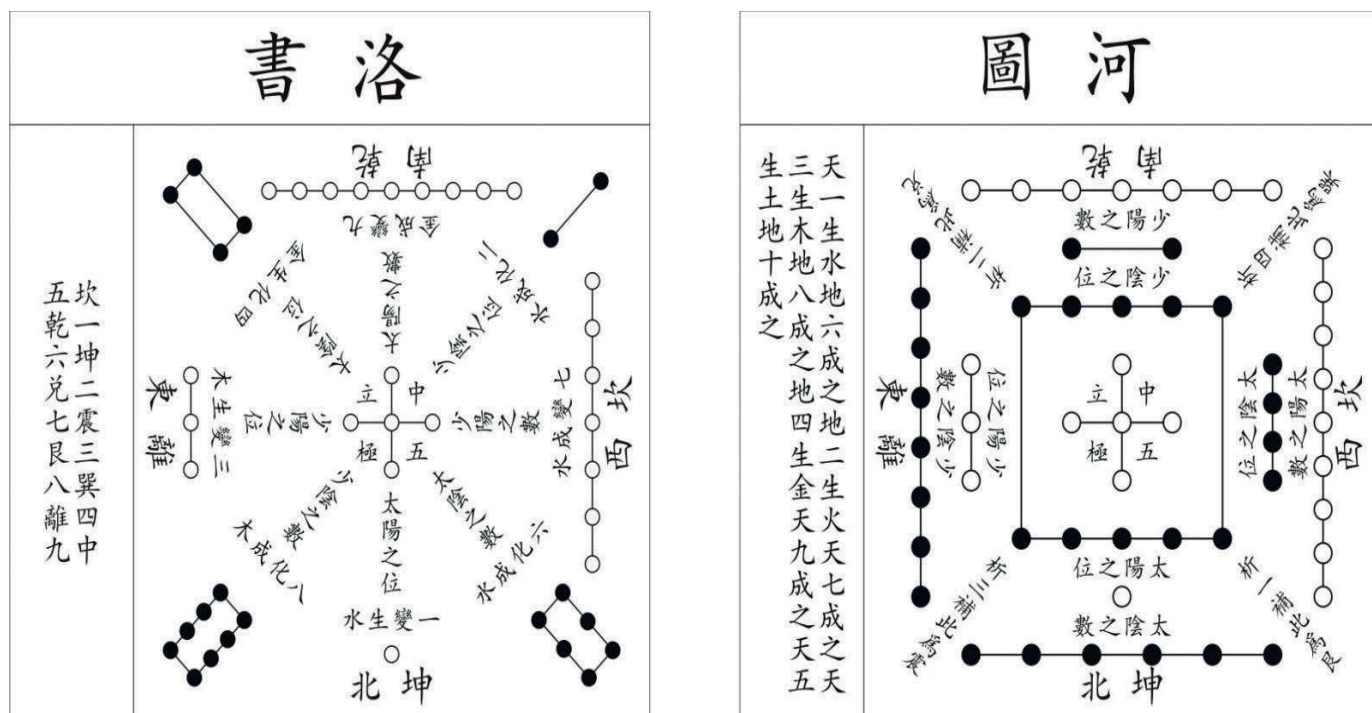
Sources of Mao's Dialectical Thought

The dialectical worldview embodied in China's ancient intellectual traditions possesses a remarkably deep and long-standing history. In this respect, it may only be compared in scope and sophistication to the *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) tradition of Islamic mysticism (Izutsu, 2017). According to Chenshan Tian (2019), explaining reality through "the interaction of complementary opposites in the creative process" constitutes one of the fundamental characteristics of Chinese thought and played a significant role in the reception of Marxist philosophy in China (p. 18). A concise expression of this principle can be found in Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi's statement that "everything subsists through its opposite" (Mevlânâ, 2017, p. 66). Laozi (Lao Tzu) illustrates this principle through examples in the second chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, while Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) explains it through metaphors in numerous passages (Laozi, 2024, p. 27; Zhuangzi, 2024, p. 101).

It would not be inaccurate to describe Mao as a master of the Chinese classics. His speeches contain far more references to classical Chinese scholars and texts than to major Marxist theorists. Indeed, dialectical thought had been developed throughout Chinese history within the framework of the philosophy of *tongbian* (continuity-through-change). Dating back more than five thousand years and traceable to the *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes), one of China's earliest written texts, *tongbian* philosophy played a crucial role in the development of *bianzheng* (dialectical materialism). According to this tradition, everything changes, yet nothing disappears completely; rather, things

reproduce themselves under new conditions, and this process of transformation emerges from contradictions within and between things (Tian, 2002, p. 126). This philosophy may be understood through four key concepts: *dao* (the Way), *yi* (change), *yin-yang* (the complementary poles of existence), and *biantong* (continuity through transformation). *Bian* refers to becoming through difference or transformation, while *tong* denotes continuity or an ongoing process. Tian illustrates this relationship through the famous analogy of a door opening and closing found in the *Yi Jing*. Opening and closing constitute *bian*—the moments of change—whereas the process itself represents *tong*. Although the spatial field produced during opening and closing remains the same, the poles of the process are opposite. Many Chinese thinkers, therefore, argued that throughout *wanwu* (the ten thousand things under heaven), *bian* and *tong* coexist. Without continuity, contradiction could not be perceived; without contradiction, the door would either remain permanently open or permanently closed. In such a case, the door would effectively cease to exist as a door and become merely a wall. Contradictions within things both determine their existence and allow them to appear as enduring entities that can be recognized and named (Tian, 2019, p. 16).

Tongbian incorporates four central propositions. First, everything in the world exists in relation to something else. Second, these relations are reciprocal, meaning that things function as complementary opposites. Third, the fundamental source of movement and change in the world lies in this structure of contradiction. Fourth, everything exists within a process of transformation and presents itself through a



The Luoshu (洛書) and Hetu (河圖) diagrams.
(Image: KKNNews, 2020).

dynamic relationship between center and field (Tian, 2019, p. 17).

As will be discussed below, Zhuangzi, Sunzi (Sun Tzu), and Romance of the Three Kingdoms were among the most influential ancient sources shaping Mao's understanding of dialectics and tongbian thought.

In addition to his mastery of the foundational texts of Marxism, Mao followed the Western philosophical tradition closely from an early age (Dirlik, 1989, p. 46; Fung, 2010, pp. 202-205; Snow, 2015, p. 186; Yang, 2016, p. 60). During the formative years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the works of M. B. Mitin, a Soviet philosopher supported by Joseph Stalin, played a significant role in introducing dialectical materialism to Chinese communists. These texts were translated into Chinese by

Li Da and Ai Siqi. However, as discussed below, Mao would later criticize both Mitin and Stalin's interpretation of dialectics (Rockmore, 2019, p. 60).

Although Stalin and Mao shared certain assumptions regarding dialectics, their disagreements were intensified by Stalin's 1937 attempt to place Wang Ming and the so-called Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks-cadres educated under Soviet supervision-at the head of the CCP (Shen, 2020, p. 43). When Wang arrived in Yan'an in October, he conveyed Stalin's directive that Mao should undergo ideological strengthening due to what Stalin regarded as Mao's narrow empiricism and insufficient understanding of Marxism-Leninism (Benton, 1975, p. 77; Short, 2007, p.332).

The accusation of empiricism reveals how distant Stalin was from the realities of China and how little attention he paid to the social contradictions driving revolutionary struggle. Those who attempted to direct the movement from a desk or from abroad could neither correctly identify China's contradictions nor derive the requirements of revolutionary practice from abstract theoretical texts. In contrast, Mao's famous 1937 essay *On Contradiction* effectively served as a response to both Stalin and Wang Ming, clearly demonstrating the relationship between theory and revolutionary practice that constituted another major source of his dialectical thought. This practical orientation was shaped by what may be termed the "revolutionary situation," a concept that later contributed to accusations of voluntarism against Mao (Schram, 1986, pp. 773-775).

Such an approach resembles expecting birth through artificially induced labor pains rather than through a natural process. Dialectics, however, operates in its own manner: excess inevitably generates its opposite.

Revolutionary periods are rare historical moments in which the masses emerge as active agents on the stage of history. Revolutions can succeed when conscious human intervention corresponds to mature objective conditions, but they can also fail through political mistakes. Such moments occur when the old social order begins to disintegrate, and organized forces

emerge capable of clearing away the remnants of the previous system while establishing a new social division of labor. During such periods, human agency acquires an exceptional significance. Consequently, even leaders whose perspectives are fundamentally structuralist tend to emphasize the role of human will and political subjectivity in history.

Because Mao believed in the theory of continuous revolution and in the repeated renewal of revolutionary power, the revolutionary situation did not end with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. As will be discussed in greater detail below, one of the most problematic aspects of Mao's thought was his conviction that revolutionary situations could be recreated every five or ten years by intensifying contradictions when necessary. Instead of allowing genuine social contradictions to unfold organically, Mao increasingly attempted to generate crises through external intervention, assuming that intensified conflict would accelerate historical development. Such an approach resembles expecting birth through artificially induced labor pains rather than through a natural process. Dialectics, however, operates in its own manner: excess inevitably generates its opposite. The rapid transformation of Chinese politics in the years following Mao's death perhaps provides the clearest illustration of this dynamic.

These three sources may therefore be identified as the principal foundations of Mao's dialectical thought. Nevertheless, as Mao's conflicts with Stalin deepened and particularly after the ideological split with the Soviet Union that began to emerge after 1956, he increasingly emphasized the Chinese classical tradition. He came to discuss dialectical materialism more

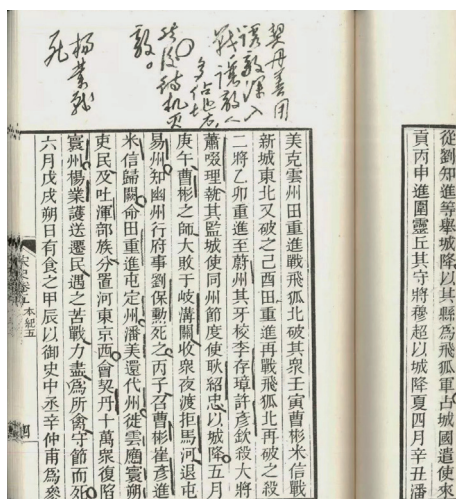
frequently through the lens of Chinese thinkers and criticized those who claimed that the Chinese intellectual tradition lacked a dialectical dimension. This tendency also spread among those around him. Two notable examples are particularly illustrative in this regard.

Speaking at the Open Session of Group Leaders of the Enlarged Meeting of the Military Affairs Committee on 28 June 1958, Mao stated:

Li Shi-min, Cao Cao, and others all knew how to wage war. China's past is immensely rich. Comrade Kai Feng said that there is no Marxism in Sun-Zu Ping-fa (The Art of War). However, when I asked him whether he had actually read the book, he could not answer. It is clearly wrong to make such definite judgments without reading it." At this point, Commander Lin Biao intervened, adding: "There is both materialism and dialectics in Sun-Zu Ping-fa (Mao, 2000, p. 95).

In a philosophical discussion held on 18 August 1964, Mao told Party intellectuals: "I am a na-

tive philosopher; you are foreign philosophers" (Mao, 2000, p. 327). During the same discussion, he argued that Lenin's ideas concerning the infinite divisibility and indestructibility of matter could already be found in Zhuangzi. A close reading of Zhuangzi's writings suggests that Mao drew extensively on them in formulating his views on matter, order, and particularly chaos (Tian, 2002, p. 23; Zhuangzi, 2024). While discussing contradictions among the people and criticizing dogmatic approaches, Mao posed the question of whether "bad things can be transformed into good things" and invoked Laozi's famous observation that "within misfortune there is fortune, and within fortune there is misfortune" as an illustration of dialectical reasoning (Mao, 1993, p. 453). Likewise, Mao referred to Mozi, the founder of Mohism and a major rival of Confucianism, as "China's Heraclitus" and praised him as "a great master of ancient dialectical materialism" (Tian, 2002, p. 23).



Mao Zedong's handwritten annotations and markings in The Twenty-Four Histories, which chronicles approximately four thousand years of Chinese history. Mao studied the work systematically for 24 years, drawing on historical experience to address contemporary political and social issues (Photo: Sohu, 2019).

Despite these appreciations, Mao did not embrace Laozi's preference for moderation and avoidance of extremes, nor did he adopt Zhuangzi's ideal of a life grounded in non-intervention. If dialectics is understood as the coexistence of opposites and the eventual transformation of things into their opposites, it can be argued that both Laozi and Zhuangzi approached the relationship between the individual and the universal with considerable subtlety and recognized that the natural world unfolds according to its own inherent order. However, neither Mao's Enlightenment-inspired faith in progress nor the historical mission he assumed allowed him to fully internalize this understanding of dialectics.

Having emerged from circumstances in which human will was forged through immense hardship and where society demanded heroic leadership, Mao refused to see himself merely as an observer of the dialectical process. Instead, he defended what may be called a secular political theology, embodied both in himself and in the masses whom he regarded as the agents of history. Consequently, he came to view history as a process that could be consciously experimented upon and directed. Within the vast scope of his revolutionary vision, the human costs of such experiments often appeared secondary.

Paradoxically, a thinker who understood dialectics well enough to recognize that no condition could represent an absolute good nevertheless came to believe that contradictions could be accelerated in order to produce something "better than the better." His conviction that the dialectic of order and chaos could be consciously manipulated helps explain the tragic dimensions of his later political trajectory. After a series of experiments that imposed immense social costs, Mao ultimately prepared the ground for a relatively

smooth transfer of power to Hua Guofeng, while undoubtedly perceiving Deng Xiaoping's rise on the horizon. In this final phase, Mao appears less as a philosopher-king seeking to direct history and more as a reflective Chinese scholar reconciled with reality, attempting to repay his intellectual debt to the classical tradition from which he had long drawn inspiration.

The Fundamental Principles of Dialectics in Mao

For Mao, the foundation of dialectics is "contradiction." He rejects the unity of opposites as formulated through the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In Mao's understanding, the thesis is overcome by the antithesis; the antithesis then becomes a new thesis, containing within itself its own opposite and eventually transforming into it. In other words, the contradiction between two opposites does not produce a third form: "What is synthesis? You have all witnessed how the Kuomintang and the Communist Party were synthesized on the mainland. Synthesis occurred in this way: their armies came, and we devoured them, piece by piece." (Mao, 2000, p. 325)

In Hegel, the question of synthesis is primarily ontological. Being (thesis), Nothingness (antithesis), and Becoming (synthesis) constitute an explanation of reality itself. In fact, "nothingness" in Hegel is less a concrete condition than a key concept for explaining the relationship between Being and Becoming. When Being is conceived in complete abstraction, its connection to existence is severed; when it is conceived in purely immanent terms, it loses its transcendence (Hegel, 2014). In Stalin, particularly under the influence of Friedrich Engels, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad is employed not as an ontological issue but as a means of explain-

ing contradiction and progress in reality. Once the unity of opposites is detached from Hegel's idealist philosophy and subjected to a materialist reinterpretation, the ontological essence of the concepts is also altered (Stalin, 1989, pp. 20-21). In this respect, Mao's criticism is directed less at Hegel than at Stalin's interpretation of the unity of opposites.

In the same text, recorded as *Talk on Questions of Philosophy*, Mao makes the following assertion: "Philosophy can exist only where there is class struggle. To discuss epistemology apart from practice is a waste of time." (Mao, 2000, p. 198) This proposition immediately raises several questions. Would there be no philosophy in societies without classes? Is epistemology the sole subject matter of philosophy? The question of Being confronts individuals as soon as they attain consciousness of their own existence. For

this, not only class struggle but even the presence of another person is arguably unnecessary (İbn Tufeyl, 2021). However, in the following sentence, Mao refers specifically to epistemology, suggesting that he may not be speaking of philosophy in its entirety. His emphasis on "practice" should be understood in the context of his long-standing struggle within the Party, particularly against the group known as the Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks led by Wang Ming, whom he frequently criticized as "dogmatists" and "intellectuals." According to Mao, any idea that is not derived from practice, tested within practice, and oriented toward practical life amounts to little more than wordplay. This observation remains significant; at the very least, philosophical discussions conducted without a serious understanding of economics and history risk becoming mere sophistry.



Mao Zedong talking with peasants in Yangjialing, Yan'an, about their production and living conditions (Photo: CPC News, 2025).

Materialist dialectics holds that external causes constitute the conditions of change, while internal causes constitute its basis. External causes operate through internal causes. At an appropriate temperature, an egg turns into a chick. However, no temperature can turn a stone into a chick, because the two are fundamentally different.” (Mao, 2008, p. 89).

Mao was acutely aware of this problem and therefore attached enormous importance to ideological mobilization. At the same time, he believed that systems of material rewards risked reproducing bourgeois cultural relations and capitalist modes of thinking.

These remarks reveal the structuralist dimension of Mao’s thought and challenge interpretations that portray him as a pure voluntarist. Indeed, Andrew G. Walder objects to such readings, arguing that Mao sought to establish a balance between changes in the economic base and transformations in the superstructure. Ideological transformations, Mao believed, could become durable only when accompanied by corresponding changes in production relations (Walder, 1977). Consistent with Walder’s interpretation, Mao pursued ideological campaigns alongside collectivization and the establishment of communes. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), he even allowed, albeit briefly, the experiment of the Shanghai Commune. The fundamental problem in Mao’s approach, however, was his

attempt to intensify contradictions to propel both the economic base and the superstructure toward a higher stage of development, with ideological struggle as the primary catalyst. In this manner, Mao envisioned a new dialectical process: the conscious collective action of the revolutionary vanguard would accelerate material transformation. In contrast, the resulting material changes would in turn elevate collective consciousness. Mao was likely convinced of the feasibility of this process by the practical experience of the revolutionary years between 1921 and 1949. However, transformations of such intensity are possible primarily under extraordinary circumstances—such as war—when contradictions reach their highest level and urgent needs demand radical solutions. Under normal conditions, when people require stability, work, and social order, such a strategy becomes excessive. Mao mistakenly assumed that the lessons drawn from the long revolutionary period could be reproduced indefinitely by transforming ordinary times into a permanent state of mobilization. During the revolutionary era, a single spark could ignite the dry grasslands of the countryside; however, the masses are not always ready to burn, nor are they perpetually willing to endure an overheated social environment.

It is necessary to ‘set fires’ at regular intervals. How often should this be done? Once a year? Once every three years? In my opinion, it should be done twice during every Five-Year Plan period, much like the extra day added in leap years.” (9 July 1957) (Mao, 1993, p. 498).

These remarks strongly support the above argument. From another perspective, ideological mobilization can be understood as a means of securing the masses’ voluntary support for ambitious economic development projects. Large-scale investments financed through high levels of do-



On August 18, 1966, Chairman Mao received Red Guards and representatives of revolutionary teachers and students at the Tiananmen Gate Tower (Photo: Mao Zedong Database [毛泽东博览], 1966).

mestic savings rather than external borrowing require the production of social consent. Ideological campaigns, therefore, play a crucial role in generating that consent. The central question, however, concerns sustainability. Under-consumption, high savings rates, and intensive labor utilization cannot be maintained indefinitely through ideological mobilization alone. Moreover, such campaigns often impose destructive costs on bureaucrats, technocrats, and intellectuals. Unlike Mao, Stalin largely neglected ideological mobilization during the Soviet Union's development drive, which was based on high savings and labor-intensive growth. The result was increasing alienation among producers, political apathy, and admiration for Western consumer culture. Mao

was acutely aware of this problem and therefore attached enormous importance to ideological mobilization. At the same time, he believed that systems of material rewards risked reproducing bourgeois cultural relations and capitalist modes of thinking (Mao, 2000, pp. 201-204). The deeper dilemma lay elsewhere. The persistence of socialism imposed costs in circumstances where central planning failed to generate sufficient efficiency. Deng Xiaoping later addressed this problem by allowing market mechanisms to regulate supply and demand and by making material incentives the principal source of motivation. While this solution enhanced efficiency, it also contributed to political depoliticization, widening inequalities, and the weakening of the working class.

As discussed above, efforts to promote high-savings growth and to transform culture in accordance with changing production relations can be defended to a certain extent. The more fundamental problem lies in Mao's belief that he could personally direct the dialectical process. One of the most striking examples emerged during the Great Leap Forward, a highly unrealistic campaign of accelerated development:

There is also the matter of eliminating the four pests and paying attention to hygiene. I attach great importance to eradicating rats, sparrows, flies, and mosquitoes. China must become a country without rats, sparrows, flies, or mosquitoes (9 October 1957) (Mao, 1993, p. 532).

A nationwide campaign against the Four Pests followed. Shortly thereafter, Mao declared: "For four thousand years, including Confucius, no one concerned himself with eliminating these four scourges" (28 January 1958) (Mao, 2000, p. 47). By this statement, Mao emphasized the historical significance of the campaign. However, it is hardly surprising that no traditional Chinese thinker has ever attempted such a project. Ancient societies neither objectified nature in the modern sense nor possessed the technological capacity to do so.

The consequences of interfering with the dialectics of nature in this manner proved disastrous. The mass extermination of sparrows in particular led to an explosion in insect populations and a severe decline in agricultural productivity. Even then, Mao did not abandon his role as a self-appointed manager of dialectics; he merely replaced sparrows with bedbugs in the list of pests and effectively rehabilitated the former. It may even be argued that the failure of the Great Leap Forward intensified Mao's desire for ideological revenge during the Cultural Revolution, pushing his experiments in managing contradictions to their most radical extreme.

Under Mao's leadership, the CCP achieved the 1949 Revolution with a success that exceeded most expectations. While the new regime was still attempting to consolidate the political system, China became involved in the Korean War, during which the United States was pushed back from China's borders to the 38th Parallel. During the following seven years, significant progress was made in China's economic development. It may be argued that the extraordinary willpower and strategic competence required to overcome these challenges gradually contributed to the emergence of a god-complex in Mao himself. Deng Xiaoping repeatedly alluded to this tendency in his later assessments (Deng, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Pu, 2015).

For Mao, the relationship between ideological mobilization, the development of the productive forces, and the transformation of cultural structures could only be sustained through the intensification of contradictions. Mao describes contradictions as follows:

Within everything there exists a contradiction between its new and old aspects, and this gives rise to a series of struggles full of twists and turns. As a result of these struggles, the old aspect shifts from important to unimportant and gradually dies away, while the new aspect shifts from small and insignificant to large and dominant. Once the new aspect gains supremacy over the old, the old thing qualitatively changes into the new. Thus, the nature of a thing is determined principally by the dominant aspect of the contradiction, that is, the aspect that has gained superiority. When the dominant aspect changes, the nature of the thing changes accordingly (Mao, 2008, p. 110).

It is noteworthy that within the same passage, Mao speaks both of the death of the old and of



Mass labor mobilization during the Great Leap Forward: building a pontoon bridge to transport earth, Jingmen, Hubei, 1958 (Photo provided by Chen Feng/China Photographers Association, 2021).

its qualitative transformation into something new. Treating qualitative transformation as equivalent to death is problematic. The circulation of matter itself demonstrates that this is not the case. Social phenomena likewise do not fundamentally disappear; what appears to have died is often reproduced in new forms. Many of the central concepts of modern political thought—such as the separation of powers, democracy, or the unity of powers—can be traced to premodern political and institutional structures that have been rearticulated in modern contexts. Another difficulty in Mao's thought is his tendency, common among progressive ideologies, to attribute a metaphysical superiority to the new over the old. However, life continues, and social forms

are constantly recycled and transformed. Mao once remarked: "I approve of Zhuangzi's approach. When his wife died, he beat a drum and sang. When people die, banquets should be held to celebrate the victory of dialectics and the destruction of the old" (Mao, 2000, p. 329). What is being celebrated here, however, is not merely the replacement of the old by the new but rather the cyclical continuity of life itself. This is not a mechanical substitution of one state for another. In the ancient worldview, death is not an ending, nor birth an absolute beginning; both are moments within a continuous process of becoming. Indeed, this perspective constitutes one of the central principles of Daoist thought (Zhuangzi, 2024, pp. 59-62).

Mao further argued that without practical contradictions or ideological struggles to resolve, the Party itself would cease to live. In addressing contradictions, he distinguished between “contradictions between ourselves and the enemy” and “contradictions among the people” (Mao, 2008, pp. 98, 121-124). In political terms, this amounts to a distinction between contradiction as paradox and antagonistic contradiction as irreconcilable conflict. Mao’s long-standing united front strategy was based precisely upon this distinction. Against forces constituting the principal antagonistic contradiction, groups that possessed secondary disagreements could nevertheless form alliances based on a shared position regarding the principal contradiction. Mao’s theoretical insights were often remarkably accurate, and his practical political strategies frequently reflected this accuracy. However, whenever the united front approach was abandoned in favor of ideological campaigns directed against particular factions or tendencies, the nature of the contradictions was rapidly and inconsistently redefined. During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, for example, many intellectuals assumed that Mao’s invitation to criticism fell within the category of contradictions among the people. They subsequently paid a heavy price for this assumption. After 1978, the CCP gradually sought to restore the positions and reputations of many individuals who had suffered because their disagreements with the Party were retrospectively categorized as antagonistic contradictions. Certainly, one cannot argue that the contradiction between the national bourgeoisie and the working class during the period of New Democracy should have remained identical under socialism. Marxists must identify new relationships between changing production relations and political struggle. The arbitrariness emerged when Mao assumed the role of a dialectical deity, justifying

purge-like policies by redefining the direction and nature of contradictions. This tendency was closely linked to an alarming indifference toward human life and dignity.

Mao famously stated that “when a thing reaches its extreme, it turns into its opposite” (Mao, 1993, p. 356). Indeed, war begins to transform into peace when it reaches its ultimate limits. The longest day simultaneously marks the beginning of the movement toward the shortest day. Similar examples can easily be found throughout everyday life. Unlike Stalin, Mao did not generally regard political opponents as foreign agents.

Mao famously stated that “when a thing reaches its extreme, it turns into its opposite” (Mao, 1993, p. 356). Indeed, war begins to transform into peace when it reaches its ultimate limits. The longest day simultaneously marks the beginning of the movement toward the shortest day. Similar examples can easily be found throughout everyday life. Unlike Stalin, Mao did not generally regard political opponents as foreign agents. Rather, he believed that contradictions inherent within political and organizational structures themselves could generate counterrevolutionary tendencies from within. Consequently, he sought to combat counterrevolution through continuous revolution, thereby directing the development of contradictions themselves.



Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin at the ceremonial meeting marking Stalin's 70th birthday, Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, December 21, 1949 (Photo: Russian State Central Museum of Cinema and Photography [РГАСПИ], 2021).

In criticizing Stalin's conception of opposites as existing side by side without transforming into one another, Mao's dialectics arguably came closer to classical understandings of dialectical thought. Responding to Stalin's example of war and peace, Mao asked: "If war were not already fermenting during peacetime, how could it suddenly break out? If peace were not already developing during wartime, how could it suddenly become reality?" (Mao, 1993, p. 400). This understanding also helps explain Stalin's reliance upon police measures and state coercion while closing off possibilities for ideological struggle and mass mobilization. For Stalin, if someone who had once been revolutionary later opposed him, that individual was, at least objectively, an agent. At most, one might search earlier records to demonstrate that he had always been a counterrevolutionary. Had Mao confined himself to this insight and conducted political struggle in accordance with the internal move-

ment of contradictions, his position would have been considerably more coherent. A cosmological analogy may clarify the point. If the Earth were to rotate significantly faster or slower, the fundamental contradictions that sustain life would be disrupted, making life impossible. However, the very contradictions that generate movement also preserve the Earth's current equilibrium. Mao's greatest difficulty lay in his "creative-modern theological" conviction that he could consciously direct contradictions, determining both their speed and intensity through political will.

Mao's reflections on structure and agency constitute another important dimension of his dialectical outlook. In this respect, he diverges from the mechanical dialectics associated with Stalin and moves closer to a Hegelian conception of dialectics. In his comments on *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, Mao criticized Stalin as follows:

He emphasized only technology and technical cadres. He wanted nothing beyond technology and cadres; there was neither politics nor the masses. This is walking on one leg. Moreover, in industry they emphasize heavy industry rather than light industry—again walking on one leg (Mao, 2000, p. 97).

The queues outside foreign food and clothing stores after 1991 dramatically revealed the accumulated effects of suppressed consumption. Nevertheless, despite Mao's criticism, China likewise remained relatively weak in light industrial investment, allocating the bulk of its resources to heavy industry (Kubo, 2019, p. 148).

Mao's criticism of Stalin's emphasis on technical cadres can be theoretically grounded in J. H. Kautsky's distinction between revolutionary political elites and bureaucratic-political elites. One of Mao's principal concerns after 1949 was that the revolutionary elites forged through war and struggle were increasingly being replaced by bureaucratic-technocratic elites, with power becoming concentrated in their hands. Kautsky similarly observed that following revolutionary transformations, conflicts often emerge between technocratic elites, focused primarily on economic development, and revolutionary elites, who view ideological and cultural transformation as inseparable from the development of productive forces. For bureaucratic-technocratic elites, economic growth becomes the primary objective, and once conditions for growth are established, further ideological mobilization appears inefficient. Revolutionary elites, by

contrast, perceive such tendencies as a grave threat and seek to inspire new generations through revolutionary memory, romanticism, and moral idealism. Mao's attempt during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) to revive the Yan'an spirit of 1937-1949 is particularly revealing in this regard. At the height of the GPCR, Mao abandoned the Sun Yat-sen suit and resumed wearing the uniform of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (CPLA), a gesture soon emulated by the Red Guards (Kautsky, 1969, pp. 441-451).

Mao's Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, with its emphasis on the superstructure, also provides the philosophical foundation for his defense of the mass line. However, Mao was, above all, a man of action. Rather than deriving political practice from an abstract philosophical doctrine, he developed his theoretical views through practical struggles and articulated them philosophically only later. His critique of Stalin's understanding of politics, agency, and the masses is fully consistent with this dialectical outlook. By accusing Stalin of "walking on one leg," Mao criticized a structuralist tendency that focused almost exclusively on the development of productive forces while neglecting the dialectical relationship between base and superstructure. Such neglect contributed to the domination of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by bureaucratic-technocratic elites and to the transformation of the Soviet Union into a vast bureaucratic apparatus. Significantly, the delegate composition of the 1956 CPSU Congress—which Mao harshly criticized—was itself a legacy of the Stalin period. Of the 1,335 delegates, 643 were party bureaucrats, accounting for nearly half of the total. Among the delegates, 758 possessed higher education, 116 had incomplete higher education, and 169 had secondary education. Given that workers and peasants in the Soviet Union commonly had secondary education, workers constituted less than 10% of the dele-

gates. The remainder largely belonged to the party and state bureaucracy (Kulski, 1956, p. 160).

One reason why Stalin and subsequent Soviet leaders neglected the light industry was their failure to follow a mass-line approach. Since the light industry primarily produces consumer goods, Soviet workers continually experienced shortages in consumption goods despite their sacrifices and the appropriation of surplus value through forced savings. The queues outside foreign food and clothing stores after 1991 dramatically revealed the accumulated effects of suppressed consumption. Nevertheless, despite Mao's criticism, China likewise remained relatively weak in light industrial investment, allocating the bulk of its resources to heavy industry (Kubo, 2019, p. 148). This circumstance may also help explain Mao's reliance on mass mobilization and political propaganda.

As Mao observed:

From beginning to end, Stalin's book says nothing about the superstructure. It does not concern itself with people; it concerns things. They believe that technology and cadres determine everything; they speak always of 'experts' and never of the 'Red,' always of 'cadres' and never of the 'masses.' They speak only of production relations and never of the superstructure or politics. One cannot arrive at communism without a communist movement. (Mao, 2000, pp. 103-104).

One of Mao's most innovative contributions to political thought is his "from the masses, to the masses" line, which occasionally opened space even for experiments in direct democracy. The mass line is inherently conflictual; at times, it may even become a matter of "masses against masses," with different sections of the people occupying opposing sides of a contradiction. For this reason, Wang Hui argues that "the mass line and mass politics are the source of political vitality and

the foundation for resisting right-wing populism" (Wang, 2015, p. 201). According to Wang, Mao's concept of democratic dictatorship is democratic because it possesses an exceptionally broad capacity for political integration and representation, yet dictatorial because this process of integration is simultaneously exclusionary and coercive (Wang, 2015, p. 50).

The mass line also exemplifies the principle that class struggle precedes class formation. During the Yan'an period, the strategy of people's war transformed participating masses into a political class (Wang, 2015, p. 161). From this perspective, Mao's assertion that "one cannot arrive at communism without a communist movement" implies that communist society itself emerges through the resolution of contradictions among the people and struggles against antagonistic enemies. In this respect, Mao's perspective shares an epistemological affinity with E. P. Thompson's preference for the concept of "making" rather than "emergence" when discussing the English working class. By emphasizing class formation through historical struggle, Thompson approaches class in a manner remarkably similar to Mao's understanding of class and class movements (Thompson, 2015, pp. 39-40). For Mao, "making" is nothing other than class struggle and the communist movement itself.

The mass line reached its peak in China during the GPCR, encompassing a wide range of radical movements and organizations. To be sure, the GPCR was not solely an attempt to promote cultural transformation or new political initiatives through mass mobilization. It also represented an effort—ultimately unsuccessful—to move politics beyond the confines of official institutional guardianship and to explore the possibility of political action emerging under chaotic conditions outside predetermined forms.

Nevertheless, Alain Badiou, who sided with Maoist groups during the events of May 1968 in France, continues to declare, borrowing from Arthur Rimbaud, “I was there, and I am still there” (Badiou, 2009, p. 87; 2020, p. 43). Badiou regards the Cultural Revolution as “the last decisive sequence still internal to the party-state” (Badiou, 2009, p. 88; 2020, p. 44). Even in its failure, he considers it the most significant “event” from which a new understanding of politics, centered on the concept of the event itself, may still draw inspiration

Conclusion

This study has examined Mao Zedong’s understanding of dialectics by considering its differences from classical Soviet Marxism, its relationship with the traditional Chinese philosophy of tongbian, and its affinity with Hegelian Marxist critiques of economic determinism.

One of the central findings of the study is that Mao’s dialectics was not based solely on a conception of history centered on productive forces and the economic base. Rather, Mao regarded politics, culture, ideology, and mass movements as constitutive elements of social transformation. In this respect, the concepts of contradiction, practice, and the mass line enabled Mao to conceptualize social change not merely as the outcome of economic development but as the product of political struggle and ideological mobilization. Consequently, Mao’s thought constituted a significant critique of the mechanistic materialist and technocratic-bureaucratic understanding of socialism institutionalized during the Stalin era.

Within this framework, Mao’s criticisms of Stalin were directed toward redefining the relationship between productive forces and the superstructure. For Mao, the continuity of socialism depended not on technical specialization and bureaucratic administration but on the active participation of the masses as subjects of class struggle. The Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution emerged as the most radical application of this perspective. Although this experience cannot be regarded as successful in terms of its political objectives, it remains a distinctive historical experiment insofar as it challenged the limits of the party-state structure and sought to reproduce the political subject through mass participation.

The most problematic aspect of Mao’s dialectics, however, was his belief that social contradictions could be consciously intensified in order to accelerate the forward movement of history. This belief constituted the foundational element of Mao’s political theology. It may be interpreted as a radical synthesis of Enlightenment-inspired constructivist thought and the Marxist faith in historical progress. Mao’s emergence as the leader of a revolutionary struggle during one of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history undoubtedly reinforced this outlook, as he witnessed the capacity of social upheaval and chaos to generate revolutionary possibilities. However, this perspective also prevented him, at least until the later stages of the Cultural Revolution, from fully internalizing the principles of tongbian philosophy, which represented another important source of his dialectical thought.

The findings further suggest that Mao’s dialectical approach was shaped significantly by the Chinese intellectual tradition, particularly its emphasis on change, opposition, and transformation. This influence did not imply a rejection of Marxism but rather its reinterpretation in light of the historical and social realities of China. Although Mao sacrificed some of the most important principles of traditional Chinese dialectical thought to the demands of his political theology, his effort to preserve an intellectual connection with China’s historical and cultural heritage remained highly significant in an era dominated by modernist intellectual currents. In this regard, Mao’s engagement with the Chinese philosophical tradition constitutes an important theoretical legacy for the continuing development and debate surrounding the project of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

In conclusion, Mao's dialectics can be regarded as one of the most comprehensive theoretical and political interventions developed within Marxist thought against economic determinism. For this reason, Mao's ideas continue to serve as an important reference point not only for understanding the Chinese Revolution but also for broader debates in contemporary political theory concerning political subjectivity, social transformation, and political participation. Moreover, the renewed emphasis on ideological discipline, anti-corruption campaigns, and the relationship between Marxism and traditional Chinese values in contemporary China suggests that Mao's dialectical legacy remains a relevant subject for critical re-examination. 🌸

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China's Global Infrastructure Strategy

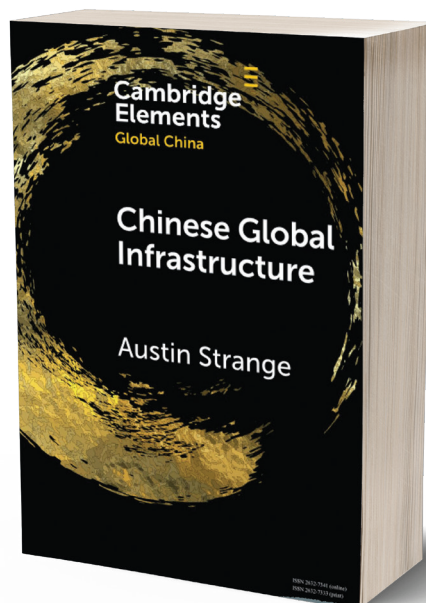
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A PERSISTENT WEAKNESS IN BELT AND ROAD Initiative scholarship has been its tendency to treat China's overseas infrastructure ambitions as a purely 21st-century phenomenon. Much of the existing literature starts the clock at the BRI's formal launch in 2013 and, as a result, misreads the initiative as something new rather than an expression of foreign policy habits with much longer roots. Austin Strange's *Chinese Global Infrastructure* addresses this gap directly. By situating the BRI in a histor-

ical context stretching back to the Mao era, Strange argues that understanding what China is doing abroad today requires engaging seriously with what it was doing there six decades ago. The book is among the more empirically grounded studies of Chinese statecraft to have appeared in recent years, and it offers analysts and scholars a way out of the polarised debate between "debt trap" narratives on one side and enthusiasm for Chinese-led development on the other.

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Strange bases his analysis on two datasets: AidData's records covering China's 21st-century activities, and an original dataset he compiled, cataloging approximately 4,000 projects from 1949 to 1999. During the Mao era, China functioned as a net donor, extending aid on ideological rather than commercial grounds and cultivating solidarity with newly independent states across Africa and Asia. But during the 1980s and 1990s, China shifted to the role of a net recipient, drawing on Japanese loans and World Bank financing to support its own modernization. By the mid-2000s, policy banks such as China EXIM Bank and the China Development Bank had begun channeling capital outward again, blending political direction with market logic in ways that laid the institutional groundwork for the BRI. The book's longitudinal design gives it its authority, as Strange is not speculating about historical continuity but measuring it.



The evidence he presents around UN Resolution 2758 in 1971 is instructive. States that had received infrastructure were measurably more inclined to back China's position, and individual projects served as material anchors for that alignment.

The book moves beyond the common binary that frames Chinese overseas investment as

either development aid or debt-trap diplomacy, introducing instead a typology based on project visibility and national salience. On the one hand, it is large-scale economic projects in transport, energy, and industry, commercially motivated and financially substantial, averaging around US\$371 million in the current century. On the other side, what he calls prestige infrastructure, smaller projects averaging around US\$29 million that carry national symbolism rather than economic weight, such as stadiums, government buildings, and conference centers. These are allocated primarily to smaller states and serve as visible tokens of political alignment, offering host governments a kind of modernity on display while providing Beijing with what Strange describes as "national symbolic capital." The distinction is more than descriptive.

Strange goes on to examine how infrastructure acquisition has historically translated into diplomatic behavior, asking whether states that received Chinese projects were more likely to support Beijing on contested international questions. The evidence he presents around UN Resolution 2758 in 1971 is instructive. States that had received infrastructure were measurably more inclined to back China's position, and individual projects served as material anchors for that alignment. The Vau i Dejës Hydroelectric Power Station in Albania, agreed upon in 1967, is one such example, a relatively modest investment that carried massive political weight during a formative period of Chinese foreign policy. Strange does not overstate the causal logic here.

He acknowledges that turning a built project into a durable political influence is rarely straightforward and depends on conditions that Beijing cannot always control, including leadership changes, shifts in domestic opinion, and the performance of the projects themselves.

This leads to one of the book's most candid arguments, its sustained attention to the limits of infrastructure as a political tool. Strange identifies a structural gap between the goals of China's central government and the behavior

of its State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in the field. These firms operate according to commercial incentives that do not always align with Beijing's strategic objectives. When projects run into trouble, whether through cost overruns, delays, or allegations of corruption, host governments tend to hold the Chinese state responsible rather than the individual contractor. Strange calls this misattribution, an underappreciated vulnerability in China's infrastructure diplomacy that no amount of



China will continue promoting BRI infrastructure development with established advantages
(Illustration: Tang Tengfei/Global Times, 2023).

careful project selection at the planning stage can fully prevent.



Strange concludes that the BRI is not in decline, but is being recalibrated in response to shifting economic and political pressures. Debt distress in a growing number of partner countries, combined with domestic economic pressures in China, is pushing Beijing toward smaller, more selective investments. The appetite for flagship megaprojects appears to be declining, replaced by what Strange characterizes as a preference for higher quality and lower risk.

The book is straightforward about the questions it cannot yet answer. Digital infrastructure, including 5G networks, AI-enabled platforms, and e-governance systems, is included in the analysis but not given the same treatment as physical projects. This is a reasonable limitation given the available data, though the digital connectivity may generate different forms of influence than physical infrastructure. Environmental questions present a similar prob-

lem. Strange notes that Chinese infrastructure projects have, in many cases, accelerated deforestation and other forms of ecological degradation. Still, the datasets do not yet support a full assessment of whether the green commitments announced in recent years, including Xi Jinping's 2021 pledge to stop financing overseas coal plants, reflect a genuine shift in practice or merely a change in rhetoric.

Strange concludes that the BRI is not in decline, but is being recalibrated in response to shifting economic and political pressures. Debt distress in a growing number of partner countries, combined with domestic economic pressures in China, is pushing Beijing toward smaller, more selective investments. The appetite for flagship megaprojects appears to be declining, replaced by what Strange characterizes as a preference for higher quality and lower risk. Whether this shift is durable or tactical remains to be seen, but the historical framing the book provides offers something useful, a reminder that the underlying instinct to use visible, nationally significant infrastructure as an instrument of foreign policy has persisted across very different phases of Chinese political economy, from revolutionary solidarity projects in the 1960s to the commercial connectivity logic of the BRI today. The book offers a strong empirical foundation and clearer analytical language than much of the existing literature, making it essential reading for understanding the origins, purpose, and future trajectory of the BRI. 🌸

ATTILA İLHAN *



**Attilâ İlhan (1925–2005) was one of the most distinctive and influential poets of modern Turkish literature, as well as a novelist, journalist, and intellectual. His poetry brought together individual experience, social reality, history, and political struggle, while combining modern poetic forms with the traditional resources of Turkish literature. His major poetry collections include Duvar, Sisler Bulvarı, Ben Sana Mecburum, and Kimi Sevsem Sensin. Beyond literature, İlhan played an important role as a public intellectual through his writings on Turkey's political and cultural questions. He combined his engagement with socialist thought with a strong commitment to national independence and sovereignty, and developed a critical stance toward Western-centered imperialism and relations of dependency. His books Hangi Sol, Hangi Batı, Hangi Atatürk, and Hangi Küreselleşme reflect this intellectual orientation. He died in Istanbul on October 10, 2005.*

Trying Loneliness**

What are you doing in the middle of the night?
Don't touch the stars—you'll burn in their light.
Look, the moon will soon be setting from your sight,
keep the darkness from staining your hands tonight,
or you'll get so confused that you lose your path.

Inside and out, all stardust, all reflections,
you'll never know the truth from the deceptions.
A dream-ship, already leaving the port, gliding by,
brushing against your dreams as they pass you by,
you'll wish to weep, but no tears will comply.

If loving is only as small
as the human heart can hold at all,
you cannot bear a love that grows too tall.
Try loneliness as well, since you've come this far -
how it echoes, from the deep, from afar,
you cannot tell if it is good or if it scars.

A human completes the human within,
inside you're one, outside you're another.
Your emptiness will seep into your fullness,
the other will fit inside this skin -
or you won't make it alive to morning



SALAH ABDEL SABOUR*



**Salah Abdel Sabour (Arabic: روبيصلا دب ع حالص) (May 1931 - 14 August 1981) was an Egyptian free verse poet, editor, playwright and essayist. He showed an interest in literature in his early life and started to write verses at the age of 13. Salah graduated from Cairo University in 1951 with a degree in Arabic literature. He began working for Rose al-Yūsuf Magazine as journalist then became the literary editor for al-Ahram. Afterwards, he held the position of undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture. From there, he became the editor-in-chief for the Cinema and Theater magazine. Between 1977 and 1978, he served as a press counselor for the Egyptian embassy in India and then headed the General Egyptian Book Organization until his death. His first collection of poems, an-Nas fi Biladi ("People In My Land") published in 1956, marked the beginnings of the free verse movement in Egyptian poetry.*

Sorrow**

My friend, I am sad.
 Morning rose, but I did not smile; its light did not brighten my face.
 I left the heart of the city, seeking whatever livelihood was within reach,
 and dipped the bread of my meager days
 in the water of contentment.
 I returned afternoon, a few coins in my pocket.
 I drank tea on the way, mended my worn-out shoe, and played dice, tossed between my friend's hand and mine,
 for an hour or two, say ten, or twenty.
 I laughed at a foolish tale my friend repeated, and at the tears of an insolent beggar.
 Then evening came.
 Evening slipped into my room.
 And sorrow is born at evening, for it is a blind sorrow— a sorrow as long as the road from hell to hell, a silent
 sorrow.
 Yet silence does not mean consent: not to the death of a wish, not to the passing of days,
 not to the weakening of our limbs, nor to a wind of rot that touched life, until life and all within it became
 hateful.
 Sorrow spread through the city, like a thief within the heart of silence, like a serpent without a hiss.
 Sorrow has conquered every fortress and carried off its treasures, and installed tyrants as rulers.
 Sorrow has blinded the eyes; sorrow has furrowed the brows, to install tyrants as rulers.
 How wretched that word once spoken by a friend, so eager to embellish his speech.
 We were walking, my hand clasped in his, and sorrow lay stretched across the road.
 My friend said: "My friend!... We are nothing but a reckless shiver of a poisonous wind, or a foolish death wish...
 or perhaps our two names were written beneath an unlucky star, my friend."
 I recoiled, and my friend smiled. A gentle numbness seemed to pass over him. I saw his eyes shine like an old
 lamp, and he went on:
 "We shall live despite sorrow, defeat it, and in the morning place our white joys— the joys of those who have a
 morning."
 He gazed at me... but his good tidings were not something the sorrowful could believe.
 My friend! Beautify your words if you must; everything has lost its taste.
 As for me, I have learned where the deep descent ends.



PHILIPPE HALSMAN*



Dalí Atomicus (1948).

**In the pre-digital era of photography, portraitist Philippe Halsman went down in history as the genius of surreal photography. As this work shows, he also collaborated with another extraordinary 20th-century artist, Salvador Dalí. Halsman masterfully brought the key idea of surrealism—the abolition of gravity—into the real world. For six hours, Dalí jumped, assistants splashed water from a bucket and tossed cats into the air, and Halsman's wife held the chair. The photographer needed a full 28 takes to get the perfect shot.*

Source: [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalí_Atomicus#/media/Файл:Dalí_Atomicus_\(final_version\).jpg](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalí_Atomicus#/media/Файл:Dalí_Atomicus_(final_version).jpg)

PABLO PICASSO*



Family of Saltimbanques (1905).

**Family of Saltimbanques (Famille de saltimbanques), which was created during Picasso's early years in Paris, depicts six saltimbanques, a kind of itinerant circus performer, who stand together but strangely appear to be disconnected, in a desolate landscape. The figures in the group appear isolated as if they are all lost in their own thoughts. The harlequin, who resembles Picasso, is shown reaching towards a child, possibly his beloved younger sister, Conchita, whose tragic death from diphtheria at the age of seven deeply affected Picasso. While the small acrobat resembles Picasso's friend, the poet Max Jacob, the deep-browed acrobat is considered a representation of André Salmon, the large jester is said to represent Guillaume Apollinaire, and the isolated woman on the right side of the painting is probably his partner, Fernande Olivier. This huge painting, measuring 212.8 x 229.6 cm, is also considered the masterpiece of Picasso's Rose Period, sometimes called his circus period, during which he began using warmer colors after the melancholic Blue Period. Another outstanding feature of this work is that it is the culmination of the Saltimbanque cycle, a series of drawings, paintings, engravings, and sculptures that Picasso focused on from 1904 to the end of 1905. After studying the lives of the circus performers at Cirque Medrano, Picasso ironically preferred to paint them stationary and melancholic, rather than cheerful and lively.*

Source: <https://www.pablocicasso.org/saltimbanques.jsp>

Y. CHEREPANOV*



Sending in Its Aircraft Carrier (1979).

**A cartoon published in 1979, after the Iranian Revolution, in the issue No. 4 of Krokodil, a popular Soviet Union humor and cartoon magazine ('Iran' is written above the keyhole).*

Source: Krokodil, (4), 16. Digital reproduction from <https://nzdr.ru/data/media/biblio/j/krokodil/1979/%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BB%2C%201979%20%2C%20E2%84%96%2004.pdf>





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A New Era in West Asia **The Erosion of Hegemony and the Rise of Regional Agency**

"A new order has not yet been fully established in West Asia. The military and economic power of the United States remains significant, and differences of interest among the countries of the region persist. Yet the old order no longer functions as it once did. The shift in the balance of power in the world is creating the objective conditions for nation-states to strengthen their independence against imperialist hegemonism. The countries of West Asia are also demonstrating greater agency in determining their own security and future."

Editor-in-Chief
FİKRET AKFIRAT