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GEOECONOMIC RIVALRY IN THE GLOBAL STEEL MARKET

Abstract:

The global steel market was dominated for decades by the so-called steel trinity (USA, China, Japan), but with successive crises in global markets, and due to political factors, it has been dominated by China. The article presents the course of the market takeover using a geoeconomic analysis method developed by the author. It takes into account not only economic data for individual countries, but also the distribution of production and the events and fate of individual industrial companies. It allows diagnosing the causes of changes in a given market and allows evaluating geoeconomic scenarios for the future.

Key words:

geoeconomic analysis, steel market, competitiveness, crises, market takeover

INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics, becoming an increasingly popular tool for analyzing the international situation, relying on hard indicators and measurements by scientific methods that reject doctrines and ideologies, entails the development of its subdisciplines: geostrategy and geoeconomics. In this study, geoeconomics, which has been used for years to assess the wealth of nations and international economic players (Vihma 2018), will serve as the basis for presenting the state of current and past competition in the steel market. Steel alloys of various varieties, types and production technologies are key strategic intermediates for countries in the context of the armaments and electro-mechanical industries, which for many countries is

also often the industry that drives GDP growth (Cunat 2004). Therefore, monitoring of the market situation so crucial is mandatory not only for the largest multinational corporations, whose “to be or not to be” depends on changes in the world economy and ideas for development among competitors (Chan, Yang, Gao 2018). Such monitoring is also of interest to the major powers wishing to pursue interests through the largest possible share of world power (military and economic).

The aforementioned geoeconomics is a subdiscipline of geopolitics. It uses similar tools and methods, but primarily studies market rivalries around the world and in specific regions. Its subject of study is the impact of local conditions on the development and power of countries and multinational corporations of various industries. Geo-economic analysts, however, using not the methods of economics, but geography, have a broader detailed synthetic knowledge, covering the issues studied globally (Axelsson, Håkansson 2016). Without prolonging, the purpose of this paper is to geoeconomically present the most important aspects of the global rivalry between the largest steel producers in recent years. Who has lost and who has gained, and why?

METHOD

This analysis to explain the reasons behind the takeover of the steel market by Chinese producers uses a proprietary research method. A longer time perspective is needed to carry it out, so the period when China began to grow into the world leader in steel production was adopted for the analysis (Hudson, Swanton 2012). According to the method, it was necessary to check how large the production of individual countries and corporations was after each slump in global markets. In the following section, the breakthroughs were detailed. In each of these, the steel production at the time was analyzed, as well as what happened to the major producers in each regional market.

This made it possible to detail the most important reasons for the rise and fall of the production potential of countries and major corporations in the steel market, as in

cases of mergers, dynamic growth and other significant changes, attention was directed to these specific cases. The conclusion brought them all together and determined the answer to the question of what causes caused China and Chinese corporations to take over the steel market.

The method of geo-economic analysis developed for the benefit of this study can be used as a theoretical tool for analyzing other industry global markets as well. However, it is important to use the right quality of data sources. This analysis uses data from the USGS and its international database (USGS 2024). It is also important to present synthetic data geographically on maps. This allows for noticing details and synthesizing different data when applying this author's method of analysis.

The starting point will be the caesura of the peak of the business cycle prior to the financial crisis and the severe shake-up of the international debt-based monetary system (also known as the multi-currency system). This was the period around 1998 to 2008, when many companies collapsed when the banking system was found to be insolvent due to an overly liberal approach to lending, which in turn was driven by the policy of countries and the IMF and World Bank to create money through debt. This system is still in place today, but is now sponsored primarily by taxpayers.

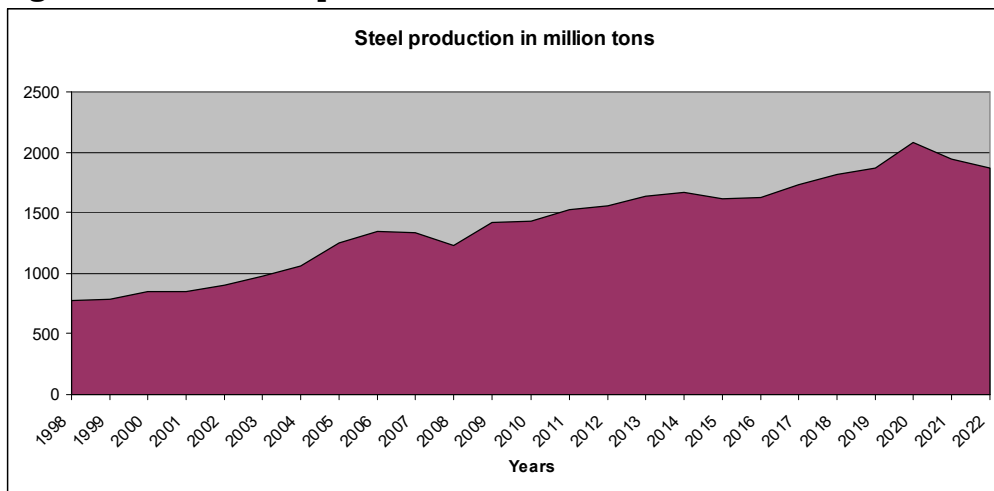
The second period of relative calm was from 2010 to 2018, that is, until the so-called pandemic. Both periods saw dynamic ownership changes in the industry. Most often, larger conglomerates bought out smaller companies unable to cope with debts and falling demand (Razin 2014).

The financial crisis and pandemic were followed by a time of uncertainty and, especially importantly, war preparations due to the bloodiest war in Europe since World War II. The gainers here will certainly be steelmakers, who will win contracts for the defense industry. On the other hand, the period of uncertainty is a time of more restrained purchases in the shipbuilding or automotive industries, which will also affect the steel market. Either way, as in any competition, the winners will be those who are quicker to understand the mechanisms of change and implement appropriate policies in

their countries and companies. This process has already begun after 2021 and is continuing today (Coimbra, Rey 2024).

During the period under review, steel production nearly tripled from 775 million tons in 1998 to 2075 million tons in 2020. In recent years, however, for the reasons described above, production has begun to decline and is now at the level of six years ago, which is a challenge for some producers (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Global steel output 1998-2022

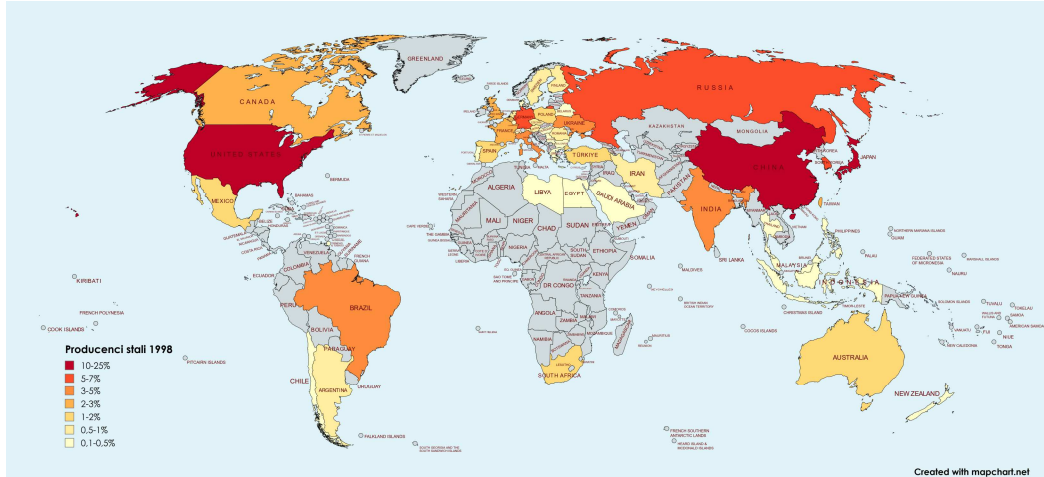


Source: Authors elaboration based on British Geological Survey World Minerals Production Yearbooks (nora.nerc.ac.uk) 2000-2024.

BEFORE THE FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008-2009

After a period of transition triggered by the collapse of the USSR, the geo-economic situation stabilized, and the decline in production in the former Eastern Bloc countries began to be compensated by state-sanctioned Chinese production. Also, African, Latin American and Asian countries, hitherto not considered highly industrialized, began to play a more serious role in the world economy, in which, as in any system, there can be no vacuum (Herfindahl 1997) (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Steel producers in 1998



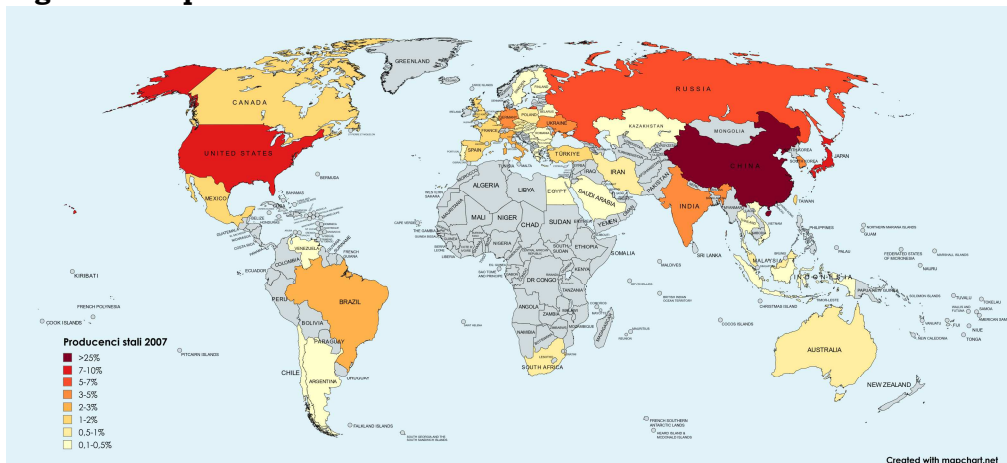
Source: own compilation based on BGS & USGS data.

Almost half of the steel produced in 1998 was produced by steel mills in China, the US and Japan. This was the so-called big steel trinity. In Europe, Germany remained the most important producer, in Africa - South Africa, and in South America - Brazil. In China, already producing the most, there were more than a dozen state-owned combines, among the largest of which were Baoshan, Shoudu, Anshan, Wuhan and Shanghai Iron & Steel Co. It was entirely indigenous capital (Wu 2000). Similarly in the United States, but the three largest corporations in the industry, i.e. US Steel, Nucor and Bethlehem, were private companies (D'Costa 1999; Gallet 1997). Japanese corporations with the largest sales at the time were primarily Nippon Steel, followed by Sumitomo, NKK, Kawasaki and the already much smaller Kobe Steel. These also have the status of private companies (Nair, Kotha 2001). In Germany, two corporations dominated: Thyssen Stahl and Krupp AG (Bender et al. 2008). In Russia, there were a great number of combines, but the Uralsk Magnitogorsk combine was already gaining a clear advantage. Together with others, such as Severstal, they were state-owned (Doroshenko 2001). Korea's most important producer, 35% state-owned, was Chebol Pohang (Lieberman, Kang 2008). In Brazil, India and Ukraine, the steel sector was highly fragmented, so despite their significant share of world production, these countries were not home to any multinational corporation. The situation

was different in Italy, where almost all steel production was in the Riva Group's steel mills (Worrell et al. 1997). In summary, the largest corporations in the steel market were US Steel, Baoshan, Pohang, Nucor, Bethlehem, Shoudu, Nippon Steel and Thyssen - each with an annual production of more than 25 million tons of crude steel. This was the period after the Asian crisis and the time when post-Soviet economies were recovering from industrial restructuring. Who took advantage of the period of prosperity can be seen by looking at the figures for 2007, just before the great financial crisis.

The aforementioned crisis led to the bankruptcy of a number of corporations, especially those struggling with high production costs in their home countries, the effects of the Kyoto Protocol, signed by various countries since the late 1990s, which imposed CO₂ reductions and internal environmental and fiscal policies of countries. Many steel mills have closed or production has been relocated, but as late as 2007, few symptoms heralded a halt to the rapid growth of production, which had reached 1.3 billion tons, almost double the level of 10 years earlier. China in particular took advantage of this period to expand its production capacity (Pauliuk, Wang, Muller 2013) (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Steel producers in 2007



Source: own compilation based on BGS & USGS data.

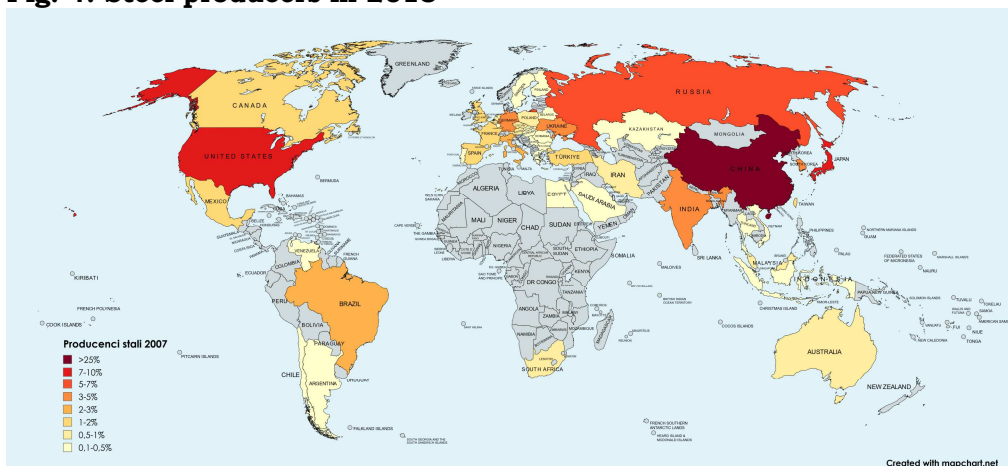
China had taken over 1/3 of the global steel market by 2007. Japan and the U.S. lost ground, but retained their

positions in the so-called big steel trinity. In Europe, Russia and Ukraine caught up and surpassed German producers, while South Africa remained the leader in Africa and South America - Brazil. In China, state-owned companies Baosteel (f. Baoshan) and Anshan maintained the largest production, while the Shagang combine became the third competitor. In addition, a number of other combines, including many new ones, maintained significant production there at the time (Song, Liu 2012). In Japan, a number of smaller steel mills merged, and as a result, the JFE Steel group was in first place in 2007, in that country, followed closely by Nippon Steel and Sumitomo (Oda et al. 2012). In the US, US Steel and Nucor maintained their dominant position, but it was already apparent that international producer ArcelorMittal, which was the third steelmaker in the US at the time, was entering the market. Russian production grew steadily under the oligarch-state system. The dominant position in the Russian market was maintained by the Magnitogorsk combine (MKK) and Severstal (Kopfle, Hunter 2008). In India, the steel industry was still highly fragmented, but the Tata group had risen to the first position there. In South Korea, Pohang was still the largest steel corporation, but Hyundai was growing in importance. In Germany, there was a merger of steel mills during this period and the formation of the Thyssen-Krupp corporation, but in second place was already ArcelorMittal. This corporation also began to invest in Ukraine, and there it gained a dominant position in the market by buying up the krzyworski combine and several minor ones. In other countries, production, despite growth, most often failed to keep up with the rest. The largest multinational corporation during this period became ArcelorMittal, thanks to the buyout of many steel mills in trouble in various countries. Far behind it were the Japanese companies JFE Steel and Nippon Steel, followed in turn by China's Baosteel, Korea's Pohang, US Steel and Nucor, and then Thyssen-Krupp, the Magnitogorsk combine and China's Anshan and Shagang. Each was responsible for producing at least 15 million tons of steel in 2007 (Mukherjee, Roy 2010).

STEEL MARKET AFTER THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

Then a lot changed after the financial crisis of 2008-2009. Production at that time returned to the levels before these key events, but a lot of minor steel mills closed. After the crisis, demand grew, but some countries and some corporations strengthened in competition for markets, while others lost ground and fell out of supply chains. One look at how the market changed during one of the years of relative calm, although it was not a surge. For example, in 2018, when global steel production reached 1.8 billion tons, roughly the amount of steel produced in the world now, after a period of so-called CoViD-19 pandemic (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Steel producers in 2018



Source: own compilation based on BGS & USGS data.

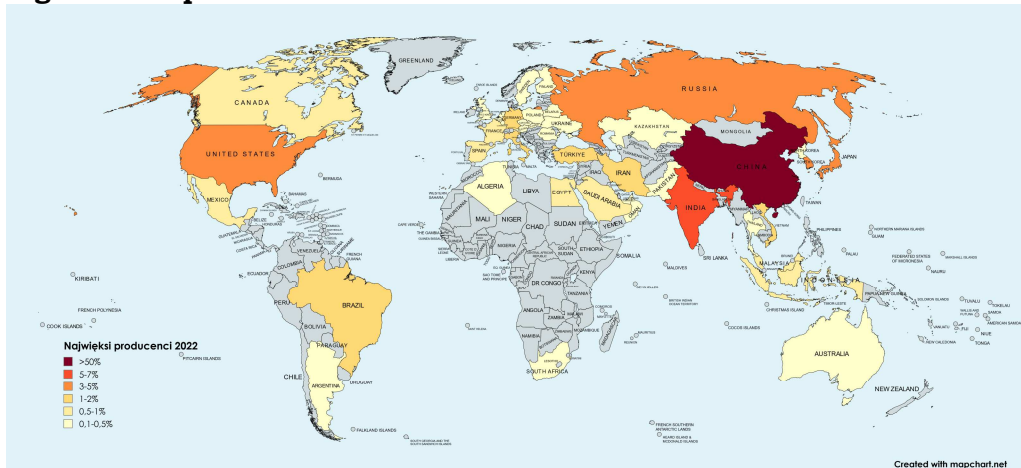
The post-crisis period has been used by China to dominate the global steel market, producing more than half of the world's steel. Importantly, still despite the pandemic and the war in Eastern Europe, which reduced production overall, China continues to produce at the same centrally-planned level, further eliminating weaker competition and increasing geoeconomic market share. Nevertheless, production and its utilization are two different things, and it should be kept in mind that in centrally planned economies like China's, much of the production may be wasted or not used according to logical resource management principles. There was also a

commassification of capital during this period. Baowu (f. Baosteel with attached mergers of smaller combinations), and the Shougang, Hebei, Shagang, Anshan, Shandong, Ma'anshan, Tianjin Bohai, Beijing Jianglong and Benxi steel groups and conglomerates became the largest steel-producing companies in China. In 2018, China's main competitors, Japan and the US, weakened, so the big steel trinity has finally ceased. The second place was taken by India. The takeover of bankrupt smaller mills by the state-owned Steel Authority of India took place there. The importance of Tata Steel has also declined (Vogele et al. 2020). In Japan, Nippon Steel and Sumitomo merged, so JFE fell to second place, and these two corporations produced 90% of Japan's steel. In the U.S., U.S. Steel experienced a crisis and fell to fifth place, with Nucor remaining the largest player. In Russia, on the other hand, obsolete steel mills remained fragmented and none of the combines prevailed without developing production more. South Korea remained among the important shareholders in the steel market, with production growth owed to POSCO (f. Pohang) and Hyundai, which began to catch up with its largest domestic competitor. In other countries, ArcelorMittal maintained an important position and was thus the largest corporation in the steel market before the so-called pandemic. China's largest producer, Baowu, was second, while it was followed by two more Chinese producers still on the list: Shougang and Hebei (otherwise known as Hesteel). The fourth largest corporation was Nippon Steel-Sumitomo, followed by more Chinese conglomerates: Shagang and Anshan (a.k.a. Ansteel). Behind them, Korea's POSCO and Japan's JFE showed significant production, followed by China's Shandong. The aforementioned companies produced at least 30 million tons of crude steel in 2018 (Sun et al. 2020).

COVID-19, WAR IN UKRAINE AND CHINESE STEEL HEGEMONY

As mentioned, another event in the world that shook the steel market was the so-called pandemic (Saltykova 2021) and

Fig. 5: Steel producers in 2018



Source: own compilation based on BGS & USGS data.

the outbreak of a full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. The increase in armaments production could not happen by leaps and bounds, so to this day we are still seeing the effects not only of the so-called pandemic, but also of a general increase in labor costs (resulting from demographic factors in industrialized countries), environmental costs, and the substitution of steel for other resources while using new technologies (Song 2023). This does not mean that the steel industry will begin a permanent recession, as was the case with lead metallurgy. However, policies unfavorable to industrialization in many liberal-democratic countries have led to the takeover of many markets by ecologically unconcerned China (Vu, Haraguchi, Amann 2021; Ba, Coleman 2021). The latest data (as of the end of 2022) show that, as a result of the economic processes the Chinese government has predicted, the country already has a nearly 55% share of steel production (Figure 5). That's growth very fast considering that it's been four years (Song 2023). Growth was recorded, although not as spectacular, by Indian corporations. Overall, however, the hierarchy remained the same at the top. In terms of growth, it is also worth highlighting the dynamic development of metallurgy in Vietnam and Indonesia. The largest declines are in the free market economies: Japan, the US, South Korea, Germany. Russia and Turkey also recorded significant

declines. Ukraine lost 2/3 of its production capacity in the war. Also, many EU countries, including Poland, succumbed to the negative effects of the so-called pandemic and the subsequent destabilization of the European market by the war. One can also observe the development of metallurgy in the Middle East, where Iran and Turkey have been joined in developing the industry by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The latter has also taken a leadership position in Africa's metallurgy (Matykowski, Tobolska 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The geoeconomic rivalry has now entered a stage of returning to stability, and this may be helped by an increase in procurement by the arms industry (Wilczyński 2013). The examples described show that merging companies from one country avoided bankruptcies, and that selling out to foreign capital did not always end well for a country. This can be seen in the deceleration of the multinational corporation ArcelorMittal, which has lost most recently, including its leading position in the steel market, and as part of the necessary savings extinguished furnaces, not excluding Polish steel mills.

Competition for markets between states and their capital represented by corporations, for this is the paradigm used by geo-economics, will now be decided in the coming period. Until the next crisis or war, a gradual restoration of the amount of steel produced globally will certainly be observed. Some countries and corporations will take advantage of this, building their geo-economic power will help develop societies and wealth, not just measured by GDP.

One can see, above all, from China how the development of primary industry has led to socio-economic development, despite the communist regime in that country. However, the way the economy is controlled through central planning, as the USSR has already found out, is ineffective and a repeat of history can be predicted. What will happen, and when, as China descends into chaos? Or could it be the EU will break up sooner and that will cause another crisis? Others predict World

War III as the inevitable end of the current business cycle in a few years. Still others, that the US dollar financial bubble will eventually burst and the currency will lose its value completely, leading to a crisis like the world has never seen before. Either way, whoever would like to play prophet in order to convince people of their reasoning should turn to geopolitics, or in the case of economic discourse, geoeconomics.

History likes to repeat itself, and the basic processes outlined in the above analysis, although perfunctory, to a skilled mind can subject different ideas to winning the geo-economic game, whether on a global scale or in one's own national backyard. Therefore, one should be encouraged to study geoeconomics and geopolitics more broadly, for the rivalry is most often hidden. It is very rarely seen on the fields of modern battles. Everyone takes part in it, whether they wish to or not.

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MYTH OR REALITY? INTER-CIVILIZATIONAL RIVALRY AND ITS RELATION TO FUNDAMENTALIST AND NATIONAL-LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

Abstract:

The inter-civilization rivalry has been discussed in geopolitical academic and popular forums for many decades. This article aims to systematize the discussion to date using selected examples. Two types of conflicts were chosen: religious and national liberation conflicts to clarify the disputes arising from the scholarly debate to date. As a result, the main assumptions of the theory of civilizational rivalry have been confirmed, but the possibility of the occurrence of phenomena in their essence opposite has also been pointed out. Therefore, one can further expect a fierce debate as to who is right.

Key words:

civilization, rivalry, fundamentalism, liberation, statelessness, nation

INTRODUCTION

The notion of civilization remains academically challenged. In the singular, civilization regards an advanced stage of development, a point of distinction between barbarity and cultural and material prosperity. In the plural, civilizations take on entirely different denotative and connotative qualities

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which themselves vary significantly. Some definitions directly imply the possibility of civilizations to create ideologically heterogeneous realities that can be antagonistic or complementary towards different units of the same kind (civilization as “a kind of moral milieu encompassing a certain number of nations, each national culture being only a particular form of the whole” (Durkheim and Mauss 1971). Others emphasize the tendency of political and ideological institutions to be shaped by cultural factors (“values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance” (Bozeman 1975)). All of these definitions are based on the premise that civilizations exist and have substantial influence on the behavior of primary actors on the international stage - states. Furthermore, essentialist approaches to civilizations consider them to be “homogeneous”, “unified”, “cohesive” whereas non-essentialist points of view use terms like “heterogeneous”, “loose”, “unstable” (Hall and Jackson 2007). This article is concentrated around the non-essentialist approach, acknowledging heterogeneity and permeability of civilizations. Homogeneity should not be confused with cohesion - cohesive civilizations, like the West, can be heterogeneous to a great extent. This diversity can and does lead to internal clashes originating from different, albeit similar, axiological foundations and policies anchored in them. On the other hand, permeability of civilizations, unavoidable in a XXIst century globalized world, leads to frequent inter-civilizational interactions and to alterations of societal fabrics (look at the European migration crisis and its implications for social structure of European states). Civilizational platforms, serving as “carriers of knowledge” (Hall 2007), establish and influence individual preferences in regard to cultural and political elements. In other words, they have a significant impact on policy-making and democratic mechanisms as they shape individuals’ worldview from the very beginning. This article is based on a synthesis of presented academic research and considers civilizations to be macro-cultural, macro-historical units of personal identification. They can be described as being transnational, artificially created and, most importantly, without a defined territory (Bettiza 2014). Even

though the aforementioned principle implicates a high degree of vagueness in terms of civilizations, their influence on the international framework is as tangible as ever. United Nations Alliance of Civilizations normatively confirms the existence of such entities while working to promote cultural diversity and mutual respect along civilizational lines. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), concentrating states belonging to the loosely-defined Islamic civilization, is a relatively significant actor on the international stage with permanent delegations to the United Nations and the European Union. The latter itself can be considered a prime example of coalescence of states with common axiological and economic bedrock and their positive dialogue. It is of paramount importance for the proper understanding of this article to clearly identify the approach of the work towards the highly contested topic of civilizations. The notion itself can be analyzed on three basic levels:

- socio-historical plane underlining the concept of civilizations as units of ontological character, closely linked with the essentialist approach;
- political plane which puts the emphasis on states' efforts to create and deepen the dichotomy between "them" (antagonistic civilizations) and "us" - it is worth noting that this approach is preferred by core states (actors which consider themselves to be the most powerful in a defined region) and can lead to inter-civilizational clashes;
- international perspective acknowledging the impact of civilizations on interstate relations and outlining the causes of its influence.

It is only when we abandon the non-essentialist approach and consider civilizations to be ontological, clashing entities that we can effectively "materialize" civilizations into reality (Katzenstein 2010). However, this approach has been widely disputed (especially regarding Samuel P. Huntington's civilizational theories) and will not be entertained in this article. Finally, many states are using the civilizational angle to frame foreign policy discourse and allow it to dictate (or heavily influence) the structure and character of interstate institutions. The prime example of this trend would be the United States during "the War on Terror" when high-ranking US officials used

the civilizational rhetoric extensively to provide legitimacy for their intervention in Iraq (the George W. Bush's "axis of evil" which was, at least in the eyes of the population, encompassing the Islamic civilization as a whole). This paper brings value through balancing neo-realist and constructivist approaches to International Relations (IR) and analysing, through the lens of aforesaid schools of thought, the impact of civilizations on states' interests and identities. It concentrates on a field of IR which still remains underdeveloped, attempting to determine factors driving actions of states, regardless of their relative power. The first part of this article focuses on civilizations and defining the nature of inter-civilizational rivalry itself. Firstly, it examines the impact of globalization on the materialization of inter-civilizational rivalry and its consequences for intra-civilizational matters. Secondly, it delves deeper into particular civilizations and shows how lack of cohesion, heterogeneity and varied interests lead to a situation where inter-civilizational cooperation, instead of rivalry, is possible while intra-civilizational competition intensifies. Lastly, it looks at how inter-civilizational issues transform civilizations from imaginary concepts into social facts - elements transcending individuals and governmental structures, created by individuals, alike. The second part uses the theoretical underpinning and defines its relationship with fundamentalist and national-liberation movements.

INTER-CIVILIZATIONAL RIVALRY IS A REALITY

The analysis of qualitative data suggests a propulsion of inter-civilizational rivalry by globalization (mainly its economic aspect) and intensification of inter-civilizational interactions' frequency and intensity. Why does the increased interconnectedness of the modern era increase the likelihood of the aforesaid phenomenon? Globalization, understood as a process resulting in increased volumes of interstate transfer of people, goods and ideas, tears down normative barriers that used to limit the scope of trade and cultural interactions. International organizations, like the United Nations (UN) or the World Trade Organization (WTO), dedicate enormous financial

and human resources to facilitate increases in the volume of international trade or to encourage regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to do the same. On the economic plane, states gravitate towards prioritization of engaging in trade relations with their allies. The most stable alliances in turn are based on shared norms and values alongside particular interests of parties involved. This phenomenon creates a situation where, in general, members of the same civilization enjoy a closer relationship with ideologically similar countries. Therefore, states have a direct motivation to cooperate with their ideological brothers, underlining the separation of the civilizational bloc from different macro-cultural units. Due to the relative similarity of intra-civilizational norms, the potential of such cooperation is greater in the long-term in comparison to inter-civilizational alliances. Furthermore, markets that experience economic growth and are the most competitive globally constitute a significant source of hard power for benefiting countries. Increased economic power generates anxiety and challenges ambitions of other actors, the power of which has relatively decreased. However, states belonging to the same civilization are able to compete within shared structures or at least on the basis of a mutual foundation whereas the same is much harder to achieve on the inter-civilizational level. Therefore, it is evident that inter-civilizational rivalry is more likely to occur nowadays where the comparatively free flow of goods and services encourages competition. As a result, there is an increased probability of interactions between members of civilizations that may result in clashes. Clashes resulting from the desire of the most prominent members of civilizations to become superior, forming the inter-civilizational rivalry. This tendency is reinforced by inter-civilizational alliances, the nature of which was described earlier. As we can see states have a direct motivation to incorporate cultural values into, what is usually considered, a strictly realist calculus, supporting the constructivist approach towards the issue. The question remains however, are states ready to sacrifice their long-term interests in favor of short-term economic gains, originating from inter-civilizational interactions?

While the WTO “is seeking to encourage the revival of the complex links and networks involved in the trade finance market”, the UN has launched several initiatives aimed at achieving the same goal. The UN Conference on Trade and Development and agreements reducing trade barriers around the globe are prime examples of such actions. Regardless of these attempts to promote inter-civilizational trade, the majority of trade remains intra-civilizational in regions where this is possible. For example, in 2022 68% of Europe’s trade was intraregional (that is excluding the US and other members of the Western civilization) and the US exported ~700 bln USD worth of goods to Canada and Mexico alone (with China, the biggest non-Western US trading partner, this value was just ~154 bln USD). Nevertheless, “world trade volume today is roughly 44 times the level recorded in the early days of the GATT (4400% growth from 1950 to 2023)”. The turbulent nature of inter-civilizational relations is best exemplified by the axis Beijing-Washington. US exports to China in 2022 were 23% lower than the projected trend based on China's overall import growth from 2018-2022 - this trend is likely to continue with draconic tariffs announced by president-elect Donald Trump and a likely escalation of the current trade war. While it is true that these tensions constitute a response to the rise of China and its increasing threat to US interests in the South China Sea region, US interests would not be threatened in the first place had China been a liberal democracy, respecting international law. Axiological differences, manifesting themselves in antagonistic political systems, should be considered as underlying causes of this rivalry, supported by qualitative data. Moreover, when members of other civilizations start succeeding economically and attributing that success to their cultural or political superiority, it is very easy for non-revisionist powers to default to civilizational lines in an attempt to preserve the image of prosperity and success, deepening the dichotomy between “us” and “them”. The US former National Security Advisor John Bolton has suggested that the recent economic growth of China is a result of the effectiveness of the Chinese political system which in turn is based on elements characteristic to the Sinic civilization. This notion however has been rejected by the US government who seem to attribute

China's growth to unfair economic practices which were described by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission as "predatory". This is a prime example of a scenario where a government of a core state of one civilization does not acknowledge the legitimacy of a success of a core state of a different civilization, increasing the inter-civilizational rivalry. Phenomena described above show how economic globalization increases the intensity and frequency of inter-civilizational interactions. They also illustrate the tendency of economic isolationism, especially in times of instability, which in a globalized world further propels inter-civilizational rivalry.

INTER-CIVILIZATIONAL COOPERATION IS ALSO A REALITY

At first glance it would seem that due to described phenomena inter-civilizational rivalry remains in the realm of imagination. From a realist perspective, in an anarchic environment states should prioritize self-preservation and strengthening their economic and political position while disregarding civilizational differences. It is only natural that different states have different, often antagonistic aspirations and prioritize achievement of their strategic objectives. It is also abundantly clear that states belonging to the same artificially derived civilization are not the same and often find a common ground with external states (belonging to a different civilization). One could argue that on an international stage cultural affiliation is of lesser importance than socio-economic prosperity and military power, leading to frequent intra-civilizational clashes and rendering inter-civilizational rivalry at best coincidental. The question remains, do tangible geostrategic interests muffle the civilizational divide or is their effect on government policy equalized by civilizational, cultural factors?

At first glance, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States appear to be unlikely allies. The stark differences between them are evident: one is a monarchy, the other a republic; one professes a commitment to human rights, while the other faces accusations of systematic and widespread

violations. Saudi Arabia, with a potential to become a core state of the Islamic civilization, enjoys a fruitful relationship with the US which encompasses over 300 joint ventures on an economic, diplomatic and military plane. To visualize, Saudi Arabia is a side to a 140 billion dollars Foreign Military Sales programme while the US imported an average of 439,000 barrels of petroleum per day from Saudi Arabia in 2023. Shared geostrategic interest expressed in the objective to contain Iran and deter it from escalatory foreign policy and to uphold a stable supply of oil to international markets ensured continued American support to the Arab state. Similarly, China and Russia have vastly divergent foundations of their political systems, different cultures and state philosophies, yet they remain closely allied. It is worth noting that Russia, as a core state of the Orthodox civilization, has not publicly acknowledged its asymmetric relationship with China, a core state of the Sinic civilization. Public humiliation for a “great power” being inferior to another is only exacerbated by its self-proclaimed cultural leadership. The grim reality of a relative power decline undermines the narrative of cultural supremacy of the Russian people, fueling the same narrative on the Chinese side. It is of paramount importance to see the relationship between Moscow and Beijing not only through the prism of politics or economics but also via the cultural lens. Regardless of aforesaid asymmetry and axiological differences, the total bilateral trade value exceeded 240 billion USD in 2022 while the two countries continued the pattern of security cooperation and called for “deeper strategic collaboration” (in the words of the Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun). It is quite clear that priority is attributed to geostrategic considerations, not cultural differences. We can see how lack of cohesion and the heterogeneity of civilizations allows for inter-civilizational alliances to form and withstand the test of time. The implications of aforesaid statements would undermine the validity of the thesis that inter-civilizational rivalry is a reality. However, is that the case? Does the presented line of argumentation withstand scrutiny?

Firstly, the aforementioned narrative sees the world through the lens of realism. It assumes that state actors prioritize their self-interest over anything else and that they are

ready to sacrifice their ethical or moral systems (stemming from a cultural underpinning) on behalf of tangible benefits. However, this is usually not the case. The United States have faced immense public scrutiny for their relationship with Saudi Arabia - American citizens do not look favourably on domestic politicians turning a blind eye to human rights violations in the broadly defined "Islamic civilization". This tendency significantly limits what the American government can do and how far it can go in regard to its partnership with Saudi Arabia, weakening this inter-civilizational alliance. Similar situation can be observed in Europe where the rivalry between the West and the Islamic civilization has only strengthened in recent years with anti-Arab sentiments spreading like wildfire throughout the continent. Any attempts to implement economic incentives for Arab (or African) migrants in European countries is currently tantamount to a political suicide as resentments, especially on the right side of the political spectrum, are particularly strong. What these two examples show us is that cultural (civilizational) differences are often too strong to allow for implementation of policies that would be the most beneficial for particular states. This line is complementary to the constructivist standpoint visualizing how core elements of state's identities prevail if they are challenged by short-term economic opportunities. Therefore, states have to (to a lesser or greater extent) sacrifice their *raison d'état* to satisfy their citizens, the source of legitimacy (in democratic states), which leads to an increased likelihood for the formation of inter-civilizational rivalries. Secondly, the narrative presented before does not take into account the nature of described relationships. Both of them lack a common, axiological foundation on which they could be based. Strategic objectives can shift relatively quickly as the system itself is anarchic and strongly dynamic. Without a semi-static bedrock, the artificial construction of a "strategic alliance" is highly fallible to fluctuations on the international stage. On the other hand, states belonging to the same civilization already have a basis for cooperation which can be harnessed to build lasting and durable partnerships. The bottom line is that alliances built on strategic interests can never achieve the depth of alliances built on common axiological foundations for reasons

described above. This phenomenon strengthens the tendency of states to coalesce around states from the same civilization, reinforcing inter-civilizational rivalries. As we can see, while inter-civilizational alliances exist and at times can be incredibly lucrative, they cannot compete with intra-civilizational alliances in the long term. Therefore, the formation of inter-civilizational rivalries is unavoidable.

FUNDAMENTALIST AND NATIONAL-LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

Fundamentalist movements form as a response to chaos, to a destruction or significant alteration of traditional social structures by a rapid introduction of secularism or modern political institutions. For the purpose of this article, they are defined as “the concept [...] used to describe a certain form of religious belief which is characterized by extremism and an inclination to violence” (Gbenenee 2018). They perform wide-range recruitment and attempt to fill the ideological void, often connected with the introduction of democracy. They answer, or pretend to answer, key human needs and embed their way of thinking into the host society. This is a commonality between fundamentalist and national-liberation movements. The latter mobilize the population by portraying themselves as addressing the need of self-determination, often creating relatively powerful bottom-up tendencies. These, sometimes destructive, centrifugal forces change the status quo, revise what is perceived to have been imposed. One civilization in particular considers itself to be entitled to an imposition of their axiological and political systems on others - the West. It should not surprise then that fundamentalist movements are often opposed to Western universalism which is simply perceived as a modern version of traditional imperialism. However, national-liberation movements are more likely to be antagonistic towards colonial or imperial governing institutions (typically Western) from which they are trying to liberate. Both of these movements use dissatisfaction of states’ population with the status quo to advance their own particular objectives, targeting especially socio-economically vulnerable groups. Similarly,

both of them gain legitimacy from deeply embedding themselves into fabrics of their civilizations (or states) and emphasizing their cultural distinctiveness. Fundamentalist movements achieve this through religious separation of their targeted population from religious frameworks of other civilizations, deepening inter-civilizational differences. National-liberation movements, understood as “non-state actors who are defined by their objective (self-determination)” (Mastorodimos 2017), tend to concentrate around three basic paradigms:

- ethno-cultural diversity of a social group, which leads to the gradual decay of legitimacy of political institutions governing it;
- major inter-civilizational differences along religious, cultural and political lines, fueling nationalistic tendencies within aforesaid groups;
- the imposition of foreign political, economic and cultural systems by actors perceived as colonial or imperialistic.

All of these notions are closely connected and should be treated complementarily. Firstly, this article will show how fundamentalist movements exacerbate inter-civilizational rivalries and exemplify it through terrorist organizations, Iran and the Taliban. Secondly, the analysis will shift to national-liberation movements and their *modus operandi*, focusing on the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Algerian National Liberation Front (NLF).

Fundamentalist movements deepen inter-civilizational divides, increasing the probability of rivalry formation. Inter-civilizational rivalry, as mentioned before, is based on socio-cultural and political imparities between these macro-cultural units. Fundamentalist movements derive their influence from religious norms which are unique to the regional environment. Furthermore, by their definition, they take the theoretical underpinning to an extreme, diversifying the religious system from similar frameworks in the region. As such, they create a self-propelling cycle of extremism, deepening the rift between individual states and, by extension, entire civilizations. Fundamentalist movements are inherently incompatible with inter-state dialogue and cooperation as they reject and attack axiological foundations of other states, especially belonging to different macro-cultural units. They then use this divide to

reinforce their own power through further radicalization of their bases and crafting a narrative about the inter-civilizational, unbridgeable differences. Therefore, inter-civilizational dialogue is not in the direct interest of fundamentalist movements, as defined by this article. Western universalism promotes the adoption of Western political and social systems by non-Western societies, often creating tensions within these populations. This tension arises as individuals struggle to reconcile foreign influences with their indigenous traditions and values, intensifying confusion over what constitutes their authentic cultural identity. This confusion directly leads to an increased popularity of fundamentalist movements which advocate for the return to traditional values and established or familiar social structures, provided that legitimacy for such actors remains strong. Globalisation, in its social aspect, strengthens this tendency through enabling fast and direct inter-communal flow of information, expediting the dissemination of fundamentalist views.

Religious fundamentalism is particularly widespread within the Islamic civilization. It derives its legitimacy from an established socio-religious system which, in this case, transcends political structures. The Sharia law and its extremist interpretations define jihad as “a salvific and purifying act with the ultimate goal of establishing a messianic caliphal state encompassing all Muslims” (Gbenene 2018). Further, Islamic fundamentalism (in the scope established by this article) provides a clear stratifying framework of civilizations and states belonging to them. Jihad is used by these groups to legitimize their war against “evil forces” with the motivation of spreading the values of Islam. By complete abandonment of a notion of inter-civilizational dialogue, the ground of inter-civilizational rivalry had been prepared and exploited by Al-Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and other fundamentalist movements. The Islamic Republic of Iran originates in a fundamentalist movement and has anchored its entire statehood in the values of Islam, asserting that the way of Islam is the only proper approach towards inter-state relations. With Iran’s constitution’s preamble beginning with words: “In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the

Merciful”, the normative foundation of the country could not be more clear. This normative plane is directly translated into reality and is reflected in Iran’s actions. President Hassan Rouhani, perceived as a politically moderate persona, had mentioned the idea of non-cooperation with non-Islam states in 60% of his speeches. This type of narrative builds obstacles on the way of potential future legislative efforts and deepens the inter-civilizational divide. Iran’s strong alignment with civilizational values, coupled with existing geopolitical tensions and other factors, hinders its ability to engage in potentially lucrative deals with major Western economic powers that fail to align with its civilizational framework, further supporting the constructivist perspective. However, the current political situation in Iran remains highly unstable with a high degree of bottom-down movements’ disturbances to the existing social and political structures. The research conducted by the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) provides reasonable grounds to believe that 81 percent of Iran’s literate adult population “does not want an islamic republic”. If that is the case, how can fundamentalist movements’ support be reinforced through exposure to foreign axiological systems, as claimed earlier? The premise of that claim was legitimacy. The Iranian Revolution and the Iranian government (in a short period of time after the Revolution) enjoyed widespread popular support. Their fundamentalism provided an ideological framework that clearly explained which actors are responsible for the disadvantageous economic situation and which values should be condemned. The post-revolutionary Iranian government managed to decrease its legitimacy through unsuccessful economic policies and chronic human rights abuses. The fundamentalist movement was strengthened by an attempted imposition of foreign values, attained legitimacy and then lost it through bad governance practices. The Taliban has experienced a similar trajectory during their operational period. Initially, the fundamentalist movement gained popular support for exhibiting staunch opposition to attempts of imposition of Soviet political and cultural norms during the 1979-89 Soviet-Afghan War. It portrayed itself as a savior of Afghani people from the subjugation to foreign values and an actor able to implement stability in the country ravaged by antagonistic

militias. The initial period of legitimacy was short-lived as the government failed to deliver on their promises, violated human rights and implemented brutal punishment for non-adherence to the religious normative system, ultimately resulting in its overthrow in 2001 by the US forces. As such, it is evident that fundamentalist movements deepen inter-civilizational divides.

National-liberation movements are a result of inter-civilizational rivalry while simultaneously reinforcing it. The main differentiating factor between national-liberation movements and secessionist movements is the anti-imperial or anti-colonial nature of the former. Denotative implication is that actors being colonized operate within a different political or economic framework than the colonizer - values (political or social) that have been imposed on the colonized entity are a target of a bottom-down revolution - a national-liberation movement. As such, it is evident that inter-civilizational rivalry contributes to the emergence of national-liberation movements, the question remains - to what extent is the aforesaid rivalry caused by them? As outlined before, national-liberation movements use the existing inter-civilizational differences to define themselves. These entities derive their power and popular support from positioning themselves in opposition to colonial or imperial power. To uphold their legitimacy, they have a direct interest in ensuring the existence of the civilizational divide and emphasizing their connection to socio-cultural structures characteristic to the region. Therefore, to ensure their survival, they aim to reinforce the inter-civilizational divide. However, it should be noted that the entire lifespan of national-liberation movements forms a cycle of self-assuring tendencies which strengthen the inter-civilizational rivalry - not only the initial operational period. Firstly, when national-liberation movements successfully take over political and economic institutions that had been established, they typically attempt to modify their governance framework, trying to align with their civilizational identity. In many cases this phenomenon manifests itself in similarization of aforementioned institutions in countries remaining in geographical proximity. Secondly, a former colonial power, faced with negative political consequences stemming from being defeated by an "inferior" political entity, cannot allow

itself (in most cases) to participate in mutually beneficial economic and diplomatic relationships, strengthening the rivalry further. Lastly, states belonging to uninvolved civilizations can use the opportunity created by the removal of hitherto influences to start to embed their own. Economically and politically, competing states belonging to different macro-cultural units use every opportunity to promote their geostrategic interests. When a power vacuum emerges in a region, it is often partially occupied by the national-liberation movement itself and partially by an external actor. It is of paramount importance to acknowledge that national-liberation movements are anti-colonial/anti-imperialist and are not, at least theoretically, inherently antagonistic to any macro-cultural unit. However, as described above, these movements are likely to be favorable towards creation of civilizational dichotomies due to their never-ending struggle for legitimacy. At least initially, this legitimacy can be provided by the fact of adherence to traditional, national norms in the first place.

PLO is a national-liberation movement, self-describing itself as representative of the Palestinian people. Its foundational document - the Palestine National Charter (adopted in 1964) - in its first article used inter-civilizational differences to clearly define its identity; "Palestine is an Arab homeland bound by strong Arab national ties to the rest of the Arab Countries and which together form the great Arab homeland" (Palestine National Charter 1964). In this context, "Arab national ties" are not only a carrier of cultural and national value but also reinforce the dichotomy between "Arab Countries" and "the rest" (in this case, the Western civilization). While Israel (supported militarily and politically by the West) has not been defeated, the state's conduct of the war has fallen short of swift achievement of military objectives. Furthermore, the escalation of the scope of the conflict has enabled external actors to attempt to embed their civilizational interests into the region. Iran has been engaged in direct military conflict with Israel for ~8 months, having been the main supplier of military and financial support for the "axis of resistance", i.e. Hezbollah and other military factions. The conflict which has arisen around this axis bears traits of inter-civilizational rivalry. While the PLO's representatives do not chant "death to America,

death to Israel”, other actors advocating for the liberation of Palestine do. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and many more have one thing in common - all of them are anti-American and anti-Western. Iran, using this inter-civilizational divide, perpetuates the cycle of inter-civilizational rivalry, hiding it under the veneer of national-liberation or the right of self-determination of nations.

PLO is just a contemporary example of a deep-rooted phenomenon. During the Algerian Civil War (1954-62), the NLF positioned itself as the organization that would ensure the long-desired right of self-determination for the Algerian people. It formed its identity around being anti-French, anti-colonial and, ultimately, anti-Western. After its identity had been formed and power seized from its former colonial overlords, the NLF firmly rejected formerly imposed civilizational norms and drifted towards the similarization of political institutions to their regional forms. Strong centralization of power, heavy emphasis on militarism and nationalism characterised the early post-colonial Algerian government that attempted to uphold its legitimacy in the eyes of the Algerian people. Nonetheless, the economic ties connecting France and Algeria remained as strong as ever - the latter found it to be undesirable to decouple from the large consumption market of France. However, the rift between these two states had been created and various influential actors aimed to capitalize on the strained Franco-Algerian relations. Russia (the core state of the Orthodox civilization), for instance, supplies 81% of weapons used by Algerian armed forces and has become one of the strongest allies of the Algerian government. The dichotomy created between Algeria and the West has enabled a third-party, Russia, to act as an important strategic partner of a government attempting to assert its position on the international stage. This realignment would not be possible without the civilizational rift which had been created as a result of decades of Western colonialism. As “Algeria’s historical non-interventionist, absolutist support for state sovereignty, and anti-Westernism allowed for alignment with Moscow” (Hill 2023), Algeria continues to be an embodiment of inter-civilizational rivalry on the basis of national-liberation past. Furthermore, the subsequent governments do not have

political capital necessary for any actions implicating a closer ideological, political or military relationship with the West. Since gaining independence, Algeria has harbored “deep skepticism and trepidation about the intentions of Western powers, especially France (its former colonizer) and the United States” (Hill 2023), a sentiment rooted primarily in its colonial past rather than any tangible contemporary factors. As a result, the inter-civilizational divide between Algeria and the West is likely to endure. This phenomenon is explicitly linked to the argumentative line of this article - while inter-civilizational economic cooperation exists and can be even described as strong, it lacks a common axiological foundation. Therefore, Algeria chooses to establish close military and political partnerships with states from different civilizations with the values of which it can align (even if only slightly).

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the relevance of incorporating a civilizational lens into the analysis of interstate relations, particularly in addressing the complexities of the 21st-century international arena. While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of global politics, the research highlights that "civilizational politics" offer a valuable supplementary framework. Although this approach is unlikely to emerge as the dominant paradigm for explaining state behavior, it provides a unique explanatory tool in instances where traditional theories prove inadequate. By adopting this perspective, scholars and policymakers may uncover nuanced dimensions of interstate interactions that might otherwise remain obscured. Future research should explore the conditions under which civilizational analysis yields the most explanatory power, thereby refining its applicability and integration within broader theoretical frameworks.

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SIKH SEPARATISM IN INDIA - A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE INDEPENDENCE OF KHALISTAN

Abstract:

2023 Witnessed a great resurgence of the Sikh separatist movement both in Punjab and among the diaspora. Arrests in India and mysterious murders of prominent leaders of the Khalistan movement abroad are showing the real scale of the problem. Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world. Unfortunately it is not well known and rarely written about in Poland, it has a tremendous impact on contemporary India's political climate. Sikhs' statehood dates back to the modern era and the idea of Sikh independence has not died since the downfall of the Sikh state in 1849. Using both Polish and English literature of the subject – with particular attention given to Sikh authors – author wants to further the understanding of who the Sikhs are, what is their religion based on, what is their history, characterize their independence movement and in general describe their religious and political community. Using the geopolitical paradigm author proves that independent Sikh state (Khalistan) in contemporary Punjab has next to no chance of establishing itself and surviving in current geopolitical scene. Even though it is certain that the idea of independent Khalistan has not died and it will still be an important issue in the Indian domestic and foreign policies.

Key words:

Sikh, India, Khalistan, separatism, Sikhism

INTRODUCTION

India, as of recently the most populous country in the world and the fifth-largest economy by GDP, despite its

impressive status and the prospects it brings, remains in the shadows of its' much more recognized neighbor - China. India is often perceived as the "lesser" of the Asian titans. Over the past 30 years, China's economy has grown from approximately \$444 billion in 1993 to nearly \$18 trillion in 2022¹. During the same period, India's economy has grown from \$279 billion to "only" \$3.4 trillion². Until this year, China, not India, was the most populous country in the world.

Apart from their geographical location in Asia, vast populations, and large economies, India and China share another critical characteristic: both are civilizational empires. They encompass numerous ethnicities and nations within a single cultural framework. The most illustrative comparison for to understand this phenomena from European perspective might be imagining the European Union as a single state. Both countries are multilingual and multi-religious, yet decision-makers shape the image of these nations as monolithic entities, at least in certain aspects. In China, this is often framed as the dominance of the Han Chinese ethnicity and the Mandarin language, while in India, religion - particularly Hinduism - is emphasized more prominently.

Despite these similarities, China is unequivocally a more frequent subject of reflection among commentators in the contemporary West. This is undoubtedly influenced by its rivalry with the United States and the steady rise of China's global significance. It is therefore unsurprising that issues related to minorities in China are also far more widely discussed, not only by scholars but also by main-stream media. The oppression in Tibet, highlighted during the 2008 Olympics, the recent annexation of Hong Kong and the persecution of the Uyghurs have been being, at least somewhat, covered for years. Few, however, are aware that issues related to minorities and, consequently, separatist movements, are at least equally significant in India.

¹ GDP (current US\$), World Bank website, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN>, (access: 01.09.2023).

² GDP (current US\$), World Bank website, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=IN>, (access: 01.09.2023).

This paper addresses this gap by examining the Sikh community, which remains underrepresented in global academic discourse despite its prominence as the world's fifth-largest religion. While Sikhism has a modest presence in regions like Europe, including Poland, where a small but active community practices the faith, its political dimensions, particularly the Sikh independence movement, are often overlooked.

Recent events underscore the relevance of studying Sikhism and its political implications. Developments such as the arrest of Amritpal Singh, the assassinations of key Sikh leaders like Paramjit Singh Panjwar and Hardeep Singh Nijjar, and the subsequent diplomatic fallout between Canada and India highlight the renewed intensity of the Khalistan issue. Protests within the Sikh diaspora and in Punjab further illustrate the complexities of this movement.

This study aims to introduce an international audience to Sikhism, not only as a religion but also as a political and geopolitical phenomenon. It explores the historical and geographical significance of Punjab, the cradle of Sikhism, and examines the contemporary challenges faced by the Sikh community as a distinct religious and political entity. The paper ultimately argues that while the idea of an independent Khalistan faces substantial geopolitical and social barriers, the aspirations of the Sikh community cannot be dismissed within the broader framework of India's political and cultural dynamics.

GEOPOLITICS OF PUNJAB

An analysis of the separatist movement must begin with defining the geographical framework of the areas it concerns and presenting their characteristics. Punjab, the land of five rivers (the name Punjab, meaning “The Land of Five Rivers,” derives from Persian: *panj* – “five” and *āb* – “water”), refers to the region of the Beas, Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi, and Sutlej rivers. It is located in the northwestern part of India. Although its boundaries have been defined differently over time, they are

consistently bordered by the Himalayas to the north and east and by the Sutlej River to the south.

The lands of the "Land of Five Rivers" are among the oldest areas of where humans built civilizations. In Punjab, one can find traces of the Indus Valley Civilization dating back as far as 5,000 years ago. Today, Punjab is divided into two parts: Indian Punjab and Pakistani Punjab. Given the focus of this analysis, we will concentrate on the situation in Indian Punjab. The Indian province of East Punjab is home to approximately 27.5 million people, accounting for 2.3% of India's total population according to the most recent census³. Of this number, about 25 million are Punjabis, with 16 million being Sikhs⁴. This means that the number of Sikhs in India is slightly less than that of Christians, a population not commonly associated with the subcontinent.

Punjab directly connects India with a land route through the Khyber Pass in the Hindu Kush (currently on the Afghan-Pakistani border). Its presence has historically ensured a steady influx of not only traders and merchants from other regions but also numerous invaders. Conquerors aiming to enter India via land routes from Central Asia had to pass through Punjab. Over the centuries, the region faced incursions from countless armies, including the Persians, Macedonians led by Alexander the Great, Arabs, Mongols under Genghis Khan, the Mughals, and Afghans. Furthermore, invaders often established imperial centers in northern India, ignoring the southern parts of the subcontinent (Siddiqi 1982). Consequently, Punjab has frequently been under the control of various peoples, beliefs, and cultures. Each group added its traditions to Punjabi culture, which, due to frequent interactions with "foreigners" not only in military but also in trade and administrative contexts, became increasingly cosmopolitan.

This strategic position as the "gateway" to the subcontinent later prompted the British to expand into this area. The geopolitical region has been administratively divided twice. Historically, it includes Indian Punjab and Haryana, as

³ 2011 Census of India, Official Website of Indian Government, [Home | Government of India \(censusindia.gov.in\)](https://www.censusindia.gov.in) (access: 02.09.2023).

⁴ *Ibidem*.

well as Pakistani Punjab (the most populous province of Pakistan). Today, the two provinces of Punjab form the borderland of one of the most dangerous interstate rivalries in the world. The Indo-Pakistani conflict, which has escalated into war three times over the past 80 years, poses a threat not only to South Asia but also to the entire planet. Both Pakistan and India are nuclear powers, and an exchange of fire between them could result in a global catastrophe.

The region was profoundly affected by the Partition of India in 1947. Punjab found itself at the center of massive migrations tied to the religious division of the former British colony. Millions of people emigrated in both directions, and the social and political chaos caused by the partition led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and numerous other crimes, with millions affected. The scars of these events are still visible today, for instance, at the famous Wagah border crossing (Tariq 2023). Today, this region is a hotbed of political, social, and religious tensions, such as the ongoing regional dispute over water resources (Gupta 2023).

Despite these unfavorable geopolitical conditions, Punjab's fertile lands, thanks to its many rivers, have always been capable of producing vast amounts of food. For this reason, even after the most devastating conflicts, it has always managed to rebuild and often found itself as a central administrative hub for powerful North Indian states (e.g., the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire). Following the so-called Green Revolution, Punjab was referred to as the agricultural backbone of both India and Pakistan. It produces large quantities of wheat, rice, and cotton. Unfortunately, modern agricultural production in the region is declining due to climate change and the overexploitation of groundwater.

THE SIKH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

As mentioned earlier, Sikhism is the fifth-largest religion in the world. Its origins trace back to the 15th century when Guru Nanak experienced a revelation and began teaching people in the region. According to religious accounts, Guru Nanak traveled extensively to the religious centers of Islam,

Hinduism, and Buddhism of his time (Grewal 1998). He laid the foundations for a religious movement initially characterized by reform and syncretism, which his successors transformed into a fully-fledged, independent religion over the years. The successors of Nanak, who held the title of Guru (effectively the head of the Sikh religious community), developed the faith not only doctrinally and philosophically but also made significant strides in organizing community life of the faithful. This evolution turned a group of followers of a local spiritual leader into a politically influential movement that rulers of the Mughal Empire had to reckon with.

Sikhism is a monotheistic, or even monistic religion (Prill 2023). Sikhs believe in the Oneness, whose emanations are present in every aspect of the world. This Oneness has no form, and the spiritual goal of every individual is to merge with it, thereby breaking the cycle of reincarnation. A person who achieves this, loses their sense of individuality and gains the understanding that all beings and actions are manifestations of the same essence⁵. Notably, the pursuit of Oneness is always good, regardless of how it is undertaken. Therefore, the followers of Nanak do not condemn other religions; instead, they commend their practices. This inclusiveness is reflected in the Sikh holy scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. It comprises hymns written in various languages, recorded in the Gurmukhi script, authored by Sikh Gurus and individuals from other religions, such as Hinduism and Islam. The *Guru Granth Sahib* evolved over centuries, with its primary authors being the successive Gurus. The title of Guru was passed from the current leader of the community to their chosen successor. There were precisely ten individuals who bore this title (chronologically: Nanak, Angad, Amardas, Ramdas, Arjan, Har Govind, Har Rai, Har Krishna, Tegh Bahadur, Gobind Singh). The last living Guru, Gobind Singh, ended this process by proclaiming (following the death of his sons) that the Guru for all eternity would be the Holy Book (*Guru Granth Sahib*). In more purist gurdwaras, this is taken quite literally. The scripture is ritually "woken up" and "put to bed," treated

⁵ In European philosophical tradition, this seems to be a view similar to the one of Plotinus, who, however, claimed that the One is fundamentally unknowable as long as there is a mind belonging to the individual.

ceremonially as if it were a living being, in accordance with the wishes of the last living Guru.

Sikhism as a religion has continuously evolved. Initially, Guru Nanak's followers were regarded as both a sect of Islam (specifically Sufism) and Hindus, hence the perception of Sikhism as a syncretic religion (Das 2006). Moreover, denizens of Punjab viewed Guru Nanak more as a reformer of Hinduism than as the founder of an independent religion. The subsequent Gurus focused on solidifying and expanding the community while clarifying its religious creed. As the number of followers grew and Sikh traditions diverged from both Islamic and Hindu practices, they began to be viewed with suspicion, leading to numerous conflicts, persecutions, and heroic acts of martyrdom that today stand as its' foundation. Sikhism developed into a religion that not only provided spiritual guidance but also constituted a distinct Punjabi political community, which spent centuries resisting the Islamic Mughal rulers and neighboring Hindu states.

This trajectory culminated during the leadership of the last living Guru, Gobind Singh. His influence on contemporary Sikhism is most evident in the establishment of the *Khalsa* ("the Brotherhood of the Pure") in 1699. This is a special class of initiated Sikh devotees (approximately 15%), who undergo the *Amrit Sanskar*—a nectar ceremony. The initiation is conducted in the presence of at least six people (five members of the *Khalsa* and a narrator) as well as the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Initiates must arrive early, ceremonially bathed, and wearing the five *Ks*. Their eyes and hair are sprinkled five times with holy sweetened water, which is then consumed by those undergoing initiation. The entire ceremony is accompanied by recitations of prayers and ritual expressions. However, members can be expelled from the *Khalsa* if they violate the principles of Sikhism.

The establishment of the *Khalsa* is associated with the contemporary most recognizable aspects of Sikhism. Guru Gobind Singh reinforced Sikh distinctiveness by mandating its display. He instructed all men to adopt the surname "Singh" (lion) and all women to adopt the surname "Kaur" (princess) to break with the Indian caste system and present Sikhs as a unified community striving for Oneness. While this tradition is

strictly abided by members of the *Khalsa* (who must change their names upon joining), less traditional Sikhs often follow it only partially, such as by adding the Singh/Kaur suffix to existing surnames. This practice, while signifying their Sikh identity and aspiration for unity, paradoxically also highlights their caste background in the Indian subcontinental context, where surnames often indicate caste (Puri 2003).

Sikhism lacks a clergy, and any respected believer, including women, may lead rituals and ceremonies. To distinct themselves Guru Gobind Singh ordered that followers must always carry five symbols of their faith, collectively known as the five Ks (with symbolic significance attached to the number 5 in Punjab):

Kesh – uncut hair – the most well-known symbol of Sikhs, as it is the long, uncut hair that Sikhs cover with their turbans. Hair symbolizes strength and holiness, acceptance of a simple life, and a desire to detach from material needs. Keeping hair uncut represents acceptance of the world as God created it and has practical significance as well. Through their turbans, Sikhs stand out not only in Western societies but also in their native region, where, although not unique to Sikhs, turbans still have the power to distinguish them from the crowd. The tradition of not cutting hair was initiated by the last living Guru, and even physically emulating him carries significant meaning (a similar custom exists in Islam, for example). The prohibition does not apply solely to the hair on the head but extends to the entire body. Sikh women are forbidden even from procedures such as eyebrow shaping, and men may not trim their beards.

Kara – a steel bracelet – the iron it is made of serves as a reminder that the *kara* is not an ornament but a symbol of being part of the community. It represents a link in the chain formed by all believers, with no beginning and no end. Furthermore, worn always in a visible place on the wrist, it is meant to deter Sikhs from committing acts that the Guru would not approve of. The idea is that actions are performed with the hands, and noticing the *kara* during an act such as theft should remind the Sikh of their faith and obligations to the community.

Kanga – a wooden comb – used for combing uncut hair, the *kanga* symbolizes cleanliness of the mind and body. It emphasizes the importance of taking care of the body given by God, which may seem contradictory to the commandment of not cutting hair and its symbolism of renouncing the material world. However, Sikhs believe there is no contradiction because the body itself is a kind of vessel for the soul striving for enlightenment. Therefore, the body should not be mortified or neglected. Sikhs culturally emphasize physical fitness and view negatively any mortification of the body as a means of attaining the Absolute (a common practice in other monotheistic religions).

Kaccha – woolen breeches – they must not extend below the knee, are very comfortable, and allow freedom of movement, making them suitable for daily wear. They symbolize purity and are a reminder of sexual restraint for Sikhs.

Kirpan – a steel dagger or sword – *kirpans* come in various forms, with lengths ranging from just a few centimeters to nearly a meter. They are typically worn concealed under clothing, although this is not a requirement. The *kirpan* symbolizes readiness to defend good and protect the weak, the fight against injustice, and broadly defined spirituality.

It is important to note, however, that for Sikhs, the symbolism is not the primary reason for adhering to these practices. The most important one being that the Guru commanded it. Using the same symbols also creates a timeless and intergenerational connection. Every member of the Khalsa is to remain faithful to these symbols, and every contemporary successor is to take pride in using and honoring the same elements. It is also worth noting that these symbols are popular among all Sikhs, not just members of the Brotherhood of the Pure. By this group they are used selectively, for example many non-orthodox Sikhs cut their hair but still wear the *kara*.

THE SIKH POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The formation of the Sikh political community, as discussed earlier, was a result of the conflicts that arose

between them and the Mughal rulers who governed Punjab at the time. Initially, relations between the Mughal imperial center in Agra and Delhi, and the Sikhs were exceptionally cordial, with many Mughal emperors expressing not just sympathy but also deep respect for the followers of Guru Nanak and his successors. However, over time, this relationship deteriorated significantly⁶. This process was linked to the political aspirations of Guru Arjan, who, along with the entire Sikh community, became involved in the internal politics of the Mughal Empire. According to Sikh legends, Guru Arjan met a martyr's death, marking the beginning of a series of conflicts between the Sikhs and the Empire⁷.

From that point on, the Sikhs were being persecuted in Punjab and had to fight for their survival for nearly two centuries. With the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, the Sikhs gained control of Punjab and established numerous small states known as *misl*s. These would unite against external threats (such as wars with Hindus in the south or invasions by Afghans) but would often turn on each other once the common enemy was no longer a pressing concern. This pattern continued until the reign of Ranjit Singh in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Ranjit Singh created a powerful state, which he modernized and centralized. However, during the same period, the British were rapidly expanding their influence in India. Until Ranjit Singh's death, relations between the two states were very good but in its' aftermath the British quickly sensed the instability within the Sikh state and, after two wars, dismantled the empire in 1849. The Sikh state had lasted only 50 years.

The British classified the Sikhs as a "martial race" and employed them in both World Wars and numerous colonial conflicts. After the annexation of Punjab, Sikhs also joined the British civil service, leading to Sikh migration throughout the

⁶ Myths of meetings between the Great Mughals and Sikh gurus are famous even nowadays. The legendary meeting between Abū al-Faṭḥ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad, for simplicity called Akbar, and Guru Amar Das was supposed to prove mutual respect, or even friendship and admiration between the parties.

⁷ It should be noted that according to Sikh legends, it was a continuation of the anti-Sikh policy of the Islamic empire. This is contradicted by the Mughal chronicles, which interpret the event as purely political. More on this topic in: R. Gandhi, *Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*, New Delhi 2013.

British Empire and earning them a good reputation in the West (Górny, 2020). However, with the end of the colonial era in India in 1947, the subcontinent was divided into two states based on religion: India and Pakistan. Although Sikh statehood and independence sentiments were older (dating back to at least the 1920s with the formation of the Akali Dal party), it was during this period that a larger-scale resurgence of the independence movement was observed (Axel, 2001). In South Asia, following the partition of British India along religious lines, countless nations inhabiting the subcontinent (such as the Tamils, and to some extent the Bengalis) were in some sorts denied their national identity as their religion was put above it by the colonizers. It was precisely what the Punjabis, seeking to expand their political agency, also emphasized to gain legitimacy on the same grounds as India and Pakistan. If Hindus and Muslims got their independent states, so it was only logical that the same would be true for the Sikhs. Those plans for independence were however quickly revised as India advertised itself as a multireligious state. Following that it's worth noting that after the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of the Indian province of Punjab, the Sikhs advocated for its further division. These pressures proved successful, and Punjab was divided into two parts (Punjab and Haryana), with some of its regions being incorporated into the third province of Himachal Pradesh. The aim was to create a province where Sikhs constituted the majority of the population and could exert more political influence within its borders. The aftermath of India's partition and the country's economic crisis led to a large-scale migration of Sikhs to Western countries and from Pakistan to India.

The year 1984 was the next pivotal moment for the Sikh independence movement and the Sikh community as a whole. Operation "Blue Star", a military operation carried out by the Indian government, was a traumatic event that resulted in the deaths of thousands and triggered the second mass exodus of Sikhs to the West. In the 1970s, the idea of Khalistan (a Sikh homeland) had gained some popularity among the Sikh diaspora, but it had not achieved significant success within India and was often viewed as a form of religious extremism. However, the continued support from the diaspora for

Khalistan, whether it was independence or greater autonomy, led to the rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in Punjab during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bhindranwale, who became an icon of the movement, was not necessarily an advocate for complete independence but rather sought greater autonomy for Punjab. However, his actions often resembled those of a criminal gang leader with an ideological bent rather than a political leader. He organized militias, ordered the assassinations of those he deemed heretics, and targeted political opponents, creating widespread chaos. Bhindranwale's actions resulted in the deaths of at least 410 people and twice as many injuries (Ghosh, 1997). Due to his connections with high-ranking members of Indira Gandhi's government, he avoided being held accountable for his actions. However, this changed when Bhindranwale turned against the ruling party and pledged allegiance to the opposition Akali Dal party in Punjab.

Now prosecuted Bhindranwale took refuge in the holiest site of Sikhism, the Golden Temple in Amritsar. As political violence escalated in Punjab, and negotiations with Bhindranwale failed, the government launched an offensive codenamed operation "Blue Star". The Golden Temple was surrounded by the military, who repeatedly called on Bhindranwale and his followers to surrender their weapons and allow pilgrims to leave. When they refused, a 24-hour battle ensued. The casualty figures vary widely, but estimates suggest that between 80 and 700 soldiers, 500 to 5,000 civilians in the vicinity of the temple, and several hundred militants (many of whom escaped) were killed. The most significant loss, however, was Bhindranwale himself.

The operation had far-reaching consequences. A few months later, in an act of revenge for the attack, the killing of innocent Sikhs, and the desecration of the Golden Temple, two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This assassination sparked anti-Sikh riots across India, leading to the deaths of thousands of Sikhs and forcing many to flee the country. The situation in Punjab deteriorated further.

The following year, 1985, the largest terrorist attack carried out by a Sikh organization took place. Sikh terrorists

planted a bomb on an Air India flight, killing 329 people off the coast of Ireland. A similar attack was planned for Japan but the bomb exploded prematurely, killing two airport workers. Although an international investigation linked the attack to the Babbar Khalsa, a group fighting for an independent Khalistan, only one person, Canadian Sikh Inderjit Singh Reyat, was ultimately convicted.

The unrest and rebellion in Punjab reached their peak. Sikh militias once again occupied the Golden Temple and in January 1986 and declared the independence of Khalistan. The fighting, bombings, protests, and civil unrest continued until the 1990s. However, the central government increasingly suppressed the rebellion, eliminating leaders and convincing the people of Punjab of the futility of seeking independence. The 1993 elections, the first fair elections after years of rigged polls, marked a significant turning point as the government party won. Although attacks and clashes with terrorist groups continued, the tide had turned.

Decades later, the idea of Khalistan has experienced a resurgence, again driven in large part by the Sikh diaspora. Sikhs living outside India continue to support organizations promoting Khalistan, providing financial assistance and international advocacy. Recent events, such as the activities of Amritpal Singh, a Punjab-based activist who has been compared to Bhindranwale, have further fueled the movement. Singh's arrest in 2023 sparked protests and violence.

Another significant event highlighting the ongoing issue of Sikh identity is the diplomatic conflict between India and Canada over the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Sikh activist. Nijjar was assassinated in the parking lot of his gurdwara in June 2023. Canadian authorities accused Indian agents of carrying out the killing. This incident has added to the tensions between the two countries, particularly given that Canada is home to the second-largest Sikh population in the world and has more Sikhs in its central parliament than India itself.

The scale of these events demonstrates that the idea of a Sikh state remains a potent force in contemporary international and Indian politics.

CONCLUSIONS

The history and tradition of Sikh statehood in Punjab are undoubtedly very strong. The region's religious and ethnic distinctiveness from the rest of India is a significant factor in the formation of separatist movements there, which are currently experiencing a kind of renaissance. However, this does not change the fact that the majority of the local population does not support, and even condemns, the activities of individuals like Amritpal Singh. While Sikhs have a relatively recent tradition of statehood, they have a much longer tradition of political independence and struggle against oppression. The role of these two culture-forming factors cannot be overestimated. It is therefore natural that the Khalistan independence movement actually exists and will continue to exist in the Sikh consciousness.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Indian Punjab region itself does not offer immediate prospects for the creation of an independent state. Punjab is located at the heart of the Pakistan-India conflict, between two military and nuclear powers that have no interest in the independence of this region. India would not allow this due to the federal nature of the state, the creation of a precedent, and the region's vital role in meeting the food needs of its growing population. Pakistan, on the other hand, would probably not even support such aspirations, as a Great Sikh Khalistan would also include the most populous part of Pakistan, where the linguistic-national factor may be more important than the religious one. Sikhs also lack the necessary state infrastructure in any area. The support of Islamabad for separatist movements in the 1980s and 1990s was not aiming for their success but only to weaken India. Additionally there is a lack of social support, and the Sikh demography in the region is too weak, as even if every Sikh supported separatism, they would still constitute only a small majority of the population, and such consensus in any multi-million population seems unlikely. It is no wonder, then, that the idea of Khalistan has undergone a significant transformation and again it rather supports the expansion of Sikh autonomy than full independence. This is all the more

important as India, as a state, has for many years been turning towards a kind of Hindu nationalism, where followers of other religions (primarily Islam, but also representatives of other religions) are relegated to the background in the eyes of the authorities and are not, in practice, citizens of the equal category.

Another problem is that the Sikh independence movement is currently popular mainly among second and third-generation diaspora, who seek their identity in a kind of support for the idea of self-determination, despite the reluctance of the Punjabi Sikhs themselves to participate in the struggle for their own independence, as they still remember Operation "Blue Star" and its consequences.

Beyond the local environment, it is also worth considering the issue of Khalistan from a systemic perspective. The current dynamic international security environment and the international system, which we are witnessing a revolution of, cannot afford to take unnecessary risks at any flashpoint, and the Indo-Pakistani border is undoubtedly one such. The liberal vision of the international system is currently in significant decline when it comes to how actors in international relations conduct their policies. Therefore, even if Sikhs were united on this particular issue, they and many other nations and communities will continue to be denied the right to self-determination and peaceful coexistence in the so-called family of free nations.

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BHUTAN AND NEPAL GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE

Abstract:

The article is dedicated to geopolitical situation of Bhutan and Nepal. The author seeks to define similarities and differences characteristic for their geopolitical situation. For this purpose he analyzes chosen factors in fields of geography, economy, social situation, ecological, political and shows development barriers. The relations of both countries with China and India are analyzed, especially according to recent violation of Bhutan's territorial integrity. The author attempts to find strategic directions of Bhutan and Nepal's development as well as potential upcoming changes in their relations with China and India.

Key words:

Bhutan, Nepal, China, India, social problems, economic growth, ecology

INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have been a time of undeniable growth in the geopolitical significance of the world's two most populous countries – India and China. Alongside dynamic economic and technological development, as well as the growth of their military forces, there is a noticeable increase in the political ambitions of both nations and competition between them, which in many aspects takes the form of direct rivalry. Within such areas, where their influences clash are the significantly smaller countries situated between these two powers – the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.

Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler who unified Nepal in the 18th century, described his country as a "gourd (yam) between

two rocks", recognizing the challenges and threats associated with being located between two much more powerful neighbors, and the resulting need to pursue a careful policy of balancing influences (Pulami, M. J. 2022). Despite the centuries passing and the complete transformation of the character of the neighboring countries, Nepal's geopolitical position in many aspects seems to resemble that defined by its 18th-century ruler. In many ways, the same applies to Bhutan. This geographical location naturally makes these countries a field of rivalry for their colossal neighbors and, as experts often observe, they are regarded as buffer states.

The aim of this study is to take a closer look at the current geopolitical situation of both countries, with particular emphasis on geographical conditions, historical processes over the past century, and economic development.

SELECTED CONDITIONS OF BOTH COUNTRIES

This work does not constitute a study in physical geography, however, for the purposes of further analysis, it is necessary to highlight at least a few of the most significant similarities and differences between the two countries. The Kingdom of Bhutan covers an area of 38,394 km², while the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal spans on 147,181 km². Bhutan is a mountainous country, reaching the world's highest average elevation of 3,280 m above the sea level. In this aspect, it is very similar to Nepal, where the average elevation is 3,265 m above the sea level. This statistics, however, can be misleading on its own, as despite both countries have mountainous and high-altitude areas of the Himalayas, a significant part of Nepal is occupied by the low-lying Terai Plain. The plain stretches along the country's southern border with India, where the elevation ranges between 67 and 300 m above the sea level. These lands, covering 33,998.8 km², or 23.1% of Nepal's total area, are densely populated and used for agricultural purposes, providing most of Nepal's agricultural production. They have also become locations for many of the country's industrial centers. A small section of the eastern Terai also lies within Bhutan's borders, where it is referred to

as the Dooars. Together with a few other small plains located in the south of the country and some river valleys, these areas constitute Bhutan's main agricultural regions, primarily used for rice cultivation. The climatic conditions of the two countries are very similar, in both cases varying roughly from north to south, ranging from the cold, dry mountain climate prevalent among the Himalayan glaciers and in places, the polar frost climate and polar tundra climate, through the moderate, humid highland climate, to the humid subtropical climate characteristic mainly of the low-lying southern valleys and plains of both countries (Bhattacharya, A., Bhattacharya, B., Fraser, N., 2001). As a result of geographical features, most importantly due to the atmospheric and topographic conditions listed above, Nepal has a total of 2,114,000 hectares of agricultural land, constituting 14.7% of its total area, while Bhutan has only 94,000 hectares of agricultural land, making up 2.5% of its area. The size of these areas has not undergone significant changes over the years, as it is determined by geographical constraints. Similarly, the amount of food produced is relatively fixed, and consequently, Bhutan's population has always been significantly smaller than Nepal's. International institutions encounter difficulties in determining the exact number of Bhutan's inhabitants, but it is estimated that the population was approximately 780,000 people in 2023. The natural growth rate, which was very high in the last century, has declined significantly since the 1980s, and over the past decade, it has even fallen below the replacement level. If this trend continues, Bhutan's population may soon cease to grow, much earlier than might have been expected. In 2023, Nepal's population reached 30.896 million, and although its natural growth rate has also declined as the country has developed, the decrease has been relatively slight in recent years. Annual population growth remains at a stable level, giving no cause for concern in the years ahead.

The mountainous and high-altitude nature of large areas in both countries limits the possibilities for establishing industrial centres and agricultural activity, as already indicated above. Both countries have not been particularly blessed with valuable mineral resources that could potentially boost industrial development. Extraction and transportation in

difficult mountainous terrain are both costly and require advanced technology, which is especially challenging for countries far from wealth and innovation. However, a more significant geopolitical obstacle arises. The second half of the last century marked a period of extraordinarily rapid growth for many East Asian nations, some of which earned the title of “Asian Tigers.” In short, successful economic model for poorer countries involved capitalizing on competitive advantages such as cheap labour, enabling goods to be sold at significantly lower prices on global markets. Low costs attract foreign investors. However, Bhutan and Nepal could not replicate the success of other countries. Due to geographical conditions, they would have to bear enormous costs for constructing road and rail infrastructure, as well as importing raw materials and exporting finished goods over vast distances. Worse still, the only neighbours of these landlocked countries are China and India, which have built their current global positions largely through cheap industrial production. These giant economies have little incentive to facilitate competition from Bhutan and Nepal. Additionally, a developed industrial sector would also entail significant environmental costs, starting with the inevitable conversion of large forested areas to industrial use. The problem of deforestation and its consequences -primarily soil erosion, landslides, and shrinking water resources - a sore spot for Nepal. Exploitative forest management led to a significant decline in forest cover in the early 1990s, with areas being converted into pastures or plantations. The resources obtained from logging were mainly exported to India, bringing little benefit to Nepal, which lacked its own timber processing industry. Since then, Nepal’s policies have changed significantly, and forested areas have been substantially increased, now covering over 40% of the country’s territory. The Bhutanese government has also been systematically pursuing afforestation policies for decades, placing even greater emphasis on ecological issues. Bhutan’s constitution mandates that at least 60% of the country’s land area must remain forested; currently, forests cover over 70% of the country. Maintaining high levels of forest cover is one element in preserving the fragile ecological balance that regulates the existence of Bhutanese and Nepalese residents, and in a

broader context, the entire Indian region (Wilczyński, W. 2021). In recent decades, Nepal has chosen to focus on developing its tourism sector, primarily targeting at relatively wealthy tourists from affluent countries in Europe and North America. The country relies on its natural attractions, such as the snow-capped Himalayan peaks, forests, and rivers that have largely retained their pristine character. The biodiversity of both countries is exceptionally high. Nepal's strategy has therefore concentrated on developing tourism to attract as many visitors as possible each year, hoping this would be one of the more promising paths to achieving prosperity, given the limited opportunities for development. Tourism generates annual revenues of approximately USD 2.2 billion for Nepal, accounting for 6.7% of the country's GDP. Bhutan, however, has opted for a different approach (Karst, H. Nepal, S., 2016), imposing restrictions on the number of tourists, allegedly to protect the environment and cultural heritage. This includes a ban on climbing mountain peaks considered to be sacred. For this reason, the Himalayan peaks located in Bhutan will remain the last unconquered among the world's highest mountains. Tourist presence in Bhutan is primarily limited by the high fee visitors must pay simply for staying in the country. This fee is a component of the kingdom's sustainable development policy, whereby every foreigner in the country must pay compensation. The funds raised are also intended to finance development programs and education. The legal basis for the fee and the allocation of its proceeds can be found in Article 14 of Bhutan's constitution (2008)¹. The pandemic significantly reduced tourist traffic in Bhutan, and upon its resumption, the sustainable development fee was increased in 2022 to INR 16,509 (approximately USD 200). However, this decision caused tourist numbers to drop significantly below pre-pandemic times level. As a result, in September 2023, Bhutan's authorities decided to reduce the mandatory fee to INR 8,254 (approximately USD 100). Tourist resorts in Bhutan are therefore geared towards wealthy visitors, offering a wide range of high-standard services to compensate for the small number of tourists with high revenues per visitor. Access to the mountainous country by air is limited to a single international

¹ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bhutan_2008 access: 29.04.2024

airport, and apart from two Bhutanese airlines offering flights primarily to India, entry is practically restricted to private jets. This approach reveals a certain hypocrisy: under the pretext of environmental protection, large numbers of potential tourists are excluded from Bhutan, yet private jets are welcomed. These jets emit enormous amounts of greenhouse gases per person and carry wealthy tourists who, within a few days of their stay, spend more money than the average Bhutanese citizen earns in a lifetime. At the same time, the high fees paid to the government deprive ordinary citizens of potential profits, which they could otherwise gain by developing tourism-related services from the ground up. In recent years, tourism has generated less than USD 100 million in annual revenue for the kingdom. Despite its environmental policies, which allow Bhutan to pride itself on being the world's only country that absorbs more carbon dioxide than it emits, it does not escape the negative effects of climate change. These include the shrinking ice cover of the Himalayas, leading to progressive transformations in the country's landscape and natural environment. Each year, new glacial lakes are formed as a result of melting glaciers (Aryal, J.P., Bisht, M., Dil Bahadur Rahut, D.B., 2024). The effects of climate change are also visible in Nepal, where the risks of environmental degradation and reduced biodiversity are not ignored, particularly given the tourism sector's role in the economy. Thanks to significant tourism revenues, the country possesses substantial resources that can be allocated towards maintaining a desirable state of the natural environment (Upadhyaya, P. 2011). The natural resource that both countries can effectively exploit, however, is their water resources. Bhutan has achieved significant success in this regard, not only fully meeting its energy needs through six hydroelectric power plants but also exporting surplus energy to India². Nepal, however, has encountered far greater challenges, and hydroelectric power remains more of a supplement than the foundation of the country's energy sector, which still relies heavily on imported fossil fuels (Dash, S.K., Ogino, K., Nakayama, M., 2019). In the field of hydroelectric energy, Nepal has partnered with China, which, for example,

² <https://ourworldindata.org/energy/country/bhutan#what-sources-does-the-country-get-its-electricity-from> access: 29.04.2024

designed and helped to construct the West Seti dam (Sharma, B. P., 2018). Bhutan exhibits very low levels of foreign investment and bases its economic relations primarily on India. The country appears to reject traditional notions of economic development, as its 2008 constitution prioritises increasing Gross National Happiness (ལྷན་པོ་དང་ས་དགའ་སྤྱི་དབུ་འཛུལ་འཛུལ་ལྷན་པོ་) ³ over GDP growth. It is worth noting that this index is measured using entirely different categories and methodologies than the Human Development Index (HDI), which still classifies Bhutan as one of the least developed countries in the world.

Bhutan is inhabited by three main ethnic groups: the Ngalop, most closely related to Tibetan ethnic group and constituting about half of the country's population; the Scharchop, who account for approximately 15% of the population; and the Lhotshampa, descendants of ethnic Nepalese migrants who settled in Bhutan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The growing number of Lhotshampas, who even established their own political party, caused concern within the regime at the time, and from the 1970s, laws providing basis for discrimination against the Nepali-speaking population were gradually introduced. In the 1980s, the Bhutanese government began promoting a new form of nationalism and changed the rules for recognizing citizenship. The culmination of this "Bhutanisation" policy occurred in 1989, when the principle of "one nation, one people" was implemented. This included banning the teaching of the Nepali language in schools and introducing a mandatory requirement to wear traditional Bhutanese attire. These measures were met with resistance from the Lhotshampa people, manifesting in protests and even attacks on educational and state institutions, with few instances of setting buildings of said institutions on fire. This actions were met with harsh response, the government intensified repression and the police and military forces brutally suppressed the resistance, with numerous confirmed acts of torture and rape against the population and destruction of their homes. As a result, thousands of Lhotshampas fled into exile voluntarily or were forcibly deported. The Bhutanese government also

³ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bhutan_2008 access: 29.04.2024

compelled them to sign “voluntary migration certificates,” which effectively amounted to renouncing their Bhutanese citizenship. The number of exiled Lhotshampas is estimated to be around 100,000 (Hutt, M. 1996). To this day, this ethnic crisis casts a shadow over Bhutanese-Nepalese relations. Despite numerous rounds of negotiations, Bhutan has refused to reinstate citizenship for the exiled population and allow them to return and resettle.

The last two years have seen a significant decline in Bhutan’s population due to unexpectedly high levels of emigration. While over the past 20 years the migration balance had remained stable at a level of a few hundred people per month, since 2021 it has risen sharply, reaching an average of several thousand per month in 2023. The primary destination for Bhutanese migration has been Australia, where 13,600 individuals have settled⁴. For a country with such a small population as Bhutan, this level of migration can be particularly damaging, especially since the median age of those leaving the country permanently is less than 35. People who attain higher education often prefer to remain abroad permanently, which further entrenches the nation’s underdeveloped position. This trend potentially signals growing impatience with the country’s slow pace of modernization - educated Bhutanese citizens face limited opportunities to find employment in advanced institutions within the country, let alone achieve satisfying earnings.

RELATIONS WITH INDIA AND CHINA

The unique nature of the relationship between Bhutan and India was established as early as 1949 through the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship⁵, which proclaims: “The Government of India undertakes not to interfere in the internal affairs of Bhutan. On its part, the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1003271/australia-net-overseas-migration-from-bhutan/> access: 29.04.2024

⁵ <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5242/treaty+or+perpetual+p> access: 29.04.2024

its foreign relations.” In practice, this clause meant Bhutan’s partial renunciation of its sovereignty, implying that the direction of its foreign policy would be determined by India. Bhutan agreed to this treaty due to China’s territorial claims on its land and its own weak economic position. Ever since, India has contributed significantly to improving Bhutan’s situation, supporting its education, healthcare, and the development of various economic sectors, including the now highly important hydropower sector and agriculture. Additionally, with the help of the Indian army, 1,770 kilometers of roads were constructed in Bhutan during the 1960s. India also played a role in facilitating Bhutan’s admission to the United Nations in 1971 (Pal, S. 2020). India remains Bhutan’s primary trading partner, with more than 80% of Bhutanese imports and exports still conducted with India. Bhutan’s small military forces cooperate closely with those of India, and the security of its borders remains heavily dependent on Indian support.

Relations between Nepal and India are profound and deeply rooted in history, culture, and religion. 81% of Nepal's population practices Hinduism. India is Nepal's largest trading partner; although trade with China has been increasing year by year, approximately 70% of Nepal's imports and exports still take place with India annually. India remains the primary source of imported goods for Nepal, including fuel, food products, and construction materials. In return, Nepal exports agricultural products, clothing, and mineral resources to India. Indian investors are active in various sectors, such as energy, telecommunications, the food industry, and tourism. Indian government and investors are often involved in large infrastructure projects in Nepal, such as the construction of roads, bridges, and hydroelectric power plants (Khobragade, V. 2016). A major point of contention in Indo-Nepalese relations is the situation of the Madhesi ethnic group, who speak various Hindi dialects. They began arriving in Nepal from the late 18th century and now make up approximately 32% of Nepal's population. In the 20th century, ethnic conflicts in Nepal escalated, and the Madhesi people faced political and economic oppression from the more privileged castes. Currently, there are various movements and militias aiming to increase

autonomy and secure rights for the Madhesi, including some separatists organizations that advocate for independence or unity with India (Nayak, N. 2011). The Indian government has repeatedly expressed its support for the ethnically related Madhesi Hindu people, which has complicated relations with Nepal (Khobragade, V. 2016).

For centuries, the Himalayas have served as a natural border separating the states located in the Indian region from Tibet, often marking the limits of conquests by successive dynasties ruling imperial China. During the Qing dynasty, Nepal, Bhutan, and the previously independent Kingdom of Sikkim (now one of India's states) became Chinese vassal states, paying tribute until they fell under British influence. However, the ambitions of imperial China did not end with establishing new tributaries. At the time, ambitious plans were drawn up to construct convenient routes through the vassal states to the heart of the Indian region, to further spread Chinese influence-causing concern in Delhi (Beena, M. B. 2019). In a twist of fate, the matter of a Chinese route leading across the Himalayas has resurfaced, though in a significantly different form. China claims rights to 495 km² of territory in northern-central Bhutan, which includes the Jakarlung and Pasumlung valleys, as well as 269 km² of land in northeastern Bhutan, consisting of the Doklam plateau. These claims are justified by the alleged belonging of the areas to the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Bhutan does not formally recognize China. But such is the case of many other countries worldwide, with only 54 independent states formally recognized by Bhutan.

For years, China has pursued a policy of *fait accompli*, methodically occupying disputed territories, deploying its troops and building roads, forward posts, settlements and other infrastructure. In 2017, the physical presence of Indian troops on the Doklam plateau prompted China to halt the construction of a road there. However, the situation had drastically shifted by 2020, when India alarmed the Bhutanese officials about the renewed presence of Chinese soldiers and workers on the plateau. India received a response from Bhutan's ambassador, Vetsop Namgyel, stating that "there are no Chinese settlements in Bhutan." This reflects a shift in

Bhutanese policy that concerns India, suggesting Bhutan might be inclined to formalize its relations with China and relinquish at least part of the disputed territories. Satellite images from December 2023⁶ confirm the existence of Chinese roads, military infrastructure, and settlements in the Jakarlung valley, which were first observed two years earlier and have since that time been significantly expanded. The unconventional methods employed by China to assert its claims are well known to India, which has faced numerous of them while being engaged in the Kashmir conflict for decades. Despite this experience, Chinese advances have not been halted for the most part.

Nepal and China bilateral relations appear to be significantly more amicable. The roots of their formal relationship date back to the 6th century AD, when the Licchavi dynasty ruled Nepal and the Tang dynasty ruled China, and these ties primarily concerned trans-Himalayan trade. The trade route established in the past played an essential role, particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries (Sharma, K. M., 1973). Economic, cultural, and political relations, as well as trade exchanges, persisted in various forms, with a hiatus between 1911 and 1955. Despite being separated by the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau - neither a populous nor a wealthy region - and despite the fact that trade between Nepal and China in the 20th and 21st centuries is significantly smaller than that between Nepal and India, China continues to strive to maintain friendly relations while refraining from interfering in Nepal's internal affairs. This approach has largely been driven by concerns that Western powers or India might use Nepal to destabilize the situation in Tibet (Sharma, B. P., 2018). The democratization of Nepal and its opening to globalization processes, including tourism, have not hindered the maintenance of strong relations with China. It seems that Nepal aims to balance the influence of India and China to its advantage - India remains Nepal's largest trading partner, while the most valuable foreign direct investments come from China. So far, Chinese cooperation in the areas of defense and the arms industry has been marginal, but there are indications that it could deepen. In March 2024, a

⁶ Source: Satellite images Maxar Technologies.

delegation of representatives from China's armed forces visited Nepal, and both sides expressed a willingness to expand the scope of their cooperation⁷.

CONCLUSIONS

China's occupation of disputed territories with Bhutan can be understood as a negotiation tactic, not only to settle border issues with Bhutan but also to influence its broader relationship with the country and draw Bhutan into Beijing's sphere of influence. At the same time, this precedent destabilizes the regional situation. The presence of Chinese armed forces on the Doklam Plateau poses a strategic threat to the security of India's Sikkim state, which is connected to the rest of the country by the narrow Siliguri Corridor located near the plateau. This situation also undermines India in the context of the ongoing hybrid conflict in Kashmir, where control over the region is contested between India and China, diverting Indian forces and attention. For now, however, Bhutan remains within India's exclusive political dominance, pursuing a gradual modernization policy since 2008. Nevertheless, current demographic, economic trends and China's mounting pressure may soon intensify desires to revise Bhutan's existing relationship with India, which in many aspects currently carries a quasi-vassal character. Nepal continues its policy of balancing India's colossal influence by seeking alternatives in China. This process has accelerated in recent years, and in many ways, China is emerging as a more significant partner for Nepal than India. Nepal effectively leverages the influence of its powerful neighbors, particularly in the energy sector, where it collaborates with both countries. Internal matters, including environmental and ethnic issues - which frequently inflame Nepalese-Indian relations - may prove to be critical. China, for the time being, avoids interfering in these matters. Nepal will likely aim to maintain peaceful relations and balanced influences from both neighbors,

⁷ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-nepal-military-relations-risks-and-opportunities-for-india> access: 29.04.2024

allowing it to continue benefiting economically from globalization processes.

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ON THE AFRICAN FRONT OF THE RUSSIAN WAR OF AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

Abstract:

This article examines Africa's significance in Putin's war on Ukraine and evaluates the options for Kyiv to secure greater support by assessing the continent's political, diplomatic, and economic stakes. By exploring Russia's strategies in Africa, both through hard and soft power, it highlights opportunities for Ukraine to fill gaps left by Moscow, particularly in development, while addressing the challenges Ukraine faces in traditional areas of diplomatic influence and agricultural trade. Although Kyiv remains aligned with its Western allies, it must also navigate independently the growing African discontent with Western positions. Ultimately, the article concludes that while Ukraine's prospects in Africa appear limited in some areas, it retains strong arguments to win support for its cause.

Key words:

Africa, soft power, hard power, interests, Ukraine, Russia

INTRODUCTION

The vote by only 28 of the 54 African countries represented at the United Nations for the resolution condemning the Russian general invasion of Ukraine from February 24, 2022, came as a shock for certain Western countries, and first and foremost Ukraine. Alexander Khara, an international relations specialist at the Centre for Defence Strategies, a Kyiv-based think tank, describes the situation this way "We thought that the invasion of sovereign territory and the extremely serious violations of international law committed

by the Russian army would automatically put countries on our side. We underestimated how strong Russian influence was on the African continent”. He concludes by saying that “To win the war, Ukraine must influence the new centres of influence and growth in Africa”.

This division in Africa’s response to Russia’s actions underscores the growing geopolitical influence of the continent, which, despite ongoing challenges, is becoming a critical arena for global power struggles and a key factor in shaping Ukraine’s diplomatic strategy.

Although many African countries continue to grapple with challenges such as poverty, insecurity, and corruption, the African Union’s recent admission to the G20, following the group’s 2023 summit in India, highlights its close ties with the world’s most populous country. It is also a candidate for the United Nations Security Council. The various African countries are particularly divided on the issue of condemning the Russian actions. While Martin Kimani, Kenya’s ambassador to the U.N., strongly condemned Russia, several countries whose leaders came to power through coups against Western-backed regimes, such as Mali and Niger, benefit from partnerships with Moscow.

These countries generally receive diplomatic backing, mercenary support, resources, and economic deals from Russia. Moscow, despite a decade long retreat from Africa in the 90s, benefits from its stance against former Western colonial powers, particularly on the issues of democracy and human rights. Russia also leverages historical ties, built during the Soviet era through economic and ideological alliances and a tradition of elite training, especially in nations where Moscow once supported “socialist” organizations.¹

In comparison, Ukraine, with its 10 embassies across the African continent before February 24, 2022, appears far more vulnerable there. Its position is further weakened by the difficulties in maintaining exports of agricultural products and grains, which are vital connections to Africa. But how exactly is Ukraine countering Russia’s influence on the continent?

Russia’s actions in Africa and its confrontation with the West and NATO on the continent have been well studied. What

¹ Example of USSR support for the independence movement in Mozambique.

has been overlooked is Ukraine's action as an independent player, different from its western partners'.

This paper will first provide a detailed overview of the various forms of Russian influence in Africa, including its military and diplomatic agreements, the role of the Wagner Group, and the Kremlin's economic strategy. It will then focus on Kyiv's comprehensive efforts to increase its presence and influence in Africa, examining Ukraine's strategies and prospects.

RUSSIAN PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE IN AFRICA: MILITARY & DIPLOMATIC AGREEMENTS

Legacy of the USSR's support for independence and anti-capitalist movements has had a lasting impact in Africa. After a period of disengagement during the political and economic turmoil of the 1990s, Russia began its return to the continent in 2006, starting with Putin's first trip to South Africa. Russia then ramped up its efforts following its 2014 invasion of Crimea, as international sanctions pushed the Kremlin to seek new "partners" and economic openings.²

Employing a range of asymmetric and often extralegal tactics, Moscow has significantly deepened its ties with many military and political elites in countries often considered, at the very least, "unstable." Today, Russia is the leading arms supplier to Africa, accounting for 40% of the continent's major weapons imports from 2018-2022, with arms sales growing from approximately \$500 million to over \$2 billion annually in recent years³.

The Kremlin has also capitalized on the void left by the partial withdrawal of American counterterrorism efforts under Trump. Currently, more than half of African countries have bilateral defence agreements with Russia, which include

² Droin Mathieu and Dolbaia Tina, Centre for Strategic and International Studies. (n.d.). *Russia: Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?* Retrieved from:

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>

³ Ibid.

seminars, official visits, training missions, weapons deliveries, and maintenance support.⁴

There are also plans for intelligence-sharing agreements between Defence Ministries, and according to Ivan U. Klyszcz, a researcher at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) in Tallinn, countries like the Central African Republic (CAR) and Madagascar—formerly more aligned with France—have now become “platforms for Russian intelligence in Africa”.⁵

But what explains this dependency of African countries on Russian equipment? Modern Russian systems are cheaper than those from the West and are generally compatible with older Soviet-era stockpiles. They’re also supplied without conditions tied to human rights or adherence to international laws. For example, Russia provides equipment to Marshal Haftar’s forces in Libya, which oppose the UN-recognized government⁶. Another crucial point is that the Kremlin promotes these deals as “partnerships,” unlike the “aid” offered by most Western countries. For instance, Russia has supplied the Malian military with helicopters and ammunition that France, due to concerns over rising insurgencies and the risk of high-tech arms falling into enemy hands—a phenomenon some experts retrospectively call the “Afghan syndrome”—was reluctant to provide.⁷

Moscow’s security approach is complemented by diplomatic efforts such as debt relief⁸, a critical factor in countries often subjected to austerity measures in exchange for international loans from organizations like the World Bank. At the upper echelons of state, Russia has actively promoted alternatives to democracy as a regional norm, backing coups to destabilize governments and install pro-Russian leaders. Russia has also invested millions to spread anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian sentiment through its network of embassies and information agencies like Rossotroudritchestvo.

⁴ Le Rubicon. (n.d.). *Quel rôle pour les services de renseignement russes en Afrique?*
Retrieved from <https://lerubicon.org/quel-role-pour-les-services-de-renseignement-russes-en-afrique/>

⁵ Le Rubicon. Ibid.

⁶ Droin, M., Dolbaia, T. op. cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

In July 2023, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, 17 African heads of state attended the second Russia-Africa Summit hosted by Putin, where multiple deals were signed, spanning several military-related fields and reinforcing Russian military diplomacy beyond arms transfers.⁹ However, while Russia has participated in some peacekeeping missions, it deploys few official military personnel on the ground, relying primarily on the Wagner Group – a private military company with strong ties to Putin’s inner circle.

WAGNER GROUP

The Wagner Group first emerged in 2014, when the Kremlin sought deniability for its involvement in the fighting in eastern Ukraine¹⁰. Likely founded by veterans of Russian military intelligence, the group was, until a failed rebellion in June 2023, officially controlled by Evgeniy Prigozhin, who had once been one of Putin’s most trusted associates. Prigozhin rose from his role as “Putin’s chef” to control many assets linked to the Kremlin’s oligarchy.

Known for their particularly brutal tactics,¹¹ Wagner operatives were initially used to train and fight alongside so-called local “independence militias,” minimizing the impact on Russian and international public opinion of Russia’s unprovoked attack on a neighbouring country, while allowing the Kremlin to avoid officially acknowledging casualties.

The war in Syria saw the expansion of Wagner’s activities. Prigozhin also developed a significant “troll factory,” later accused of interfering in U.S. political affairs and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Open Society Justice Initiative (2023, November 8). *Accountability for Crimes of Personnel of the Wagner Group in Ukraine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/a8de622f-bfbf-4cf5-99ba-f5b98b34f4ad/accountability-for-crimes-of-personnel-of-the-wagner-group-in-ukraine-en-20231108.pdf>

¹¹ Deutsche Welle (n.d.). *Ukrainian POWs say Wagner Group violated war laws*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/en/ukrainian-pows-say-wagner-group-violated-war-laws/a-67223859>; Open Society Justice Initiative, op. cit.; U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). *The Wagner Group's Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth*. Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/the-wagner-groups-atrocities-in-africa-lies-and-truth/>

attempting to influence U.S. presidential elections¹². This operation is also believed to be a key component of Russia's online propaganda efforts in Africa. With growing combat experience, Wagner began to partially fund itself by taking shares or outright control of natural resource operations in various countries, particularly following an alleged rift between Prigozhin and Russia's official military high command.

Deployed in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan at the end of 2017, the group transformed into a security provider for Moscow's allies in the region, offering protection in exchange for economic advantages.

Although details are scarce, a pattern of Wagner's activities in Africa can be discerned. First, it engages in disinformation campaigns targeting Western powers and supporting pro-government narratives through tactics like fake polls and counterdemonstrations. Second, Wagner secures payment in extractive industries, such as bauxite in Guinea and gold in CAR. Third, Wagner collaborates with national militaries, facilitating direct ties with Russian military forces by offering training, advising, personal security services, and anti-insurgency operations. This involvement also opens opportunities for Russian state-controlled companies, such as Gazprom and various diamond extraction firms.¹³

Wagner's main strategic value for Moscow seems to lie in its "low-cost" model—an inexpensive way to extend influence in the region. After Prigozhin's death in August 2023, the Kremlin consolidated its control over the mercenary group, now rebranded as "Africa Corps."

While Wagner has achieved some "military successes," most notably assisting the Malian armed forces in retaking the rebel stronghold of Kidal, a recent event may threaten the group's standing as Moscow's key tool in the region.

¹² Columbia University - School of International and Public Affairs. (n.d.). *Study Confirms Influence of Russian Internet Trolls in 2016 Election*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/news/study-confirms-influence-russian-internet-trolls-2016-election>

¹³ ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) (2022, August 30). *Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali*. Retrieved from: <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/>

In late July 2024, Wagner members accompanied Malian soldiers on a “stabilization mission” in the northeastern border city of Tinzaoaten, when fighting broke out with Tuareg rebels. As the joint force retreated, they were ambushed by militants from the al-Qaida affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). Reports indicate that up to 80 soldiers, including more than 40 Malians, were killed.¹⁴ A defeat of this scale, coupled with Wagner’s brief, unsuccessful 2019 counterterrorism mission in Mozambique, may prompt some African leaders to reconsider Wagner as their primary security provider.

RUSSIA’S ECONOMIC STRATEGY IN AFRICA

Trade revenue between Russia and African countries has nearly doubled, rising from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$17.7 billion by 2021. Grain plays a particularly strategic role, as many African countries rely on grain imports to feed their populations, with Russia supplying 30% of Africa’s grain needs.

The stakes are especially evident in Russia’s use of Ukrainian grain as a bargaining chip. The Kremlin’s refusal to renew the Ukrainian grain deal has endangered millions who depend on these imports. To further increase African dependency, Russia promised free grain to its closest allies most impacted by the deal's end and inevitable price surges. This move further tightened Moscow's control over countries whose leaders were already indebted to Russia for their ascension to power.

Another critical aspect of the Kremlin’s African economic strategy involves natural resources. Through Wagner, Russia has gained favourable or direct control over the natural resources of several African nations, which are exploited by state-owned or partially state-owned companies like Rosneft and Rosatom, including nuclear plant developments in Egypt and diamond extraction projects led by Alsora in countries like Zimbabwe and Congo.

Despite these gains, Russia remains an economic “dwarf” in Africa, especially when compared to what other powers

¹⁴ For context, in almost 10 years in Mali, the French armed forces only lost 59 soldiers.

invest in traditional statecraft through civil and infrastructure investments. However, Russia's main advantage seems to be its ability to offer affordable military services, a wide range of weapons, and security support without attaching conditions related to human rights. This approach, unlike the "patronizing" concerns typical of Western powers, allows Russia to strengthen alliances without criticism.

In contrast to China's large-scale investments, some argue that Russia's approach may lack long-term strategic benefit. Yet, because Russia's alliances are largely elite-based and overlook long-term development needs, they may appear more sustainable in the short term. With endemic corruption, insecurity, and unequal distribution of state wealth diminishing the impact of large-scale infrastructure investments in many African countries, China's reduced lending in recent years reflects the limitations of its strategy in a region where returns are uncertain, and risks are high.

THE UKRAINIAN OFFENSIVE IN AFRICA: A LARGE DIPLOMATIC EFFORT

The preservation of Ukraine's independence remains the country's primary foreign policy goal, as outlined in the Law of Ukraine on the principles of domestic and foreign policy. In Africa, Ukraine's efforts to advance this objective encounter varying levels of support across different countries.

The African Union, through statements by its President Macky Sall and Chairperson of the African Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat, has expressed "extreme concern" and urged Russia to respect Ukraine's sovereignty. However, this stance is not uniformly shared among AU members.¹⁵

While 26 countries voted to support sanctions against Russia at the United Nations, a number that increased to 30 for the resolution condemning Russia's annexations in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, many countries, including some of Ukraine's traditional allies in

¹⁵ African Union (2022, February 24). *African Union Statement on the Situation in Ukraine*. Retrieved from: <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220224/african-union-statement-situation-ukraine>

North Africa, have refrained from joining the sanctions movement. Some even abstained from the UN resolution demanding Russia's withdrawal¹⁶, instead blaming NATO and the West for "instigating" the war.

Ukraine's diplomatic efforts in Africa have been hindered by decades of minimal investment in the region, stretching from its independence in 1991 up to Russia's initial aggression in 2014. During this time, Kyiv's foreign policy was largely concentrated on Europe and former Soviet states.¹⁷

As a result, its limited number of embassies has translated into a low cultural and political presence on the African continent. A noticeable shift began after the 2014 Euromaidan protests, as the Ukrainian diaspora in Africa organized events to promote Ukrainian culture, raising awareness to the point that the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recognized this cultural diplomacy as a valuable tool. Notable events took place even in South Africa, a country traditionally more aligned with Russia (Kachur, Rozumna 2018).

Still, with only 10 embassies at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, some of them in charge of several countries, Ukraine was still far behind Russia. Since February 24, 2022, Kyiv has pursued four main diplomatic goals, according to George Erman, a BBC Ukraine journalist: "to secure support for territorial integrity; to gain backing for a special tribunal against Russia; to advocate for reparations; and to promote the Crimean Platform [an initiative to reaffirm Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea]."¹⁸

Gaining support from non-Western countries is crucial for these initiatives, which seek to address Russia's actions from a global, not solely Western, perspective. Despite the financial strain of the ongoing war, Ukraine has made significant diplomatic investments over the past two years, including the recent opening of an embassy in Ghana and

¹⁶ The Washington Post (2023, February 24). *U.N. Security Council members vote on resolution regarding Ukraine*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/24/un-ukraine-resolution-vote-countries/>

¹⁷ South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) (n.d.). *Beyond Bread: Ukraine's Africa Diplomacy*. Retrieved from <https://saiia.org.za/research/beyond-bread-ukraine-africa-diplomacy/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

plans for new embassies in Botswana and Mozambique. Discussions are underway with additional countries like Mauritania, Tanzania, the DRC, and Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁹

Ukraine's former Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, has conducted multiple tours across Africa, the first of their kind by a Ukrainian official of his stature. "He understands that African countries seek tangible benefits," explains Erman. "Ukraine needs to support African interests in international organizations and provide practical assistance across various sectors."²⁰ However, collaboration in international institutions presents challenges, as Ukraine is dependent on Western allies for support, making it difficult to champion Africa's push for a more prominent role in the Western-dominated global order. Nonetheless, Ukraine could leverage key sectors of its economy to deepen its ties with African nations.

AN ECONOMIC WAR

Ukraine has a clear economic objective on the African continent, according to Maksym Subkh, Ukraine's special representative for the Middle East and Africa. "To gradually reduce the share of raw material exports to Africa, namely cereals and oil, by increasing that of processed goods, such as agricultural technologies. Military-technical cooperation is also promising, especially with the sale of various types of weapons."²¹

This policy builds on pre-existing partnerships from before the full-scale invasion, particularly in university education. Prior to February 24, 2022, Ukraine hosted a significant number of African exchange students in its universities.²²

¹⁹ Le Monde (2023, November 20). *L'Ukraine tente de défier la Russie en Afrique*. Retrieved from: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/11/20/l-ukraine-tente-de-defier-la-russie-en-afrique_6201324_3212.html

²⁰ South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), op. cit.

²¹ Le Monde, op. cit.

²² Le Monde (2022, April 7). *In Ukraine, African students scramble to flee the war*.

Retrieved from: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/04/07/in-ukraine-african-students-scramble-to-flee-the-war_5979916_124.html

President Zelensky himself, during his address to the American Congress in December 2022, highlighted the "colossal economic potential" of such relations with Africa, announcing the setting up of multiple trade representative offices.²³

These goals are primarily aimed at reducing economic dependence on agricultural and cereal exports and sidestepping Russian leverage. There is also a broader ambition to align Ukraine's economy more closely with the European Union, preparing the country for integration into the common market.

Ukraine brings significant strengths in the IT sector, which remains strong despite the war. For example, the government-run app Diia enables citizens to store documents and complete administrative tasks online—an innovation that could benefit African countries struggling with widespread corruption in public services.²⁴

Another potential area of cooperation lies in power grid management. Despite heavy targeted bombings, Ukraine has managed to maintain mostly consistent power access, except in areas of ongoing conflict. Roughly half of Africa lacks electricity, and even developed economies like Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa face challenges in managing their grids. Assisting with infrastructure development and maintenance could allow Kyiv to contribute meaningfully to African development.²⁵

However, Ukraine has not abandoned its traditional grain exports to Africa. The "Grain from Ukraine" (Зерно з України) program, launched by President Zelensky on November 26, 2022, on the 90th anniversary of the Holodomor,²⁶ aims to foster partnerships by providing grain to countries at high risk of famine. Through this initiative, Ukraine, alongside partner countries and private donors, will supply Ukrainian grain to nations in Africa and Asia facing food insecurity. The goal is for donors to purchase grain directly from Ukrainian producers

²³ Reuters (2022, December 23). *Ukraine eyeing a bigger diplomatic footprint in Africa - Zelenskiy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-eyeing-bigger-diplomatic-footprint-africa-zelenskiy-2022-12-23/>

²⁴ South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), op. cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Genocide through hunger of the Ukrainian people by Staline in 1932-1933, thought to have killed at least 3,9 millions Ukrainians.

and distribute it to countries in need. For some, like Comoros, which has remarked that Putin's "gifts" may be insufficient to stave off hunger, this program could be an effective tool to strengthen partnerships on the continent.²⁷

Under this program, 60 shipments are planned to Africa.²⁸ Yet, the prospects for Ukrainian agricultural exports to the continent remain uncertain, as they depend entirely on Kyiv's ability to keep the Black Sea ports open following Moscow's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The economic and diplomatic connections that might have developed through these exports have been largely severed by Putin's conflict. However, Ukraine's engagement with Africa isn't limited to soft power alone.

UKRAINIAN MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

Before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian military engagement in Africa was minimal, limited to around 300 soldiers in the United Nations mission in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, before February 24, 2022.²⁹

Since then, Ukraine, beyond defending its territories, has launched efforts to strike at Russian interests abroad, aiming to weaken its economic assets and diplomatic credibility.

In Sudan, rumours circulated for months about the presence of Ukrainian military advisers, especially after the appearance of tactics specific to Ukraine³⁰ in the conflict between the rebel Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—primarily representing the Arabic Sudanese minority and led by a figure

²⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) (n.d.). *African Union Chairman: Ceasefire, Grain Deal Insufficient in Ukraine-Putin Talks*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/african-union-chairman-ceasefire-grain-deal-insufficient-ukraine-putin/32524692.html>

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (n.d.). *Grain Ukraine*. Retrieved from: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/grain-ukraine>

²⁹ Reuters (2022, March 9). *Ukraine to pull troops, equipment from UN missions*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-pull-troops-equipment-un-missions-2022-03-09/>

³⁰ Suicide drone attacks against vehicles with camera, previously were unseen on the Sudanese field.

linked to Russia through a gold-smuggling network³¹, supported by Wagner, and the military government of Khartoum.

A source informed the French newspaper *Le Monde*³² that Ukrainian special forces within the HUR (military intelligence directorate) left a strong impression on General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the leader of Sudan's ruling military junta, by successfully organizing a complex land evacuation of foreign civilians to Egypt. This likely contributed to the Sudanese government, despite its frayed ties with the West due to halted political transition following Omar al-Bashir's ouster, entrusting Ukraine to assist in combatting the RSF—accused of atrocities in the West Darfur region.³³

An “unscheduled” meeting between president Zelensky and the chief of the Sudanese army at the Shannon airport in Ireland in September 2023, where were discussed “illegal armed groups financed by Russia”³⁴ seems to support the notion that Ukraine may be establishing Sudan as a “bridgehead” for counter-Russian operations across the region.

Both sides have leveraged this information war opportunity. Ukraine has showcased its special forces' reach, including successful drone strikes on Wagner troops, underscoring its ability to target Russia globally. Meanwhile, Russia has attempted to sway Arab audiences by highlighting Ukrainian support for al-Burhan, painting it as aligned against

³¹ Warsaw Institute (n.d.). *As Zelensky meets Sudan's Burhan, is Ukraine present in Sudan?* Retrieved from: <https://warsawinstitute.org/as-zelensky-meets-sudans-burhan-is-ukraine-present-in-sudan/>

³² *Le Monde* (2023, September 27). *Ukraine wants to thwart Moscow's plans all the way to Africa*. Retrieved from: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/27/ukraine-wants-to-thwart-moscow-s-plans-all-the-way-to-africa_6140299_4.html

³³ Human Rights Watch (2023, November 26). *Sudan: New Mass Ethnic Killings, Pillage in Darfur*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/26/sudan-new-mass-ethnic-killings-pillage-darfur>; Harter, F. (2023, December 15). *Looting, massacre in Ardamata is the latest chapter in Darfur's horror story*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/dec/15/looting-massacre-in-ardamata-is-the-latest-chapter-in-darfurs-horror-story>

³⁴ *Le Monde*, op. cit.

the RSF's vision of Sudan's future, similarly to how it leverages Ukrainian support for Israel.³⁵

However, Ukraine's position in Sudan appears tenuous. The junta's forces are losing ground rapidly, and Ukraine lacks the extensive military resources, like aviation and advanced intelligence, that would enable Western powers such as France, the UK, or the US to alter the situation and secure a stable position.

Thus, Ukraine's direct military intervention against Russian influence in Africa does not appear promising on a broader scale, as limited firepower constrains its capabilities. This is further complicated by the stance of African countries, even the most unstable, which are generally reluctant, as former CIA operative and security expert Cameron Hudson noted, to "become a proxy battlefield for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict."³⁶

The Tuareg victory in Tinzaouaten in July 2024 and the subsequent statement from the HUR's spokesperson, who claimed the rebels "had received intelligence" aiding their success, triggered a diplomatic row between Ukraine and Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, leading to a severing of ties. While Ukraine has denied supplying the rebels with UAVs as speculated in certain reports, there remains insufficient information to fully assess Ukraine's position in this particular region.

CONCLUSIONS

In Putin's war against Ukraine, Africa has become an indirect front, heavily impacted by economic consequences like rising prices across multiple sectors. Political rifts with the Western world have emerged, as many of the continent's traditional Western allies have opted for neutrality, choosing

³⁵ Ukrinform (n.d.). *Russian propaganda invents death of eight Ukrainian soldiers in Sudan*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-factcheck/3775993-russian-propaganda-invents-death-of-eight-ukrainian-soldiers-in-sudan.html>

³⁶ Le Monde (2023, November 20). *L'Ukraine tente de défier la Russie en Afrique*. Retrieved from: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/11/20/l-ukraine-tente-de-defier-la-russie-en-afrique_6201324_3212.html

not to take sides or pressing for peace talks. This article has outlined how Russia has long cultivated its influence in Africa, spreading its ideology and influence through various channels and proxies like the Wagner Group, positioning itself as a defender against former colonial powers, often perceived as meddling in African affairs.

It raises questions about the potential for Ukraine to establish its own influence on the continent and highlights the policies President Zelensky's administration has pursued. Though Ukraine faces an uphill battle, particularly on the diplomatic front, it possesses tools to offer viable alternatives to Russia. While Moscow has often amplified African grievances against the West, Kyiv may present solutions, at least in specific sectors.

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