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Can China's Developmental Peace Be an Alternative to Liberal Peace? A Critical Feminist Interrogation

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Abstract

A growing body of literature within international relations (IR) has attempted to understand China's approach to peacebuilding, so-called developmental peace, mostly in relation to critiques of liberal peace. The literature shares an assumption that developmental peace is distinct from liberal peace and discusses whether Chinese peacebuilding efforts might function as an alternative to the liberal approach. The discussion largely draws on conventional IR perspectives involving only limited engagement with critical scholars. It therefore lacks analysis of hierarchies related to gender and local power relations. By contrast, this article critically interrogates existing arguments to examine the extent to which developmental peace differs from liberal peace and in what sense it can be seen as an alternative. Informed by feminist IR, the article explores three core elements of developmental peace: developmentalism, the absence of the political and South-South cooperation. It shows that developmental peace largely replicates and reinforces the limitations of liberal peace by marginalising women and minority groups, and failing to prioritise local needs. Based on these findings, it argues that China might be an emerging actor that, in a nominal sense, can diversify the field, but that developmental peace does not constitute an alternative perspective in any substantive sense.

Introduction

A growing amount of work has been done to better understand the Chinese approach to peacebuilding, referred to as 'Chinese peace' (Kuo 2015), 'peace through development' (Wang 2018) or, more commonly, 'developmental peace' (He 2017). The emergence of developmental peace is primarily understood as part of China's increasing interest in participating in the global governance system. Rationalist studies tend to understand developmental peace in connection with the realist interpretation of China's rise. They share a sceptical view that China is driven by its self-interest (Richmond and Tellidis 2014; Berthelemy 2011; Mohan & Power 2008; Gong 2020). They also assert that developmental peace can be understood as China's realpolitik struggle for maximising its power (Huang 2013; Hirono, Jiang & Lanteigne 2019; Adhikari 2021). International relations (IR) research based on constructivism tends to view developmental peace through the lens of ideational factors. Specifically, it interprets this concept as part of China's effort to be perceived as a responsible power on the global stage, aimed at mitigating fears that its rise might not be peaceful (Hirono & Lanteigne 2011; Teitt 2020). Additionally, this approach is seen as a way for China to gain soft power by developing and promoting a different set of norms that may appeal to other countries (Wong 2021). This view emphasises China's distinctive approach, which underlines China's role as an atypical great power, setting itself apart from Western powers (Richardson 2011).

In both literatures, developmental peace is mostly discussed in relation to *liberal peace*, the mainstream form of peacebuilding led by liberal democracies. Both approaches share the assumption that China's developmental peace is distinct from liberal peace, and shape a dichotomous discourse on liberal peace and developmental peace. In most of the literature, the extent to which and how developmental peace constitutes an alternative to liberal peace are central questions. While some argue that developmental peace could complement liberal peace and compensate for its limitations (e.g. Zhao 2011; He 2017, 2019; Wang 2018), others contend that it is more of a disrupter in peacebuilding (e.g. Höglund & Orjuela 2012; de Carvalho & de Coning 2013; Abdenur 2016). Moreover, this growing body of literature has been dominated by conventional IR perspectives and involved only limited engagement with critical scholars. The concept of 'peace' in the literature on developmental peace is conceptualised through a state-centric perspective, which neglects to acknowledge or address inequalities and insecurity at the individual and community levels. As in traditional IR, the discussion on developmental peace has been treated as gender-neutral, reinforc-

ing the assumption that developmental peace and gender constitute two separate fields of inquiry. Thus, analyses of hierarchies, including those related to gender and local power relations, are largely absent.

Against this background, this article provides a critical analysis of developmental peace and interrogates questions within the literature concerning the extent to which developmental peace differs from liberal peace and whether developmental peace can ever be seen as an alternative. The article employs a feminist IR perspective, which allows exploration of the absence, silence and marginalisation as well as the (re)production of diverse hierarchies of power. This ultimately enables a problematisation of the dichotomous discourse on developmental peace and liberal peace.

The analysis demonstrates that China's developmental peace largely replicates and reinforces the limitations of liberal peace by marginalising women and minorities, and failing to prioritise local needs. Based on these findings, the article questions existing arguments about the distinctiveness and complementarity of China's approach to peacebuilding. While China might diversify peacebuilding in a nominal sense, it does not add an alternative perspective in a substantive sense. More specifically, it might serve as a substitute for liberal peace, but it is unlikely to be a better option from the perspectives of women and the marginalised. Through this analysis and argument, the article makes two contributions to the literature on China's developmental peace. First, it enhances the understanding of developmental peace by drawing attention to power dynamics and gendered underpinnings, which are largely absent from the existing literature. Second, by opening up a new discussion informed by critical perspectives, it provides an opportunity to scrutinise the ongoing discussion on whether China's developmental peace could function as an alternative norm.

The following section discusses existing research on China's developmental peace and critiques of liberal peace. The methodology section examines feminist IR theories and the specific methodological approach taken in this article. The next section provides a critical analysis of developmental peace from a feminist IR perspective and discusses whether developmental peace can be seen as an alternative. The article concludes by setting out a future research agenda.

Developmental peace and liberal peace

The growing scholarly interest in China's peacebuilding has produced a considerable body of literature in contemporary IR and developed the concept of developmental peace. The literature on China's peacebuilding efforts emphasises the differences between the principles of developmental peace and liberal peace (He 2021). The core idea is that while liberal democracies promote democracy, good governance and the neoliberal form of market-based economics in their peacebuilding efforts, China's peace engagement primarily emphasises economic

development and a strong central government (Lei 2011). Table 1 summarises the
key differences between developmental peace and liberal peace discussed in the
literature.

Table 1: Key differences between developmental peace and liberal peace

Key area	Developmental peace	Liberal peace
Actor	China, as part of its expanded engagement in global gover- nance	Mainstream peacebuilding approach led by liberal democracies
Core value	Peace through development, with economic development at the core	Peace-as-governance, with liberal democracy at the core
Political aspect	A strong central government (strengthen the existing govern- ment), social stability	Modern political reform, promotion of civil society, the rule of law, hu- man rights, gender equality
Economic aspect	Emphasis on developmental state based on its own experi- ence	Neoliberal economic ideology, mar- ket-based economy and free trade
Conditionality/ interference	No interference, no political strings attached	Necessary interventions, condition- ality
Approach in practice	Top-down practice, based on South-South cooperation	Top-down and bottom-up, lack of local ownership

Source: Author

Liberal peace

Due to its dominance in post–Cold War peace engagement, liberal peace has been
understood as representing the concept of peacebuilding as a whole rather than a
particular form of it (Selby 2013). It is characterised by and based on liberal values
such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law and multilateralism (Richmond
2006; Campbellm, Chandler & Sabaratnam 2011). In practice, liberal peace inter-
ventions have largely focused on political reform and institutionalisation such as
legal reform, and promotion of civil society and good governance (Sabaratnam
2011). Thus it is also referred to as 'peace-as-governance' (Richmond & Franks,
2009). While the political element of peacebuilding is heavily emphasised, the

economic element does not take up a large part of liberal peace intervention. Nonetheless, it promotes economic development in conflict-affected countries in the form of economic liberalisation with market-oriented development and free trade. As part of the political element, gender equality is highly emphasised in the liberal peace framework, as represented by the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. The WPS agenda is a global policy norm that includes a range of international efforts to increase the role of women in global politics, and to promote and protect the rights of women in fragile contexts. The WPS agenda is understood as part of liberal peace (Demetriou & Hadjipavlou 2016) and even referred to as 'another piece in the liberal peace jigsaw' (Aroussi 2017: 30).

Although liberal peace has been praised as moderately successful and is still regarded by some as best suited to conflict management, its hegemony has been questioned by critical scholars since the 1990s, following the failure of various liberal peace projects (Richmond 2006). Much existing research engages with the criticisms of liberal peace in order to develop arguments for the complementarity of developmental peace. Liberal peace is criticised from a range of perspectives, including among realist, Marxist, liberal, constructivist, feminist, critical and post-colonial scholars (Richmond & Mac Ginty 2015). Similarly, critiques of the WPS agenda have enjoyed rich and insightful engagement from a multidisciplinary body of literature in law, development studies, politics and international relations (Shepherd 2020). Although these critiques cover a wide range of issues, this section focuses on critiques related to the economic and political domain and those that pay attention to the local, dimensions central to developmental peace and the gender dimensions of each element.

First, liberal peace is criticised for its adherence to neoliberal economic policy. Economic disparities are often not prioritised in liberal peace. For example, critics argue that the WPS agenda has neglected the negative impact of the neoliberal system on women and marginalised groups (True 2012; Hewitt & True 2021). It is also said to have failed to bring economic prosperity or sustainability to post-conflict countries (Richmond 2006; Richmond & Franks 2009), and to have caused gendered harms and inequalities (Duncanson 2016; Bergeron, Cohn & Duncanson 2017). The push for free market reforms is argued to have led to economic inequalities in many contexts. Feminist critics point out that liberal peace with a neoliberal economic ideology has jeopardised the well-being and security of women and other marginalised groups rather than contribute to any improvement. It is well documented that the globalised economic system, including financial and trade liberalisation, has deepened gendered (economic) inequalities in societies and even escalated violence against women (True 2012; Hewitt & True 2021). This is exemplified by how the gendered division of labour has concentrated women's employment in the informal sector and low-skilled, labour-intensive work. In addition, neoliberalist strategies have been criticised for their instrumental ap-

proach to gender equality. For example, 'smart economics' sees women's labour as a means to achieve growth and increase profits rather than in terms of gender equality (Bergeron & Healy 2015).

The political aspects of liberal peace and the WPS agenda have also been critiqued. The heavy focus on state building is seen to come at the expense of addressing root causes of conflicts such as inequalities, lack of accountability, local grievances and ethnic tensions (Hameiri 2011). Imposing and rushing into institution building in post-conflict countries has been criticised as resulting in weak and corrupt governments (Öjendal & Ou 2015). This one-size-fits-all approach, which overlooks the importance of cultural context and local norms, has also faced criticism (Eriksen 2009). In addition, the inclusivity of the scope of WPS policies and practices has been widely questioned, in part due to the language ambiguity in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 which has led to different interpretations of subsequent resolutions, and thus variable implementation in practice (Alvarado Cóbar, Bjertén-Günther & Jung 2018). This language often reduces gender to a women's issue and has excluded other marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ (Kirby & Shepherd 2016; Hagen 2016).

Finally, the critiques highlight the lack of locally driven politics in liberal peace theories and practices. In the same vein, Eurocentrism in liberal peace has been singled out for reflecting the concerns and priorities of the West or the Global North (Sabaratnam 2013). Traditional donors with a liberal peace agenda tend to promote western values and institutions as universal standards, and to overlook the diversity of societies and context-sensitivity (Zaum 2012; Richmond 2011). The WPS agenda has been criticised for its western dominance (Aroussi 2017; Parashar 2016; Pratt 2013; Basu 2016). The agenda has been largely led by traditional western donors shaping priorities and agendas with the support of several UN Security Council resolutions, while the views of non-western donors have often been excluded (Jung & Tsujisaka 2019; Aroussi 2017).

Developmental peace

Developmental peace is often discussed in relation to and differentiated from liberal peace. Mostly, it can be explained by Chinese officials' belief in the relationships between development, social stability and a strong state. Foot names it a 'triadic model', which is summarised as 'development as primary, stability as being equivalent to peace, and good governance as corresponding to pragmatic, effective governance' (Foot 2020: 246). This triadic model can be further understood with historical background. Its primary focus on development, or so-called developmentalism, has been at the centre of Chinese politics. It dates to 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power with its socialist development model, which further evolved with the policy of Reform and Opening Up in 1978. Development has consistently been emphasised as a primary solution to various

issues, such as social stability, by different leaderships. It is exemplified by Deng Xiaoping's legacy on 'development is the absolute principle' and Jiang Zemin's stance on development as 'the party's top priority in governing and rejuvenating the country' (Meng 2023). This notion of comprehensive development has further served as a legacy of humanitarianism in China (Hirono 2013). While one could argue that Western liberalism also entails economic advancement as one of its policy aims, China's developmentalism differs from liberalism in that it is based on collectivism, statism and the preference of cultural particularism (Karmazin 2023). In addition, the emphasis on the state's leading role on stability is associated with both a Confucian understanding of state and communist features of the Chinese political system. Historically, the Chinese state has been understood as the moral agent (Fairbank 1968), and the ideal of a well-ordered state has been seen as a key element of humanitarianism (Hirono 2013). This is evidenced in the statement made by Ambassador Liu Zhenmin in 2009: 'The primary task of post-conflict peacebuilding is to restore the administrative functions of state organs of the country concerned' (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN 2009). Within the Chinese political system and culture, the role of non-state actors such as civil society in foreign assistance has been limited.

On the other hand, the Chinese rhetoric of responsible power and the idea of peaceful development (or peaceful rise) are crucial to understanding China's peace engagement as a commitment to making a peaceful international environment more broadly (Richardson 2011). First, the concept of responsible power has been widely used by the Chinese government to promote its commitment to safeguarding peace and promote development (Xinhua 2019). It is often argued that China promotes this term to integrate into the international system and to gain an international reputation as a legitimate great power (Suzuki 2008). Under this rhetorical concept, China has expanded its involvement and influence in humanitarian activities, such as in conflict-affected countries. It is also notable that the concept highlights China's position as an atypical great power, distinguishing itself from Western power (Richardson 2011). Second, in the early 2000s under Hu Jintao, China began to push for the idea of peaceful development, which has been widely used to assure the international community that China's rise would not be a threat. In his address at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2005, Hu Jintao stated that 'China is committed to the road of peaceful development and the mutually beneficial and win-win strategy of opening up. . . . The more developed China is, the greater contribution it will make to the world' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2009). It articulates that China's development would be achieved through peaceful means and would contribute to global peace and prosperity.

Given this historical and political context, the dominant understanding of key characteristics of developmental peace can be outlined as follows. First, as the

name indicates, it is distinguished by its primary focus on the economic aspects of peacebuilding. The concept envisages state-led economic development as a prerequisite for sustainable peace. Infrastructure development in particular is continuously highlighted, which strengthens the relevance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China emphasises a strong central government to ensure peace and stability and also places the state at the centre of peacebuilding (Foot 2020). Consequently, it is understood to promote government-to-government engagement rather than multilaterally or through direct engagement with local organisations, which leaves little room for civil society (Hirono 2013; Wong & Li 2021). In addition, China's principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries is also applied to developmental peace. Chinese foreign assistance is known to have fewer political conditionalities than western countries' assistance (Strange et al. 2017). In relation to this non-interference principle, the human rights agenda is excluded in developmental peace. China's rhetoric on South-South cooperation is also important. It claims that its relationship with other countries in the Global South is based on mutuality and equality (Asante 2018). By highlighting its position as a developing country, China applies its own experience as a developmental state achieving rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation to other countries in need.

Various approaches have attempted to account for China's increased participation in global peace governance in academic literature. According to Yuan (2022), there are two dominant views on developmental peace vis-à-vis liberal peace: as a challenger and as a status quo actor. First, those who see China as a challenger argue that it is undermining the processes and outcomes of liberal peace. This is exemplified in several historical cases, such as the Syrian Civil War which China framed as terrorism rather than a humanitarian matter (Abdenur 2016). This view is in line with the rationalist approach that understands China's motivations in terms of material interests. Some argue that China's peace engagement is driven by pragmatic needs, such as its own economic interests regarding potential access to natural resources and energy or security concerns (Hirono, Jiang & Lanteigne 2019). Similarly, there is an understanding that China is attempting to obtain global hegemony or to change the international system (Cooley 2015). From this point of view, developmental peace is associated with China's ambition to gain an international reputation, and ultimately to become a great power by developing and promoting a different set of norms that can appeal to other countries (Wong 2021).

Second, there is the perspective that China is contributing to maintain the status quo in peacebuilding rather than attempting to disrupt the international efforts within the framework of liberal peace. Such research sees China as not having revisionist intentions (Alden & Large 2015), arguing that China does not aim to undermine liberal norms such as democracy and good governance, and

remains indifferent to them (Givens 2011). They elaborate further that China positions itself as a supporter of liberal peace suggesting that they align with the liberal peace framework without attempting to propose an alternative peacebuilding model (Richmond & Tellidis 2014). Chinese scholars and practitioners often argue that developmental peace can complement the limitations of liberal peace, suggesting that it can coexist with, rather than oppose as antithesis, the liberal peace framework (He 2019; Yuan 2022). While these two approaches might differ in their understanding of China's intentions, there is a shared assumption. The literature agrees that China's developmental peace is clearly distinct from liberal peace and could function as a positive or negative alternative to liberal peace. This shapes a dichotomous discourse on liberal peace and developmental peace.

Feminist IR as a methodological approach to (developmental) peace

This article argues that the prevailing discourse on developmental peace in the literature examined above is predominately shaped by conventional IR perspectives, with only limited engagement from critical scholars. The existing literature on developmental peace approaches the concept of peace from a state-centric perspective, and is therefore unable to account for various qualities of peace, such as inequalities or insecurity at the individual and community levels. The discussion on developmental peace has been treated as gender-neutral, as if developmental peace and gender are two separate and unrelated entities. Moreover, hierarchies of power, such as gender and local power relations, are overlooked and not integrated into the analysis. This is in contrast to the wide range of theoretical perspectives in liberal peace critiques, which foster a robust debate within IR and show that the current literature captures only a partial picture of developmental peace. This limited understanding raises further questions about how much developmental peace and liberal peace differ.

Against this background, the article aims to contribute to the scholarly discussion by revisiting existing arguments about the distinctiveness of developmental peace. Specifically, it takes feminist IR as a theoretical foundation and uses a feminist perspective to conduct a critical inquiry into developmental peace. Feminist IR scholarly works have successfully brought gender perspectives into the international security realm and attempted to make gender visible in the IR discipline (e.g. Enloe 1989; Tickner 1992). In this theoretical tradition, gender is understood as both an empirical and an analytical category. The former concerns how women and men are differently affected by political processes and consequences. The latter indicates an analysis of a hierarchical system of masculine-feminine differentiations and constructions of masculinity and femininity. Feminist IR scholars have highlighted how conceptualisations of national security and protection both shape and are shaped by gender norms and hierarchies (Åse & Wendt 2021; Tickner & Sjoberg 2011). Others have shown the gendered nature of violence and conflict

(Yadav & Horn 2021), including how violence is deeply rooted in power inequalities and ideologies of male supremacy (Hudson 2009). The gendered nature of peace (processes) has also been documented and theorised (Pankhurst 2008; Duncanson 2016). Scholars informed by feminist institutionalism have provided an analytical tool to examine the underlying gendered assumptions in formal and informal institutions (Holmes et al. 2019). Post-colonial feminist scholars go further, attempting to theorise gendered and racialised dimensions underpinning foreign policy discourse and practice (Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Hudson 2016).

Unlike more traditional IR literature based on realist ideas and a narrow conceptualisation of peace and security, feminist IR conceptualises peace more broadly and takes gender power dynamics into account (Hewitt & True 2021; Duncanson 2016). From this viewpoint, war is a continuous event, especially for the marginalised (Cockburn 2004). Feminist peace research has developed as a field to become a key programme in peace research and IR more broadly. Using gender as an analytical tool, feminist peace research provides both epistemological and ontological frameworks for inquiring into peace (Wibben 2021; Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic 2021). This means that feminist peace research does not just study gender-related issues in the domain of peace. It also provides critical analysis for a fundamental shift in our understanding of peace, and visions of transformative (gender) power relations inextricably linked to peace (Wibben et al. 2019).

A critical feminist perspective on peace research has several implications. To begin with, feminist inquiry into peace enables researchers to explore absences, silences, marginalisation and power differences in political discourses and practice (Ackerly & True 2008). It also allows us to reveal how intersecting oppressions resulting from hierarchies of different social categories operate and are naturalised (Achilleos-Sarll 2018). In other words, this perspective can shed light on what or who has been silenced or excluded in the real world and in previous studies. For example, it seeks to research the experiences of marginalised subjects of conflicts and peace, such as women and other minority groups, and in doing so to make their presence and agency visible (Peterson 2010). Similarly, critical insights informed by feminist theories can help decolonise and decentre modes of thinking and knowing (Wibben et al. 2019), offer an alternative perspective and challenge the traditional, Eurocentric gaze (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic 2021). Its analytical resources allow researchers to unpack various power dynamics, especially at the intersections of different axes, through what is often referred to as intersectionality. This means that a feminist perspective can advance analytical capacity of the complexities of sexualised, racialised and gendered hierarchies of power (Peterson 2010; Achilleos-Sarll 2018).

This article argues that new knowledge generated through this methodological approach ultimately enables a substantive discussion on the distinctiveness of

developmental peace and in what sense it can serve as an alternative norm in the global governance of peace. First, it provides a lens to zoom in on absence, marginalisation and difference in the discourse and practice of developmental peace. This makes it possible to account for the experiences of marginalised subjects such as women and minorities in relation to developmental peace, a perspective that is currently missing from the literature. This approach also exposes some of the silences, for instance, in the 'apolitical' stance of developmental peace. Second, a feminist IR approach enables an analysis of how China, through its peace discourse, (re)produces gendered and racialised hierarchies of power. China has a unique position as an emerging power and non-traditional actor, as opposed to a traditional power in the Global North. China has promoted its image as an equal partner in South-South cooperation, but has faced much criticism for its neo-colonial practices. Exposing diverse hierarchies of power helps account for China's complex positionality and relationships with other actors, such as traditional actors and local populations. Last, it also helps unpack the underpinning gendered assumptions and practices in institutions – in this case, within developmental peace discourse.

In conducting a critical examination of developmental peace, this article draws both primary source data and secondary sources. By secondary sources, it refers to previous studies in the developmental peace literature. Even as a bourgeoning literature, however, existing empirical studies are insufficient. The article therefore also refers to some of the literature on Chinese aid, international cooperation programmes such as the BRI and foreign policy more broadly. These studies can provide key insights into developmental peace, as its core principles are rooted in Chinese foreign policy rhetoric and overall directions. In addition, primary source data is used to supplement the secondary sources. These sources include: (*a*) Chinese official policy documents published in English; and (*b*) leadership statements related to China's international cooperation. The analysis is limited to the period from 2014 to 2023, after Xi Jinping took office, during which China's presence and influence in global governance grew significantly. The first two were chosen to identify the Chinese government's official stance and policy directions, especially in relation to its peacebuilding and to gender-related issues which are largely absent from existing research. The policy materials proved useful as they offer direct insight into Chinese government's official stance, including objectives, strategies and positions on those issues. They also provide direct access to the official language Chinese government, reflecting the policy and societal discourse. This makes them appropriate for analysing how China (re)interprets and (re)shapes concepts in relation to developmental peace, particularly feminist perspectives which can uncover both visible and invisible narratives underlying these policies.

Analysis of developmental peace from a feminist IR perspective

This article focuses on three core elements: developmentalism, the absence of the political and South-South cooperation. These were chosen as an analytical focus because they represent the rhetoric of Chinese distinctiveness and correspond to the points of liberal peace critiques examined in Section 2. On the basis of this analysis, the article revisits an existing question within the literature: Can developmental peace be seen as an alternative to liberal peace?

Developmentalism

One of the main features of developmental peace is its focus on state-led economic development. The adverse impact of conflict on the economy and socio-economic inequality, and that economic issues are the drivers of conflict and insecurity are well-documented (Duncanson 2019). Developmental peace's approach to economic development seems to have the potential to contribute to sustainable peace in conflict-affected societies (Wong 2021). However, developmentalism in the discourse and in practice requires a more critical investigation that takes account of intertwined power relations.

First, critiques of China's overseas development cooperation may partially apply to the concept of developmental peace considering development is an important component of its peacebuilding efforts, making it a topic worth further exploration. These critiques often highlight China's domination of the local economy and exploitation of natural resources, as well as heavy debt burdens and imbalanced power dynamics faced by numerous countries, exemplified by the so-called debt-trap policy associated with China's lending practices. Such issues have fuelled accusations of Chinese neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism (Asante 2018; Lumumba-Kasongo 2011). However, although China's lending practices are not without issues, it should be noted that the intentions and actual outcomes of its debt-trap policy remain uncertain. For example, Brautigam argues that her case studies do not support the claim that China intentionally entraps countries in debt. She suggests that while Chinese loans may be driven by economic and strategic interests, they lack the malevolent intent implied by the debt-trap narrative. Carmony supports Brautigam's argument by asserting that China is not deliberately engaging in debt-trap diplomacy, though he highlights the potential negative consequences, such as increasing dependency of African countries on China (Carmody 2020). These studies suggest that critiques of China's development cooperation stems from its key characteristics, which involve a combination of expertise, loans, technology and investment –elements that are not only intertwined but also mutually reinforcing. This reflects China's approach to foreign assistance, where its motivations to protect its security and development are seen as indivisible (Jones & Teitt 2020).

While the impact of debt-trap diplomacy remains a subject of debate, its potential negative impact on the local populations is more likely considering its

exclusive focus on state-level engagement and the absence of deliberate policies to promote inclusivity. As highlighted in the previous literature, developmental peace is characterised by a state-centric perspective, with a strong central government and state-led economic development consistently positioned at the core of policy, discourse and practices. This emphasis on statism is deeply embedded in China's developmentalism (Karmazin 2023). This implies less focus on the local population such as lack of direct engagement with local organisations and civil society (Hirono 2013; Wong & Li 2021). This concern has been reflected in some cases such as in Myanmar, where China is argued to have overlooked local needs and local contexts and to have reinforced elite controls in Myanmar (Adhikari 2021). Moreover, the implications of China's involvement through debt-related investments and infrastructure projects have double-edged implications for vulnerable local populations. While there is a potential for positive impacts, such as job creation and improved infrastructure, these projects could also exacerbate existing inequalities and lead to further marginalisation if not managed with careful attention to social impacts. For example, it remains questionable whether these initiatives will result in meaningful job creation for women and minorities, who are often employed in low-wage, low-skilled, precarious positions in large infrastructure projects. This concern is heightened by widespread claims that Chinese companies bring in their own labourers, thereby reducing local employment opportunities and creating uneven development (Brautigam 2009; Carmody 2016).

Furthermore, China's developmentalism in its peace engagement also has significant implications for the gender-related aspects. Specifically, the issue of problematic and gendered developmentalism is evident in the developmental peace discourse, where the focus tends to be on women's socio-economic rights. First, I argue that China's approach to women in the labour force is rooted in an instrumentalist view. Notably, this mirrors the World Bank's practices, which frame gender equality as a driver of economic growth and grounded neoliberal rationality while advocating for more equality (Prügl 2016). In Chinese foreign policy documents and statements, terms such as 'women's socio-economic rights', 'economic autonomy' and 'economic empowerment' are frequently used as rhetoric with reference to promoting gender equality, especially in foreign policy areas (e.g. Permanent Mission of PRC to the UN 2022). This view is in part associated with the women's liberation movement in China, but also with China's state feminism. The latter was heavily based on economic pragmatism and an instrumentalist view of gender equality. China's state feminism has its foundation in socialism and has been exercised with top-down measures with a focus on women's social advancement since the Mao era (1949–1976). Under a proclamation by Mao Zedong 'Women hold up half the sky', women's participation in the labour market has been actively promoted in domestic China, with a background of the need for a female workforce in the national economy when

the CCP came to power in 1949 (Blanchard & Lin 2016; Wang & Zhang 2010; Wang 2005). The state-controlled women's movement in China has traditionally focused on women's affairs rather than gender (power) relations *per se*, especially those that are related to state formulation such as economic participation in the labour market as well as women's reproductive role.

Second, even if China has not integrated neoliberal ideology into its economic policies, some aspects of its practices align with those found in the globalised economic system. The gendered division of labour is a representative example. Research shows that Chinese-owned firms and factories abroad exhibit highly gendered labour practices. For instance, low-skilled work in Chinese garment factories in Angola is predominantly performed by women (Oya & Schaefer 2019). The traditional understanding of the gender division of labour is also shown in its development aid projects. A large proportion of China's aid projects on vocational training and employment entail sewing and embroidery skills development for women, by providing either training or equipment (Custer et al. 2021). This is an area of work in the garment industry that is already female-dominated, understood as labour-intensive and low paid, and risks reinforcing a further gendered division of labour and escalating the feminisation of poverty, and ultimately the gendered unequal distribution of resources.

Such patterns indicate that developmentalism in China's peacebuilding shares several of the limitations of liberal peace. Its practices appear to overlook local needs, making local economic prosperity and even development less likely –a criticism often directed at liberal peace efforts. Furthermore, while China addresses economic concerns and agendas such as poverty and economic growth, it overlooks the issues of economic disparity and inequality. Additionally, similar to neoliberal economic policies, China's approach to promoting economic development is prone to reinforce a gendered division of labour, where women's employment is concentrated in the labour-intensive or informal sectors. By replicating these existing limitations, China's heavy emphasis on economic development in peacebuilding is unlikely to lead to substantially improved conditions.

The absence of the political

The 'apolitical' stance of China's foreign policy has been widely discussed. It is explicitly promoted through the rhetoric of non-interference, and respect for the local socio-political situation and for sovereignty. By 'apolitical' or the absence of the political, this article does not imply that China's peace engagement is truly non-political. Instead, it challenges this rhetoric and problematises the implications of this claimed apolitical stance. Using a feminist perspective to uncover what is invisible or even silenced in the discourse, this article argues that this deliberately apolitical stance should be regarded as a highly political act, characterised by its silence on key elements of peace.

To begin with, China does not address the issues of human security, human rights and other liberal democratic values, which can result in local people being left behind (Wong 2021). Its foreign policy stance of non-interference reduces the human rights agenda in peacebuilding to the right to development. The effects have been documented in various contexts. Höglund and Orjuela (2012) show how China privileged the regime in Sri Lanka using the principle of sovereignty, which stood by during or fuelled human rights violations. China has been criticised for its engagement with the Sudanese government at the beginning of the Darfur conflict, which perpetuated the conflict and human rights violations (International Crisis Group 2017). This is echoed in the case of Myanmar, where the bilateral relationship is based on a policy of non-intervention. China's exclusive engagement with the military government and local elites through arms sales and aid has marginalised local populations (Wong & Li 2021; Adhikari 2021).

In addition, this apolitical stance is associated with indifference to or ignorance of gender relations. Zhang and Huang (2023) argue that China has not integrated gender norms into its foreign assistance because gender equality is regarded as a domestic affair in which foreign actors should not intervene. However, China's approaches to and implementation of the WPS agenda have been documented in several studies (Liu 2019; Li 2022; Hamilton, Pagot & Shepherd 2021). These show that China implements the WPS agenda in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) focused on humanitarian assistance to women affected by conflict (Liu 2019). Moreover, there is an explicit focus on socio-economic development in the context of promoting gender equality (Cai 2021). China has promoted women's health, education and training, and poverty alleviation through its aid projects, donations to UN agencies and other South-South cooperation projects (Cai 2021). Remarks by President Xi Jinping at the Global Leaders' Meeting in 2015 also reflect that China pays specific attention to social development in areas such as education, training and the employment sector, as a means of supporting gender equality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2015).

However, China's foreign policy pays insufficient attention to an agenda on women's political participation, which is limited to its commitment to the WPS agenda. Issues of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are also notably absent from the peace and gender-related agenda in Chinese foreign policy. This contrasts sharply with traditional western actors, for whom women's political participation and SGBV are central to the liberal peace framework, especially the WPS agenda including through their national action plans (Hudson 2012). This omission can be partly attributed to the close association of the issues of women's participation and SGBV with gender power imbalances, which are both silenced in China's discourse and practice, and partly by China's own limitations. The absence of women in Chinese politics was highlighted after the 20th Party Congress, where none of the 24 Politburo members were women (Master 2023).

Similarly, LGBTQ+ issues are invisible in Chinese foreign assistance in the context of gender equality and foreign policy more generally. This should not come as a surprise, given the alarming status of LGBTQ+ rights in mainland China and the government's silence on the matter (Jeffreys 2017).

This demonstrates that China's peacebuilding policy direction and practice fall short of the political aspects of peacebuilding, particularly due to its silence on key elements of peace related to power imbalances. It seems clear that the limitations of developmental peace rest on its exclusionary practices. It overlooks a number of key elements of the well-being and security of women and other marginalised groups, such as human security, women's political participation, SGBV and LGBTQ+ issues. It also condones human rights violations in various contexts, potentially contributing to the perpetuation of conflict. It has illustrated that the feminist perspective, employed as a key analytical lens, has been crucial in uncovering these silenced aspects, particularly those affecting marginalised groups.

South-South cooperation

A core element of developmental peace is China's attempt to differentiate itself from traditional actors by suggesting that it can offer an alternative to conflict-affected countries and the global governance of peace. This is in line with the framework of South-South cooperation that China promotes as a comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership based on political equality, and mutual trust and learning (Asante 2018). Within this framework, China has emphasised its distinct position as a developing country and invoked a common identity with sharable experiences that challenge the donor–recipient binary (Mawdsley 2012). It is argued to be best understood in the context of relationality, which goes beyond the traditional binary donor–recipient relation and the material aspects commonly emphasised in mainstream views on foreign aid (Benabdallah 2022). Using a feminist perspective, this article unpacks both the discourse and practice of South-South cooperation. Specifically, it utilises the analytical tools of the feminist lens to explore power dynamics and the complexities of racialised and gendered hierarchies.

Mawdsley (2020) shows that ideas on sexuality and gender are not confined to North-South relations, but also ingrained in the South-South relations. She argues that racialised and sexualised hierarchies, which are mostly discussed in a North-South context from a postcolonial perspective, have been deepening in South-South cooperation too (Mawdsley 2020). Cultural and national superiority can be observed in China's discourse on developmental peace. China's focus on state-led economic development in peacebuilding is driven by the idea of sharing its own experience. Within this discourse, the binary between who gives (teaches) and who receives (learns) is clear – that is, who plays a superior role and who is assigned a subordinate role. This is in line with what Nyíri frames as the 'Chinese

discourse of modernisation', which is that 'China can transmit its own advanced experience to those less fortunate' (Nyíri 2013).

This also operates a form of gendered hierarchy. In elaborating on an example of Chinese PKO medical units in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a white paper on China's participation in PKOs states that 'Touched by the love and care from the units, children in the village called the female members their Chinese mothers' (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2020: 10). Portraying Chinese women peacekeepers as carers reveals problematic practice of creating a racialised and sexualised hierarchy of power. This not only perpetuates China's conservative gender norms – emphasising women's motherhood – but also postulates a hierarchical parent-child relationship between itself and the local population in the DRC.

Similarly, the other end of peace, where China's peace engagement takes place, is largely absent but also 'otherised'. Adhikari (2021) argues that Chinese conflict management in Myanmar has overlooked local needs and local contexts, and reinforced elite control, complaints that have frequently been directed at liberal peace. It is also worth noting that China understands the WPS agenda as part of its peace engagement in conflict-affected countries, rather than an issue of gender equality that is applied to its own society and governance (Liu 2019; Asante 2020). Within its official engagement with the WPS agenda, such as in the UN Security Council Open Debate on WPS, China frames itself as a provider or supporter (Hamilton, Pagot & Shepherd 2021). This replicates the binary understanding of itself as a donor and of others as mere recipients, a limitation of the WPS agenda highlighted by feminist scholars.

Finally, China attempts to export its own concerns and agendas rather than prioritise local needs and perspectives. Despite the rhetoric on equal partnership and South-South cooperation, it replicates the limitations of traditional western actors by overlooking local needs and priorities, as well as locally driven politics. This is particularly evident in its influence on vulnerable local populations, including women and minority groups, who are often the most affected by peacebuilding interventions. This echoes previous research findings that China's asymmetrical relationship with African countries does not fundamentally differ from the African-Western relationship (Tull 2006). The racialised and gendered hierarchies embedded in developmental peace reproduce and reinforce the power imbalance between donor and recipient. In this sense, since it largely replicates rather than addresses the limitations of liberal peace, it is questionable whether China's developmental peace can be seen as an alternative.

Conclusion

This article analyses the concept and practice of China's developmental peace through its three core elements: developmentalism, the absence of the political

and South-South cooperation. It employs a feminist perspective, which allows for a focused examination of the absence, marginalisation and differences in the discourse and practice of developmental peace. In particular, this approach makes it possible to account for the perspectives of marginalised subjects, such as women and minorities, in relation to developmental peace, while also addressing the complexities of power relations by exposing diverse hierarchies of power. The article finds that China tends to overlook local needs in its foreign assistance, pays little attention to economic inequalities and reinforces the gendered division of labour. The analysis further shows that China's apolitical stance in its peace discourse and practice has several limitations, especially in relation to the marginalisation of local people and the exclusion of human rights, as well as issues related to the gender power imbalance. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric on equal partnership, racialised and gendered hierarchies are embedded in developmental peace discourse and practice.

Based on these findings, the article argues that China largely replicates and reinforces the limitations of the traditional peacebuilding approach by marginalising women and minorities, and in failing to prioritise local needs. It argues that China does not provide an alternative approach to the global governance of peace. This questions China's identity as a non-traditional, emerging actor in global governance. With its own approach and agenda, China might have been able to diversify a field that has been dominated by traditional western actors. However, the outcomes of developmental peace efforts are unlikely to be so different from existing approaches. From the perspectives of vulnerable local populations, including women and marginalised groups, developmental peace is unlikely to offer a better alternative. The analysis demonstrates the need to challenge the established western–non-western dichotomy, or the binary understanding of traditional and emerging actors, in the literature.

By problematising the understanding of developmental peace in the existing literature, this article makes two contributions to the literature on China's developmental peace. First, it has increased the understanding of developmental peace by revealing absences, silences and marginalisation. The feminist IR approach has enabled an analysis of complex power dynamics within developmental peace, such as racialised and gendered hierarchies of power, and rhetoric such as equal partnership under South-South cooperation. This analysis makes it possible to interrogate the current debate on whether China's developmental peace can serve as an alternative norm.

While this article generates useful insights and makes contributions, it also raises new questions for future research. First, this relevant area of academic research would greatly benefit from empirical studies on the gender dimensions of developmental peace, especially regarding its implications on the ground. As some researchers point out, the question of gender in China's foreign assistance, such as

the BRI, is largely lacking in academic literature and policy research (Ruwanpura & Ferdoush 2023). It would be particularly essential to examine gendered implications of China's infrastructure development projects considering the crucial role of infrastructure in peacebuilding and China's heavy focus on infrastructure in its foreign assistance. Moreover, China's foreign policy is often criticised for its inconsistency, and the principles of developmental peace at a conceptual level do not necessarily correspond to actual practices and effects on the ground. Empirical studies on discrepancies between principles, policies and practice, as well as on intended and unintended consequences, would contribute significant new knowledge and enable a more systematic investigation of the extent to which developmental peace can be seen as an alternative.

Second, the broader implications for women and marginalised populations of China's increasing participation in the global governance of peace should be further explored. This article finds that developmental peace cannot compensate for the weakness of liberal peace with regard to the various power imbalances, such as gendered inequalities and racial hierarchies. This suggests that developmental peace would be less likely to provide an alternative option for marginalised communities and individuals. However, what China's increased involvement in peacebuilding would mean for the peace and security of marginalised populations remains unclear. The extent to which a changed dynamic within the global governance of peace would affect the lives of women and other marginalised locals remains to be seen.

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The 'Geographical Here' and the Pursuit of Ontological Security: Spheres of Influence Narratives and Great Power Identity in Times of Threatened Status

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Abstract

This article explains why self-identified great powers seek to provide a 'sphere of influence meaning' to geographical space when such narratives have the potential to insult the smaller actors in the space over which such powers seek exclusive influence. The article draws and expands on the 'physical turn' in ontological security studies by introducing the notion of a 'geographical here' as key to a great power that perceives its status as threatened. The argument is illustrated through a comparative analysis of three US presidential administrations. The article analyses (i) how the US' status is perceived and narrated, and (ii) what meaning officials assign to the 'geographical here'.

Keywords: spheres of influence, ontological security, narratives, great power rivalry, US foreign policy

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Introduction

Giving geographical space political meaning is unavoidable in international politics, and it is foundational for how events in the world unfold. Doing so can also be utilised as a tool of foreign policy (Ó Tuathail 1996; Pamment 2014) and has real-world effects. It is therefore puzzling when powerful and ambitious actors voluntarily resort to publicly ascribing meaning to geographical space in a way that could work against their 'best interest' insofar as the maximisation of benefits is concerned. This is particularly palpable when a powerful actor assigns an adjacent geographical space the meaning of a 'sphere of influence'. The notion – and the literal concept – is widely considered pejorative (Hast 2014: 1–6) and it is easy to see how it is insulting for a smaller state to be put in a great power's 'sphere' and have its self-determination called into question.

From this perspective, a 'rational' and 'influence-maximising' approach would be to reject that one's power is malign or threatening. China's leader Xi Jinping, for example, stated that the People's Republic of China would never seek 'hegemony' or a 'sphere of influence' during a visit to Vanuatu (Xi Jinping 2021). This is a recurring theme when Chinese officials comment on China's regional power. Arguably, the most effective power resides in the shadows and is not experienced as coercive or intrusive (Barnett & Duvall 2005: 55). Xi's remarks allow smaller Pacific nations to maintain their pride and, combined with economic means, increase Chinese influence in the South Pacific. However, not all great powers follow this example. For instance, Russian political figures such as Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev frequently express the opinion that Russia has exclusive rights and privileges in its vicinity, or the 'Russian world' (*russkii mir*), and have acted on this by putting it into law and invading neighbouring states (Suslov 2018: 333; Ó Loughlin et al. 2016: 746–753). Moreover, representatives of France have for many decades said how France's former colonies in West Africa represent a sphere of influence (*Françafrique*, or France's *pré carré*) (Bovcon 2013; Recchia 2020: 513). Such a public formulation of great power mentality, or arrogance, has prompted fierce anti-Russian or anti-French sentiment in the countries located in these respective 'spheres'.

Insulting smaller states by assuming the role of a hegemon in a self-proclaimed sphere of influence can also benefit a great power's adversary. Arguably, one of the most puzzling cases is how various presidential administrations in the United States have characterised their relationship with Latin America. An article in *Foreign Affairs* makes the argument that the Trump administration's arrogant and even aggressive rhetoric towards Latin America, invoking the Monroe Doctrine (on the US sphere of influence in Latin America, see below), has driven the region into the arms of China (Stuenkel 2020). Similarly, a reference to the controversial doctrine by former presidential candidate Ron DeSantis during his campaign prompted assessments that 'it wouldn't be wise to brand any stepped-up en-

gagement under the umbrella of the Monroe Doctrine. For Latin Americans, the dogma conjures up . . . a grim century of coups, invasions and protectorates that still rankle to this day' (Mirski 2023). This can be verified by Latin American leaders' recent statements in relation to the United States and China (see e.g. Gabriel Boric, quoted in Weymouth 2023), and how the US narratives are used extensively in Chinese and Russian propaganda and disinformation (see e.g. Sheng 2023; People's Daily 2023; Sputnik News 2019). Indeed, upon analysing the op-eds and statements made by Russian ambassadors in various Latin American capital cities, one can see that neo-colonialism, anti-Americanism and the Monroe Doctrine are among the major subjects (Digital Forensic Lab 2024).

It is not difficult to see why the doctrine is controversial and why it is used by Russia and China in their strategic narratives, especially given how leading US politicians refer to it themselves. Hast writes that the Monroe Doctrine marked 'the beginning of a division of the world into spheres of influence, even a new world order' (Hast 2014: 40). As a measure to formalise US hegemony in Latin America, President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams introduced the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. As James Pamment tells us: 'The Doctrine defined the American sphere of influence as the entire New World. Monroe boldly asserted that the European powers no longer had the right to colonial activity in the Americas' (Pamment 2014: 52). Originally conceived as a defensive doctrine, 'over the nineteenth century, it became "expansionist as well as exclusionist" and was used to justify American interventionism and imperialism' (Murray 2019: 147; Crandall 2006). Using the doctrine as a pretext, the United States intervened and meddled in Latin American nations countless times from the late nineteenth century and throughout the Cold War, with a brief intermission in the 1930s and 1940s (Guerrant 1950: 1–3; Crandall 2006: 15–18). Although some welcomed these interventions, they also generated trauma and indignation. Possibly the most emblematic expression of anti-Americanism in Latin America occurred during then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon's visit to Venezuela. In Caracas, Nixon's motorcade was attacked by an angry mob. To quote McPherson: 'These groups [a mixture of students, peasants, and 'unemployed dwellers'], also, had accumulated a vast repertoire of anti-U.S. imagery over decades – the predatory eagle, the omnipresent octopus, greedy Wall Street tycoons, the impersonal boots of U.S. Marines, and so on' (McPherson 2003: 10). The US has employed different tools other than a 'sphere of influence-policies' to construct a regional order; but it is the interventions and covert operations that in many ways stick out in the collective Latin American memory. With this in mind, it might be expected that a 'rational actor' would avoid invoking these painful memories, as doing so might provide its adversaries with ammunition for their strategic narratives and greater sympathy in the region. Derived from this research problem, this article sets out to answer the question: Why do great powers narratively construct an

adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence when such narratives might benefit their adversaries and undermine their ability to practice influence in that geographical space?

The geopolitical realist international relations (IR) literature tends to view spheres of influence as 'natural' either through geographical determinism or the possession of power capabilities. However, whether states seek to establish spheres of influence because of a concern for security (Jackson 2020: 258; Mearsheimer 2014: 82), or to maximise their international influence (Gilpin 1981: 24) remains disputed. It appears, however, that characterising neighbouring small states in terms of a sphere of influence can generate undesirable effects, benefit an adversary and thus reduce the physical security of the great power. At the same time, the liberal literature notes how spheres of influence are incompatible with the liberal international order (Ikenberry 2011: 18), and that these spheres largely disappeared with the end of the Cold War (Allison 2020: 30). However, a superficial analysis of world politics since the Cold War reveals that such a notion is oversimplified. Great powers have expressed positive views on spheres of influence during this time, not least the United States under the Trump administration. Conversely, constructivists posit spheres of influence as intersubjective products, socially constructed through language and/or practices. This intersubjectivity can be either between the great power and those influenced (sharing an identity) or between the great powers themselves (Jackson 2020: 261–263), 'agreeing' on the centrality of a sphere of influence to being a great power (Murray 2019: 63–64). In other words, the sphere of influence is central to the idea of great power identity. States that wish to be perceived as great powers set out to create such spheres through either rhetoric or practice (Recchia 2020: 513; Zala 2020: 213). Simply acknowledging that a sphere of influence is part of a great power identity, however, is not sufficient when seeking an explanation to the puzzle as a reduction in the great power's influence would *threaten* the sought-after great power identity that prompted the narrative construction of a region as a sphere of influence.

To address the puzzle, this article turns to ontological security studies (OSS) and the assumption that actors pursue a sense of stability in relation to their identity, or their 'Self'. It draws inspiration from the established contradiction that the pursuit of ontological security can interfere with an actor's pursuit of physical security (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Some scholars in the OSS literature suggest that practices may contribute to the formation of a stable identity (Mitzen 2006; Murray 2019), though this perspective might have limited relevance to the research problem addressed in this article. To understand why a state would formulate rhetorical narratives that could undermine its ability to practice influence, we must recognise the importance of autobiographical narratives in the formation of identity and the maintenance of ontological security (Hagström 2021: 333). Based on these premises, I argue that adjacent geographical space can

become *foundational* to great power identity. To conceptualise this, I introduce the term 'geographical here', an abstraction of adjacent geographical space that is endowed with emotional properties. In a context where the status of a great power – implicitly its identity – is perceived as threatened, it responds by providing a 'sphere of influence meaning' to its geographical here. To illustrate this theoretical argument, the article engages with the cases of the United States under three successive administrations: the Obama (2009–2017), Trump (2017–2021) and Biden (2021–) administrations.

In advancing this argument, the article sets out to contribute to three principal strands of literature. First, the article contributes to the literature on ontological security by noting the tension between narratives and practices when pursuing a sense of a stable Self. In devising this research puzzle, the article highlights the paradox that narratives intended to provide ontological security can generate unwanted actions from other (insulted) actors, which can undermine the desired ontological security. It notes that this perpetually reinforced ontological insecurity could escalate beyond the control of actors, creating dangerous situations in international politics reminiscent of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Second, the article contributes to the identity literature in IR by introducing the notion of the geographical here as constitutive of identity alongside the Self/Other dichotomy. Drawing on the 'material turn' in OSS, this article looks beyond the state's 'body' as a source of ontological security by introducing the importance of adjacent geographical space in times where status/identity is narrated as threatened. The third, and possibly most significant, contribution seeks to generate new knowledge in relation to the sphere of influence literature by going beyond the 'usual' observation that spheres of influence are part of a 'great power identity'. Although such a statement has some weight, the article adds more nuance and context *when* the sphere of influence becomes part of great power identity.

A relevant criticism is *why* the article focuses on a liberal great power at a time when the international system faces more urgent threats posed by authoritarian great powers using force in active attempts to incorporate smaller states into their spheres of influence (e.g. the Russian Federation) (see Götz & Staun 2022). This is a fair point, and the study of autocratic states should indeed be taken seriously. Nonetheless, I maintain that serious self-reflection is vital if a relatively rules-based order is to prevail and persevere. It is not sustainable for representatives of a liberal world order to express themselves in a way that directly benefits their adversaries.

The sphere of influence literature: The hows and whys

It is a common observation that the concept of 'spheres of influence' has been neglected in the IR literature (Etzioni 2015: 118; Hast 2014: 1; Zala 2020: 213), lately, however, the concept has received more attention among scholars (see

for example, Allison 2020; Etzioni 2015; Recchia 2020; Weede 2018; Schreer 2019; Sankey 2020; O'Rourke and Shifrinson 2022; Fix 2022). Nonetheless, the concept's properties and theoretical utility remain underexplored and quite vague. This led Filippo Costa Buranelli to call 'spheres of influence' an 'essentially contested concept' (Costa Buranelli 2018: 379).

Several scholars have tried to define the sphere of influence in terms of its 'unique' hierarchical characteristics. Edy Kaufman writes that a sphere of influence is 'a geographical region characterized by the high penetration of one superpower to the exclusion of other powers and particularly of the rival superpower' (Kaufman 1976: 11). Paul Keal offers a definition of a sphere as 'a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities in it' (Keal 1983: 15). More recently, scholars such as Resnick have defined the concept in a slightly narrower way, as 'the explicit or implicit agreement by one state (the grantor) to allow a rival state (the recipient) to militarily dominate a territory that lies outside both states' borders' (Resnick 2022: 564). Etzioni suggests that the nature of the 'influence' defines a sphere of influence, as it is primarily 'economic' and 'ideational' rather than coercive (Etzioni 2015: 117). What all this means in practice, however, is rather unclear. The problem is aptly summarised by Jackson: 'the logic, mechanisms, and implications [of spheres of influence] . . . can vary significantly depending on key analytical assumptions that derive from divergent theoretical traditions' (Jackson 2020: 256). Recent developments suggest we should view spheres of influence as a 'negotiated hegemony' where there is bargaining between 'the influencer' (the great power) and 'the influenced' (Costa Buranelli 2018). The properties of the concept are murky, and so is its theoretical utility (Jackson 2020: 255; Hast 2014: 78–82).

To scholars of 'geopolitical realism', the sphere of influence appears to be a 'given' of international politics where the strong impose their will on the weak. However, the concept remains elusive in the respective strands of the literature. In the essentialising geopolitical literature, 'spheres of influence are present as circles on a map' (Hast 2014: 80). To quote Hast, 'The geopolitical intention is to discover who will rule the world and how, not to discuss matters of sovereignty, intervention, justice and other themes which relate to the pejorative associations of the present idea of spheres of influence' (ibid.). However, 'there is no comprehensive engagement with the idea or the concept of sphere of influence [in the geopolitical literature], because the imperialist dimension does not capture the originality of the phenomenon' (ibid.).

Similarly, realism largely neglects the concept's theoretical underpinnings and implications. While Morgenthau and Waltz do not mention the concept in their major works, Mearsheimer mentions the role of 'regional hegemons' (Mearsheimer 2001: 40–42, 247–249; Hast 2014: 81), but without explicating 'the relationship between the hegemon and its subordinates' (Hast 2014: 81). Meanwhile, Robert

Gilpin writes that states seek to establish spheres of influence to increase their influence over other states' behaviour (alongside measures such as coercion and threats) (Gilpin 1981: 24). In a similar vein, Stephen M. Walt acknowledges that several great powers had spheres of influence in different places in the world, at different times (Walt 1996: 180). Tacitly, these strands of the literature appear to accept that it is natural for great powers to seek spheres of influence – and, by implication, natural for smaller states to be in these spheres – although the geopolitical literature is more deterministic than its realist counterpart. In realism, the pursuit of spheres of influence is either to maximise power or to maximise security through a defensive 'buffer zone' (Jackson 2020: 258–259; Mearsheimer 2014: 82). The overarching purpose is to become more secure and ensure survival. Nonetheless, despite the fact that it is highly relevant to them, these perspectives do not address the research problem at hand. Narratives should not be considered epiphenomenal if they have an effect on national security. We must therefore, in this case, look beyond the geopolitical and realist literature.

Meanwhile, the liberal literature takes the view that spheres of influence are antiquated and disappeared with the victory of liberalism over communism in the 1990s. As Ikenberry writes, the 'liberal order can be seen as a distinctive type of international order', which 'can be contrasted with closed and non-rules-based relations – whether geopolitical blocs, exclusive regional spheres, or closed imperial systems' (Ikenberry 2011: 18). It is in relation to liberal ideas that spheres of influence are considered 'pejorative' (Hast 2014: 1), because they violate principles such as the self-determination of small states. Regardless, the liberal idea is that spheres of influence are deleterious and incompatible with the system that prevailed following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, if they are returning, they are doing so in the hands of revisionist great powers that are seeking to overthrow the unipolar world order. While it is undeniable that autocratic regimes are trying to coerce small states into obedience, it is also obvious that liberal states have a much more complex relationship with spheres of influence than the liberal literature suggests.

There are various examples of leaders of liberal states referring indirectly to their spheres of influence, such as former Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison (Chacko 2023: 1; Pearlman 2019: 3–4), and senior US political figures in the 1990s (Madeleine Albright quoted in Sciolino 1994). Graham Allison argues that spheres of influence did not disappear after the Cold War, but were converted into a single US sphere (Allison 2020: 30). Regardless of whether this is an adequate account of the post–Cold War world, there are palpable limitations to the liberal IR literature as it pertains to the sphere of influence debate. Most notably, it argues that spheres of influence go against the ideals of the liberal international order but fail to properly acknowledge actual contemporary arrangements and practice. Nor does it address the research puzzle discussed in this article.

The constructivist literature, lastly, has a more diverse take on spheres of influence. One is that spheres of influence are formed through intersubjective agreements between the more powerful actor and the less powerful state, and concern shared identities (Jackson 2020: 261–262). From this point of view, the sphere of influence appears quite similar to conventional understandings of security communities (see Adler & Barnett 2005). However, this perspective cannot account for spheres of influence where the subject of influence resists or disagrees with 'the influencer'. Here, a second constructivist perspective explains, in that there is an intersubjective understanding among the great powers, that a sphere of influence is an essential element of seeking great power status. Indeed, several scholars note that spheres of influence are a staple of great power identity (Zala 2020: 213; Recchia 2020: 513; Murray 2019: 63–64). One issue for this article is that most scholars view spheres of influence from a practice point of view. Yet, such an approach does not adequately address the research problem. Narrating a geographical space as a sphere of influence appears to insult the smaller states within that sphere, potentially undermining any sense of great power identity. This is why great powers 'double speak' and what Jackson seeks to address by offering a 'rigorous conceptualisation' (Jackson 2020: 272). Spheres of influence appear important to great power identity, but this does not resolve the narrative puzzle.

Thus, the question remains: why would a great power narrate geographical space as a sphere of influence if that action undermines the influence practices that are central to great power identity? To make sense of the research problem, it is useful to turn to existing research on ontological security in international politics. However, it is first necessary to develop how great power identity and spheres of influence, geographical space external to the state's 'body', interact. To do so, I introduce the *geographical here*.

'Self/Other narratives', the 'geographical here' and ontological security

The guiding assumption in ontological security studies (OSS) is that actors – individuals and collectives (states) alike – seek stability in their sense of Self (Hagström 2021: 333; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005; Kinnvall 2004; Giddens 1991; Laing 1990 [1960]), which informs how these actors operate in the social world. There are two principal strands in OSS: one that emphasises practice as a source of identity stability (see e.g. Mitzen 2006; Murray 2019), and one that emphasises autobiographical narratives as the required vehicle for achieving stability in the sense of Self (Hagström 2021: 333; see also, Berenskoetter 2014; Steele 2008; Ringmar 1996). This article adheres to the latter category, where autobiographical narratives are considered foundational for identity. As Erik Ringmar puts it, 'when we wonder who we are . . . we tell a story which locates us in the context of a past, a present and a future' (Ringmar 1996: 451).

The primary theoretical argument of this article is that the actor (in this case, the great power) narrates its geographical vicinity (and its role in it) as a sphere of influence to counter a sensation of ontological insecurity, i.e. anxiety connected to the sense of Self in the world. The sensation of ontological insecurity originates in the narratively constructed notion that the actor's established status – implicitly, their identity – is threatened. In the case of a great power, or even a hegemon, the threat is the rise of a powerful challenger that could displace it. One can understand it as experiencing 'inadequacy in one's own eyes' and/or 'inadequacy in the eyes of others' (von Essen and Danielson 2023: 12–13, 15–16). Thus, to re-assert its identity, it ascribes a 'sphere of influence meaning' to its geographical vicinity in its autobiographical narratives. The great powers do this regardless of the effects it might have on their 'actual influence' over the small states that end up in their sphere.

In making this argument, the article draws heavily on several works within OSS. Based on the assumption that states seek stability in their perception of their own identity, Jennifer Mitzen suggests that a state can become 'attached' to conflicts as they identify against an antagonist (Mitzen 2006: 342). Mitzen's work illustrates that states prioritise a sense of ontological security at the expense of physical security, which in turn is based on the notion that identity is 'co-constituted with difference' (Hagström et al. 2022: 317; see also Campbell 1998). 'Self/Other relations' means that to be able to establish our own identity, we need to know what we *are not*. Consequently, if an actor's identity becomes dependent on a conflictual relationship with an enemy, the conflict itself provides security for the actor's sense of Self.

Although these insights are valuable, they do not address this article's research problem. The question remains: Why do great powers narratively construct an adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence when such narratives might benefit their adversaries and undermine their ability to practice influence in that geographical space? Such narratives can also rekindle painful collective memories of previous military interventions, or benefit an adversary that in the long run could compromise the state's national security. There should be other ways of reaffirming one's identity. Instead, the projected narratives could undermine the sphere of influence practices that some argue are key to maintaining ontological security (Murray 2019: 63–64; cf. Mitzen 2006). So, how to make use of Mitzen's insights to address this article's research problem? First, we can note that states seem to prioritise ontological security over physical security, which is in line with Mitzen's findings. Second, autobiographical narratives are a source of great power identity, based on the reasoning described above. The practices of influence are negatively affected by narratives that ascribe a sphere of influence meaning to geographical space. Thus, this article takes the position that actors engage in storytelling when ascribing meaning to themselves and the world around them

(Polkinghorne 1988: 1). However, these narratives must be prompted by something since they are a reaction to ontological insecurity. This article argues that a self-perceived great power experiences ontological insecurity when faced with an actor that challenges its status. In response, the great power narrates its adjacent 'geographical here' as a sphere of influence to reassert its status. But to understand why they do so, it is necessary to introduce the concept of the 'geographical here'.

The 'geographical here' concept is an abstraction of geographical space. Rather than an actual location, it is a feeling of proximity and geography. It is a feeling that something is *close* but in an unspecified way. It is malleable, it can be stretched to encompass places such as Panama, Grenada or Venezuela. To provide a short definition, I would suggest that the 'geographical here' is an abstract sense of geographical proximity that heightens (potentially skews) threat perceptions and becomes foundational for great power status. It is a place where the great power can (and possibly 'should') project its power. The 'geographical here' has particular properties, it is often the 'periphery' in a 'core-periphery order' that was emblematic of the previous world order (Flockhart 2024: 475). The geographical here is an extension of the state's body that is *not quite the state* but occupies a key position in relation to a certain state's self-perceived status.

The invention of the concept draws on the observation that 'questions of identity and territory are always deeply entangled' (Toal 2017: 70). This is not a novel view of OSS. Several works make this argument as part of the 'material turn' in ontological security studies (Ejdus 2020; Mitzen 2018). Whereas much of this work stresses the importance of the physical 'body' of the state as another source of ontological (in)security (Krickel-Choi 2022: 165–168; see also Giddens 1991: 55), this article suggests that *adjacent geographical space is also important for ontological security*. One can see this as the 'home' or 'garden' in which 'the body' (the state) is located. For the great power, the physical Self is not complete without a deferring, adjacent geographical space for which it has responsibility. A response to an emerging *Other* that threatens one's status in the international system is to reassert adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence by invoking old metaphors and doctrines with great power connotations. This suggests that the formation of great power identity is to be found not only in the relationship between Self and Other, but also in geographical space, the 'geographical here'.

The article suggests the existence of two principal Self/Other narratives relating to great powers' status. Self/Other narrative #1 generates a worldview of how great power status is threatened by the rise of one or more challengers. If the established identity of the Self is anchored in the status of a hegemon, the notion of emerging 'Others' that challenge this status causes ontological insecurity, a sense of inadequacy in their own and others' eyes (von Essen & Danielson 2023: 12–13, 15–16). The state responds to its emotions of anger, anxiety and shame by attempting to reassert its hegemonic identity through an autobiographical narrative that

gives the geographical here a sphere-of-influence meaning. It remains an open question of *who* experiences the emotional reaction, whether it is the decision-makers themselves or whether they somehow react to a collective sense among the population and workers within the state. This article does not address this. Instead, it adopts Mitzen's view that the issue of 'state personhood', i.e. whether a state can 'feel' something, is a theoretical device, useful regardless of whether states seek physical or ontological security (Mitzen 2006: 352).

A geopolitical master narrative is activated that dictates what a great power 'ought' to be, and which posits spheres of influence as *natural* or even *necessary* for great power status (Jackson 2020: 257). Thus, the state engages in narration of the (abstract) 'geographical here', awarding it sphere-of-influence meaning. Ortmann summarises the role of the sphere of influence quite well: 'The concept "sphere of influence" is strongly associated with what John Agnew has called the *modern geopolitical imagination*. . . . At its core is the "Westphalian myth", an understanding of state space as fixed and bounded that is associated with classical geopolitics and Realist approaches in International Relations' (Ortmann 2018: 405, emphasis added).

Conversely, Self/Other narrative #2 constructs a world where status and identity are stable in relation to other great powers. In this context of relative ontological stability, there is little need for the great power to narrate the 'geographical here' as a sphere of influence. It may even provide the state with the confidence to publicly dismantle the generally perceived sphere.

That ontological security is at stake in relation to spheres of influence is something already noted by Murray (2019: 63–64), and thus not something novel. However, as discussed in the literature review, Murray does not explain why the controversial sphere-of-influence narratives are projected. This, I argue, is the underlying logic of why, despite the potentially problematic consequences of

Table 1. Illustration of the interplay between geography and identities (Self/Other and geographical here) and the sphere of influence narrative (the explanans) highlighted

	Self/Other narrative #1 (narrated threat to status)	Self/Other narrative #2 (no narrated threat status)
Meaning assigned to the 'geographical here'	**Sphere of influence narrative** (foundational for identity)	Non-sphere of influence narrative; potential dismantling of previous sphere-of-influence narrative

Source: Author

their actual influence, great powers narrate their adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence.

This new meaning of adjacent geographical space, however, makes the great power more vulnerable. As discussed above, it can insult the small states in 'its sphere' and push them closer to the great power's adversary. Moreover, an adversary can deal a significant blow to the great power's credibility and status by inserting themselves in the geographical region adjacent to the great power. This can start a dangerous chain reaction, further fuelling ontological insecurity for the great power, initiating a vicious circle. Such a situation can quickly escalate, potentially placing several actors on a collision course and generating military intervention.

This article offers a theoretical framework to explain why actors (particularly great powers) narrate adjacent geographical space according to a sphere of influence logic (see Table 1). The explanation is derived from ontological security and the dominant narrative about the actor's Self in relation to Others. The methodology and analysis below illustrate this framework in more detail.

Methodology

This article sheds light on why great powers narrate the geographical space in their vicinity as their 'sphere of influence' when this potentially antagonises the smaller states the great power seeks to influence. Through within-case comparisons of US presidential administrations, this article develops the theoretical argument discussed in the previous section to address the puzzling phenomenon of publicly articulated spheres of influence. It does so by showing the connection between particular 'status narratives' and which meaning is provided to the 'geographical here'. First, it explores the respective administrations' narratives pertaining to the international system, particularly with regard to great power rivalries, adversaries and challengers. This helps to define whether it is a Self/Other narrative that constructs the status of the state as safe or threatened. Second, the article traces the meaning assigned to the adjacent space, or the geographical here, to illustrate how in times of great power competition and subsequent ontological insecurity geographical space becomes co-constitutive of great power identity. Within the case of the US, the Obama administration (2009–2017), the Trump administration (2017–2021) and the Biden administration (2021–present) are selected based on their differences, particularly in relation to the world in which they had to operate, moving from a state of US hegemony to one where US hegemony is being challenged. The results are summarised in Table 2.

With this framework, the article offers, on the one hand, an analysis of how US administrations narrate the United States concerning the international system and other great powers (the Self/Other narratives concerning status) and, on the other, an account of how these administrations assign meaning to the geographi-

cal space of Latin America (the 'geographical here narrative'). First, the 'Self/Other narrative' is explored by analysing who is depicted as the threatening and the implications for the United States. While a terrorist organisation, for example, is presented as a threat to the physical security of US citizens, it is not a threat to a great power's international status in the same way as a rising adversary. Thus, a Self/Other narrative is coded '#1' if it constructs a world where US status as a hegemon is threatened by rising challengers, but a Self/Other narrative is coded '#2' if the Self is constructed as secure in an established role and an entrenched status, and 'Others' have accepted this structure of the international system. Second, to assess the meaning assigned to the 'geographical here', I analyse how the United States constructs its own current role in relation to the space, how this role uses the past and the principal threat(s) to the region. If the great power constructs the geographical here as its historical responsibility, from where it must combat external threats, the narrative is coded as a 'sphere of influence narrative'. The empirical material is primarily derived from secondary sources, such as public speeches by administration officials, memoirs and open national security documents. These are taken from the official websites of the White House and the US State Department.

Analysis
The Obama administration: US hegemony and a geographical here of equals
On entering office in 2009, the Obama administration stuck to a narrative of an international system where the United States was still the undisputed hegemon. Despite many controversial foreign policy decisions in the early 2000s, the US status as the global hegemon established at the end of the Cold War was still relatively intact as great power rivals appeared significantly inferior. President of Russia Vladimir Putin (and Dimitri Medvedev) were beginning to demonstrate imperial aspirations to reassert Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space that challenged US hegemony, such as in the war in Georgia in August 2008, but on the whole, there were few expressions of this in US national security strategies of the time.

Rather, the 2010 US NSS discusses how the administration was seeking 'to build a stronger foundation for American leadership' (NSS 2010: 2), noting that 'just as America helped to determine the course of the 20th century, we must now build the sources of American strength and influence, and shape an international order capable of overcoming the challenges of the 21st century' (NSS 2010: 1). The subsequent strategy notes that the United States 'will lead with strength' (NSS 2015: 3), and that 'after a difficult decade, America is growing stronger every day. The US economy remains the most dynamic and resilient on Earth' (ibid.). Multiple pages in both strategy documents discuss how the United States *would lead* in the capacity of a hegemon. Meanwhile, the most prevalent of the threats to

the United States identified in the 2010 NSS was till terrorism, and defeating and dismantling al-Qaeda remained at the top of the list of priorities (NSS 2010: 19–22), something which also appeared in the subsequent document (NSS 2015: 9). On the United States' fellow great powers in the international arena, or the international order, the narrative is congruent with the notion of US hegemony. Several other actors are acknowledged as important:

> We are working to build deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence—including China, India, and Russia, as well as increasingly influential nations such as Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia—so that we can cooperate on issues of bilateral and global concern, with the recognition that power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero-sum game. (NSS 2010: 3)

Similarly, the document notes that:

> More actors exert power and influence. Europe is now more united, free, and at peace than ever before. The European Union has deepened its integration. Russia has reemerged in the international arena as a strong voice. China and India—the world's two most populous nations—are becoming more engaged globally. (NSS 2010: 8)

These passages indicate that the Obama administration *acknowledged* the power of its fellow states, but at the same time that these states had *accepted US hegemony*. They have been integrated into the US-led world order. This ties into the wider narrative of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989), or how the liberal world order had prevailed under US leadership, and all other states were obliged to adapt to this new reality. The 2015 NSS strikes a different tone in relation to Russia than the one published five years before, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014. Although Russian 'aggression' is a frequent theme (NSS 2015: 4, 10, 19, 25), there is little to suggest that US status is threatened. China's 'rise' is discussed, but overall, the strategy expresses how 'the United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China. We seek to develop a constructive relationship with China that delivers benefits for our two peoples and promotes security and prosperity in Asia and around the world' (NSS 2015: 24). Furthermore, the 2015 NSS begins with the words: 'Today, the United States is stronger and better positioned to seize the opportunities of a still new century and safeguard our interests against the risks of an insecure world' (NSS 2015: i). US ontological security under the Obama administration reflected its narratives on the geographical here.

In his second term, Obama's administration rejected the notion of a US sphere of influence over Latin America by publicly dismantling the Monroe Doctrine. It narrated a past in which the United States behaved in a bullying way towards its southern neighbours, leading by power rather than example. Consequently, the

Obama administration sought to orient itself in the present by juxtaposing itself with *a negative, imperial past*. In November 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry told the Organization of American States (OAS) that:

> [t]he relationship that we [the United States] seek and that we have worked hard to foster is not about a United States declaration about how and when it will intervene in the affairs of other American states. It's about all of our countries viewing one another as equals, sharing responsibilities, cooperating on security issues, and adhering not to doctrine, but to the decisions that we make as partners to advance the values and the interests that we share. (Kerry 2013)

Kerry declared an end to the Monroe Doctrine – the era was 'over' – and remarked how such a proclamation was worthy of the spontaneous applause that erupted from the Latin American delegates (Kerry 2013). The Obama administration constructed the United States as a *reformed* great power. During the administration's normalisation with Cuba (2014–2016), Obama stated while standing next to the Cuban leader, Raúl Castro, 'America chooses to cut loose the shackles of the past so as to reach for a better future – for the Cuban people, for the American people, for our entire hemisphere, and for the world' (Obama 2014). In a speech delivered during a visit to Havana in 2016, Obama stated: 'I have come here to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the Americas. . . . A policy of isolation designed for the Cold War makes little sense in the 21st century' (Schulteis 2016). Instead, the Obama administration narrated a vision for the *continuation* of the liberal world order with sovereign states acting under the same principles, not least in Latin America. The 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) concluded that the United States 'will work in *equal* partnership to advance economic and social inclusion, safeguard citizen safety and security, promote clean energy, and defend universal values of the people of the [Western] hemisphere' (NSS 2010: 44). At a press conference in Havana in 2016, Obama echoed these sentiments: 'I affirmed [to Raúl Castro] that Cuba's destiny will not be decided by the United States or any other nation. *Cuba is sovereign* and, rightly, has great pride. And the future of Cuba will be decided by Cubans, *not by anybody else*' (Obama 2016, emphasis added). The narrated threats to the region primarily internal, most notably drug trafficking (NSS 2010: 43, 46; 2015: 27).

In sum, the Obama administration embraced the prevailing narrative of the day. It adhered to the characterisation of the Self as possessing the status of hegemon and the Other as either criminal terrorist organisations or states that have accepted US leadership. This is a Self/Other narrative #2 where US status was not acutely threatened. In short, the United States did not experience ontological insecurity in its identity as a hegemon at this time. Consequently, it did not resort to a sphere of influence narrative to provide meaning to the geographical space of Latin America.

Instead, it had the confidence and room to dismantle the notion of a US sphere of influence publicly and explicitly in Latin America.

The Trump administration: The re-narration of the geographical here

The world as narrated by the Trump administration was very different from the one described by its predecessor. The administration characterised the Self as declining, where US status as hegemon was disappearing due to the rise of China and the decisions of previous US leaders. Indeed, the first words of the administration's NSS echo Trump's campaign slogan: 'The American people elected me to make America great *again*' (NSS 2017: 1, emphasis added). While this was a campaign slogan designed to make Trump appear a saviour and connect back to former US President Ronald Reagan, the notion of a United States in relative decline permeates much of the document. Unlike the two preceding documents, 'the Others', China and Russia, are constructed as severe threats to US hegemony:

> China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence. (NSS 2017: 2)

This is the horizon of experience that the Trump administration offers to make sense of the present: a Self that is damaged and has lost its status to aggressive great powers. The administration contends: 'These competitions [with Russia and China] require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners' (NSS 2017: 3). Alongside these narratives found in national security documents, it is also notable that it was in 2018, during the Trump presidency, that the 'China threat narrative' was cemented among scholars, analysts and debaters, sowing further doubt and anxiety about US status and identity (Jerdén & Winkler 2023), and further fuelling the US experience of a loss of status.

This Self/Other narrative (#1), which orients the Self between a past of power and a horizon of lost status, provokes emotions of anxiety and shame, something which can be counteracted in part by approaching the geographical here through a sphere-of-influence narrative. For the Trump administration, the way to reassert great power status was to return to the controversial doctrine that the previous administration sought to dismantle and bury. In 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson gave a speech praising the relevance of the Monroe Doctrine in countering an 'imperial' China (Gramer & Johnson 2018). Similarly, his successor, Mike Pompeo, contended that the Monroe Doctrine was *as relevant in contemporary times as it was when it was created* in 1823 (Pompeo 2019, emphasis added). On another occasion,

Trump's second National Security Advisor, John Bolton, remarked that 'the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well' (Schake 2019). Trump also weighed in publicly while addressing the United Nations in September 2018: 'Here in the Western Hemisphere, we are committed to maintaining our independence from the encroachment of expansionist foreign powers. *It has been the formal policy of our country since President Monroe that we reject the interference of foreign nations in this hemisphere and in our own affairs*' (Trump 2018, emphasis added).

Two years later, in his 2020 White House memoir, Bolton oriented the United States in relation to a very different horizon of experience from the Obama administration. He identified the United States as a great power that keeps order in its 'backyard': 'America had opposed external threats in the Western Hemisphere since the Monroe Doctrine, *and it was time to resurrect it* after the Obama-Kerry efforts to bury it' (Bolton 2020: 248, emphasis added). On Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Bolton writes:

> Maduro's autocratic regime was a threat due to its Cuba connection and the openings it afforded Russia, China, and Iran. Moscow's menace was undeniable, both milita*rily* and financ*ial*, having expended substantial resources to buttress Maduro, dominate Venezuela's oil-and-gas industry, and impose costs on the US. Beijing was not far behind (ibid.).

In terms of visions for the future, the 2017 NSS defined the US role somewhat in accordance with the Monroe Doctrine as the powerful, responsible regional leader, stating that it would 'build a stable and peaceful hemisphere that increases economic opportunities for all, improves governance, reduces the power of criminal organizations, and *limits the malign influence of non-hemispheric forces*' (NSS 2017: 51, emphasis added). Once again, there is a differentiation between the 'hemisphere', where the United States is the hegemon, and 'non-hemispheric forces'. These forces were once European colonial powers but today they are China and Russia. President Trump further expressed his vision of the world when discussing his administration's policy on Cuba, which was on a par with the logic of the sphere of influence: 'Countries should take greater responsibility for creating stability in their own regions' (Trump 2017).

In sum, the Trump administration adhered to a Self/Other narrative in which the established status of the Self was severely threatened (Self/Other narrative #1) by rising rival powers. Consequently, it turned to its geographical here to reassert anxiety regarding great power identity through a sphere of influence narrative.

The Biden administration: Quietly maintaining the meaning of the geographical here

Although it has offered softer rhetoric compared to the preceding administration, the Biden administration has largely maintained the Trump administration's

policies towards China, for which there is bipartisan support (Borg 2024: 8–11). However, the Self in relation to hegemonic status is less clear. The 2022 NSS reads: 'We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order' (NSS 2022: i). The narrative of the world is very similar to that of the Trump administration: US hegemony is under threat, or possibly just a memory. It offers a possibility that the US could return to its rightful place in the world, but this is far from certain: 'We are now in the early years of a decisive decade for America and the world. The terms of geopolitical competition between the major powers will be set. *The window of opportunity to deal with shared threats, like climate change, will narrow drastically*' (NSS 2022: 6, emphasis added). The Biden administration narrates a Self that must reassert its role as a benevolent hegemon in the face of emerging autocratic great powers. The administration makes this clear by stating: 'The need for a strong and purposeful American role in the world has never been greater' (NSS 2022: 7). The administration seeks to emphasise that the United States has faced this challenge before: 'Prophecies of American decline have repeatedly been disproven in the past – and . . . it has never been a good bet to bet against America' (NSS 2022: 8). The threats are also specified:

> Russia and the PRC [Peoples Republic of China] pose different challenges. *Russia poses an immediate threat* to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown. *The PRC, by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order* and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective. (NSS 2022: 8, emphasis added)

The Biden administration appeals to classical US great power narratives, and an overwhelming need to rearticulate a status and identity is obvious. I therefore conclude that this is a case of a Self/Other narrative #1, as the narrative pertaining to the 'Self/Other' is similar to that of the preceding administration, especially in national security documents.

Turning to the geographical here, the Biden administration's position also resembles that of its predecessor: 'The Western Hemisphere directly impacts the United States more than any other region so we will continue to revive and deepen our partnerships there to advance economic resilience, democratic stability, and citizen security' (NSS 2022: 12). In addition, '[the United States] will support effective democratic governance responsive to citizen needs, defend human rights and combat gender-based violence, tackle corruption, *and protect against external interference or coercion, including from the PRC, Russia, or Iran*' (NSS 2022: 41, emphasis added). The 2022 NSS further states that: 'These challenges may be internal, including from local gangs, or transnational, including from criminal organizations that traffic drugs and humans and undertake other illegal operations – *or external,*

as malign actors seek to gain military or intelligence footholds in the region' (ibid., emphasis added). This echoes quite a lot of how the Trump administration made sense of the US role in the region and the threats it had to face. There are, however, some differences. First and foremost, in 2021 the administration's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, set out the US position on spheres of influence in no uncertain terms. Blinken made it clear that the US did not recognise 'spheres of influence' and that the notion 'should have been retired after World War II' (Removska 2021). Moreover, in a press conference, Biden stated:

> We used to talk about, when I was a kid in college, about 'America's back-yard'. It's not America's backyard. Everything south of the Mexican border is *America's front yard. And we're equal people. We don't dictate what happens in any other part of that—of this continent or the South American continent.* We have to work very hard on it. (Biden 2022, emphasis added)

Referring to Latin America as a 'yard' of any sort is quite controversial, but Biden stressed that the Latin American nations were 'equals' with the United States. It should be remembered, however, that Trump also occasionally floated liberal tropes of self-determination and freedom within the scope of a sphere-of-influence narrative. The Biden administration still narrates a special responsibility in the geographical here to *keep out the bad actors* and although the Trump administration was much more public in its references to the controversial Monroe Doctrine than its successor, the Biden administration has not reversed the reintroduction of the doctrine. Instead, it has maintained a silence on the topic. Publicly

Table 2. Illustration of the article's findings

	Narrated status of the own state	Meaning of the geographical here
Obama administration (2009–2017)	Self/Other narrative #1: US status is secure	Non-sphere of influence narrative
Trump administration (2017–2021)	Self/Other narrative #2: US status is threatened	**Sphere-of-influence narrative**
Biden administration (2021–present)	Self/Other narrative #2: US status is threatened	**Sphere-of-influence narrative**[1]

Source: Author

[1]　The Biden administration has been much more careful in its sphere-of-influence narrative and taken a softer approach.

rejecting the US' role in Latin America in times of great power confrontation would be to voluntarily abandon its status as a great power.

Whereas the Biden administration has been less clear than the Trump administration in this respect, possibly because it takes greater care to stress liberal values, it still approaches its geographical here in an almost protective way. This is despite the fact that several Latin American states, such as Chile (Government of Chile 2023), are happily engaging in new trading agreements with China or moving closer to Russia. (Russian troops were invited to a military parade in Mexico last year [Associated Press 2023].) Narrating Latin America as a sphere of influence, regardless of whether this is done to show responsibility or to coerce a certain outcome, probably insults many small countries in the region, making them more prone to engage with Washington's adversaries. This, in turn, is likely to have a negative impact on US national security.

Conclusion

Using ontological security studies and the new notion of the 'geographical here', this article offers an explanation as to why great powers engage in a potentially counterproductive behaviour of assigning the contentious meaning of sphere of influence on adjacent geographical space. It argues that states that experience anxiety regarding their established status and identity resort to narrating their 'geographical here' according to a sphere-of-influence logic, despite the risk of insulting smaller states and subsequent undesirable effects. In developing the theoretical framework anchored in OSS, the article primarily illustrates the importance of spheres of influence as *narrative vehicles* for ontological security, which has not previously been discussed, as well as the significance of geographical space external to the state for identity construction alongside the Self/Other relationship at times when a great power's status is perceived as threatened. It also sheds light on the paradox that socially constructing a geographical space as a sphere of influence could reduce a great power's ability to exercise influence in that geographical space by encouraging smaller states to seek support from the great power's adversaries, potentially reducing the physical security of that great power. Thus, the article contributes to the literature on spheres of influence, great power identity and ontological security in international politics.

The article illustrates its theoretical contribution through analyses of three US presidential administrations. It notes how the narratives that provide meaning to the Western Hemisphere change alongside the Self/Other narrative that gives meaning to the status of the United States in the world. Much as the notion that China is a security risk to the US is bipartisan (Borg 2024), the importance of the role of the United States in protecting Latin America from external enemies seems to transcend ideological lines in the White House, although the Biden administration formulates its narratives on Latin America with a greater degree of prudence.

It will be important to continue to study the significance of the geographical here for great powers in times of ontological insecurity. Insulting small states in times of great power rivalry is potentially risky as there is a chance that they might turn to a great power adversary for money and support. If the 'geographical here' is foundational for the maintenance of a great power identity, such a turn of events could generate even greater ontological insecurity. This situation could get out of control and make military confrontation unavoidable. At the same time, however, other perspectives also require greater attention – especially those of the small states and the people in those states.

Trine Flockhart writes that it is highly unlikely that we will revert to a bi- or multi-polar world order following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2024: 473–474). This may very well apply to the 'traditional' sphere of influence as frequently referred to by political actors in their public communication. Arguably, their unwillingness to let go of such an 'ordering' concept and tendency to resort to it are expressions of an inherent anxiety about the uncertainties of the future, and not least, their status in the future global order.

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Hungary's Relations with the BRICS in the Context of the Changing World Order

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyse Hungary's evolving foreign policy in a changing world order since the politico-economic regime change of the early 1990s, but with the main focus on relations with the member states of the BRICS group since the initiation of Hungary's 'Global Opening' policy in 2011. As such, the paper aims to offer a comparative overview of Hungary's engagements with the five core members of the BRICS. By following the theory of poles and paying attention to the changing world order, Hungary's foreign policy is critically examined to pave the way for a geopolitical analysis of bilateral relations with the BRICS members. Trade, security and soft power (culture and education) will be analysed in more depth and scrutiny.

Introduction and theoretical background

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the 'unipolar moment' was defined by the United States' unrivalled dominance, both militarily and culturally, contrasting the bipolar world order that permeated the Cold War period. Kenneth Waltz's neorealist theory of polarity (Waltz 1979; Buzan 2013) seems to be a key framework for understanding these shifts, as it classifies global orders based on the number of major powers, or poles, that dominate economically, militarily and technologically. According to this theory, a unipolar system like the one seen after the Cold War is characterised by one superpower, while bipolar and multipolar systems have two or more major powers. Although material factors like military budgets are often prioritised in this analysis, soft power elements can also play a significant role in defining polarity (Vörös & Tarrósy 2024).

Waltz argued that bipolar systems, such as the US-Soviet setup during the Cold War, are the most stable because they create a clear balance of power, reducing the likelihood of major interstate conflict (Waltz 1979). This perspective was appealing to both Washington and Moscow during the Cold War, as it allowed them to dominate global affairs. However, Waltz viewed unipolar systems as inherently unstable due to the absence of counterbalancing forces, which could encourage other states to push back against the dominant power. Critics like Huntington, however, disagreed, arguing that in a unipolar world, the dominant power can maintain its supremacy unchallenged for an extended period (Huntington 1999). The post–Cold War era, sometimes described as 'non-bipolar' due to a lack of clear neorealist consensus, saw the US retain its hegemony, but growing challenges began to emerge.

As global dynamics have shifted, the emergence of regional powers such as China and the reassertion of Russia have signalled the reemergence of multipolarity, with some scholars pointing to the rise of tripolarity involving these three powers (Motin 2024). By the early 2000s, it became apparent that the United States was reluctant to maintain its previous unipolar stance, leading to what some scholars have described as a post-hegemonic, multipolar world order (Tálas 2021). Emerging states, including BRICS nations, seem more inclined toward fostering a multipolar system, which allows them to assert regional influence while countering US dominance. This potential for global multipolarity, where middle powers and regional actors challenge the interests of the United States of America, continues to reshape international relations today (Vörös & Tarrósy 2024).

In this paper, three research questions (RQs) will be investigated. The primary research question, and thus the most critical, is RQ1: 'What are Hungary's relations with members of the BRICS, and how has Hungary been re-positioning itself amidst new geopolitical challenges?' This question is central to understanding Hungary's evolving role within the shifting global landscape and its strategic engagement with BRICS countries. The other two questions, RQ2: 'What are the power dynamics behind the changing international arena that contribute to the positioning of the BRICS?' and RQ3: 'How has Hungary's foreign policy changed since the political transition at the beginning of the 1990s?', are supplementary. Indeed, they provide essential context by examining the broader global dynamics influencing BRICS and Hungary's historical policy shifts, but they ultimately support the focus of RQ1.

Our methodology embraces a multi-year research project including field projects, archival work and document analysis. Since the publication of 'Hungary's Foreign Policy after the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of European Union' in 2011, we have presented several analyses of the government's 'Global Opening' policy. This was defined as 'revitalising Hungary's ties with those parts of the world that have been accorded lesser importance in Hungary's foreign policy focus in recent years (or have always been outside the scope of that focus); increasing our role in shaping the global agenda and strengthening our activism in meeting global challenges' (MFA 2011: 9). We aim to show that this paper is a sequel to the previous research we have done on the topic, which can still be considered underexplored. With this in mind, the intention with this piece is to contribute to a better understanding of Hungarian foreign policy in a changing international landscape.

First, the analytical framework is set up within the theoretical context of poles, the importance of geopolitics and the notion of pragmatism in international relations. Then, Hungarian foreign policy regimes will be analysed in the context of BRICS-dynamics in the global arena. Focus will be laid on Hungary's relations with the core BRICS member states as emerging non-Western actors. Soft power elements such as trade, security and education will be dealt with in more depth and scrutiny. Finally, responses will be offered to the initial research questions together with some concluding thoughts, as well as suggestions for some directions for further research.

Geopolitics and the rise of the BRICS

The essence of contemporary global politics appears to be shaped by the geopolitical tensions between hegemony, represented by the United States, and the power equilibrium sought by China, Russia and other emerging powers. Interestingly, rising powers such as Brazil, South Africa and India have become increasingly influential in global affairs due to their economic growth, military capabilities and

strategic positioning. The power transitions from the Global North to the Global South over the last decade have been salient considering the rising powers' aspirations and growing engagement in global governance (Freddy & Thomas 2023: 395). These countries often pursue their interests through alliances, coalitions and organisations that usually aim to promote common goals, meet common needs and resolve common problems (Tripathi 2010). Some of the common goals entail fostering South-South economic cooperation, political stability and collective security among member states. It is worth mentioning that beyond multilateralism and economic partnerships, these alliances and trans-regional integration initiatives can lead to the challenging of traditional global power structures, the emergence of new power blocs and the shift of alignments in the international system. It is within this context that the BRICS has presented itself as the voice of the Global South (Pant 2023) since its establishment back in 2009. Comprising emerging market economies and developing countries (Xiaolin 2023), this intergovernmental organisation seeks to establish a more equitable and fairer world via the promotion of peace, security, development and cooperation (South African Government 2013).

The burgeoning prominence of BRICS or BRICS+, as some tend to informally call it after its 2024 enlargement, stems from its significance in terms of economic growth and human capital. Following the new membership of Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Ethiopia, the bloc is now home to more than 40% of the world's population. Even more, the BRICS accounts for 37.3% of the world GDP, which is more than double the EU's share, as the EU does not reach 15% of the global GDP (European Parliament Research Service 2024: 2). Committed to expanding its ranks, reforming major multilateral institutions such as the UN Security Council and the International Monetary Fund and de-dollarising the global financial system, the BRICS seems to be on a quest for greater global influence (European Parliament Research Service 2024). This cherished influence was interpreted by some scholars as a sign of declining Western dominance (Kapoor 2023: 4) and even as an attempt by the bloc to reshape an international system that is unfairly dominated by the US (McCarthy 2024). The recent BRICS summit on 22–24 October 2024 in Kazan further proves that, despite the rejection of the war in Ukraine, aspirations for a transformation of the world order are alive and well, and BRICS could indeed become a key organisation in the (shaping) of the new world order. In the realisation of any such aspiration and in our understanding of power shifts and dynamics across the arena, interpretations play a role, and as Ó Tuathail underscores, most geopolitical production in world politics is of a practical type, where 'practical geopolitics refers to the spatializing of practices of practitioners of statecraft [. . .] those who concern themselves with the everyday conduct of foreign policy' (Ó Tuathail 1996: 60). In this vein, we are looking at the changing practices in Hungarian foreign policy, highlighting the presence of pragmatism among the practitioners involved.

Hungary's foreign policy since the initiation of its 'Global Opening'

Several of our previous works have explored the major dimensions and critical partnerships within Hungary's foreign policy matrix since the political transition at the end of the 1980s. We examined new or revisited agenda items alongside certain challenging issues and connections, such as the evolving foreign policy priorities in a dynamic global system (Tarrósy & Vörös 2014), the 'Global Opening' policy (Tarrósy & Morenth 2013) and Hungary's increased pragmatism in fostering relations with countries like China, Turkey, Russia, the Gulf states, Sub-Saharan Africa and other emerging regions. This pragmatism stems from the belief and the idea that the world is changing, that it is becoming multipolar and that in such a structure Hungary must maintain relations with all the key actors – possible poles within this system – to foster its national interests. In particular contexts of either problematic or promising situations, stemming from the Realist school of thought in international relations, any pragmatic policy is shaped 'in line with the national interest, know[ing] the facts of existing conditions, and pay[ing] special attention to power and its alignments' (Cochran 2012: 2). In our contemporary international system, such pragmatism can be traced in any of the actors' behaviour to 'seek power and calculate interest in terms of power' (Ibid: 8). Such power-driven interest, especially in today's heightened global focus on security and securitisation, 'is always relative to the social and political situation in which foreign policy is crafted' (Ralston 2011: 79).

In the context of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine (as of the writing of this paper), it is essential to emphasise that one of Hungary's most significant foreign policy challenges, as an EU member state, is its relationship with Putin's Russia. The Hungarian government's ability to navigate this relationship, leveraging a deep understanding of Russia's regional geostrategy based on the Primakov doctrine, is crucial (Lechner 2021: 20–21; Sz. Bíró 2014: 41).

Upon our latest detailed analysis of Hungarian foreign policy, we identified the necessity for a more nuanced approach; yet, in the current era of global uncertainties and concerns, Hungarian foreign policy can be characterized—albeit to a limited extent—as pragmatic. Pragmatic, as it replaced the traditional Western orientation of Hungarian foreign policy established following the regime transition by recognizing other options beyond the EU–NATO–immediate neighbourhood policy triangle. This realization has enabled Hungary to implement its strategies regarding the growing East and the prospective South. Although these initiatives lacked coherence and were perhaps unsuccessful and temporary, they demonstrated that relinquishing all our interests in these nations at the conclusion of the 1980s and the onset of the 1990s was a misguided move. Consequently, Hungary should avoid finding itself in the same situation once more. (Tarrósy & Vörös 2020: 132)

At that point, it was evident that this new foreign policy was not consistently pragmatic and, in certain instances, lacked logical coherence. The Orbán admin-

istration has aligned its foreign policy with domestic political objectives, resulting in a diminished credibility regarding its international actions (ibid.).

Now, a few years later, it has to be said that the situation has not changed, and in fact Hungary has further isolated itself from its Western partners, pursuing an increasingly serious anti-Western foreign policy. Pragmatism, as we can state today, would allow and prioritise relations with emerging actors, while maintaining Western partnerships, which would fit much better into the multipolar worldview defined and envisioned by the Hungarian government. A unilateral foreign policy that criticises Western actors – such as in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War – without condemning Russia is likely a pragmatic miscalculation in terms of power. This approach would pigeonhole the country, hindering its ability to achieve its objectives. One of these aims is to unequivocally use connectivity to become a link between the West and the East. Since 2010, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, in coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), has consistently emerged victorious in national elections, securing a constitutional majority in parliament in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022. Numerous internal and foreign policy changes have been implemented, including managing relations with an array of 'non-traditional' partners as part of the new chapters of the Global Opening doctrine (see Puzyniak 2018).

The pivot towards the East, particularly Russia, Central Asia and China, alongside re-engagement with the South, including Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, has dominated Hungary's foreign policy priorities.

With a heightened focus on international visibility, Hungary has effectively utilised soft power, too, particularly after the introduction of the Stipendium Hungaricum state scholarship in 2013 (see Császár et al. 2023). This initiative, with a focus on China-Hungary educational relations (Tarrósy & Vörös 2019), exemplifies Hungary's active foreign policy in regions at Europe's periphery, Asia and certain African countries, as well as in neighbouring nations and across the diaspora (Kacziba 2020: 82). However, this aspect of Hungary's foreign policy is not widely recognised within its society, where more emphasis is placed on government protection and securitisation schemes addressing refugee flows, energy dependency and the ongoing war in the country's immediate vicinity.

As we can see, for some time, pragmatism at least at a rhetoric level has been a salient feature of Hungarian foreign policy, which could also enhance its neighbourhood policies. One prime example of this, based on security considerations of the broader macro region, coupled with shared historical ties, intercultural connections and economic interests with neighbouring countries, drove Hungary into closer collaboration with Serbia, whose EU accession efforts it supported (Vörös & Tarrósy 2022).

We cannot, however, ignore the prominence of European structures. As a member of the EU, Hungary is not able to make itself independent of the Union's

foreign policy, and the EU is not capable of independent foreign policy action, and, if anything, the conflict in Ukraine has shown that the EU remains dependent on the United States. 'The war erupted just as the EU was beginning to emerge from the economic crisis following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus and was about to start growing again. One might say that the timing of the war is unfortunate, but in fact wars always come at the wrong time. At the same time, the fact that Europe's response to the invasion of Ukraine has been so doctrinaire, often against its own economic interests, does not suggest that the EU leadership is capable of assessing what Europe's interests really are in the new world order' (Ugrósdy 2024: 201). What is needed, therefore, is an autonomous, strategically independent Europe, which is well understood by Hungarian foreign policy. However, with its constant vetoes, Hungary is one of the impediments to the potential creation of this unity – in order to achieve the domestic policy goals already mentioned.

As we have already stated, 'rebuilding this credibility should be the ultimate goal of the government, therefore, the discourse should not be about offended reactions and confrontation but about trade, business and economic interests; not about political party goals but country priorities' (Tarrósy & Vörös 2020: 132) – and within this context, BRICS can remain a significant and meaningful option to fully benefit from the changes of the world order.

BRICS and the changing world order
Overview of the BRICS-dynamics

The BRIC acronym was coined by Goldman Sachs analyst Jim O'Neill in 2001 to highlight Brazil, Russia, India and China as emerging economies that were poised to surpass the G7 in growth. O'Neill argued for restructuring global policy frameworks like the G7 to better represent these growing markets, proposing a shift to a 'G9' that would include BRIC nations along with a unified EU to represent European interests (O'Neill 2011). While the G7 persisted without these states, O'Neill's analysis had a significant impact, prompting the BRIC countries to begin organising joint meetings. By 2009, they institutionalised their collaboration in Yekaterinburg, Russia, and with South Africa's addition in 2010, the coalition became BRICS.

Since then, BRICS has increased its influence through initiatives like the New Development Bank, formed to support members' financial interests alongside organisations like the IMF and World Bank. BRICS countries now frequently co-ordinate on political and economic issues, seeking to consolidate their positions in international forums, as evidenced by their shared approach to UN Security Council votes (Feledy 2013). According to Haibin (2013), the BRICS economies, with their expanding size and diplomatic activity, are steadily gaining a larger role in international decision-making, making BRICS an attractive coalition for other emerging powers interested in balancing Western-dominated global institutions.

While there is no official list of the states that have applied for BRICS member-ship, they are presumably among the emerging powers.

New BRICS members/aspirants

Considering the bloc's economic benefits, burgeoning global influence and po-tential to shape the future of global finance, more and more nations have become eager to join BRICS. As of 2023, more than twenty countries, including Indonesia, Algeria and Nigeria, have formally approached BRICS countries to become full members (BRICS Portal 2023). Out of this growing number of interested countries, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Egypt and Argentina were formally invited to join the bloc and reinforce its ranks following the 15th BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August 2023. This marked the bloc's second expansion in more than a decade, a move zealously relaunched and urged by China during its BRICS presidency in 2022. This enlargement move was hailed as the most important development in the previous decade of BRICS history (Lissovolik 2024: 2). As Figure 1 shows, the grouping arguably aims to be a platform for empower-ing the Global South and giving greater prominence to its perspectives in global discussions (European Parliament Research Service 2024: 3). In this vein, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa posited that, through its new expansion, the BRICS grouping has embarked on a new chapter in its efforts to build a world that is fair [. . .] just [. . .] inclusive and prosperous (France24 2023).

Figure 1: BRICS in the world: Global South and Global North positions unaltered?
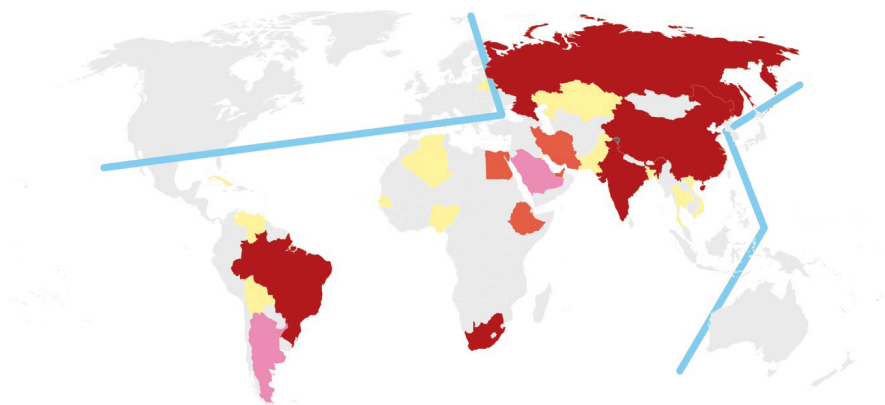
Legend: Red: BRICS (Original 4+1), Orange: New members from 2024, Pink: Countries approved for accession but which decided not to join, Yellow: Applicants according to various reports. Source: Authors

Starting on 1 January 2024, the new cohort of countries became official mem-bers of the bloc except for Argentina and Saudi Arabia. Following the election of

far-right President Javier Milei, Argentina withdrew from BRICS days before its planned entry to the bloc. In a similar vein, Saudi Arabia's membership has not yet been made official, as more internal deliberations have been conducted concerning this polemical move. The membership of one of the world's leading oil exporters and one of the Gulf´s biggest political and financial heavyweights is expected to give the bloc added heft (Fassihi et al. 2023). The region's historical ties with the US, along with the changing geopolitical scene following the war in Gaza, are slowing down the ongoing negotiations between Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US.

Iran's involvement in the BRICS expansion initiative has proven to be a significant diplomatic win, considering its long isolation due to its nuclear advances and support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Though battered by Western sanctions, Tehran is still an important regional power and one of OPEC's largest oil producers. In fact, it holds the world's second largest gas reserves and a quarter of the oil reserves in the Middle East (Fassihi et al. 2023). Moreover, the United Arab Emirates' decision to join the alliance is expected to further strengthen its economic ties with China and India, its two largest trading partners, and increase its role in the Middle East. The strong ties between the UAE and the US, mainly in the security sector, did not stop the country from adopting a pragmatic foreign policy that works on reinforcing trade and partnerships with both China and Russia. The presence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE together with Iran in the same bloc would not have been possible was it not for the Saudi-Iran détente brokered by China in March 2023.

Unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Egypt is not one of the world's largest energy suppliers but rather one of the top recipients of American aid (Axelrod 2011: 3). Egypt joined the BRICS in a bid to bolster its economic relationships with prominent developing nations, most notably China and India, which are Egypt's top two trading partners. Considering its ailing economy, Egypt suffers from various troubles such as inflation, dollar shortage and rising debt. Thus, it perceives the BRICS membership as an invaluable opportunity to ease its economic pressures via attracting more investments from member countries, trading in its local currency and improving its access to strategic commodities like wheat. The African presence in the bloc has been further boosted with the new membership of Ethiopia, which is the second most populous country on the continent (Le Monde 2023). Besides its prominent human capital and key role in founding the African Union, Ethiopia is one of the world's fastest growing economies with a 7.2 percent growth during the previous fiscal year (2022–2023) (World Bank 2023: 2). Following the Tigray civil war of 2020–22, the US cut trade privileges and suspended food aid from the country (Fassihi et al. 2023). Thus, joining the BRICS seems to have been an opportunity to move further from the American orbit via securing alternative economic partnerships and attracting new investments.

Hungary's relations with the core BRICS members

Hungary's relations with the BRICS states, therefore, fit into the foreign policy concept of building relations with new potential poles – power centres of gravity – in a changing world, and in this respect treats the members of the organisation as middle powers – emerging economies with this potential. Hungarian foreign policy, pragmatic in its rhetoric, is focused solely on building political and economic relations with these states, looking ahead to the future and aligning with the perceived powers of the emerging world order. In this sense, Hungary views BRICS as a strategic partner and a promising platform for fostering economic collaboration and diplomatic partnerships outside of the Euro-Atlantic sphere. Acknowledging that 'we are now living in a multipolar world order' and that 'Asia will be the dominant center of the world', PM Orbán sees the BRICS as a pathway to diversify Hungary's foreign alliances and reduce its over-dependence on the West (BRICS News 2024; Hungarian Conservative 2024). By fostering relations with BRICS nations, Hungary is positioning itself as a 'bridge' that connects East and West, aiming not only for collaboration but also for substantial economic and political gains from both blocs (Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs 2024) . In a world order marked by shifting power dynamics and the growing voices of the Global South, Hungary's alignment with the BRICS can be considered as a sign of its flexible diplomacy and adaptive pragmatism. Through this dynamic pragmatism, Hungary seeks to bolster its international autonomy and build partnerships that advance its strategic goals within an increasingly multipolar global order.

1. Brazil

In the context of increasingly diversifying Hungarian foreign policy, one notable example is Hungary's growing relationship with Brazil. This relationship has developed within the broader context of Hungary's Global Opening policy, in line with its central aims to expand economic, political and cultural ties beyond the traditional trans-Atlantic focus on Europe and North America.

Historically, Hungary and Brazil have had limited interactions, largely due to geographical distance and differing regional priorities. However, the end of the Cold War and subsequent globalisation trends have provided new opportunities for these two nations to explore bilateral cooperation. The establishment of diplomatic relations in March 1961 laid the foundation for future engagements, but it is only in recent decades that substantial progress has been made.

One important dimension of bilateral ties that evolved over time from the turn of the 20th century up until the 1956 Hungarian Revolution is the presence of Hungarians and Hungarian descendants in Brazil. Today, this number is estimated to be at least 100,000. According to Csrepka:

the Hungarian community in the city and region of São Paulo today numbers more than 10,000, and there is also a significant number of Hungarians in other cities: Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and Porto Alegre. Therefore, it is not easy to estimate the number of descendants, which could vary between 150 and 300 thousand. (Csrepka 2022: 129)

This diaspora community is seen as a crucial thread between the two countries, also with regard to fostering business-related cooperation.

Amongst the different policy layers, economic engagement forms a cornerstone of Hungary-Brazil relations. Brazil, as the largest economy in Latin America, presents significant opportunities for Hungarian businesses. Trade between the two countries has been steadily increasing, with Hungarian exports to Brazil including machinery, pharmaceuticals and agricultural products. Conversely, Brazil exports mainly raw materials and food products to Hungary. In addition to this dimension and beyond a continuous political dialogue, certain issues such as sustainable development, international security and migration, as well as education and technology exchanges were placed high on the bilateral agenda – particularly during Jair Bolsonaro's presidential term (2019–2023). In October 2019, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said that Hungary wanted to 'develop "the closest ever" ties with Brazil, since the two countries' leaders share[d] very similar approaches to global politics' (About Hungary blog 2019), referring to the fine understanding between President Bolsonaro and Prime Minister Orbán. This 'closest' tie was reaffirmed in February 2024 when Bolsonaro spent two nights in the Hungarian embassy in Brasília, 'presumably to hide from Brazilian authorities that were investigating his alleged coup attempt' (Leali 2024).

In terms of soft power and cultural diplomacy, the Hungarian government has offered Brazilian students opportunities to pursue full-degree bachelor's and master's studies in fields such as agriculture, engineering, natural sciences, sports, social sciences and the arts within the framework of the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship scheme.[1] Brazil has an annual quota of 250 students provided by the Hungarian government on a bilateral basis. The scholarship is financed from taxpayers' contributions to the national budget and it does not contain EU elements. Moreover, other cultural diplomacy initiatives include Hungarian cultural festivals and exhibitions in Brazil, with the intention of raising awareness about Hungarian heritage and culture. These activities complement the broader strategy of enhancing Hungary's soft power on the international stage. Complementing these efforts, Brazil sent Brazilian students to Hungary (and many other parts of the globe) with its own governmental scheme: between 2011 and 2015, the Science without Borders scholarship programme allowed 100,000 scientific exchanges overseas in areas identified as priorities

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1   See <https://stipendiumhungaricum.hu/>.

for the country's development – mostly in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) (Estudo No Exterior n.d.).

2. Russia

Hungary's relationship with Russia is shaped not only by its socialist past, but also by its energy dependence, which has become a key issue since the Russo-Ukrainian War. Until the outbreak of the conflict in 2022, Hungary imported 85% of its natural gas and over 60% of its oil from Russia (ATV 2022). Despite Hungary's sometimes hesitant vote for EU sanctions, the Russian share of imports remained significant – mainly due to the fact that Hungary, as a land-locked country, was already highly dependent on Russian energy. In the event of a full cut of Russian imports, it is unequivocally 'the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that would face the highest prices due to internal bottlenecks preventing LNG from reaching these markets from West to East' (Kotek et al. 2022: 240). The Hungarian government's position demanding slower action and sanctions is a logical request, and this has also been accepted by the community which allows for further imports, although Ukraine is likely to stop gas transit at the end of 2024, posing new questions for the players in the region.

Hungary is often criticised for these very actions, and while the economic interest is understandable, in many cases Budapest has indeed adopted a softer policy towards Moscow, and the 2023 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) summit between Orbán and Putin did not help the acceptance of the Hungarian side's position within the EU. The Hungarian government explains its cooperation by multilateral interests and a changing world order, but, as we have already discussed in the section on pragmatic foreign policy, it seems implausible that Hungary aims to become a truly pragmatic actor while drifting further and further away from Western values. Its pro-Russian stance has in fact made the country a lonely actor within the EU, even at the cost of pushing the Visegrad Cooperation (V4, including Czechia, Slovakia and Poland together with Hungary) into crisis. The previously important scheme of four CEE countries helped Orbán to set the goal of becoming the new engines of Europe – but because of the Hungarian interpretation of the war, the V4 is hardly a club of countries with similar interests and understandings within the EU anymore. Moreover, the continuous vetoes of Hungary regarding further sanctions on Russia creates an even more hostile environment for Budapest within the EU, further questioning the pragmatic approach.

Regarding Russia, there are two more issues worth mentioning: one is the nuclear power plant expansion at the town of Paks, about 60 miles southwards along the river Danube, which has been dragging on for years and it is rather questionable if the Russians will finally build it – although both sides are waiting to admit this. The other is the Hungarian army mission in Chad, which

will take place outside the EU, NATO and the UN in a region where Russia's interests are growing and where anti-Western sentiment is so palpable: it is no coincidence that some fear (RLI 2024) that the Hungarian military presence could serve Russian interests.

3. India

Since the establishment of bilateral diplomatic ties in 1948, Hungary's relations with India have been described as friendly, multifaceted and substantive (Embassy of India, Hungary and Bosnia & Herzegovina 2023). Besides the recently growing number of high-level visits from both countries, India and Hungary signed a new series of bilateral treaties and agreements in various fields such as investment, education and water management. In 2015, the total bilateral trade between India and Hungary was USD 578.3 million. This figure hit a new record in 2022 as it reached USD 1.2 billion with USD 790.7 million Hungarian imports and USD 491million Hungarian exports (Embassy of India, Hungary and Bosnia & Herzegovina 2023). Major Hungarian exports to India include mechanical appliances, electrical machinery and medical and surgical instruments. India was the largest greenfield investor in Hungary in 2014 and the number of Indian investments has been growing ever since as many companies expanded their bases in the country. The Indian presence in Hungary includes major companies such as Apollo Tyres, Sun Pharmaceuticals and Tata Consultancy Services. As of 2020, the total investment value of Apollo Tyres reached EUR 700 million, with the company employing over 800 workers (Embassy of India, Hungary and Bosnia & Herzegovina 2023). In total, Indian companies in Hungary provide employment to over 10,000 people. Education is another field of growing cooperation between the two nations as 44 candidates from Hungary availed the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme between 2007 and 2023. According to Tempus Public Foundation, the number of Indian holders of the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship, offered by the Hungarian government, rose from 60 students in 2015 to 420 students in the 2023–2024 academic year (Tempus Public Foundation 2023). India has an annual quota of 200 student placements. In a similar vein, cultural links between India and Hungary have been steadily evolving since the opening of the Indian Cultural Centre in Budapest in 2010. The Amrita Sher-Gil Cultural Centre has been organising various cultural activities like yoga, dance and Hindi classes. In 2016, the Ganga-Danube Cultural Festival was launched, featuring artists, performers and dancers from India. Other cultural initiatives and celebrations reinforcing the cultural ties between the two countries entail the International Day of Yoga, the Indian Film Festival and Mahatma Ghandi's birth anniversary (Szenkovics 2019: 13). Individual institutional activities, such as the International

Seasons intercultural events series of the University of Pécs,[2] further enhanced bilateral linkages.

4. China

Hungary's relations with China are widely depicted as multifaceted and prosperous mainly after Orban's 2010 'Eastern Opening' Policy. The Fidesz leader's desire to develop economic relations with the non-Western world has been at the core of deepening the Sino-Hungarian ties (Végh 2015: 47). Following a meeting in Budapest in 2011, leaders of China and 16 countries of Central and Eastern Europe announced the China-CEE cooperation mechanism (Embassy of Hungary Beijing 2023). The 16+1 initiative[3], now known as the 14+1, was launched with the aim of bolstering and strengthening relations between Beijing and these CEE countries through broadening investments and business prospects. Supporting Chinese initiatives in Europe, Hungary was the first European country to join the Belt and Road Initiative through projects like the Central European Trade and Logistics Cooperation Zone (CECZ) and the Budapest–Belgrade (BuBe) railway line. 'Along the new routes of this emerging connectivity network via the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, Central and Eastern European countries clearly present a strategic region for China' (Tarrósy & Vörös 2019: 259).

China is, indeed, one of Hungary's major trading partners globally and its most important partner in Asia (Szunomár & Peragovics 2019: 3). Bilateral trade between China and Hungary hit USD 14.52 billion in 2023, an increase of 73% compared to 2013 (Asian Financial Cooperation Association 2024). Top exports from Hungary to China were navigation equipment, electrical transformers, and parts and accessories of motor vehicles (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2024). Interestingly, Beijing has been Hungary's leading foreign investor since 2020 as China's direct investments reached EUR 7.6 billion in 2023 (Asian Financial Cooperation Association 2024). Recently, BYD, the Chinese electric vehicles giant, picked the Hungarian city of Szeged as the site of its first car factory in Europe. In the field of education, the first Confucius Institute (CI) in Hungary was established at Eötvös Loránd University in 2006. Following its inauguration, other Confucius Institutes were founded in Szeged, Miskolc and Pécs. The one in Pécs is the only traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)-focused CI in Europe. In the 2023–2024 academic year, about 345 Chinese students held Stipendium Hungarian scholarships (Tempus Public Foundation 2023). The inauguration of Hungarian centres in Beijing and Tangshan and the planned construction of Fudan University in Budapest – as the first overseas campus of the Shanghai-based institution – are but examples of the

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2   See <https://www.facebook.com/InternationalSeasonsPTE>.

3   Greece officially joined the 16+1 initiative in 2019 and the initiative became known as the 17+1 initiative. However, Lithuania announced its exit from the initiative in 2021, and was later followed by Estonia and Latvia.

burgeoning educational cooperation between the two nations. These are coupled with several cultural events, which can grab the hearts and minds of the populations of both countries. Among the events organised by the Beijing Hungarian Cultural Institute, for instance, we find several education-related ones, such as the Kodály Point programme, which was started in October 2015, offering 'music classes in small groups for children between the age 3-12, for adults, and also choir classes for poor children from the neighbourhood' (Tarrósy & Vörös 2019: 267; Embassy of Hungary 2019).

5. South Africa

According to the official website of the Hungarian Embassy in Pretoria, former Ambassador Attila Horváth highlighted that the Republic of South Africa 'occupies a prominent place in [Hungary's] network of relations with sub-Saharan Africa'.[4] In a 2014 interview with the then South African ambassador to Hungary for the US-Africa portal AFKInsider, Ambassador Johann Marx explained, 'Hungary and South Africa share a common experience in that both countries emerged in the early 1990s from relative global isolation, due to the so-called "Iron Curtain" imposed on Hungary by Soviet occupation following World War II, while during the same period, South Africa experienced the ideological "Iron Curtain" of apartheid.' Therefore, it is not surprising that both Hungary and South Africa were 'obliged in the years that followed to focus on their economic re-integration in their respective regions', according to Ambassador Marx (Tarrósy 2014).

In terms of investments, large South African companies were active in Hungary in the 1990s – notable examples include SAB, Mondi, Group 5, Intertoll, Ster-Kinekor and Steinhoff International. Moving into the new millennium, small and medium-sized companies, such as Naspers and CNS, began expanding their business activities in both directions. In 2013–14, South African investments in Hungary were estimated at about USD 250 million. Trade figures reveal that while in 2014 the total volume stood at USD 283 million (with Hungary enjoying an 88% trade surplus), by 2020 the total had decreased to USD 194 million, still favouring Hungary substantially (with a surplus of USD 136 million, or 82% of the total), but with a minor 6% increase on the South African side. In recent years, real estate has emerged as the primary sector for South African capital, with the South African property developer NEPI Rockcastle being the largest real estate investor in Central and Eastern Europe (Tarrósy 2022).

From a political perspective, both Hungary and South Africa consider it important to develop bilateral linkages. Reflecting this, on 13 May 2013, they established the South Africa-Hungary Joint Economic Commission to develop and diversify relations. In a November 2015 meeting, the two governments outlined

4   See <https://pretoria.mfa.gov.hu/eng>.

areas of cooperation: education and training (including student exchange for skills development), manufacturing (joint ventures on car components and bus manufacturing), pharmaceuticals, water management and water technology, agriculture, tourism and banking.

As underscored several times, education and research are pivotal in reshaping Hungary's presence in Africa, potentially forming the basis for long-term cooperation, and the Stipendium Hungaricum public scholarship programme is a key component of Hungary's foreign policy and evolving Africa policy. With an annual quota of 100 places for South African students, those who graduate from Hungarian universities often become advocates for bilateral collaboration. In addition, a new government scholarship targets the descendants of former emigrants, focusing on diasporic communities. The Hungarian Diaspora Scholarship is available for members of the Hungarian diaspora living outside of the European Union, Serbia and the Zakarpattia Oblast of Ukraine. Local diaspora organisations issue letters of recommendation, facilitating the process.

For South Africa, the Hungarian Alliance of South Africa is involved in this process. The alliance, with roots dating back to 1932 and re-established in 1953, has continuously worked to preserve Hungarian language, values and culture in South Africa. Its mission includes nurturing these cultural aspects, commemorating important events in Hungarian history, and fostering a strong Hungarian community in South Africa. The alliance is the official partner of the Hungarian government, which engages with its diasporic communities through the Diaspora Council. This council forms part of a broader governmental effort to support diaspora communities. As Prime Minister Orbán emphasised in his 2019 speech to the Diaspora Council, the aim is to 'join the blood circulation of the Hungarian nation' (Tarrósy 2022).

Conclusion

In this paper, our hypothesis posited that while BRICS members and countries aspiring for membership demonstrate an increasing preference for a multipolar global order, the prevailing dominant power appears inclined towards re-establishing a bipolar scenario. Amidst these evolving dynamics, it has been observed that Hungary, since the early 2010s, has been advancing its 'Global Opening' foreign policy initiative, shifting its previously pragmatic agenda towards prominent new doctrines concerning the emerging Global South, particularly focusing on the East. In any case, it seems that the Hungarian government's global assessment of the changing world order and the role of the BRICS in this transformation is in line with global political realities. While the relations with emerging countries that have been developed on the basis of this recognition have corresponded to this perceived future, the idea of multipolarity has not been maintained in relations with the Western, Euro-Atlantic partners: the pragmatic approach has been

disappearing. Pragmatic considerations of the broader macro-region, along with shared historical ties, intercultural connections and economic interests with neighbouring countries, have driven Hungary into closer collaboration with Serbia, for example, and have positioned the country as a key actor in the macro region of the Western Balkans. However, it can be concluded that by 2024, Hungary had further isolated itself from its Western partners, pursuing an increasingly anti-Western foreign policy. This discernible shift suggests that Hungary's foreign policy directions are growingly influenced by ideological preferences, especially those that align with a multipolar vision of the world, as outlined in BRICS-oriented frameworks. Yet, as Hungary leans further toward anti-Western policies, it risks severing ties that could otherwise support its strategic and economic interests.

Pragmatism, as we have emphasised, would facilitate relations with emerging actors while maintaining Western partnerships, aligning more effectively with the multipolar worldview defined and envisioned by the Hungarian government. Therefore, the fading away of pragmatism in Hungarian foreign policy, and in particular the changing pattern and evolving nature, requires more nuanced critical attention and research.

Working with our research questions allowed us to come to the conclusion that the power dynamics of the changing international arena is multifaceted, which requests a critical geopolitical approach to shed light on its complexities, amongst which we find the importance of soft power and cultural diplomacy both as useful approaches and tools. The analysis of Hungary-BRICS relations enriches our understanding of Hungary's foreign policy shifts, highlighting its evolving priorities, strategic ambitions and adaptive responses to the changing international landscape. Through this lens, the paper reveals that BRICS states as much as Hungary, with its aspirations to forge closer ties with BRICS, use soft power to widen and strengthen their engagements. State scholarships have been placed high on the political agendas and can prove Nye's predicament about 'smart power' (Nye 2004: 32), which in fact is about how to combine hard and soft power to enhance the positions of the given actor in the international system. Offering such opportunities to foreign publics can contribute to 'winning the hearts and minds' and to building support constituencies for the Hungarian interest abroad – former graduates undoubtedly cultivate ties with their alma maters and host countries and can, therefore, function as real actors of furthering bilateral relations. Hungary's relations with members of the BRICS have dynamically developed and showed the evolving context of rather this 'smart power' approach than the formerly evident pragmatism the country strived for. As a next step, the deeper investigation between smart power and pragmatism in international relations may contribute to a better understanding of the changing world order, which cannot neglect the growing voices of the countries of the Global South.

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India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics

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Abstract

For a long time, countries in Central Europe (CE) were caught in the structural rivalry of East and West, and Indian policy towards the region too remained passive. The end of the Cold War preoccupied India and the CE region alike, focusing on their economic transformation and recalibrating their respective foreign policies. India, however, with its rising political and economic clout, began an active pursuit of multialignment and thereby seeks a greater strategic engagement with the CE region. The shifting geopolitical landscape has made it inevitable to look at Europe beyond its traditional focus on the UK, France and Germany. Moreover, the steady growth trajectories of India and CE make a strong case for strengthening the bilateral partnership through enhanced political, economic and diplomatic investment. The paper thus explores the changing contours of India-Central Europe relations and avenues of cooperation where both sides could partner in building their domestic capacities and resilience. It argues that India needs to better its diplomatic outreach to CE and explain its distinct security and threat perceptions and strategic ambivalence on the Russia-Ukraine War. While China is a formidable rival with its expanding footprint, India can leverage its image as a safer and reliable economic partner. Likewise, the CE countries are keen to engage with India to widen their profile beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

Introduction

Walter Russell Mead's essay published in 2014 in *Foreign Affairs* described the Russian annexation of Crimea as a jolt to the false sense of security that had long comforted the US and Europe after the end of the Cold War. For what was being hailed as 'the end of history' and creation of an everlasting liberal order turned out to be a temporary post–Cold War geopolitical settlement (Mead 2014). The prophecy of liberal democracy subsuming rivalries and paving way for peace and development soon fell apart as revisionist powers like Russia and China began challenging the status quo. International politics is witnessing a revival of the zero-sum game as regional geopolitical rivalries take centre stage. Russia's armed attack on Ukraine, the war in Gaza and China's assertive moves have upset the traditional balance of military power triggering instability and creating an unpredictable landscape of risks posed to the US-led global order. Europe finds itself in a quagmire that has once again intensified debate on military preparedness. The full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 has not only caused a rift between the East and the West but also exposed the divisiveness within Europe, with Germany and France fearing a nuclear escalation while Poland and Hungary fear occupation (Krastev 2023). Central Europe has long been trying to preserve its unique culture and civilisation against conquest and invasions. Revolutions in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War symbolised this fight for identity and Europeanness (Kundera 1984). The Russia-Ukraine War has vindicated the apprehensions of Central European countries (CECs) who had been forewarning this threat from Russia.

Another important development that needs attention against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, is the role of rising and non-Western powers. Described as the new Cold War, the current security situation in Europe has pitted major powers like United States, China and Russia in an ideological confrontation and has simultaneously brought to the limelight the growing influence of powers like India, Brazil, Japan, Indonesia and Türkiye in international relations. Russia's announcement of a 'no-limits partnership' with China has led to a competition among states to seek new alignments to secure their security and economic interests in a dynamic geopolitical chessboard. These states are devising independent strategies based on the specific issue at hand, and are therefore more flexible and pragmatic in making informed policy choices through multialignment (Cohen 2023). They refuse to be bracketed within the democracy vs. autocracy coalition and are willing to shape the global agenda suited to their national objectives. Without the binding ideological constraints,

the rising powers are free to exercise their agency. These are not part of a cohort with similar characteristics, rather the common feature of their foreign policy is the use of a transactional approach aimed at maximising their sovereign interests (Aydıntaşbaş et. al 2023).

While maintaining a close alignment with the US, countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan also prefer de-risking rather than de-coupling their relations with Beijing because of their economic and technological dependence on China. At the same time, they are exploring options to shore up critical dependencies as their room for manoeuvre becomes limited because of the intensifying Sino-US rivalry (Aydıntaşbaş et. al 2023). The traditional allies of the US from the Gulf region, Saudi Arabi and the UAE, are keeping all options open in a multipolar order. Although Chinese investments and influence have made deep inroads in regions like Africa, Latin America and Central Asia and these countries are adopting hedging strategies to consolidate their sovereignty. Thus, in a fragmented world with complex interdependencies, states are embracing strategic partnerships with different regional actors to increase supply chain resilience and reduce their traditional dependencies amid economic uncertainties. A scramble for like-minded partners during an international crisis, their lucrative markets, a dynamic skilled workforce and rich reserves of natural resources underscore the political and economic importance of these rising powers. The shifting distribution of power has created new opportunities and provided these countries a substantial leverage to advance their strategic interests.

India's rising economic profile has garnered significant attention and has added to its geopolitical clout with the West keen to engage India for shaping the order in the Indo-Pacific region. There has been a marked shift in India's foreign policy since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. He appointed S. Jaishankar as the country's foreign secretary in 2015. During his second term in office in 2019, Modi further elevated him to minster of external affairs. With Jaishankar taking over the command of India's foreign relations, there is a perceptible quest to target 'mutual interests' and embark on a path of multialignment in order to seek maximum benefits. India's assertive foreign policy anchored in strategic autonomy is articulated with the objective of 'management of differences' and 'pragmatic settlement' (Jaishankar 2020) while navigating geopolitical turbulence. In 2014, India abstained on the UN Resolutions against Moscow for its attack on Crimea. New Delhi's reticence on the issue is attributed to its long-standing relationship with Russia and thus it is deftly balancing its interests between Russia and the West.

In contemporary context, New Delhi has gained significant strategic value for the West and is on a geopolitical centre stage (Kumar 2023). India is making concerted efforts to reach out to diverse players and to expand cooperation with regional and sub-regional entities like the EU, ASEAN, Nordic Council, etc. Cen-

tral Europe has long been an area of competing influence among major powers. It serves as NATO's eastern flank, a transit hub linking Europe with the Caucasus, West Asia and Central Asia, and a logistics hub for aid to Ukraine (Czyżak & Theisen 2024). The CE region thus assumes significance amid the evolving regional and global dynamics and has acquired a renewed emphasis in India's foreign policy imagination and geostrategy. The usual tendency to treat the region as a subset of the Soviet empire eschews the possibility of harnessing its economic potential in contemporary times (Jain 2021). From once sharing a close equation during the Cold War period, both India and CE lost touch as their respective priorities made them look towards other important players. For India, it meant a gradual cosying up to the West, and for Central Europe preoccupation with their immediate neighbourhood to improve prospects of getting EU membership became a paramount concern. The paper thus discusses the emerging contours of India's engagement with the countries of CE. It analyses the vicissitudes of India-CE relations against a historical backdrop and captures the shifts in New Delhi's posturing towards this region. The paper proceeds into the following sections: the first section provides an overview of India's pursuit of strategic autonomy by following a multi-vector foreign policy. It outlines the rationale for India's diplomacy on the Ukraine crisis and how it is trying to maintain some equilibrium in its ties with the West and Russia. The second section traces the historical dimensions of India-CE relations which at one point in time were quite vibrant but became lacklustre after the end of the Cold War due to newfound circumstances. The third section examines the Russia factor in India's engagement with the CE region. The fourth section argues that recent transformations in the international landscape have made a strong case for reinvigorating India-CE ties. The last section puts together the concluding observations.

The Ukraine crisis and India's multi-vector foreign policy

Scholars have described countries like India, Brazil, Türkiye and Indonesia as 'swing states' because of their flexible approach to the international order. These countries promise impressive economic growth and have a vital stake in the global trade and investment regime. With an expanding geographic scope of interests, they could decisively steer the trajectory of the current international order. They are expected to share new global responsibilities and thus it is in their larger interest to avoid a major upset in the existing scheme of things that arrests their momentum of steadily rising economies (Kliman & Fontaine 2012). India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar calls India a 'bridging power' who is pursuing a 'multi-vector' policy to seek like-minded partners and build a common ground on major global challenges (Peri 2024).

It is important to understand the predicament of non-Western powers who do not wish to choose sides. For them, the Western approach on the Ukraine ques-

tions speaks of double standards as the same is not applied while condemning Israel's use of brute force in Gaza. Thus, selective invocation of rules-based order does not hold ground with the non-Western powers who continue to define their national policies on their own terms. Moreover, while respecting Ukraine's right to territorial integrity, a lot of these countries haven't severed ties with Moscow. For example, Türkiey has sent arms to Ukraine and initiated the Black Sea Grain Initiative to get Ukrainian agricultural supplies to world markets without sanctioning Russia (Ero 2023).

The consequences of the Kremlin's military operation against Ukraine have reverberated far beyond the region. The structural rivalry with the West has further intensified as NATO becomes stronger with the membership from previously neutral Scandinavian states like Sweden and Finland. The CE region acquires strategic significance as a theatre of action where great powers have locked horns to hold or expand their influence. China is making deeper inroads into the region through its 17+1 cooperation format and heavy aid and investments. Washington and its allies are countering this assertiveness through gathering like-minded partners who are supporters of the rules-based order. On the other, Moscow and Beijing's strategic goal is to push towards greater multipolarity in order to challenge US hegemony. India's rising global clout and its different nature of relations with Russia and China therefore puts it in a salient position to shape the emerging order.

India is treading carefully on the Ukraine issue too as it advocates for diplomatic solutions and cessation of military hostilities, while also protecting its special ties with Russia by abstaining from those UN war resolutions which mostly condemn Russia's military action (Vardhan 2024). A lot of non-Western powers like India, China and Brazil therefore did not see the logic of imposing sanctions on Russia on the pretext of rules-based international order. The G20 communiqué adopted at the New Delhi Summit in September 2023 echoed the need to secure strategic consensus among the global leaders and therefore did not mention the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Lynch & Ward 2023). For India, the rationale behind the emerging Sino-Russian entente is that Moscow has been constrained because Western sanctions made it turn towards Asia, especially China (Chakraborty 2024). Washington's portrayal of Russia and China forming an authoritarian axis therefore doesn't appeal to India (Ollapally 2022). India is therefore walking a diplomatic tightrope, balancing its interests between its all-weather friend and the regional rival. This articulation of strategic autonomy has been New Delhi's consistent approach to navigate such complex situations. It also illustrates how India is learning to craft a fine balance between sticking to the traditional tenets of its foreign policy and protecting its core strategic interests amid the shifting sands of geopolitics.

Over the past few decades, India-US relations have seen an upward momentum. However, that doesn't necessarily imply that this burgeoning partnership

comes at the cost of New Delhi's long-standing ties with Moscow. India's defence modernisation is growing leaps and bounds and that has made the country turn towards the US, France, Israel and other European players to fill the gap where Russia could not pitch in. At the same time, Russia provides platforms and technologies and does not threaten India with sanctions and restrictions under laws like Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) (Sibal 2022). The current geopolitical flux gives India a flexible policy space rather than treating bilateral relations as exclusive. India is not comfortable with China's idea of a multipolar world that is based on antagonism with the West (Panda 2022). It rather stresses inclusivity and cooperation in a multipolar global order where it wields influence and independence.

Geopolitical uncertainty has forced states to step out of their comfort zone and India is not an exception. There has been a flurry of diplomatic visits between India and CECs which underscores India's keenness to revive the dormant ties and engage on critical issues of security, economy, energy and climate change. While its traditional dependence on Russian military supplies will not completely end given the low cost of arms imports and a long-standing comfortable equation, there is surely a quest to find new countries to fill this gap. It is here that the CE region can offer interesting prospects. There has been an intense diplomatic engagement with New Delhi by most major European powers to defuse the crisis. However, the CE region is yet to make an active outreach. Representatives of Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia have only visited India as part of the Raisina Dialogue[1] (Bornio & Poojary 2022). The CECs have not been able to pay much attention to India despite the latter's elevating status in global affairs. Lack of knowledge about the complementarity of interests and potential avenues of cooperation has been an obstacle in building a robust partnership.

India and Central Europe: A historical connect

India's relations with the CE region have been shaped by several key factors such as the long-standing people-to-people connect, a synergy of political ideas and economic models, the advancement of science and technology, a vibrant business community and educational and institutional collaborations. There was a deep interest in Indology which led to the establishment of the Sanskrit Chair at Prague's Charles University in 1850 and centres for the study of the Indian culture were

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1   The Raisina Dialogue is a multilateral conference organised by the Observer Research Foundation in partnership with India's Ministry of External Affairs. Hosted annually in New Delhi since 2016, the multi-stakeholder dialogue brings together heads of state, cabinet ministers and local government officials, as well as leaders from the private sector, media, civil society and academia to discuss pressing issues related to foreign policy and strategic affairs. It has become a flagship event to enhance India's diplomatic engagement.

established at Krakow, Warsaw and Budapest (Lukaszuk 2020). Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore's visit to Hungary in 1926 marked a significant milestone in the Indo-Hungarian cultural relations. Several of Tagore's literary works were translated in Hungarian and later he too hosted Hungarian scholars and artists like Ferenc Balázs, Ervin Baktay, Gyula Germanus, Erzsébet Sas-Brunner and her daughter Erzsébet Brunner[2] at his University in Shantiniketan (Szenkovics 2019).

Apart from a strong cultural connect, there were deep political exchanges especially during India's freedom struggle. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had been closely following events in Czechoslovakia and was inspired by the revolutionary movement. Similarly, Czech newspapers and radio made frequent references to Gandhi and Indian National Congress (INC) (Krasa 1989). The INC too was unequivocal in its opposition to the Nazi regime and stood by their friends in Central Europe during the crisis in 1938. In 1934, with the establishment of the Indo-Czech Association in 1934, the two sides witnessed a vibrant diplomatic and cultural exchange with visits of Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose. Further. Czech Indologist Vincenc Lesný published prolific writings on India's independence movement (Vavroušková 2008).

Following India's independence in 1947, several high-level state visits took place between India and Hungary leading to the signing of the Indo-Hungarian Exchange Programme in 1962, giving a further boost to the bilateral ties through academic and institutional networks and people-to-people contact. Institutions like the Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre (New Delhi), Amrita Sher-Gil Cultural Centre (Budapest) and the Hungarian–Indian Friendship Society have organised several literary and cultural events like film screenings, exhibitions, etc. and have thus served an instrumental role in building a cultural connect between the two countries.

During Nehru's visit to Poland in 1955, Warsaw and New Delhi endorsed the Panchsheel doctrine in their joint statement. Nehru later invited Polish economist Oskar Lange to discuss the emerging contours of the Third World development politics. Lange and other Polish economists like Michał Kalecki and Ignacy Sachs were instrumental in setting up the Warsaw Center of Research on Underdeveloped Economies in New Delhi that trained several academics and experts from Asia, Africa and Latin America and developed a global social science (Mazurek 2018: 609). Nehru was particularly fascinated by Poland's new experimentation with a market-oriented planning approach which found resonance with India's mixed economy model. For Poland, India provided a looking glass to understand the decolonising world as an intellectual site of reflection on global underdevelopment (Mazurek 2018: 599). During the late 1950s, the Soviet Union had embarked

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2   Erzsébet Sas-Brunner was conferred the Padma Shri award in 1985 by the Indian government for her artistic performance.

on the de-Stalinisation of its foreign and economic policies, thus eschewing the vision of camp politics and economic orthodoxy. This was the time the Soviet bloc mooted the idea of 'peaceful co-existence' to chart an independent course that would enable a competitive yet non-aligned strategy to cope with decolonisation (James & Leake 2015). India and Poland thus found a common ground in steering the Third World development agenda and forging transnational networks to initiate a fresh discourse on modernisation. There was a mutual recognition among the Indian and Polish academic community to reflect on the developmental challenges in the decolonised nations and to search for new ways to ameliorate the conditions of rural poor around the world. There was a vibrant exchange of intellectual ideas between Indian and Polish scholars and policymakers that contributed to forging transnational circuits of knowledge, thus cutting across bloc politics and super power rivalry (Mazurek 2018: 608). With this emerging bonhomie, diplomatic relations between New Delhi and Warsaw entered into a new phase.

Nehru's reading of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was attributed to economic woes resulting from large-scale industrialisation and skewed development that had caused unemployment and food scarcity. New Delhi abstained on several resolutions on Hungary at the UN, questioning the call for holding elections under UN supervision. It was similar to the posture India had adopted on the Kashmir question arising from the fear of foreign interreference in a sovereign country that violates the UN Charter. Hungary and Poland initially did not expressly support India's stance towards the Chinese aggression in 1962. However, Moscow's attitude began gradually shifting towards New Delhi and the CECs thereby followed suit, denouncing the Chinese action against India. Later, Nehru's daughter and former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi too refrained from condemning the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 in the wake of the special nature of relations between India and the Soviet Union (Appadorai 1969). The military invasion of Czechoslovakia also caused a rift within the Communist Party of India. Towards the 1970s, there was a growing political and economic engagement between the East European countries and developing countries owing to Third World solidarity. The economic woes necessitated a shift in the strategy which made the rapidly industrialising Central European economies tap new markets for their exports and source cheap raw materials (Jain 2024). Several bilateral agreements were inked during this period and India's economic and technical cooperation with the CECs grew leaps and bounds in sectors such as ship-building, telecommunications, metallurgy, oil extracting and refining, coal mining and power generation (Kaushik 1985). Czechoslovakia was instrumental in extending assistance in the expansion of the Soviet-built heavy electrical plants while Romania aided the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) in setting up an oil refinery in Assam. Bulgaria and Hungary also helped build chemical and

pharmaceutical plants (Kaushik 1985). The period also engaged dialogue between the political elites of the two sides exchanging notes on salient issues like nuclear disarmament, balance of payment crisis, etc. India and Yugoslavia, as the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), also contributed to CE's favourable posturing towards New Delhi. The CECs were also supportive of India's stand during the crucial moments of the India-Pakistan conflict (Zajączkowski 2006).

The decades of mutual trust and bonhomie that India enjoyed with the CE region saw a dramatic shift in the 1990s as both India and CECs were compelled to make adjustments in their domestic and foreign policy in view of the new geopolitical realities in the aftermath of the Cold War. CECs had begun to seek a closer alignment with the European Union, leaving New Delhi bereft of the taken-for-granted approach on the political and moral support on various international issues. This growing chasm in India-CE relations was illustrated by the latter's criticism of India's nuclear tests in 1998, human rights violations in Kashmir and the insurgency in Punjab. Meanwhile, India too was recalibrating its foreign policy to improve relations with the West. With Europe, it meant elevating the predominantly development and economic cooperation to a strategic partnership. Economic cooperation remained a cornerstone of India-Europe ties as foreign direct investment and transfer of technology were key to transforming India into a free market (Zajączkowski 2006). The shifting geopolitics thus made India and CE drift away from each other as became evident from the diminishing trade and investment statistics. India was preoccupied with its Look East Policy and the CECs too confined themselves to the neighbourhood and Asia fell out of their focus area. The previous decades, which had witnessed a rich intellectual, diplomatic, cultural and economic cooperation, had now given way to a loss of mutual focus owing to new foreign policy priorities. Moreover, for both India and CE, this changed foreign policy outlook was driven by the domestic imperatives to ensure internal stability, liberalise the economy and attract foreign investors. As both were wooing the developed nations, India and the CECs in fact became competitors.

Elephant in the room: The Russia factor in India-CE relations

Towards the end of the Cold War, India–Soviet Union ties started showing signs of strain in the face of the rules of realpolitik and a fast-eroding objective base (Kaushik 1985). After decades of relying on Soviet assistance to build its infrastructure and military prowess, there was a pronounced tilt towards the West to seek technological support. Over the years, however, the bilateral relations have remained steadfast in the face of geopolitical transformations and are firmly rooted in historical connections and a strategic convergence over the vision of a multipolar global order. At the same time, New Delhi has demonstrated discretion and a nuanced approach to balancing its equation with Moscow and the West.

On the Ukraine crisis, India has tried its best to accommodate Russia while upholding the primacy of dialogue and diplomacy. In 2024, the two sides registered a jump of 33 percent in trade from 2023 and are also holding talks on joint production of military equipment. There is also an investment treaty and signing of a free trade agreement with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union on the cards (The Hindu 2024). At the Raisina Dialogue 2024, the European ministerial contingent (which comprised a majority of delegates from the CE region including Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Albania and Bosnia) urged India to reconsider trade relations with Russia, and to press the case for Ukraine's sovereignty (Haider 2024). However, India's long standing strategic relationship with Russia has been a major reason why India has avoided criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A major importer of Russian arms, New Delhi has also received Moscow's support on the Kashmir question. India's subtle handling of the situation speaks of its complex nature of relations with Russia which prevents it from an unequivocal condemnation of Russia's action. The official position reiterates respect for the UN Charter; however, India maintains a strategic ambivalence and therefore does not outrightly call out Russia. Indian strategic thinking is very much governed by the logic of being friends with Moscow to prevent it from getting close to China and Pakistan (Bornio & Poojary 2022).

However, Russia's political and economic isolation in the aftermath of the February 2022 armed invasion is making it tilt towards China and thus several challenges would complicate India-Russia ties (Ganguly 2022). For instance, Western sanctions have barred several Russian defence companies from international markets (Detsch & Gramer 2022). Delays in supplies have made India explore alternative sources. CECs offer a potential substitute for Russian spare parts, tanks, armoured vehicles and aircrafts (Warren & Ganguly 2022). Moreover, the growing proximity between Russia and China could play a spoilsport for India's calculations which is turning to forums like the Quad. India's import of Russian oil at a discounted price has upset Western officials and commentators who call out India for taking 'sweet deals' from an otherwise diplomatically isolated Russia (Ollapally 2022). While India has benefitted from this deal, sustaining a lucrative energy partnership between the two may not be easy because of the geographic hurdles and infrastructural constraints. Russia's 'energy blackmail' has led the CE states to diversify supply routes (Slakaityte & Surwillo 2024). The announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the New Delhi G20 summit adds another opportunity to invest in India-CE relations. Partly funded by the EU's Global Gateway initiative, the ambitious project aims to rival China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While viability challenges remain for these logistic corridors to offer cost-effective and functional routes, it does signify efforts to further boost the current trend of transactional partnerships (Inamdar 2023). Thus, IMEC could also be a channel for India and CECs to come together in facilitating

sustainable infrastructure development and improving supply-chain resilience. It would also be helpful in mitigating potential risks stemming from economic dependencies on Russia and China (Dacey & Bianco 2023).

At the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum held in June 2022, Jaishankar argued that 'Europe has to grow out of the mindset that its problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems aren't Europe's problems' (Chaudhary 2022). The Ukraine war is a test case for the global order and rising powers like India are setting the terms of global engagement. The crisis has further underscored India's desire for multialignment in a dynamic geopolitical constellation.

Engaging Central European countries: A new raison d'être

Chaudhuri (2021) argues that India's relations with Central Europe can be divided into three distinct phases: the Soviet era which was (and continues to be) the dominant lens to understand these ties, the post–Cold War period when there was a complete disconnect owing to new priorities and then the post Brexit phase, when India's rising economic clout enabled a revival of interest on both sides. The Russia-Ukraine War has further altered the context of this engagement as dynamics have changed with both India and CECs keen to reduce their traditional dependence on Russia and thus seek new partnerships.

Indian foreign direct investment diversified and picked up momentum after the mid-2000s as Indian multinationals began expanding their operations in knowledge and technology driven sectors such as pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, steel production and automotive industries. The CE region also saw an upward swing in investments post liberalisation phase due to their geographical proximity acting as gateway to western European markets with advanced technological availabilities (Gerőcs 2018). Indian investors pursued a deliberate strategy to target smaller and peripheral economies before making entry into large and competitive markets (Ramamurti 2012). After the eastward enlargement of the EU in 2004, there was an expectation that India would benefit from the new markets. *The Polish Strategy towards Non-European Countries* (2004) did identify India as a 'priority' (Jain 2024). However, a lack of awareness about trade and business opportunities on both sides diminished prospects of cooperation. This was also attributed to low levels of research among trading and industry organisations, inadequate business networking and promotion events, few connectivity options via air routes and visa and consular arrangements (FICCI 2004: 5). The Indian business community thus missed out on the golden opportunity that the CECs accession to the EU brought forth and continued to deal with the member states on a bilateral basis rather than treating the EU as a common trade entity (Jain 2021).

Following the global economic meltdown of 2007–09 and to reduce its dependence on the EU-15, Hungary announced its Eastern Opening policy in 2012. This was meant to attract investments from Asian countries like China and India owing

to Hungary's conducive geographical location, which would facilitate logistics and transportation to the markets of the Asian and post-Soviet states (Völgyi & Lukács 2021). In the mid-2010s, Central Europe emerged as 'a strategically important place on the global economic map' and was the threshold of economic resurgence (FICCI 2015). The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) identified Switzerland, Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic as crucial markets for pharmaceuticals, automobiles, textiles, nanotechnology, etc. Hungary had already established a marked presence in the Indian IT and defence sector while several Indian BPO companies had set up their offices in Poland. TCS set up its first overseas Global Delivery Centre in Budapest in 2001. The Hungarian Government and TCS Hungary concluded a strategic cooperation agreement in 2013 (Völgyi & Lukács 2021). The CII report also noted that Slovakia's geographical location could be of great advantage for transportation and connectivity (CII & Deolite 2014). Despite these positive signs and high quality exports, Indian firms could not compete with China's aggressive pitching towards the CEE region.

In 2013, Prime Minister Viktor Orban visited New Delhi and Mumbai along with a 100-member delegation. During this visit several MoUs were signed on Traditional Systems of Medicine, Cooperation in the areas of Defensive Aspects of Microbiological and Radiological Detection and Protection and Cultural Exchange Programme (Embassy of India, Budapest 2024). In 2014, a steering committee was set up comprising officials from the Indian government, from Central European embassies in India and representatives from the Indian industry. The idea was to foster a better understanding of mutual business opportunities through a structured business dialogue. During his visit to the Czech Republic in 2018, the then Indian President Ram Nath Kovind urged the Czech defence companies to set up joint ventures with the Indian defence manufacturing sector. The two sides also signed MoUs between the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, India and the Czech Academy of Sciences related to visa waiver agreements for diplomatic passport holders and support for Indo-Czech projects in diverse areas of science and technology. A MoU was also signed between the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and ELI Beamlines in the field of laser technology (The Economic Times 2018). Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar's visit to Poland in 2019 wasn't followed by concrete initiatives to take forward the bilateral cooperation.

The CE countries with their large qualified workforce make an attractive destination for Indian companies to host key manufacturing activities that reflect a 'near-shoring approach' (Milelli 2016). A significant number among them are members of the WTO and EU Customs Union which makes it easy for a foreign company to carry out economic ventures in a rule-based framework (Goyal & Mukherjee 2012). Developed infrastructure and technological excellence and economic competencies were an added advantage for forging partnerships. In January 2020, the Czech government announced an expansion in quota for fast-

track visas for highly skilled professionals from India and also agreed to facilitate movement of Indian students and researchers through Project Student (Embassy of India, Prague 2024). Since their accession to the EU, most of the CECs have made rapid progress in upgrading from a developing to developed market status. But they are also facing demographic challenges in the form of aging populations and low fertility rates resulting in labour shortages. Facing an acute crunch in their domestic labour markets, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria have open doors to foreign workers in the farming, construction and service sectors (Harper 2024). India is a major source of skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers who are in great demand overseas. An enhanced public diplomacy and outreach is required to support policy initiatives that enhance student mobility programmes, mutual recognition of degrees and skills, and attracting talent in important sectors like healthcare, IT, science & technology, etc. There exists a sizeable opportunity for India and CE countries to expand the scope for cooperation in sectors like clean technologies, handling of radioactive waste, cyber-security, e-commerce and development of smart cities (ORF 2020). Indian companies like Infosys, TCS, WIPRO, Apollo Tyres, Sun Pharmaceuticals, HCL, Orion Electronics Ltd. and Tech Mahendra have made a prominent presence in the CEE region. Kugiel and Upadhyay (2014: 5) argue that 'there is a need for business groups from CEE to become stronger in the India-EU economic interactions through formal mechanisms and ad hoc initiatives'.

The increasing number of high-level visits from India to the CE region indicates a well-chalked out strategy to re-engage with a once neglected area which has now become geo-strategically important in New Delhi's strategic calculus (Sachdeva 2018). This stands in contrast to the earlier 'perfunctory rather than consistent' approach (Singh 2018). However, what has been notably evident in India's dealings with the CECs is the lack of a dedicated and integrative outreach unlike what the New Delhi has devised in the case of the Nordic region. At present, India lacks a coherent Indian strategy towards Central Europe and that creates space for China to expand its footprint in the region (Jedrzejowska & Wróbel 2021). China deserves credit for creating an institutionalised template for regional cooperation. The launch of '17 + 1' in 2011 is a case in point in efforts to build a synergised outlook towards a region in the context of the BRI. This grouping of all the 16 CEECs was missing in the EU and NATO enlargement (Smith & Kavalski, 2010). Despite their distinct historical experience and approach towards post-communist development, the first time these countries were brought together to develop a shared regional understanding was under the 17 + 1 (Kavalski 2020).

The Visegrad-4 (V4) has emerged as an active foreign policy to engage with issues beyond Europe. They have also extended it to the 'V4+' format where regular summits have been organised with Japan (since 2013), South Korea (since 2015) and Israel (since 2017) (Kugiel 2024: 338). Along with the bilateral mechanisms,

India and CECs should institutionalise exchange through the V4 format to bolster regional cooperation. The regular India-V4 summits would help in steering the global agenda. Poland is heading the V4 from July 2024 for a year and will also hold the EU Presidency in 2025. This could be an opportune moment for India to elevate not only the bilateral relations but also to push for stronger engagement with the CE region on various issues including cooperation on multilateral initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) (Kugiel 2024).

In 2022, China's Y-20 transport planes delivered a sophisticated anti-aircraft system to Serbia, which was flown in under semi-secret conditions. In May 2024, Serbia (an EU Candidate country) became the first country in Europe to sign an agreement with China to build a 'shared future'. Chinese firms are building highways and rail and road networks across the Balkan nation and also run Serbia's biggest copper mine and steel factories. In 2014, Hungary and Serbia entered into an agreement with China to modernise the railway link between Budapest and Belgrade, to connect with the Chinese-controlled port of Piraeus in Greece. While China has stepped up its engagement with the CE region, there remains some scepticism about the delivery of its promises. The CE countries showed visible signs of drifting away from China through project cancellations, critical statements and improving ties with Taiwan and joining the US Clean Network, an initiative to address threats to data privacy, security and human rights posed by authoritarian countries (The Print 2022).

As Russia inches closer to China, both India and CECs are trying to eschew path dependence and seek greater commonality of interests. Sustainable connectivity offers one such arena where India could provide a normative leadership in collaboration with the EU (Jaishankar 2018). Moreover, to counter China's expanding footprint, India needs to step up its engagement with the V4 platform as these countries rank high on the Human Development Index and have demonstrated impressive growth trajectories in recent years (Chaudhary 2019). While it will be tough for India to match China's economic might, it could still offer the CECs a potential alternative as a safer and reliable economic partner. There are favourable indications of this, such as Poland opening a branch of its investment agency in Mumbai, and a new direct flight between Warsaw and New Delhi (Lidarev 2020). In January 2024, Czechia became the first country in Central Europe to sign a strategic partnership with India. The mounting Western pressure against Russia and China would put India in a better spot for the CE region. The V4 countries are equally keen to woo India as they see it as an attractive destination and therefore willing to provide technological support to facilitate India's infrastructural development, infrastructure for sanitation and agro-processing (Kugiel 2024: 335).

After a long hiatus, the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Poland and Ukraine in August 2024 came at a crucial juncture as India balances its geopolitical interests

in the region. An Indian PM visited Poland after 45 years and Modi also became the first Indian PM to visit Ukraine. This was seen by many as bold diplomatic posturing by a leader from the Global South to raise concerns about the impact of conflict on poor nations (Bisaria 2024). Moreover, this also underscores India's commitment to deepen its strategic engagement with Europe as a whole and also focus on different sub-regions to cater to its economic interests as well (Pant 2024). While the prospect of New Delhi being a peace mediator may sound unrealistic, India's recent warzone diplomacy does contribute to an active effort towards peaceful resolution of the conflict.

In the context of the current geopolitical situation, the CECs have the opportunity to exercise greater influence in the EU and shape its foreign policy agenda. With increasing investments in defence, the region is strengthening its military prowess as Poland intends to commit four percent of its GDP annually to defence (The Economic Times 2023). Herein, a robust relationship with India would be mutually beneficial to make use of emerging economic opportunities and partner in steering the global agenda. Additionally, India and the CECs can explore the Indo-Pacific as a potential area for collaboration as both India and the EU have emerging interests in the region with respect to upholding a rule-based order and also a plethora of security and economic opportunities. India is pursuing across-the-spectrum bilateral engagements with states that have significant stakes in Indo-Pacific stability, and is also working with trilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral forums (Panda 2022).

Conclusion

As traditional resources deplete, future crises will lead to a fierce competition among states to secure supply chains. There will be an avid interest in exploration of critical minerals and rare earth metals and also access to cutting-edge technology to stay superior. Multipolarity and rebalancing military power is likely to cause greater uncertainty about state behaviour and diplomatic disputes and standoffs can escalate to dangerous levels causing further instability. Countries therefore need to develop resilience against newer challenges and risks posed by environmental degradation, economic shocks, pandemics and artificial intelligence. These are likely to create new fault lines and geopolitical tensions.

The Russia-Ukraine War has been a wake-up call for states to craft a delicate balance between economic interests and geopolitical considerations, which emphasise the importance of diplomatic efforts for conflict resolution. Also, states are prioritising economic statecraft to secure their core geopolitical interests. It is in this context that after a long hiatus, India has begun beckoning the CE region, realising the untapped potential that these countries hold. The CECs have witnessed a remarkable economic transformation and have a lot to offer to a fast growing economy like India. New Delhi's close historical relations with the

CECs are of added advantage to regain the lost momentum and push for greater cooperation and convergence in strategic outlook. The CECs can benefit from the intellectual calibre and skill-sets of the Indian workforce and India could target the region to tap niche technologies in different sectors like infrastructure, health and education. India and the CECs need to identify complementarities rather than exacting competitive leverages (ORF 2020). New Delhi's clear articulation of the 'India First' narrative illustrates that in its commitment to a rules-based order, it refuses to tag along the anti-West propaganda and is also not hesitant to make new friends to navigate the fast-changing geopolitical landscape.

<p style="text-align:center">∿</p>

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The Growing Relations between India and the Baltic States in a New Geopolitical Environment

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Abstract

The Baltic states, positioned as a conduit between Eastern and Western Europe, possess considerable geopolitical importance for numerous nations globally, including India. India views the Baltic states as a strategic entry point to Western and Northern Europe, offering significant opportunities to strengthen India's ties with the Eastern and Northern European regions. The looming China threat for India and the Baltic states and the growing concentration of power in the Indo-Pacific region have also heightened India's significance for the Baltic states. In the aforementioned framework, the significance of the relations between India and the Baltic states is underscored by cultural affinity and exchange, geopolitical importance and mutual respect. The connections between India and the Baltic states are driven by three fundamental elements: the political, social and economic. This study will analyse the three key components and the changing dynamics between India and the Baltic states since the resurgence of the Baltic states. This study also explores further avenues for collaboration to enhance India's involvement with the Baltic states, as well as how the imminent risk of China is compelling India and the Baltic states to forge a closer partnership.

Introduction

The year 1991 was an important year for India and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) as the Baltic states were freeing themselves from the clutches of its imperial neighbour and India was changing its economic system from state-driven to market-driven. The Baltic states were in the process of establishing themselves on the world map and India was consolidating its position from an underdeveloped state to a vital state in the world order.

After regaining their independence, the Baltic states rejoined the international community and built a policy to move toward Europe to save their nation from the potential threat of expansionist Russia. Therefore, immediately after the independence, they signed various multilateral agreements with European nations and also became part of various multilateral groups and institutions. In 2004, they became part of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to secure both their economic and security interest. India views the Baltic states as a strategic entry point to Western and Northern Europe, offering significant opportunities to strengthen India's ties with the Eastern and Northern European regions (Chadha 2020). The looming China threat for India and the Baltic states and the growing concentration of power in the Indo-Pacific region have also heightened India's significance for the Baltic states (Grare & Reuter 2021).

The relations between India and the Baltic states are underscored by cultural affinity and exchange, geopolitical importance and mutual respect. The connections between India and the Baltic states have been driven by three fundamental elements: the political, social and economic. This study analyses these three key components and the changing dynamics between India and the Baltic states since the resurgence of the Baltic states. Now the question arises as to why these three components are important in bilateral relations between India and the Baltic states.

Political, cultural and economic components are the basic foundation of bilateral relations between nations or regions because they build a structure of cooperation, coordination and common values. It also shapes the dialogue between nations and influences, everything from diplomatic negotiations to trade agreements. Diplomatic tactics, political systems, ideology and governance styles are some of the major tools of the political component. Political components in bilateral relations are important because political stability and strategic interest help in the formation of stronger ties, while political differences can lead to rivalry or even conflicts (Waltz 1979). Political cooperation also enhances

the international transaction which leads to economic stability and growth (Keohane 1984). The economic component in bilateral relations is tangled with political, social and security dynamics. It creates a thread of interdependence that minimises the chances of conflict because the economically intertwined states have a vested interest in maintaining peaceful relations (Keohane & Nye 1977). Political relations not only focus on hard power but also on soft power that influences others through persuasion rather than coercion. Historical ties, common values, language and religion are a vital pillar of cultural components which helps to reduce differences and promote soft power. Cultural exchange and people-to-people contact enhance soft power which leads to cordial and stronger bilateral relations (Nye 2004). Cultural exchange solidifies mutual understanding, shapes national identity and international acceptability, and helps promote international norms and principles (Wendt 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink 1998).

In the above-given context, the study explores the evolution of the relations between India and the Baltic states over the years. However, in the last few years, the geopolitics of the world has changed rapidly with the trade war between the US and China, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the rising border dispute between India and China. Relations between India and the Baltic states have also been touched by the changing geopolitical dynamics. This study explores the key areas where India and the Baltic states' interests are aligned especially connecting the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) with the Indian Ocean in the changing geopolitical scenario. This study also explores further avenues for collaboration to enhance India's involvement with the Baltic states, as well as how the imminent risk of China compels India and the Baltic states to forge a closer partnership.

The method used in this paper is descriptive and analytical. Due to limited scholarly articles and books, the arguments in this article largely rely on statements of government officials and the data they provide. The data collected for this paper is mainly from the official government websites of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and India, and their respective embassies. Personal interviews were also used from 2018 field visits to Kaunas Technology University (KTU) in Lithuania and to the Baltic Center at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India.

Evolution of India and the Baltic states' relations since the end of the Cold War

In 1991, India recognised the independence of all three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and established diplomatic relations with all three nations in 1992. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, India and the Baltic states have maintained cordial and respectful relations which are historically driven by three fundamental components – the political, cultural and economic – which

still play an important role in fostering the bilateral relations between India and the Baltic states (Sharma 2023).

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and the Baltic states, the cooperation between the states has remained below their expectations. For a long time, neither side in their foreign policy documents prioritised enhancing the cooperation between nations, despite having so many opportunities. However, in the last decade, the Baltic states and India have wanted to enhance their cooperation prompted by shared economic interests, cultural exchange and changing geopolitics and strategic interests. The rise of China and its close partnership with Russia in the Eurasian landmass raised security concerns for the Baltic states that compelled Baltic states to work with rising Asian powers, especially with India. India is similarly facing regional security challenges from China, particularly in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific region; therefore, India is also enhancing its European policy by reaching out to the smaller states of North, South, Central and Eastern European nations.

Historical connections and cultural exchange between India and the Baltic states

The Baltic states are newly independent countries and are still in the process of rediscovering and reinventing their civilisation and cultural past to reconstruct their identity to establish themselves on the map of Europe and their important status in the international system. To establish a close cultural link with India, the Baltic states have made sincere attempts to showcase their interest in Indian thought, culture and ideas. The Baltic states showed their interest in Indian ideas during the last phase of the Soviet Union when the Baltic states were leading a freedom movement known as 'The Singing Revolution' and 'The Baltic Way', very much inspired by Gandhi's ideas of Non-violence (Ahinsa) and Satyagraha. Gandhi used these methods to channel the mass movement to free India from the clutches of British colonial rule. Through mass meetings and writing, Gandhi spread the idea of non-violence and Satyagraha as tools of civil resistance to bear the brutal treatment from the British. Baltic freedom fighters also applied the same method against the brutal treatment of the Soviet regime during their freedom movement (Govardhan 2015).

Historical links between the Balts and Indians have not been explored as of now; however, limited available literature and resources suggest that the Baltic states have a solid curiosity towards India and Indology studies. The linguistic similarity between India and Lithuania is conceived as a common thread that links the two states culturally and linguistically. 'Philologists and historians point out the direct connection of the Latvian and Lithuanian languages to ancient Sanskrit, one of the classical languages in India. The Anglo-German ethnologist Max Muller (1833–1900) also identified a link between the Sanskrit "Deva" (deity:

bright or shining one) and the Lithuania "Dievas" or the Latvian "Dievs" (both signifying God)' (Usha 2015: 97).

The Indo-European background of the Balts and the Aryans was first studied by Indian author Suniti Kumar Chatterji in 1967 who said:

> Baltic writers and poets like Andrejs Pumpurs, the Latvian poet who composed the Latvian national epic of Lačplēsis (based on old Latvian ballads and myths and legends) in 1888, and Jānis Rainis (1865–1929), the national poet of Latvia, and writers also from Lithuania, described in glowing terms how the culture and wisdom and even the origin of the Balts was from far-away Asia in the East, from India itself. The Latvian writer, Fr. Malbergis, actually wrote in 1856 that the Latvians like the Russians and Germans came from the banks of the Ganga. Another Latvian writer in 1859 put forward the same view. (Chatterji 1967: 17)

Chatterji goes further and says:

> During the nineteenth century, when the Baltic peoples, the Latvians and the Lithuanians, began to study their national literature of the Dainas and became conscious of their Indo-European heritage, through their study of it from the German Sanskritists who took a leading part in establishing the 'Aryan' or Indo-Germanic or Indo-European bases of the culture of the European peoples, they developed an uncritical and a rather emotional idea that the Baltic peoples came from the East-from Asia-and as they thought, from India too. (ibid)

There is a cultural similarity also found in the historical evidence. Marija Gimbutas (1963: 43) believes that 'over 4,000 years ago the forefathers of the Balts and the Old Indian people lived in the Eurasian steppes'. A custom similar to India called 'sati' was also prevalent in Lithuania. According to Gimbutas,

> The frequent double graves of a man and a woman indicate the custom of self-immolation by the widow. The wife must follow the death of her deceased husband- a custom which continued among Hindus in India (Suttee) into the present century, and in Lithuania is recorded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries A.D. (Gimbutas 1963: 42)

As one of the oldest surviving Indo-European languages, the Lithuanian language exhibits numerous resemblances to Sanskrit, suggesting potential historic connections. Prior to their conversion to Christianity in the 13th century, the inhabitants of Lithuania practiced nature worship. The society worshipped a triad of deities – Perkunas, Patrimpas and Pikuolis. This notion of trinity shares many similarities with Hinduism. Lithuania had its first direct experience of India through the efforts of Lithuanian Christian missionaries who began their service

in India around the 16th century. Vydunas, a prominent Lithuanian philosopher and ideologue of the 19th century, showed a profound fascination in Indian philosophy. In fact, he went so far as to develop his own philosophical system, drawing heavily from the principles of Vedanta. During the 1930s and 1940s, Antanas Poska and Matas Salcius, both Lithuanian travellers, dedicated several years to the study of Sanskrit and Indian culture while also embarking on journeys to explore these subjects.

India has had a long-standing relationship with Estonia for many centuries. E. Eckhold is believed to be the earliest known individual of Estonian descent to have travelled to India, arriving there in the late 17th century. In 1797, the Estonian seafarer A. J. Von Krusen Stern travelled to Madras and Calcutta. The 'Pühhapäiwa Wahhe-luggemissed' ('Sunday Intermediary Readings') by Otto W. Masing, published in 1818, was the earliest Estonian written work to mention India.

In the 19th century, Estonia sent its first missionaries to India, namely A. Nerling (1861–1872) and J. Hesse (1869–1873). Subsequently, a number of additional individuals pursued. The missionaries facilitated the transmission of extensive knowledge about India to Estonia, resulting in the publication of several papers and books. These mostly pertained to the evangelical missionary efforts in India but also encompassed discussions on the caste system, religions, teachings of yoga and Indian classical literature. In 1912, writer Andres Saal made a noteworthy contribution by writing extensive pieces on the Indian epic 'Mahabharata' play, and folk wisdom in the literary magazine 'Olevik' ('The Present') (Embassy of Estonia, New Delhi).

In the early 1800s, the University of Tartu issued numerous publications in Sanskrit. The teaching of Sanskrit began at Tartu University in 1837. K.B Usha, associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, who has worked extensively on India-Baltic states relations and runs the Baltic Studies, says

> Tartu University was home to many world-famous orientalists of Estonia Baltic-German origin. Among them, the renowned scholar of Indian studies Leopold von Schroeder and Buddhologist and Philosopher Hermann Graf Keyserling deserve special mention. Estonian Buddhists played an important role in spreading Buddhism in Europe. The first person who disseminated Buddhism in Estonia was Karlis August M. Tennisons (1873-1962), also known as the Sanghraja of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, the Buddhist Archbishop and the Baltic Mahatma. (Usha 2015: 99)

After regaining independence, the Baltic states showed interest in India's culture, philosophy, myths, etc., which led to the establishment of oriental studies where Indology became one of the important branches of the Baltic Oriental Studies (Usha 2015). In 1996 a separate India studies centre was established at Vilnius University, operating within the Department of Oriental Studies. The 2nd Regional Conference of Central and Eastern Europe on India Studies (CEEIS) was held at Vilnius

University in August 2006, with the support of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). The Oriental Centre of Vilnius University, in collaboration with the Lithuanian Embassy, has published a collection of 108 frequently-used Sanskrit words in the Lithuanian language (Pandey 2023). Academic collaboration between Indian and Baltic states universities has been established and various MOUs signed between them. Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India's top-ranked university known for academic excellence in the social sciences, runs a course on the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea Region. Since the establishment of the course in 2009, several dozen theses and dissertations have been written related to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania ranging from economy, security, identity and gender. JNU has also signed several exchange programme agreements with Lithuanian and Latvian universities. Other than JNU, Dev Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya in Haridwar has also established the Center for Baltic Culture and Studies (CBCS) to foster and promote the cultural activities of both India and the Baltic countries.

The growing cultural relations and understanding between India and the Baltic states have provided a suitable environment for Indian students pursuing their higher education in the Baltic states. In the last ten years, the number of students of Indian origin has increased in the Baltic states, particularly Latvia. According to the official statistics of Latvia, in 2014 the number of Indian students in Latvia was 164 which increased to 2643 in 2023 (Official Statistics of Latvia 2023; LSM+ 2024). Lithuania has also seen a huge rise in the number of Indian students, increasing from 37 in 2011 to 357 in 2014 and to 1000 in 2022 (Sinha 2015). Despite its rise as a technological hub among the Baltic states, Estonia is the least preferable destination for Indian students as only 138 were studying there in 2022 (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2022). Students from the Baltic states also acknowledge the educational standard of India and show a keen interest in studying at Indian universities. In 2020, there were around 900 Estonians, 4000 Latvians and 2000 Lithuanians studying in Indian universities (Jain 2023).

Political cooperation between India and the Baltic states
In the 1920s and 1930s, the Baltic states surfaced for the first time as an independent nation on the world map. In 1921, India recognised the Baltic states for the first time, when they became a member of the League of Nations (Usha 2015: 103). In 1991, after the Soviet disintegration, the Baltic states regained their independence and India established diplomatic relations with them in 1992. In 2008, after 15 years of diplomatic relations, Lithuania was the first Baltic nation to open its embassy in India; Latvia and Estonia followed in Lithuania's footsteps and opened their embassies in 2013 and 2015 respectively. On the occasion of its 30th year of diplomatic relations with the Baltic states, India opened its first embassy in Estonia in 2021 (ERR 2020), its second embassy in Lithuania in 2023 (LRT 2023) and intended to open its embassy in Latvia in 2024 (WION 2023).

Since 1992, various bilateral agreements have been signed between India and the Baltic states. As shown in Figure 1, the first agreement India signed with Estonia and Latvia was the Declaration of Principles of Cooperation in 1995, and it signed its first agreement with Lithuania in 1993 with the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation. Since then, India and the Baltic states have signed various agreements ranging from economic, technology, cybersecurity and agriculture. The latest MOU Estonia signed with India was in 2019 for the cooperation of cybersecurity and visa waiver on diplomatic passports. India's latest agreement with Latvia was in 2013 on the prevention of double taxation and tax evasion. Lithuania's latest agreement with India was in 2019 for an agricultural work plan.

As highlighted in Figure 2, many high-level visits and interactions between government officials have also taken place. The first visit from Estonia to India was by Minister of Foreign Affairs Trivimi Velliste in October 1993, and the most recent visit was paid by Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Margus Tsahkna on 21–23 February 2024. From Latvia, the first high-level visit to India was paid by President Guntis Ulmanis in October 1997, and the latest visit was paid by State Secretary of Ministry of Foreign Affairs Gunda Reire in March 2023. From Lithuania, the first official visit to India was paid by Prime Minister Adolfas Slezevicius in September 1995, and the latest visit was paid by Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis in April 2022. From India, the first official visit to Estonia

Figure 1: India's bilateral agreements with all three Baltic states

India-Estonia
• Declaration of Principles of Cooperation (entered into force on 15 October 1993)
• Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation (signed on 15 October 1993)
• Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation (signed on 14 October 1993)
• Protocol on Foreign Office Consultations (signed in August 1995)
• Agreement on Cooperation in the Spheres of Culture, Education, Science, Sports, Arts, Mass Media, Tourism and Youth Affairs (signed on 15 October 1993)
• Agreement on Cooperation in Science & Technology (signed on 5 February 1999)
• Joint Business Council Agreement between FICCI & Estonian Chamber of Commerce (signed in February 1999)
• Agreement for Avoidance of Double Taxation and Prevention of Fiscal   Evasion (DTAA) (signed on 19 September 2011)
• MOU on Cooperation in Biotechnology and Higher Education (signed in October 2013)
• MOU on Cooperation on Capacity Building etc. in e-Governance (signed in February 2014)
• Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons (signed on 15 November 2016)
• MOU on cooperation in ICT, e-Gov, Cyber Security between the State of Telangana and the Government of the Republic of Estonia signed in October 2018. (yet to be implemented)
• MOU for Cooperation in e-Governance and emerging digital technologies (signed in August 2019)

- MOU for Cooperation in Cyber Security (signed in August 2019). India and Estonia formalised on 25 January, 2023, the Joint Declaration of Intent (JDI) extending the current MOU for Cooperation in Cyber Security for another period of 3 years, with the provision of further extension.
- MOU for Waiver of Visas for diplomatic passport holders (signed in August 2019)
- Mutual Recognition of Vaccine Certificate (MRVC) through exchange of Note Verbales (October 2021)
- An Agreement was signed on 10 February, 2023 between Rashtriya Raksha University (RRU), Gandhinagar and CybExer Technologies in furtherance of bilateral MOU on Cooperation in the areas of Cyber Security

India-Latvia

- Declaration of Principles and Directions of Co-operation signed in September 1995;
- Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation in the fields of Culture, Arts, Education, Science, Mass Media and Sports signed in Sept 1995;
- Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between Latvia and India signed in Sept 1995;
- Protocol on Foreign Office Consultations signed in September 1995;
- Air Services Agreement signed in October 1997;
- Agreement on the Inter- Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation signed in June 2001;
- Cultural Exchange Agreement was signed in May 2006;
- Bilateral Investment 2 Protection Agreement signed in February 2010.
- Agreement on Health was signed on 28th February, 2012; and
- Agreement on Prevention of Double Taxation and Tax Evasion was signed in September 2013.

India-Lithuania

- Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation (July 1993)
- Protocol on Bilateral Consultations between the Foreign Offices (Aug. 1995)
- Agreement on Air Services (Feb. 2001)
- Agreement on Cooperation in Culture, Science and Education (Feb. 2001)
- Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation (Oct. 2001)
- Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPA) (March 2011)
- Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation (DTAA) (July 2011)
- Agreement on the exemption from visa requirement for holders of diplomatic passports (Nov. 2013) has come into operation on 30 July 2014
- MoU on Agriculture and Allied Sector (July 2016)
- Extradition Treaty (signed in October 2017 and ratified in August 2019)
- Protocol amending the Bilateral Air Services Agreement (Oct. 2017)
- Cultural Exchange Programme for the period 2019–21
- Agriculture Work Plan 2020–2022 (August 2019)

Source: Collected by Author from various sources (Embassy of India, Tallinn, Embassy of India, Stockholm, Ministry of External Affairs, India, Embassy of India, Vilnius)

and Lithuania was paid by Minister of States for External Affairs Shri Salman Khurshid in August 1995, and the latest visit was paid by India's Vice President Hon'ble Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu in August 2019, the first-ever high-level visit (from India) to the three Baltic countries (The Economic Times 2019).

Even though the number of mutual official visits suggests dynamic development of relations, it is disappointing to note that, despite maintaining thirty years of diplomatic relations, the cooperation between India and the Baltic states has not reached its potential due to their limited engagement and the absence of a diplomatic representative from India in the Baltic states. India's engagement with the Baltic nations appears to align with the evolving dynamics of its foreign policy. The Baltic countries exhibit not just quick economic growth but also possess advanced technological capabilities. They aim to establish a unique identity that goes beyond the EU and NATO, built upon their capabilities in economic, scientific, technological and digital governance fields.

The current prime minister of India has started emphasising the engagement with the small states of the Eastern European region. In an interview with a news channel (Times Now), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted his policy towards small states by saying, 'we also need to understand that we shouldn't consider smaller countries insignificant. . . . The small countries of the world are as important as big nations' (Modi 2016). The recent visit of India's Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu to all three Baltic states has established the foundation for increased collaboration between India and the Baltic region by offering a chance to explore potential areas for cooperation in the future. These countries view India as an untapped market, whereas India seeks innovative technologies and e-governance from this region.

Economic relations between India and the Baltic states
India and the Baltic states are situated in different parts of the world, and are indeed distinct in many ways; however, there are some similarities. In geography, culture and language, both India and the Baltic states are very diverse. The Baltic states are part of the second largest democracy (the EU) and India is the largest democracy in the world. Cultural diversity is a vital stronghold of the Baltic states as it is for India. Though there is a historical cultural link between India and the Baltic states, economic relations between India and the Baltic states have been fairly limited.

Two vital cooperation platforms remain significant for the Baltic states' economic relations with India: the EU and the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). India has fairly good economic relations with many BSR nations and the EU is one of the largest investors in India. As shown in Figure 3 & 4, trade between India and the Baltic states has increased manifold over the period, and overall trade between India and the Baltic states has doubled in the last ten years. Trade between India

Figure 2: Bilateral visit between India and the Baltic states

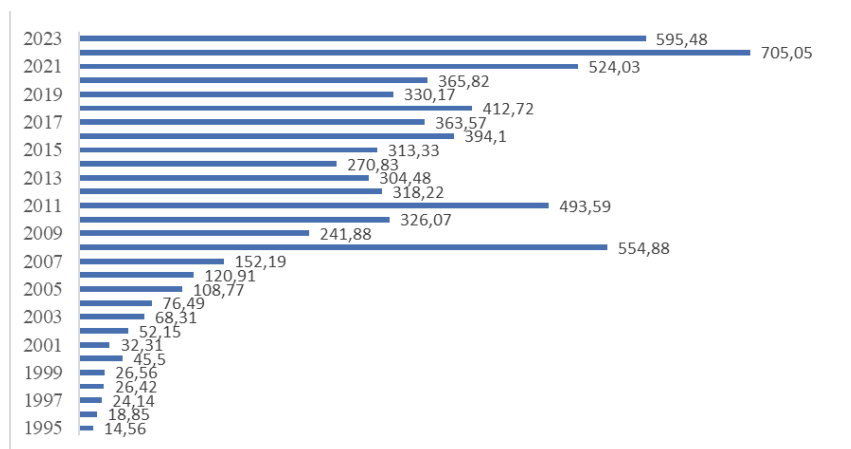| India-Estonia	
By India	**By Estonia**
• MOS(EA) Shri Salman Khurshid in August 1995 • MOS (EA) Shri Digvijay Singh in November 2003 • MOS(EA), Smt. Preneet Kaur in March 2011. • Minister of Communications and IT, Shri Kapil Sibal on 19 September, 2011 • Minister of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises, Shri Praful Patel in October 2011 • MOS Corporate Affairs, Shri Sachin Pilot in April 2013 • MOS Petroleum and Natural Gas, Smt. Lakshmi Panabaka (with a delegation from ONGC and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd.) in June, 2013 • Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Smt. Jayanthi Natarajan on 20–22 September, 2013. • Minister for Law and Justice & IT, Shri Ravi Shankar Prasad on 11–13 September, 2016. • MOS External Affairs (MJA) 27–28 May, 2017 • Vice President of India Hon'ble Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu visited Tallinn, Estonia on 20–21 August, 2019.	• Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Trivimi Velliste October 1993 • Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Urmas Paet November 2008 • Minister for Education and Research, Mr. Jaak Aaviksoo from 28 September – 1 October, 2012. • Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Urmas Paet February 2013 (to inaugurate Embassy of Estonia) • Minister for Education and Research Mr. Jaak Aaviksoo visited India in October 2013. • Minister for Justice, Mr. Hanno Pevkur on 9–11 December, 2013. • Minister for Economic Affairs and Communications, Mr. Juhan Parts on 3–8 February 2014. • Minister of IT and Entrepreneurship, Ms. Urve Palo on 8–12 March, 2018 • FM Mr. Urmas Reinsalu, 15–16 January, 2020 • Minister of Economic Affairs and Information Technology, Mr. Tiit Riisalo took part in the Global Vibrant Gujarat Summit on 10–12 January, 2024. • Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Margus Tsahkna, 21–23 February, 2024
India-Latvia	
By India	**By Latvia**
• Minister of State for Ministry of External Affairs, Anand Sharma from 27-29 March 2007 • Minister of State for External Affairs, Smt. Preneet Kaur in 2011 • Ravi Shankar Prasad, India's Minister of Electronics &IT and Law & Justice in 2016	• President Guntis Ulmanis in October 1997 • Latvia - Speaker of Saeima ingrīda ūdre (2003) • Deputy Prime Minister Ainars Slesers on 24-29 November 2003 • Foreign Minister Artis Pabriks in 2006

• MOS (EA) MJ Akbar visited Latvia in 2017 • Lok Sabha Speaker Smt. Sumitra Mahajan in 2018 • Vice President Venkaiah Naidu visited Latvia in August 2019	• Minister for Electronic Government Affairs of Latvia, Ina Gudele from 8–12 October 2007 • Atis Slakteris, Latvian Economics Minister accompanied by a business delegation in February, 2010 • Solvita Āboltiņa, Speaker of Saeima (2012) • Foreign Minister Rinkēvičs visited twice in 2013 • Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis in November 2017 • Minister of Foreign Affairs Rinkēvičs in Jan 2020 • State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Andris Pelšs visited India in November 2022 • State Secretary in Ministry of Foreign Affairs Gunda Reire in March 2023

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India-Lithuania

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By India	**By Lithuania**
• Shri Salman Khurshid, MoS (External Affairs) in August 1995 • Shri Rao Inderjit Singh, MoS (External Affairs) in October, 2005 • Shri Anand Sharma, MoS (External Affairs) in March 2007 • MoS for External Affairs, Mrs. Preneet Kaur, in March 2011 • MoS (Agriculture) Shri Mohanbhai Kundariya in October, 2015 • A delegation led by the Minister of State for External Affairs, Shri M. J. Akbar, in May 2017 • The Hon'ble Vice President of India, Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu, paid an official visit to Lithuania from August 17–19, 2019	• Prime Minister Adolfas Slezevicius in September 1995 • President Valdas Adamkussit accompanied Foreign Minister Antanas Valionis in February 2001 • Foreign Minister of Lithuania, Mr. Vygaudas Usackas, accompanied by Economy Minister Mr. Dainius Kreivys, from 2–5 December, 2009 • The Foreign Minister of Lithuania, Mr. Linas Linkevicius, in November 2013 • The Lithuanian Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Mantvydas Bakevius, in November 2014 • The Lithuanian Minister of Culture, Sarunas Birutis, on 8–12 March 2016 • The Lithuanian Vice Minister of Agriculture in July 2016 on a bilateral visit

	• The Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis in April 2022 • Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, Egidijus Meilunas, in November 2023

Source: Collected by Author from various sources (Embassy of India, Tallinn, Embassy of India, Stockholm, Ministry of External Affairs, India, Embassy of India, Vilnius)

and the Baltic states stood at USD 595.48 million in 2023. In 2022, trade between India and the Baltic states was USD 705.05 million and USD 524.03 million in 2021, which shows the constant growth of trade between India and the Baltic states.

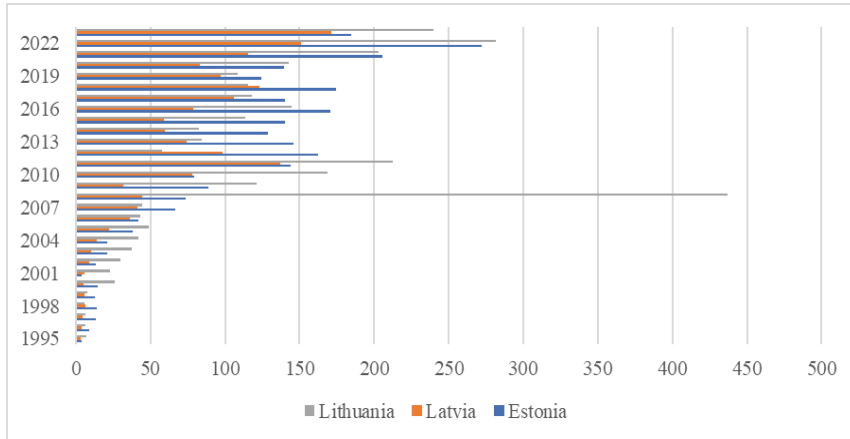Figure 3: Total Trade between India and the Baltic States in (1995–2023)

Source: Calculated by author based on Export Import Data Bank of OECD and UN Comtrade Database (In US million dollars)

India-Estonia

The bilateral trade between Estonia and India has grown gradually since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Trade data from the OECD and the UN suggests that bilateral trade between India and Estonia was USD 184.54 million in 2023, USD 272.11 million in 2022 and in 2021 stood at USD 205.71 million. Since 1996, trade between India and Estonia has grown by an average of 26.24 percent every year. In 2023, Estonia imported USD 95.98 million worth of products from India and the top products were electrical machinery and equipment, organic chemicals, and articles of iron & steel. In the same year, Estonia exported USD 88.55 million worth of products to India. The top products that India imports from Estonia are mineral fuel and mineral oil, wood pulp, electric machinery and equipment, and articles of wood and wood charcoal (OECD and UN Comtrade Database).

Figure 4: Bilateral Trade between India and All Three Baltic States (1995–2023)

Source: Calculated by author based on Export Import Data Bank of OECD and UN Comtrade Database (In US million dollars)

Since Estonia has a good capacity in cybersecurity, information technology and blockchain, India is looking for collaboration in these fields to enhance their capabilities. Estonia is also trying to attract IT companies to establish data centres in Estonia (Embassy of India 2024). In 2018, Indian business tycoon Mukesh Ambani became an e-resident of Estonia and, along with Union IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad (The Economic Times 2018), set up a research centre in Estonia to analyse and understand the digital society of the Baltic nation and what benefits India can extract (Embassy of Estonia, New Delhi 2019). Apart from the IT sector and blockchain, India and Estonia are also looking into potential collaboration on green energy tech including green hydrogen and wind energy. In a recent visit to India, Tiit Risalo, Estonia's economy minister, expressed interest for close cooperation with the Adani group and the Indian government on the research and development of green hydrogen (Mattoo 2024).

India-Latvia

The bilateral trade between India and Latvia was USD 151.11 million in 2022, which increased 13.18 percent by 2023 and stood at USD 171.03 million. The major products exported from India to Latvia in 2023 were pharmaceutical products, rubber tires, organic or inorganic compounds of precious stone and metals. In the last twenty-five years, the exports of India to Latvia have enlarged at yearly average of 20.18 percent, from USD 3.34 million in 1995 to USD 171.03 million in 2023. In 2023, Latvia exported USD 49.08 million worth of products to India. The major products India imports from Latvia are iron and steel, edible vegeta-

bles and certain roots and tubers, and wood and wood charcoal (OECD and UN Comtrade Database).

India-Lithuania

Lithuania is India's largest trading partner among the Baltic states. Lithuania's trade with India in 2023 stood at USD 239.91 million. This is -14.87 percent less than the bilateral trade between India and Lithuania in 2022, which was USD 281.83. In 2023 Lithuania imported USD 139.99 million worth of products from India. The top products India exported to Lithuania were electric machinery and equipment, fish and other seafood, chemical products, iron & steel, and pharmaceutical products. Like Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania's exports to India grew from USD 2.93 million in 1996 to USD 99.92 in 2023. Lithuania's exports to India were recorded at the highest level in 2008 when it saw a jump of 2,945 percent compared to 2007 (see figure 4). This was due to India's import of fertiliser, driven by the global fertiliser crisis caused by high oil prices and the US shift towards biofuel corps. This situation forced countries like India and China to stock fertiliser in large quantities to guarantee their food stocks (Vidal 2008). The top products Lithuania exports to India are iron & steel, salt, sulphur, lime, cement, electrical machinery and equipment, coffee, wood and wood charcoal (OECD and UN Comtrade Database).

Lithuania invites Indian companies to invest in pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and life sciences and the country is expecting a boom in the coming years. In a 2019 joint press conference with Indian Vice President Venkaiah Naidu, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda asked Indian companies to invest in those areas. At the same time, they agreed to 'enhance cooperation in areas such as agriculture, food processing, information technology, financial services, and also financial technology' (Delfi 2019).

Trade data indicates that India's exports to the Baltic states have grown rapidly, especially after the Covid pandemic. India and the Baltics both continue to diversify their economic partnership. India, as the fastest growing economy with a young and skilled workforce, can gain access to new markets and technology from the Baltic states. The Baltic states, in turn, have a strong track record of innovation and a focus on digitisation and e-governance. Meanwhile, the Baltic countries can benefit from India's large and growing economy.

Changing geopolitics and India-Baltic states' relations

Recent confrontations like the US-China trade war, the India-China Border clash, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Israel-Hamas conflict have brought major changes in world politics (Tchakarova 2023). In this changing geopolitical scenario, India has also renewed its attention to Europe. India is not only reaching out to big nations but also to small nations including the

Baltic states. India's Europe policy is still focused on engaging both the European Union (EU) as a whole and its individual member states separately. However, there is also growing interest in building cooperation efforts in certain sub-regions, such as central and Eastern European countries (Xavier & Kumar 2017).

With the rise of China as a threat perception in the West, the Baltic states became more cautious regarding China's role in the Baltics. A few years ago, it would have been impossible to imagine that Lithuania would have emerged as one of China's most vocal critics. Lithuania's relationship with China has gone from wrong to worse due to recent steps of Lithuania, such as leaving the 17+1 format because Vilnius believes that Beijing is trying to use the format to divide the European states and strengthen its influence in Europe. Some of Lithuania's actions include excluding Huawei in the development of 5G technology on the recommendations of the 2020 national threat assessment, passing a motion to condemn China's policy against Uyghur Muslim and slamming Beijing for clamping down on Hong Kong protesters (Andjauskas 2020; Andjauskas 2021). The tension culminated when Lithuania allowed the Republic of China (Taiwan) to open a representative office in Lithuania. Allowing the Republic of China (Taiwan) to open a de facto embassy in Vilnius using the name Taiwan has irked Beijing (Andjauskas 2022). In response to this step China recalled its ambassador in August 2021 and downgraded its relations to the level of charge d'affaires – a rank below ambassador (LRT 2021).

Besides diplomatic measures, China has also taken economic measures to punish Lithuania. Lithuania's direct trade with China only accounts for 1% of its total trade; however, Lithuania's export base economy is home to several companies that make products like laser, furniture, glass, food and clothing for multinational companies that sell to China (LRT 2022). China steadily pushed the pressure button on Lithuania by pressuring multinational companies to avoid using parts and supplies from Lithuania or they would no longer be welcome in the Chinese market. As a result of Chinese economic retaliation, many German firms involved in peat, lasers, car parts and high-tech sectors have suggested that they may have to shut factories in Lithuania. The German Baltic Chambers of Commerce warned the Lithuanian government in a letter that the German investors might need to close their services in Lithuania until there is 'a constructive solution to restore Lithuania-Chinese economic relations' as they cannot receive the necessary components from China for production (Sytas & O'Donnell 2022).

China's confrontation with Lithuania over Taiwan policy, and China's deadly clash with India, drove Baltic states closer to India (Marjani 2022). Also, cyber-attacks by Chinese hackers on the Baltic states and India forced them to cooperate closely to counter China's cyber threat. India and Estonia have united to counter cyber threats originating from China and are aiming to strengthen their cybersecurity cooperation. Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur has accused

the Chinese government of recruiting experts to carry out cyberattacks. 'Every country ready to fight this evil is more than welcome in Estonia', he said in Times Now, expressing his invitation to the Indian defence delegation (Chowdhury 2024). The collaboration between Estonia and India signifies a courageous move towards a better-protected digital future in the critical cyber warfare arena. This strategic alignment enables both parties to cooperate and enhance their defensive capabilities against China's ongoing cyber threat.

In recent years many European nations like France, Germany, the UK, etc have unveiled their Indo-Policy strategy. In 2021, the EU also officially released the joint communication to the European Parliament about the EU strategy for coopera- tion in the Indo-Pacific (European Commission 2021) to counter China with the creation of multilayer cooperation with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan, South Korea and Australia (Pugliese 2024). The Baltic states have also shown their interest in the Indo-Pacific; Lithuania in particular has released an Indo-Pacific Strategy document in 2023 which shows Lithuania's strategy response to 'global geopolitical shifts that have a direct effect on our country and the EU' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania 2023). These 'shifts' com- prise the China-Russia 'no limits' collaboration, which includes threats to topple the global rules-based system, Russia's protracted invasion of Ukraine and the consequent growth and change of NATO's force posture, and the consequences for NATO and its partners (Garrick & Andrijauskas 2023). Lithuania emphasises India's importance in its Indo-Pacific strategy to maintain the rules-based order and for resilient economic growth. In an interview with Indian Media while visit- ing India in November 2023, Lithuanian Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Egidijus Meilunas highlighted India's importance in their Indo-Pacific strategy, saying:

India has a prominent role to play in our strategy. We will aim at mutually beneficial cooperation with India, the largest democracy and one of the largest economies in the world. This year, with the opening of the Indian embassy in Vilnius, we witnessed a very positive momentum in our bilateral relations. We have to work together to foster our economic and trade relations, very glad that our trade turnover and exports are increasing. I am confident that in due time will [sic] be considering about the developing our bilateral security and defence dialogue with India. (Sharma 2023)

In the changing geopolitical dynamic, both India and the Baltic states are trying to maximise the benefit by cooperating closely. They are working together on their shared desire to maintain the multilateral rules-based order and increase the rep- resentation of international institutions. Their interest in changing international institutions is most visible in the UN Security Council; India wants a permanent seat, while the Baltic states want better representation in both permanent and non-permanent membership categories. Their mutual commitment to upholding the rules and regulations in the maritime domain is quite visible. Both parties

are mutually concerned with guaranteeing maritime security and upholding the freedom of navigation in separate regions: the Baltic Sea and the Indo-Pacific (Adomenas 2022; Rajiv 2018: 2).

In the Eurasian landmass China is becoming a prominent player and growing relations between China and Russia have alarmed the Baltic states. The growing naval drills by Russia-China in the Baltic Sea Region have also alarmed the Baltic states and created strategic challenges and security dilemmas for the Baltic states (Scott 2018). 'This economic leverage translates to political leverage able to be exerted on the Baltic states by China' (Scott 2018: 25) to weaken solidarity within the grouping and in the EU. In addition to investment from the EU, the Baltic states are seeking to attract external investment and to establish themselves as regional transport hubs. India is an appealing option to counter Chinese investment due to its support for the International North-South Transport Corridor, which can connect the Baltic Sea region with the Indian Ocean region. Due to its strategic location, Latvia sees itself as a conduit between both the European Union and the Russian hinterland. Latvia seeks increased investment and commerce from India, as well as access to its all-weather ports. During his 2017 visit to India, Latvian Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis said that 'Latvia is focusing on the transport and logistics. . . . Building direct link [sic] and establishing direct contact through ports will establish a close relationship between the two countries' (Business Standard 2017). Lithuania also discussed the advantages of Klaipeda port with India, considering the expertise of India in port infrastructure development and Lithuania's location as a gateway to the Eastern European Region (PIB 2023).

Although the relations between India and the Baltic states are growing, at the same time Baltic and Western leaders have shown irritation over India's refusal to join international condemnations of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its repeated abstention in the UNSC's (United Nations Security Council) votes on the issue of Russia-Ukraine War (Mohan 2022). Since the fall of the USSR, Indian foreign policy has largely been dominated by the strategic autonomy discourse. However, Russia's aggression in Ukraine forces India to strike a balance between its long-term trusted partner Russia and the growing and important relationship with the US and the Quad. India firmly believes that it is best to avoid provoking Moscow since doing so could drive Russia into China's sphere of influence. For India, the worst-case scenario would be a formal alliance between Russia and China, in which China might exert control over Russia's engagement with India. India is already in a border dispute with China, and the current standoff with China has resulted in the deployment of a large number of troops and heavy weapons along the border with China in the Himalayan region; additionally, Russia is India's largest weapon supplier; antagonising Russia in this scenario could prove fatal for New Delhi (Lieberherr 2022). Though the EU and Baltic states have shown discomfort with India's position on Russia's aggression against Ukraine,

they agree to disagree on this aspect. Baltic states understand the circumstances that force India to not take a stand in the Russia-Ukraine war and even know that India will maintain its position of non-alignment. Therefore, India's Relations with the Baltic states will remain intact despite India's position on Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Conclusion

The cooperation between India and the Baltic states has been largely driven by political, economic and cultural factors. Since the establishment of the diplomatic relations, all three factors have greatly contributed to bringing these two different regional states together, but the cultural link between India and the Baltic states is the vital factor driving their cooperation. In the last three decades, the relations between India and the Baltic states have not reached the position they could have due to their geographical distance and the lack of will for diplomatic engagement from both sides which hindered cooperation. However, the recent geopolitical changes in world politics and the rise of China brought India and the Baltic states to work more closely together. Their democratic ethos and belief in rule and value-based order are also determining factors that drive the relations. Cultural similarity and increasing people-to-people engagement play an important role in swinging the relations upward. The Baltic states' rise in economic, technological and digital innovation and governance have also increased India's interest where India can try to learn and gain a foothold.

In the coming decade, India will be one of the top three largest economies in the world and the Baltic states want to divert their business from China to India as many Western countries are already doing. The Baltic states see India as a tool to counter China in the Baltic Sea Region, Central Asia and Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, India is also convincing the EU and other Western nations to recognise the threat of China not only to India but also to the current international order. India also wants to develop a greater Indo-Baltic engagement on regional and international issues which can allow India to have a more diverse perspective in Eastern, Central and Northern Europe. In an era of geopolitical transformations, the security of the Baltic region, South Asia region and Indo-Pacific region are interconnected. It is increasingly crucial to collaborate closely to maintain international law and develop the ability to address direct and indirect threats, whether they arise in the Indian Ocean region, the Indo-Pacific region or the Baltic Sea region.

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Dr. Karan Kumar is an early career scholar with a Doctoral Degree in Russian and Central Asian Studies, from Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. His Doctoral thesis investigated the development of the Baltic Sea Region through the lens of identity, security and economic dimensions. He has also submitted an M.Phil. thesis on NATO's expansion and its implication on the Baltic States. He was awarded with Erasmus+ Fellowship for an exchange programme to visit as a research fellow at Kaunas Technology University, Lithuania, in 2018; Moreover, he holds a master's degree in International Relations from Pondicherry University, India. His area of research concentrated on the Baltic Sea Region, the Security Dynamics of Russia and NATO's Expansion, and India, China and Baltic States Bilateral Relations.

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Thematic section
Central and Eastern Europe's Relations with Emerging Non-Western Powers

Slovakia-Taiwan Relations: Slovakia's Pragmatic Approach as a Model of Engagement with Taiwan

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Abstract
This article examines the evolution of Slovakia-Taiwan relations, focusing on the early 2020s (specifically 2020–2023), a period marked by a shift toward closer ties. Despite adhering to the One China policy, Slovakia has strengthened its engagement with Taiwan, driven by both regional and domestic factors. Regionally, the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region's disillusionment with unmet Chinese economic promises has led to a pivot toward alternative partnerships, including Taiwan. Domestically, Slovakia's 2020 government shift introduced a more Taiwan-receptive policy, aligning with the EU and NATO's cautious approach to China. The analysis highlights Slovakia's adoption of a low-visibility, pragmatic model that contrasts with the high-profile symbolic approaches of fellow CEE 'vanguard' states (the most active players in political interactions with Taiwan) like Czechia and Lithuania. Slovakia's strategy involves pursuing a 'positive' agenda with Taiwan with minimal public attention, redirecting criticisms of China to parliamentary channels and conducting symbolic actions vis-à-vis China. While this approach reduces risks of Chinese backlash and minimises domestic politicisation, it also limits public awareness and

support. Nonetheless, the Slovakia-Taiwan relationship has seen tangible, durable gains. Slovakia's approach offers a viable blueprint for other states interested in engaging with Taiwan without provoking China.

Keywords: *Slovakia-Taiwan relations, international relations, pragmatic approach*

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Introduction

In a world where most countries recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only representation of the whole of China, Taiwan's (officially the Republic of China, ROC) foreign policymaking is rather limited. Although the European Union (UN) and its member states do not formally recognise Taiwan, many actively pursue trade and economic relations with the island. In the early 2020s, EU-Taiwan relations, particularly between Taiwan and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), reached an unprecedented level of cooperation. Data collected by the CEIAS EU-Taiwan Tracker, an online tool developed by the author in her capacity as a think-tank analyst, demonstrates a six-fold increase in various forms of EU-Taiwan interactions (governmental, economic, security and cultural engagements, along with mutual visits) between 2019 and 2023 (see Figure 1), with CEE countries accounting for over half of all engagements in 2022 and 2023 (Kironska et al. 2024).

What prompted such a significant shift in relations was the adoption of the EU-China Strategic Outlook in 2019 and the launch of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Figure 1: EU-Taiwan interactions per year (2019–2023)
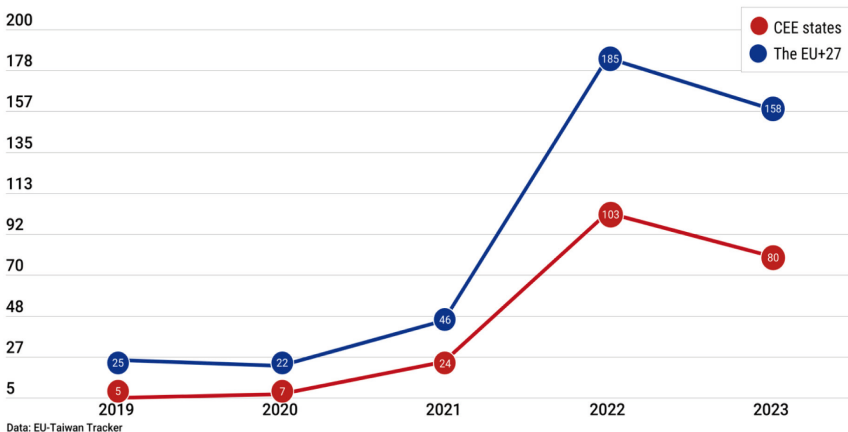
Source: The figure adapted from Ličková & Kironska (2023)

in 2021. The Outlook marked a turning point in EU policy, defining China as both a partner and a systemic rival and advocating for 'de-risking' (rather than full 'decoupling'). This shift emphasised reducing economic dependencies on China while upholding European standards in technology, human rights and sustainability. Importantly, the Outlook laid the groundwork for EU alignment with like-minded partners – including Taiwan – to enhance resilience and autonomy amid China's growing global influence. Europe's Indo-Pacific Strategy further supported this approach by promoting an open, rules-based order and strengthening ties with countries like Japan, India or Taiwan (Kironska et al. 2023). Additionally, in 2021, the European Parliament passed its first resolution on EU-Taiwan political relations, urging the European External Action Service, EU member states and the Commission to deepen political partnerships with Taiwan (Ličková & Kironska 2023). Zooming in on the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, this strategic shift has been further supported by a growing skepticism toward China's economic promises, leading many CEE countries to turn their attention to Taiwan, viewing it as the next East Asian cornucopia.

The CEE region is not monolithic, and the countries in particular leading the way in engagement with Taiwan were the so-called 'vanguard countries', a term introduced by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) in its publication *Beyond the Dumpling Alliance* (Šimalčik et al. 2023). This group – Slovakia, Poland, Czechia, and Lithuania – has emerged as the most active in fostering political and economic ties with Taiwan, particularly in trade, investment, and R&D. However, their approaches vary. Czechia and Lithuania have adopted high-profile strategies, such as symbolic actions that have accelerated their relations. Czechia made headlines in 2020 when Senate President Miloš Vystrčil addressed the Taiwanese Parliament, famously stating, 'Wo Shi Taiwan Ren' ('I am a Taiwanese') (EU-TW Tracker 2020). Following the 2024 elections in Taiwan, Czech President Petr Pavel was the first European leader to congratulate Lai Ching-te on his election victory, followed by Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis. These bold moves depart from the traditional European practice of congratulating the electorate without naming the president-elect, prioritizing stability in the Taiwan Strait and adherence to the One China policy. However, such visibility risks triggering Chinese coercion (as seen with Lithuania) or domestic politicization (as in Czechia), potentially slowing momentum during political transitions (Kironska 2024: 51–54). In contrast, Slovakia and, to some degree, Poland, have opted for a pragmatic path, avoiding grand gestures but still engaging meaningfully with Taiwan.

Despite the attention given to CEE-Taiwan relations in think-tank circles, scholarly exploration of these dynamics – especially Slovakia's role – remains scarce. While scholars such as Fürst and Pleschová (2010) have explored Taiwan's diplomatic efforts and soft power in the CEE region, their work predominantly

focuses on broader regional trends in connection to their relationship with China rather than offering a detailed analysis of Slovakia's specific interactions with Taiwan. Similarly, recent works by Parello-Plesner (2024) or Ferenczy (2024), while offering valuable insights into current EU-Taiwan relations, do not delve into country- or regional-level engagement with Taiwan. Tubilewicz's (2007) *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies* is crucial for understanding the development of CEE-Taiwan relations, providing foundational insights into the early stages of this relationship. Rejtová (2019), in turn, focuses explicitly on Slovak-Taiwanese relations, and her article, 'Slovak–Taiwanese Relations under the One China policy, serves as a valuable source by tracing the history of Slovakia-Taiwan relations across various Slovak governments, with a particular focus on inter-parliamentary linkages. However, it concludes in 2018, leaving subsequent developments unexamined. In Rejtová's (2022) book chapter on Slovak-Taiwanese relations, part of a Slovak-language book on Taiwan co-edited by the author of this article, she recounts the process of establishing ties between the two sides and provides insight into the strengthened relations after 2020. In contrast to the research on Taiwan-CEE, research on China-CEE relations is more extensive, with significant attention given to China's economic and political influence, particularly through initiatives such as the 16+1 framework. Alongside the abovementioned scholars, others, such as Turcsányi (2020) and Szczudlik-Tatar (2019), have provided in-depth analyses of China's strategic interests in the region, focusing on the diplomatic, economic and security implications of its engagements with CEE countries.

This article seeks to address the gap in the literature by examining Slovakia-Taiwan relations, with a particular focus on the early 2020s (2020–2023), a period marked by a shift toward closer ties, though characterised by a more pragmatic approach in Slovakia compared to the other 'vanguard' countries. The analysis explores the motivations behind Slovakia's increased engagement with Taiwan, asking 'What prompted Slovakia to become so active in this partnership?' It further outlines the advantages of a pragmatic approach to Taiwan, contrasting Slovakia's strategy with that of Czechia and Lithuania, and ultimately presents this as one of several models of engagement with Taiwan for other countries (not evaluating which one is better). In addressing these dynamics, the article seeks to fill a gap in academic literature, as CEE-Taiwan relations are frequently discussed in think-tank circles but rarely explored in scholarly research – and Slovakia's role even less so. This study, however, faces challenges due to the often-clandestine nature of interactions between the two countries, particularly from the Slovak side.

The article employs a qualitative, comparative case study methodology, supplemented by observation and (some) insider information, to examine the bilateral relations between Slovakia and Taiwan, using a neoliberal lens to frame the analysis. Through historical analysis, it explores key moments in the evolution of these relations, drawing on scholarly literature, policy reports and other secondary

sources. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the diplomatic, economic and geopolitical factors shaping Slovakia's engagement with Taiwan, highlighting how pragmatic economic and diplomatic interests guide the relationship. The study contributes to a broader discourse on Central and Eastern European countries' relations with Taiwan, offering insights into how states pursue mutually beneficial interactions, consistent with neoliberal theory.

The article is structured chronologically as follows. To provide a comprehensive overview, the introduction is followed by an exploration of the establishment (in the early 2000s) and evolution of the official, though not formally diplomatic, relationship between Slovakia and Taiwan throughout the 2010s. This section is succeeded by an analysis of the factors driving the shift towards stronger relations in the 2020s, along with an examination of the resulting outcomes. Subsequently, an assessment of Slovakia's approach to Taiwan as a potential model of engagement for other countries is presented, leading to the conclusion.

Evolution and institutionalisation of Slovak-Taiwanese relations

The lack of official diplomatic relations between the EU and Taiwan does not leave Taiwan's foreign policy without strategic alternatives. 'If formal relationships are not possible, 'informal,' 'substantive,' or 'virtual' ties serve as an excellent substitute' (van Vranken Hickey 2007). Taiwan has employed methods like 'economic diplomacy', particularly in CEE since the 1990s. Post-communist nations were targeted with investment promises, humanitarian aid, grants and loans, which were welcomed in the region. By 1991, Taiwan shifted from seeking CEE diplomatic recognition to fostering substantive relationships, leading to the establishment of representative offices in Hungary (1990), Czechoslovakia (1991) and Poland (1992) (Tubilewicz 2007). By 1991, Taiwan shifted from seeking CEE diplomatic recognition to fostering substantive relationships, leading to the establishment of representative offices in Hungary (1990), Czechoslovakia (1991) and Poland (1992).

While these countries benefited from conducive economic conditions and supportive business infrastructure, Slovakia's situation diverged. Under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, personal political motives drove policies that deepened economic distress, deterring international investors, including those from Taiwan, who prioritised stability and safety (Tubilewicz 2007). Consequently, Slovakia's economic engagement with Taiwan during the 1990s remained limited.

Following Czechoslovakia's dissolution in 1993, Czechia fostered friendly ties with Taiwan, with President Václav Havel openly advocating for its inclusion in the United Nations. In contrast, Slovakia prioritized political relations with China, limiting its interactions with Taiwan to trade-focused non-governmental organizations (Rejtová 2019).

An obvious shift occurred following the 1998 elections that brought a democratic, pro-EU government to Slovakia, transforming its foreign policy and revit-

alising relations with Taiwan. Slovakia's efforts to attract foreign investment and narrow the gap with its neighbours led to an increased interest in partnerships with Taiwan. After three years of negotiations, the Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava (TROB) was inaugurated in August 2003, supporting trade, investment, education, science and culture. This was mirrored by the establishment of the Slovak Economic and Cultural Office Taipei (SECO) in November 2003, positioning Slovakia as the 19th European nation to establish such a presence in Taiwan. While these offices function similarly to embassies, there are distinctions in the accreditation level of their heads of mission compared to traditional ambassadors.

The institutionalisation of Slovak-Taiwanese relations can be seen as resulting from a 'convergence of economic interests', as noted by Tubilewicz (2007). The positive post-1998 power shift in Slovakia reinforced this trajectory, exemplified by the opening of representative offices. It is plausible to suggest that if similar conditions had existed in the early 1990s, Slovakia might have mirrored the regional trend and established mutual representative offices shortly after gaining independence.

Certain agreements preceded the establishment of representative offices. Slovakia signed its first agreement with Taiwan in 1996, focusing on scientific and technological cooperation. In 1998, key agreements followed, including a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Customs Cooperation and a cooperation agreement between the Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Taiwan's National Association of Industry and Trade, creating a structured framework for economic collaboration. Following the establishment of official missions, numerous agreements ensued. These include the MoU on cooperation between national associations of small and medium-sized enterprises and the agreement for the avoidance of double taxation (both in 2011) (2011 Income Tax Agreement 2011). Over the subsequent years, Taiwan and Slovakia forged cooperation in eGovernment, mutually recognised each other's drivers' licenses, and signed an MoU between the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia and the Institute of Foreign Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the ROC (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 30). Notably, Slovakia emerged as one of the first EU countries to include Taiwan on its roster of safe countries during the pandemic, eliminating the need for mandatory quarantine upon arrival from Taiwan to Slovakia due to Taiwan's commendable success in disease prevention (OCAC 2020).

Numerous parliamentary delegations from Slovakia have visited Taiwan, often meeting with the Taiwanese president (MOFA ROC 2011). Former Prime Minister Iveta Radičová delivered a speech at the World Women Journalist and Writers Meeting in 2012 and was received by then-President Ma Ying-jeou. She returned to Taiwan in 2016 as part of a delegation representing the Holy See and 17 other European countries for the inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen (MOFA ROC

2016). Parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament (MEPs), such as Peter Osuský, Ivan Štefanec, Eduard Kukan and Ján Budaj, have also made trips to Taiwan (MOFA ROC n.d.). Moreover, in 2020, Slovak MEPs expressed solidarity with Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil following his visit to Taiwan and the ensuing pressure from China, when Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that Vystrčil would 'pay a heavy price' for what Beijing considered a violation of the One China principle (Lexmann 2020). In this case, the threat ultimately remained unfulfilled (as the then-Czech government, which sets the foreign policy, distanced itself from the visit); however, the Chinese response highlights China's efforts to dissuade other countries from conducting similar high-level visits or expressing support for Taiwan.

To further facilitate concrete economic projects and investments between Slovakia and Taiwan, an MoU on economic cooperation was signed in 2019, which later evolved into a full-fledged economic dialogue (Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation) with a regular consultation mechanism. Initially, Taiwan's economic interest in Central Europe focused primarily on exports such as computers, bicycles, textiles, machinery and consumer goods. Today, cooperation between Taiwan and Slovakia involves the electrotechnical and automotive industries, with new collaborations emerging in IT, blockchain tech and waste management. Taiwan has also become a significant player in direct investment, ranking as the second-largest East Asian investor in Slovakia (after South Korea) (Kironska & Šimalčík 2023), with the largest Taiwanese investments being AU Optronics in Trenčín (since 2011),[1] Foxconn in Nitra (since 2010/2016)[2] and Delta Electronics in Dubnica nad Váhom (since 2007).[3] Other notable investments include Eltek in Liptovský Hrádok, Darwin Precisions in Trenčín and BizLink (headquartered in the United States) in several locations across Slovakia.

Additionally, these economic ties are complemented by cooperation in other sectors. Academic collaboration has strengthened through the Taiwan Scholarship

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1   *AU Optronics,* a producer of LCD modules, has been operating in Slovakia since 2011. Its 200,000-square-metre facility in Slovakia serves as the company's second European production site and is integral to the manufacturing and assembly of large LCD modules supplied to television manufacturers (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 33).

2   *Foxconn* manufactures TVs and related technologies in Slovakia and ranks among Europe's largest suppliers by volume. The operation originated as Sony Slovakia, which began in Trnava in 1996 and expanded to Nitra in 2007. A strategic partnership between Sony and Foxconn was established in 2010, and by 2016, Foxconn had acquired full ownership of the facilities (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 33).

3   *Delta Electronics* launched its production facility in 2007, though its presence in Slovakia dates back to 1994, when it set up a sales office in Bratislava and partnered with a local manufacturer in Nová Dubnica. The company specializes in producing power supplies for telecommunications, IT, industrial automation, and medical equipment. In 2015, Delta expanded its portfolio by acquiring Eltek, a provider of power solutions for telecom, industrial, and datacenter applications (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 33).

programme, bilateral MoUs between universities and the establishment of the Taiwan-Slovakia Exchange Association in 2020, which supports educational and cultural exchanges, including Slovak language courses at Soochow University (Taipei Times 2020). Tourism cooperation has involved joint participation at international travel fairs and the 2018 sister railway relationship between Alishan Forest Railway and Čierny Hron Forest Railway (Alishan Forest Railway 2019), though direct flights remain absent due to Vienna's nearby international airport. A working holiday scheme initiated in 2014 enables reciprocal year-long travel, while journalist and academic tours (on both sides) promote bilateral ties. Cultural ties are showcased through various performances, film festivals and book translations, with TROB in Bratislava fostering these relations via annual National Day receptions attended by supporters of Taiwan from various sectors including ministries, educational and cultural institutions, and members of the Slovak-Taiwanese Parliamentary Group (founded in 2006 by Ivan Štefanec, and later chaired by Peter Osuský and then Ondrej Dostál), and various donations to schools (interactive whiteboards, projectors, notebooks and WIFI connections) and hospitals (electro-coagulators, sterilizers, X-rays).

Overall, after a rather slow start in the 2000s, the relationship between Taiwan and Slovakia expanded across various domains of cooperation throughout the 2010s, including diplomacy, economics, academia, tourism and cultural exchange. A notable enhancement in relations, however, occurred with the advent of the 2020s.

Shift towards a strong relationship in the early 2020s

The shift towards stronger relations between Slovakia and Taiwan in the early 2020s was prompted by two major factors, one regional and the other domestic. Regionally, a trend emerged in which countries in the CEE region grew increasingly disillusioned with China. These countries had been part of the China-CEE multilateral regional cooperation framework, also known as 16+1 or later 17+1 (with Greece's inclusion) and which has now been reduced to 14+1 following the withdrawal of the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. According to Song and Fürst, these departures were largely driven by Beijing's failure to fulfil promised investment and trade commitments, coupled with a perception of an imbalanced leader-follower relationship, wherein China set the agenda and norms (Song & Fürst 2022). Pleschová (2022) observes that China's efforts to cultivate soft power through cultural initiatives, economic activities and political relationships with individual Central European countries have largely failed to convince these states to regard China as a benign power. Furthermore, public discourse in several of these states reflects concerns about the alliance between the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China (Bogoni 2024).

In response, the European mainstream approach has increasingly emphasised caution in cooperation with China, as articulated in the EU-China Strategic

Outlook. While not all countries have exited the China-CEE framework, many, including Slovakia, have pivoted toward other East Asian partners for economic cooperation that promises more substantial benefits. This shift, along with heightened attention at the European level to the Indo-Pacific region (Ferenczy 2023) – including rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait – has further influenced Slovakia's evolving stance on Taiwan.

Domestically, Slovakia underwent a political change after the elections in early 2020, which resulted in a government more receptive to engagement with Taiwan. After 12 years, Smer-Social Democracy (Smer), a left-wing populist and nationalist party, did not win the elections. Smer dominated Slovak politics from 2006 to 2020, leading two coalition governments and one single-party government, and was known for seeking stronger relations with China, driven by both economic and political considerations. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) party, which had served as the parliamentary opposition during the 2012–2016 and 2016–2020 terms, secured victory and formed a ruling coalition with China-critical political parties from the centre-right and liberal-left. The approach to foreign policy has changed. For this new coalition, a close partnership with China was not compatible with their economic, geopolitical and normative priorities given their strong preferences for the EU and NATO. It's not that the new coalition rejected maintaining economic relations with China; rather, there was a willingness to also address critical topics, such as human rights violations in China or the security impacts of China's presence in Europe. An effort was made to balance two potentially opposing national interests – trade and overall security, especially in relation to dealings with authoritarian states. Consequently, Slovakia's relations with Taiwan deepened, resulting in several Taiwan-supportive parliamentary resolutions and an increase in reciprocal political visits.

Conversely, within the Slovak political spectrum, left-wing populist and far-right parties tend to have favourable views of China and therefore show limited interest in developing relations with Taiwan (Šimalčík 2021). This stance is primarily driven by economic opportunism (Fico said numerous times that China offers enormous trade opportunities and therefore cannot be overlooked), disregarding other aspects, such as for example cybersecurity risks associated with contracting Chinese firms for projects within Slovakia. This approach has been observed during previous Robert Fico-led governments, as well as with the new one following the 2023 general elections.

While the aforementioned factors were the necessary underlying requirements, the spark in Slovak-Taiwanese relations emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the two countries provided mutual aid. In the early phase of the pandemic, when Taiwan was internationally praised for its successful disease prevention, Taiwan donated masks and other protective equipment to Slova-

kia. One year later, as Taiwan encountered challenges in vaccine procurement, Slovakia reciprocated the generosity. Alongside other CEE countries, Slovakia donated 160,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, improving its positive image in Taiwan (Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic 2021). Slovakia was the second EU country, after Lithuania, to provide vaccines to Taiwan. Taiwan was very vocal in expressing gratitude to Slovakia. President Tsai Ing-wen repeatedly posted messages of thanks on Twitter,4 and a sign thanking Slovakia for the vaccines was even displayed on Taipei 101, the iconic Taiwanese skyscraper. From that moment onwards, relations between Slovakia and Taiwan entered a phase of increased attention, as stakeholders from political, business and civil society communities explored various cooperation opportunities.

These developments accelerated the number of mutual political visits. Notably, in 2021, a 43-member delegation led by Slovak Deputy Minister of Economy Karol Gálek made the country's highest-level executive visit to Taiwan since the opening of the SECO in Taipei (EU-TW Tracker 2021a). The purpose of the visit was to attend the first session of the Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation, which concluded with the signing of several MoUs, including cooperation in smart cities, electric vehicles and semiconductors (Šimalčík, Gerstl & Remžová 2023). In 2022, Slovak Deputy Speaker of Parliament Milan Laurenčík led a cross-party delegation of 10 parliamentarians to Taiwan (EU-TW Tracker 2022a). Slovak parliamentarians also participated in the most recent presidential inauguration of Lai Ching-te in May 2024 (Everington 2024). These visits were reciprocated by the Taiwanese side, with National Development Council chief Kung Ming-hsin leading a 60-member delegation to Slovakia in 2021 (EU-TW Tracker 2021b), Taiwanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu visiting that same year to attend a conference in Slovakia (EU-TW Tracker 2021c), and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roy Lee visiting in 2023 (EU-TW Tracker 2023a).

Two important agreements were concluded. In 2021, the Extradition Treaty, the second such treaty in the EU after Poland, was signed (Šimalčík 2022). This type of treaty has a significant political element, as it addresses the sensitive subject of criminal policy. In 2022, the agreement on Judicial Cooperation in Civil and Commercial Matters, the first of its kind in the EU, was signed (EU-TW Tracker 2022b). This was a significant development, as it provides a rule of law infrastructure for private relations, such as those between businesses, thereby facilitating business relations between the two countries. Additionally, the Bratislava Region reached a sister-city agreement with Kaohsiung in 2022 (Sister, Friendly, and Partner City 2022).

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4   See Tsai Ing-wen's Tweet from 16 July 2021 thanking Slovakia for the vaccine donations: <https://x.com/iingwen/status/1416030647097860098?lang=en>.

Taiwan-supportive resolutions have been adopted in several Slovak parliamentary committees, notably the Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as the Health Care and European Affairs Committees. Since the commencement of the 2020–2024 term (shortened to 2023 due to early parliamentary elections resulting from the government losing a no-confidence vote at the end of 2022), these committees have passed resolutions in support of Taiwan on at least five occasions. In September 2022, support was expressed for Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization (EU-TW Tracker 2022d). Several vocal parliamentarians also proposed a committee resolution supporting Taiwan's participation in INTERPOL but failed to gain the necessary support (Šimalčík, Gerstl & Remžová 2023). Moreover, a letter to the WHO president expressed support for Taiwan's participation at the 2020 World Health Assembly (EU-TW Tracker 2022c).

Although lacking full diplomatic recognition, the relationship was quite vibrant and extended beyond the mere signing of treaties and hosting dignitaries. In the economic realm, Slovakia received investments from Taiwan. The National Development Fund of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan established the CEE Investment Fund with a value of USD 200 million (EU-TW Tracker 2022e). The fund, managed by the Taiwania Capital, a national venture capital firm, targets crucial strategic sectors including semiconductors, biotechnology, aerospace, fintech, electric vehicle and laser optics across both Taiwan and the CEE region, with a particular focus on Lithuania, Slovakia and Czechia. In Slovakia, specific investments include a €8 million investment made in the Slovak technology firm Photoneo (EU-TW Tracker 2023b). This company collaborates with the automotive industry and robotics manufacturers in Germany, along with technology firms in Taiwan. Also in the same year (2023), a €6.2 million investment was made in the Slovak green tech company Sensoneo, which is a leading global provider of innovative and intelligent waste management solutions (EU-TW Tracker 2023c).

Slovakia's pragmatic approach to Taiwan

The mere threat of being shut out of China's market is often enough to deter the EU and its member states from entering into economic agreements with Taiwan (despite widespread support in the European Parliament for an investment agreement that could strengthen economic cooperation) (Parello-Plesner 2024). A notable example occurred in 2020, when Australia faced trade restrictions from China on its wine, lobsters, wheat and coal with one of China's objections being Australia's interference in Taiwan. However, in the early 2020s, the CEE region emerged as the most significant supporter of Taiwan in Europe. Slovakia charted a distinct course of engagement from the other 'vanguards' in the region. While Czechia and Lithuania opted for high-visibility, symbolic actions, Slovakia

(akin to Poland) adopted a more pragmatic stance (Šimalčík, Gerstl & Remžová 2023).

This pragmatic approach to Taiwan manifests in three primary forms. Firstly, it involves restricting governmental actions to pursue a 'positive' agenda with Taiwan without explicitly framing these activities in opposition to China. For instance, despite increasing engagement with Taiwan, Slovakia has maintained its participation in the China-CEE cooperation format. Moreover, engagements with Taiwan were conducted discreetly. For instance, members of Slovak delegations to Taiwan have been subject to social media bans. While Taiwanese media extensively cover these delegations, Slovak media scarcely report on such activities. This discreet approach aims to avoid provoking China, in contrast to Czechia and Lithuania's preference for high-profile activities. While this strategy aligns with China's preference to minimise public awareness of such gestures – and Chinese leaders are generally content to overlook acts of goodwill toward Taiwan as long as they remain out of the public eye – it also brings clear benefits from the partnership with Taiwan (in contrast to cooperation with China, which has yielded few positive outcomes for CEE countries).

Secondly, Taiwan-related criticism of China is shifted to the parliamentary level, thereby retaining a level of deniability by the government. Examples include two resolutions passed in 2022 in the Slovak parliament calling for Taiwan's inclusion in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Taiwan Today 2022) or the International Civil Aviation Organization (Chen 2022), both of which were blocked by China. The latter resolution was proposed by Miroslav Žiak, a parliamentarian who had visited Taiwan a month earlier and was reportedly impressed by the country's democratic, political and economic development. This also highlights the importance of mutual contact for Taiwan and demonstrates how economic and political relations complement each other. Moreover, the unanimous passage of the resolution underscores the strong support in the Slovak parliament during those years for Taiwan and Taiwan-related issues, such as the island's participation in international organisations.

Thirdly, Slovakia engages in some symbolic actions vis-à-vis China, such as actively participating in the unveiling of a commemorative postal envelope on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the China-CEE platform in Beijing in April 2022 (Kironska & Šimalčík 2023). This event served as a substitute for the formal summit and for the ambitious declarations that one might expect from Chinese policymakers on such an occasion. This anniversary attracted little attention and the envelope itself speaks volumes about the depth of the crisis facing China-led multilateral diplomacy in CEE (Kowalski 2022).

For Slovakia, this approach offers the advantage of reducing the risk of Chinese retaliation or coercion while promoting steady development of relations with Taiwan, which is crucial for attracting investments – a primary goal of Slovakia's engagement with Taiwan – alongside the values-based orientation of the ruling

coalition. According to a study by Fürst (2010), China rarely retaliates against CEE countries for their cooperation with Taiwan. In contrast, while this may have been true in the early years of the new millennium, it no longer holds. This was demonstrated when Vilnius opened a new Taiwan office in 2021. Typically, to avoid offending China, such representative offices are labelled 'Taipei', as seen with the Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava. However, Lithuania went a step further by allowing 'Taiwan' in the office's name. China viewed this as a violation of the One China policy and responded with coercive measures targeting Lithuania's economy, which effectively amounted to informal sanctions (in practice, trade stopped almost completely) that also impacted third parties (Hyndle-Hussein & Jakóbowski 2021). While this experience had significant negative impacts, especially for the affected businesses, it also opened new opportunities as Taiwan increased its support for Lithuania.

While Slovakia's approach may not garner the high-visibility publicity that Taiwan often desires, it still solidifies the foundation of the relationship. Significant agreements, such as the Extradition Treaty and the Judicial Cooperation Agreement described above, have been established and are not easily rescinded, even with a change in government. This was evident in Slovakia in 2023, when early parliamentary elections reinstated the Smer party, which led to a renewed inclination towards closer engagement with China. Since then, Slovakia-Taiwan ties have included only a handful of engagements, mostly in cultural cooperation, such as setting up the Taiwan Studies Center at the Comenius University in Bratislava in September 2024. However, a detailed examination of this shift lies beyond the scope of this paper and would warrant further dedicated research.

Another drawback of Slovakia's pragmatic approach to Taiwan is their limited knowledge and awareness of each other, as evidenced by Sinophone Borderlands Indo-Pacific Survey (2022) (Turcsányi et al. 2022). While there are positive trends in perceptions between Taiwan and Slovakia that both sides can leverage to enhance their mutual image, gaps remain (Turcsányi et al. 2023). Specifically, Slovakia is viewed favourably in Taiwan, though slightly less so than Czechia and significantly less so than Western countries. Conversely, Taiwan is perceived with neutrality in Slovakia; however, respondents with higher levels of political interest were more inclined to hold positive views of Taiwan. Partisan differences were also evident (albeit less pronounced than in the Czech context), with supporters of Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS) exhibiting the highest favourability toward Taiwan, whereas respondents aligned with Smer demonstrated the lowest levels of favourability.

In conclusion, Slovakia's pragmatic approach to Taiwan, marked by discreet diplomacy and limited public acknowledgment, strikes a strategic balance between fostering positive relations with Taiwan and mitigating potential backlash from China. Despite challenges, this approach has resulted in meaningful, albeit

low-profile, agreements that persist even through political transitions. Considering these dynamics, Slovakia's model – with its advantages and drawbacks – serves as a potential blueprint for other countries seeking to engage with Taiwan. Although it may not fully satisfy Taiwan's desire for high-profile recognition, it is often preferable to no engagement at all and can yield significant and enduring benefits over time.

Conclusion: Pragmatic engagement as a viable model for strengthening relations with Taiwan

The strengthened relationship between Slovakia and Taiwan in the early 2020s, shaped by both regional and domestic factors, underscores Slovakia's adeptness in balancing diplomatic pragmatism with meaningful engagement. Although Slovakia adheres to the One China policy (formally recognising Beijing as the sole representative of China), the relationship between Slovakia and Taiwan has deepened across various fronts in between 2020 and 2023. This shift reflects the broader disillusionment of the CEE region with China's unmet economic promises, prompting these countries to seek new partnerships in East Asia. Domestically, Slovakia's change of government in 2020 has introduced a foreign policy more receptive to Taiwan, aligning its economic and security interests within an EU and NATO-friendly framework.

Distinct from the high-visibility approaches adopted by Czechia and Lithuania – two other CEE countries pioneering relations with Taiwan (the so-called vanguards) – Slovakia (akin to Poland) has embraced a pragmatic stance. This approach focuses on pursuing a constructive, 'positive' agenda with Taiwan without directly positioning these actions in relation to China. It involves redirecting Taiwan-related criticisms of China to the parliamentary level, by which the government retains a level of deniability, and subtly engaging in symbolic actions vis-à-vis China. By keeping its diplomatic engagement with Taiwan out of the spotlight, Slovakia has minimised the risk of economic and political backlash from Beijing while advancing practical cooperation in areas such as economics, judicial collaboration and parliamentary exchanges. This approach shields Slovakia from potential retaliation and minimises domestic politicisation of the issue.

However, this pragmatic model also has its limitations. The low-visibility engagement with Taiwan reduces opportunities for mutual public awareness, lacking the public support that higher-profile approaches might cultivate. Nevertheless, Slovakia's pragmatic approach has proven effective, securing durable agreements (not easily undone by future governments), such as the Extradition Treaty (2021) and the Judicial Cooperation Agreement (2022), which underscore the substantive gains achieved in their bilateral relationship.

In sum, Slovakia's measured approach to Taiwan demonstrates how countries can build productive partnerships with Taiwan without backlash from China. This strategy, albeit a rather cautious one, could potentially serve as a blueprint for other nations that may hesitate to engage with Taiwan. Though Slovakia's model

may not fully satisfy Taiwan's aspirations for public recognition, it solidifies a foundation of sustainable, strategic cooperation.

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Disclaimer

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in the CEIAS EU-Taiwan Tracker at https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker. This online tool, developed by the author Kristina Kironska and her team at CEIAS, provides comprehensive information about the development of relations between Taiwan and the 27 EU member states from January 2019 onwards.

Kristina Kironska is a socially engaged interdisciplinary academic with experience in election observation, research, and advocacy. She lived in Taiwan for many years, including a period as a lecturer at the University of Taipei. Currently, she is Co-Director at the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) and lectures at Palacký University Olomouc. Additionally, she also serves as a Board Member of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS). In her research, she focuses mainly on international relations and human rights in Southeast and East Asia. She is the author/editor of several academic articles and books, such as 'Contemporary China: A new superpower' (Routledge, 2023)

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EU-TW Tracker (2021c): Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu paid a 3-day visit to Slovakia and Czechia. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 26 October, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/77>.

EU-TW Tracker (2022a): A cross-party delegation of 10 Slovak Parliamentarians led by the Deputy Speaker of the Slovak Parliament Milan Laurencik paid a 6-day visit to Taiwan. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 5 June, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/165>.

EU-TW Tracker (2022b): Slovakia and Taiwan signed an Arrangement on Judicial Cooperation in Civil and Commercial Matters. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 8 June, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/167>.

EU-TW Tracker (2022c): Slovakia's Foreign Affairs and Health committees of the National Council passed resolutions calling for granting Taiwan observer status to WHA. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 26 April, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/144>.

EU-TW Tracker (2022d): The European Affairs Committee of the Slovak Parliament passed a resolution in support of Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) conferences, related mechanisms, and activities. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 8 September, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/214>.

EU-TW Tracker (2022e): The National Development Fund of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan established the CEE Investment Fund with a value of $200 million The fund is managed by the Taiwania Capital, a national venture capital firm, and targets major strategic sectors, such as semiconductors, biotechnology, aerospace, fintech, electric vehicle, and laser optics, in both Taiwan and CEE, with a special focus on Lithuania, Slovakia, and Czechia. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 27 April, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/145>.

EU-TW Tracker (2023a): Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roy Lee visited Bratislava to give a talk at GLOBSEC's Taiwan Forum. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 30 November, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/439>.

EU-TW Tracker (2023b): Taiwan's Central and Eastern Europe Investment Fund Taiwania Capital approved its second investment worth €8 million for the Slovak technology firm Photoneo (its first project in Slovakia). *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS,* 4 January, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/288>.

EU-TW Tracker (2023c): Taiwania Capital announced its 4th investment worth €6.2 million in the Slovak green tech company Sensoneo, which is a global provider of innovative and smart waste management solutions for cities, businesses, and countries and aims to open its first branch in Taiwan (Asia in general) and expand to the Asian market. *EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS*, 8 June, <accessed online: https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/360>.

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Navigating Geopolitical Shocks: Comparative Strategies of the Visegrád 4 and Indonesia in Global Value Chains

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Abstract
This paper explores the influence of geopolitical events on global value chains, particularly focusing on the Visegrád 4 countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and Indonesia. The objective is to analyse how these semi-peripheral nations, which are more susceptible to geopolitical shocks, navigate their vulnerabilities and policy options. The methodology includes a comparative analysis of two case studies: the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on commodity value chains and the implications of the rise of electromobility. Major findings reveal both similarities and differences in the economic structures and policy responses of the V4 countries and Indonesia, highlighting their approaches to decoupling and derisking. Despite facing similar problems in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the V4 countries pursued decoupling while Indonesia attempted to reverse the decoupling trends. Both regions attempt to benefit from the rise of electromobility by encouraging reshoring into their jurisdictions, although the tools they use vary due to differences in the underlying economic thought. In conclusion, the paper emphasises the importance of understanding how semi-peripheral countries can strategically leverage their positions in response to the intricate geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges that shape global value chains.

Introduction

Increasing geopolitical tensions have significantly impacted the structure and function of the global value chains (GVCs). Experiencing multiple disruptive events concurrently creates a state of polycrisis, in which 'the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts' (Tooze 2022). Global value chain networks are particularly vulnerable due to their length, interconnectedness and complexity. Due to their centrality in the world economy, the World Economic Forum has recently identified the collapse of a systemically important supply chain as one of the top global risks (Heading & Zahidi 2023).

This paper compares the impact of geopolitical events on supply chains and the subsequent policy responses. The comparison will focus on the countries of the so-called Visegrád 4 (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and Indonesia. These nations are part of what Richard Baldwin called 'Factory Europe' and 'Factory Asia' (Baldwin 2012), two regional blocks with the world's most advanced inter-country production networks, characterised by a high level of exchange in intermediate products. Within their regional production networks, both the Visegrád 4 and Indonesia occupy a semi-peripheral position (Arrighi & Drangel 1986; Hopkins & Wallerstein 1977; Kostoska et al. 2020), exposing them to greater vulnerability to geopolitical shocks and shaping their ability to respond.

At the same time, the global nature of geopolitical factors allows us to observe both similarities and differences in their impact on these two distant regions. This paper will examine two case studies in which geopolitical events affected the structure of value chains in both regions. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a significant restructuring of energy supply chains in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region (Jirušek 2024), while it has strongly impacted the food supply chain in Indonesia (Donnellon-May & Teng 2023). The reshoring processes that emerged in response to the pandemic, trade wars and technological competition have a significant presence in both regions, and the case study on the rise of the electric mobility supply chain will be used to illustrate the similarities and differences in policymakers' approaches. While there are a number of other geopolitical events with consequential implications for the functioning of global value chains, due to a large asymmetry in their impact on both regions, a comparative study would not be feasible.

This paper will consider the challenges and opportunities these developments present to both regions, highlighting the differences and similarities in their

economic structures and analysing the ways they address these challenges in a comparative manner. The structure of the paper is as follows: it will begin with a background on the importance of supply chains in both global and national economies and place the CEE region and Indonesia within them. It will then introduce a geopolitical layer to the supply chain analysis, linking the economic management of supply chains with political preferences. Next, we will dissect the two comparative case studies mentioned above to uncover similarities and differences in approaches. Lastly, we will conclude by summarising our findings.

Global value chain in a geopolitical world

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant expansion of global value chains, which are interconnected processes in the production of goods across multiple borders. This period has witnessed the rise of multinational corporations (MNCs) and the fragmentation of production processes across borders, fostering increased international trade and investment flows. Driven by technological advancements, trade liberalisation and the pursuit of cost-efficiency, firms have been able to source raw materials, components and services from geographically dispersed locations, optimising their production networks (Gereffi & Fernandez-Stark 2016). This has led to the creation of complex, interconnected value chains, where different stages of the production process are carried out in various countries, taking advantage of comparative advantages and specialised capabilities (Antràs 2020).

Rather than focusing on whole industries, countries have increasingly specialised in specific activities and stages within global value chains, resulting in a growing trade in intermediate goods and services. Since 1995, the trade in intermediate goods has outpaced the growth in trade of final goods, contributing a little more than half to the overall growth in total manufacturing trade between 2009 and 2018 (WTO 2019). Currently, GVCs account for approximately 84% of the international production networks of multinational corporations.

Both the V4 countries and Indonesia have been increasingly embedded in GVCs; however, the historical and structural nature of their engagement with GVCs differ. Therefore, this section will first introduce the evolution and current state of participation of both regions in GVCs, and then proceed to conceptualise the impact of geopolitical risks on GVCs in the manufacturing semi-periphery. It will conclude by creating a framework that will allow us to systematically analyse and compare the responses of these countries to the geopolitical shocks in their production networks.

Visegrád 4's integration in GVCs

In Europe, German firms have been at the forefront of vertical specialisation. Geographical proximity, cultural similarities and relatively high differential in labour costs have led many German firms to relocate parts of their production

facilities into Central and Eastern European countries. The magnitude of this process has changed the structural relationship between the German and V4 economies, to the extent that it was identified as a 'German-Central European Supply Chain Cluster' (IMF 2013) or the 'central European manufacturing core' (Stehrer & Stöllinger 2013).[1]

Substantial empirical research has demonstrated the close and dynamic integration of the V4 region with the European Union (EU) market, particularly the Eurozone, as well as the broader global economy (Altomonte et al. 2013). Initially, the V4 countries tended to specialise in labour-intensive and resource-intensive manufacturing sectors, leveraging their comparative advantages (Dobrinsky 1995). This specialisation was driven by increased foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows and intra-industry trade in these sectors.

The growth of manufacturing specialisation was a crucial driver of economic transition in many V4 states. There was a significant shift from simple, labour-intensive assembly operations to more sophisticated processing and local production of parts, as well as an expansion beyond EU markets. A significant shift occurred in the V4 economies' participation in international production networks, with a growing emphasis on higher-skilled, knowledge-intensive activities (Jürgens & Krzywdzinski 2009).

The global economic crisis in 2008 had a significant impact on the automotive industry, while its effects on other economic sectors, with the exception of housing and finance, were less severe (Van Biesebroeck & Sturgeon 2010). In V4 countries the 'economic crisis interrupted 15 years of rapid FDI-driven development of the automotive industry' (Pavlínek 2015: 25) and the value of production and exports only exceeded pre-crisis levels in 2011 (Domański et al. 2013). A survey of case studies conducted by Cieślik, Biegańska & Środa-Murawska (2019: 3) revealed 'an ongoing of industrial upgrading' in the V4 region. Initially, the participation in GVCs was largely limited to assembly, however, V4 countries are now performing tasks of higher complexity and have become important suppliers of final products and parts (Pavlínek & Ženka 2011). The new EU member states increased their share in EU-wide value chain exports twofold between 2000 and 2014 (from about 5% to 11.6%), which was a primary reason the EU as a whole experienced a relatively small drop in global market share in value chain trade (Stöllinger et al. 2018).

Cieślik, Biegańska & Środa-Murawska (2019: 3) note that a number of studies found that V4 countries are often located in relatively downstream activities of global production chains (e.g., Fortwengel 2011). As the V4 economies 'do not grow through domestic research that generates innovation', they rely on imported technology, FDI and inputs to support the expansion and competitiveness of their exports, therefore, they lack a clear specialisation in labour-intensive or low-skill

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1   Here I draw on my previous analysis (Šebeňa 2018: 2).

undertakings (Kordalska & Olczyk 2022: 3-4). While the V4 countries are primarily concerned with elevating their manufacturing capabilities and achieving a higher proportion of knowledge-intensive production, they face fierce challenges from East Asia, particularly China, as this region is also keen to climb the value chain and expand knowledge-intensive production (Song 2017).

Indonesia's participation in GVCs

Indonesia's first substantial linkages to global value chains were spurred by the economic reforms in the mid-1980s, which reduced trade barriers, revamped the customs and supported internationalisation, even as the economy remained dominated by cronyism (Ing, Pangestu & Cadot 2018). Nevertheless, the slowly but steadily increasing trade volumes experienced a sharp downturn during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 to 1999, when the GDP dropped by 13 percent, inflation rose by 58 percent and the exchange rate fell by 244 percent. Crucially for trade, the collapse of the banking sector hindered trade, as businesses were unable to finance their imports or exports (Pangestu & Habir 2002). Indonesia's trade increased in the subsequent period, as exports were initially supported by the weak currency (Wie 2002) and later by booming commodity prices. This, however, resulted in a higher share of resources in total exports – particularly coal and palm oil – a situation typical of a country with a 'resource curse' (Rosser 2007).

Regarding Indonesia's participation in GVCs, the volume of trade in intermediates in absolute terms generally increased after 2000; however, over 80% of the intermediates were sourced domestically and 75% of the final products remained in the domestic market (ISDB & ADB 2019). A joint research by the Islamic Development Bank and Asian Development Bank found that 'the use of foreign intermediates declined across the economic sectors except for medium and high-tech manufacturing' (ISDB & ADB 2019: vi), which accounted for most of Indonesia's intermediate exports. In relative terms, however, Indonesia's participation in GVCs declined from 2000 to 2017 through forward and backward linkages, with forward participation being higher than backward, indicating that Indonesia is largely self-reliant in the production of intermediate inputs, importing relatively few technologically advanced products from abroad as manufacturing inputs (ISDB & ADB 2019: 40).

Due to several factors, including legacies from the Asian Financial Crisis, a large domestic demand base, favourable demographics and rapid urbanisation, Indonesia has been able to grow despite the low proportion of exports on its economic output (Das 2018: 163). Indonesia has a relatively small trade size in comparison to the overall economy and its trade is more bilateral than global, with domestic value-added used more by direct importers for domestic consumption (Shepherd & Soejachmoen 2018).

The comparative advantage of Indonesian firms is concentrated in primary and low-tech manufacturing industries, some of which increased their advantage from 2000 to 2017. Indonesia's position departs significantly from that of its ASEAN neighbours, as it has a much lower dependence on foreign service inputs. Shepherd & Soejachmoen (2018: 115) conclude that it is 'quite likely that part of the competitiveness challenge faced by Indonesian firms that could potentially join GVCs is related to their ability to access competitive services inputs'.

Indonesia's exports contain a higher proportion of final goods than those of other ASEAN countries. This stands out in the transport equipment category, within which 76 percent of Indonesia's gross exports consist of final goods, in contrast to 45 percent for Thailand, where Japanese GVCs in this sector concentrate (Shepherd & Soejachmoen 2018: 117). In their analysis of Indonesia's GVC linkages, Aswicahyono and Rafitrandi (2018: 3) maintained that 'Indonesia's economic performance is not sustainable nor resilient to respond to the external environment challenges' due to weak ties with global production networks.

The geopolitics of value chains

Both Indonesia and the Visegrád 4 experienced three decades of intensifying supply chain activities; however, since 2016, the world has undergone a shift towards nationalism and protectionism, leading to tensions between nation-states and an increase in geopolitical risk (Noland 2020). Starting with Brexit, events such as trade wars, the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and high-tech competition have created increasing stress on global supply chains.

Changes in global value chains can occur for structural, strategic and geopolitical reasons. The most common category is structural change, pursued by the multinational firms operating within GVCs as part of their profit-seeking strategies (Weller & Rainnie 2023). Strategic changes are long-term gradual adjustments initiated by host country firms or governments with the intention of changing the underlying structure of their economy, usually in pursuit of goals such as industrial upgrading or import substitution (Yeung 2015). Geopolitical changes to GVCs are conceptualised as the impacts on the relationships within GVCs caused by geopolitical forces external to them and negatively affecting their participants. This leads to the rupture of ties between global firms and host country regions, which affects both outside-in transactional relationships (foreign firms' relationships with actors in host economies) as well as inside-out transactional relationships, i.e. domestic firms' relationships with other actors abroad (Pavlínek 2024: 141).

States play a central role in facilitating or hindering changes in global value chains. Rory Horner (2017) identified four ways in which states are involved in the management of GVCs: they support the inclusion and operation of firms in production networks, regulate them in their jurisdictions and engage with them

through state-owned enterprises, and procurement policies. Political economy approaches emphasise the intersection of economic and political processes in constituting global production networks and global value chains, as well as the central role states assume through their various actors and agencies (Glassmann 2011). In the words of Beata Javorcik (2020), the reshaping of the supply chains is driven by both managerial (i.e. firm-level) and political (i.e. sub-national, national or supranational-level) factors. Governments recognise the strategic value of the global value chains and are increasingly willing to intervene in shaping their structure, geographical distribution, resilience and robustness. Furthermore, the disruption caused by geopolitical events has diverted policymakers' focus towards more self-reliance, resulting in proposals of measures that better protect, reinforce or even reinstate macro-regional or national productions of certain goods (Barbieri et al. 2020).

This paper focuses on two approaches that governments have been pursuing as strategies under the aegis of economic security: decoupling and derisking. The former is defined as weakening interdependence between two nations or blocs of nations (Witt et al. 2023). As Witt et al (2023) note, decoupling can be a result of political, economic and technological factors, with geopolitics being 'the most unambiguous force behind decoupling'. Ando, Hayakawa and Kimura (2024) further distinguish between offensive and defensive decoupling, where defensive decoupling refers to precautionary measures, and offensive decoupling is conceptualised within the context of economic competition between nations. From the perspective of national governments, it is important to distinguish between passive and active decoupling. Passive decoupling refers to a country's economy reducing its interdependence with another nation through geopolitical, economic and technological processes not initiated or managed by the government. In contrast, active decoupling refers to decoupling results from deliberate policymaking.

This definition leads to a further distinction between preventative and reactive economic policy measures. Preventative decoupling results in a lower level of interdependence due to targeted policy measures launched in pursuit of self-reliance or other strategic goals. Reactive decoupling encompasses policies implemented in response to shocks to global supply chains, which can be categorised as supply ruptures, demand ruptures/surges and transportation ruptures (Baldwin & Freeman 2022). While in the supply chain risk management literature, there is a variety of labels and categorisations for policies that countries can adopt in response to shocks, the most common include diversification of suppliers, customers and delivery channels; establishment of redundant production capabilities; boosting flexibility; stockpiling/inventory/buffer stocks; and improvements in information gathering (Sá et al. 2020).

The Russo-Ukrainian War that started in 2022 facilitated a decoupling in commodity trade between Russia and both the Visegrád 4 and Indonesia. However,

there is a notable analytical difference between both regions. Indonesia saw its imports of fertilisers and agricultural products from Russia involuntarily disrupted, to which it responded by implementing reactive measures. In the CEE region, the war itself did not lead to a physical disruption in the flows of gas and oil from Russia to the Visegrád 4 (Adolfsen et al. 2022). Nonetheless, the countries decided to decouple from Russian energy resources and find alternative sources of supply. In this sense, the exogenous geopolitical shock was proactively leveraged by the V4 politicians to decouple and restructure their energy supply chains, while Indonesia was in a reactive mode, and sought to prevent decoupling primarily through engaging in heightened diplomatic activity.

This paper adopts the definition of reshoring by Barbieri et al (2020), characterised as a decision to relocate manufacturing activity to a country within a preferred macro-region. Unlike decoupling, the primary goal of derisking is not necessarily a reduction of interdependence – although this might eventually occur as a result – but a change in the structure of the interdependent relationship. While the liberal theory enlists the benefits of interdependence and explains the rise of global value chains (Witt 2019), from a security vantage point, structural imbalances create risks for production networks and macroeconomic stability. More specifically, these imbalances create vulnerabilities that can be exploited by malleable actors related to supply chain resilience, technology security and weaponisation of economic dependencies (Šebeňa 2024).

Derisking is pursued by business actors as part of their risk management practices, as well as by governments within their economic security frameworks. As Fratocchi and Di Stefano (2019) note, governments and businesses may prefer to reshore to their home country (home-shoring), or a preferred macro-region (near-shoring). Since Indonesia and the V4 countries do not have many large MNCs engaged in global value chains, this paper will focus analytically on near-shoring.

The rise of derisking in both regions is related to several concurrent events. Trade wars and great power competition are facilitating an overall reshuffle of the supply chain, especially as they relate to China (Farrell & Newman 2023). The newly emerging electric vehicle supply chains have made their inroads into both regions. Indonesia, with the world's largest deposits of nickel, a mineral critical for the production of electric batteries, has attracted considerable investment in its automotive industry, including electric vehicles (Schröder & Iwasaki 2023). The CEE region, traditionally very strong in car manufacturing, has experienced a huge wave of investment into transitioning towards electric vehicles and battery manufacturing capacities (Szunomár 2024).

In the sections that follow, we will investigate the governments' responses to two geopolitical disruptions and use the analytical concepts of preventative/reactive decoupling and near-shoring to demonstrate the centrality of governments' positions in constituting value chains, investigate how they pursue change

or retrenchment in GVCs in reaction to geopolitical ruptures, and identify the limits of their actions stemming from their semi-peripheral position in global production networks.

Russian invasion of Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine constituted a major geopolitical shock, resulting in severe disruption in global value chains (Steinbach 2023). The Visegrád 4 region felt this disruption primarily in terms of energy flows, although sanctions also halted exports of intermediate and final goods to Russia. Indonesian value chains were impacted by the sudden stop in the supply of fertilisers and agricultural products (Donnellon-May & Teng 2023). This case study examines how the disruption in trade in commodities affected economies and contrasts the respective policy responses.

Energy decoupling in the V4 countries

For decades, the V4 countries have been significantly dependent on Russia for the provision of natural gas, oil, coal and uranium, although the level of dependency on individual energy resources varied across countries (Żuk et al. 2023). In an effort to manage and eventually reduce this dependency, the V4 countries – individually or within the EU framework – applied three approaches identified within the decoupling framework, namely: long-term preventative measures after 2014, short-term reactive measures after 2022 and long-term preventative measures after 2022.

In 2014, in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea and under the influence of the 2006 and 2009 gas supply crises, the European Commission adopted the European Energy Security Strategy (Prisecaru 2022). Within its framework, it included measures to strengthen emergency and solidarity mechanisms, moderate energy demand, build an internal energy market, increase energy production in the EU, diversify suppliers and improve coordination of national energy policies (European Commission 2014).

In 2022, the European Commission responded to the Russian invasion with a series of short-term reactive energy measures. The Commission suggested voluntary reductions in natural gas consumption of 15% and the member states agreed to impose sanctions on Russian coal and oil (Prisecaru 2022). Simultaneously, long-term preventative measures were proposed and implemented, such as securing alternative supplies, adopting gas storing rules to ensure the availability of reserves, facilitating joint gas purchases, investing in energy efficiency and strengthening the decarbonisation goals through greater deployment of renewable sources of energy (European Commission 2022).

The situation is more complicated on the national level. With the exception of Hungary, which opposes energy decoupling with Russia, the V4 countries

largely follow the EU-wide energy security strategy, except in situations where it is not feasible. Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia fully depend on imports of Russian nuclear fuel and have a high dependence on Russian oil. In both cases, exemptions from sanctions have been granted to the three countries (Mišík & Oravcová 2024). Czechia and Poland have been actively seeking new energy supplies in order to reduce dependence on Russia as much as possible, while Slovakia (after the 2023 elections) and Hungary pursue supply diversification at a much slower pace (Csernus 2023).

Although there has been a considerable reduction in the consumption of Russian energy in the two years since the outbreak of the war (McWilliams & Zachmann 2024), due to the exemptions from sanctions and infrastructural linkages, Russian energy has continued flowing into the V4 countries, allowing for a smoother transition to alternative supplies and avoiding disruption of value chains. Nevertheless, the shock of the war and subsequent sanctions led to a steep increase in energy prices, which impacted all countries regardless of their stance on the issue (de Guindos 2022). Inflation of energy inputs was felt throughout the value chains in the region and constituted a larger strain on GVC performance than the cutoff from Russian energy sources, despite the governments' efforts to dampen the price increases by targeted measures.

Agricultural imports disruption in Indonesia

Although Indonesia also had to deal with the increase in global energy prices, the Russian invasion of Ukraine impacted Southeast Asian countries most prominently in the supply shortages of agricultural products and fertilisers (Donnellon-May & Teng 2023). Indonesia is the world's largest importer of wheat, which is used in the production of instant noodles, of which Indonesia is the world's second-largest consumer (Jibiki 2022). Prior to the outbreak of the war, Ukraine was Indonesia's largest supplier of wheat, while Russia also ranked among the top exporters of this commodity. The situation is similar in the fertiliser industry, which is highly vulnerable due to the concentration of production within a small number of countries (Hebebrand & Laborde 2022). Indonesia purchases almost one-third of its fertilisers in Russia and Belarus (Donnellon-May & Teng 2023).

The Indonesian food industry exhibits higher forward than backward participation in GVCs, indicating it exports more food inputs than it imports. This is, however, true principally for the trade in rice, which is heavily regulated (Amanta & Gupta 2022). These trade regulations, which essentially constitute the implementation of an export substitution policy, are part of a broader suite of measures designed to achieve self-sufficiency in rice production (Habir & Negara 2024). Therefore, Indonesia can be seen as pursuing long-term proactive decoupling in the rice trade.

In contrast, Indonesia cannot fully decouple from its principal suppliers in the wheat trade. When the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War reached Indonesia,

the government responded in two ways. In the short term, it limited exports of certain food products to ensure domestic supply and price stability (Al Jazeera 2022). In the medium to long term, the government of Joko Widodo launched an unprecedented diplomatic initiative in an effort to secure the restoration of the foodstuffs supplies (Mantong & Kembara 2022).

At the end of June 2022, four months into the conflict, Widodo travelled to Ukraine and Russia in an effort to mediate the conflict and secure a passage for food exports. Widodo's top priority was to find a way to stop the conflict in Ukraine, but should that prove unsuccessful, it was to find a way of exporting Ukrainian and Russian wheat and fertilisers (Maulia 2022). In addition to the two immediate goals, Widodo invited both leaders to attend the G20 meeting in Indonesia (Rohmah 2022).

Widodo's achievements during these trips were mostly symbolic. He was the first Asian leader to visit Ukraine, received confirmation from Russian President Vladimir Putin that the Russian supply of food and fertilisers would remain uninterrupted, and was commended by the Ukrainian government for his efforts. However, his diplomatic initiative resulted neither in a settlement of the conflict nor in securing an export channel for Ukrainian wheat (Dharmaputra 2022), even though on 22 July, less than a month after Widodo's visit, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was signed between Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN, which allowed for Ukrainian wheat exports (Guterres 2022). This agreement resulted in a drop in wheat prices to pre-war levels, which calmed the situation in global wheat markets (Cooper 2022). Widodo's diplomatic outreach contributed little, if anything, to the conclusion of this deal. Widodo also hosted the G20 Bali summit in November 2022 in which the war in Ukraine was the central discussion point, including discussions on the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Indonesia was praised for facilitating the adoption of the final declaration, which reiterated the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Niblett 2022). However, no concrete results leading to improvements in grain exports were achieved.

Despite its supply vulnerabilities, the Indonesian government appears neither willing to reduce nor capable of reducing its dependency and decoupling its wheat imports from Eastern Europe. Therefore, the two approaches the country adopted after the outbreak of the war were short-term reactive measures and long-term preventative measures, where preventative is rather paradoxically understood in the sense of the prevention of decoupling.

Electric vehicle transformation

The automotive industry is undergoing a transition from the production of vehicles with internal combustion engines (ICEs) to the production of electric vehicles (EVs), leading to a global restructuring of the existing automotive industry (Pavlínek 2023). The rise of the EV industry has been accompanied by trade

wars, which facilitate reshoring, and green transition/decarbonisation, attracting government support for the industry. The semi-peripheral regions of 'Factory Asia' and 'Factory Europe' are poised to benefit from the reshoring trend linked to the EV transformation, for reasons that are both similar and different (Handfield, Graham & Burns 2020).

The similarity that unites both the V4 and Indonesia is the impact of the trade wars. Tensions arising from booming Chinese exports, accusations of unfair trade practices, and violations of human rights and environmental standards have resulted in a long list of economic measures, particularly from Western countries, which to a considerable degree limit trade between China and the West (Gur & Dilek 2023). This has prompted both Western and Chinese companies to establish production sites outside of China.

Both the V4 and Indonesia are capitalising on the relocation of production out of China to countries that are considered 'friendly', but also possess comparative advantages in the automotive industry. The comparative advantages of these regions differ, which subsequently influences the choice of policy instruments that politicians in both regions use to facilitate the reshoring toward their economies. The V4 countries build on the fact that they have for decades been a part of the central European car manufacturing supply chain and thus have the manufacturing tradition, infrastructure and skilled labour (Pavlínek 2023). In contrast, Indonesia has large deposits of natural resources critical for EV production, particularly nickel and cobalt, a large domestic market and low labour costs, which allow it to implement policies to attract overseas investment in this sector (Tambunan 2011). An important distinction that shapes policymaking is that the V4 countries produce automobiles primarily for export, while Indonesia's focus is on domestic car purchases.

EV sector in the V4 countries
In the past three decades, the V4 region has become deeply integrated with the European automotive supply chains. This integration has enhanced the region's competitive advantages and led to a rise in value-added activities, with several indicators reflecting the V4's automotive prowess. Nevertheless, with the rise of electric vehicle manufacturing, the region has been identified as lacking not only East Asian industry leaders but also Western European carmakers. This is due to the region not being the centre of electromobility innovation, a slower pace of transition to the production of EVs and Western carmakers' decisions to move ICE production to the region in order to open capacities to EV production at home (Pavlínek 2023).

Conversely, there is a growing trend arriving predominantly from China and South Korea, where companies active within the EV supply chain (chiefly carmakers and battery manufacturers) are more frequently choosing to locate their production facilities in the V4 countries (Kratz et al. 2024). World leaders in

electromobility, such as BYD, CATL, SK ON and LE Energy, are attracted by the region's strengths in its semi-peripheral location: being part of the single European market, proximity to major EV consumer markets, comparatively lower corporate taxes and other comparative advantages listed above (Szunomár 2024).

Another major pull factor for the Chinese and Korean firms is the governmental policies that shape incentives and alter the risk-reward calculations for private investors. These policies are driven by both the EU institutions as well as from the national governments (Sebastian & Boullenois 2024). At the EU level, two major areas of policymaking impacting the EV sector are the green transition and the nascent economic security policymaking, while national governments primarily use traditional supply-side incentives to attract foreign investors (Pavlínek 2023).

The European Green Deal commits member states to the phaseout of ICE vehicle production. Under the Fit for 55 programme, carmakers will no longer be allowed to produce ICE vehicles starting in 2035, pushing them towards a transition to EV production. The resulting need to upgrade existing car manufacturing facilities or build new ones has led to increased investment in the V4 region (Eurofound 2023). Notably, a large portion of this investment has come from East Asian countries, particularly China (Kratz et al. 2024).

The European economic security policy has been developed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and received a coherent framework in 2023 with the publication of the Economic Security Strategy (European Commission 2023). This strategy aims to promote the competitiveness of European strategic industries and the industrial base, protect its economy from economic coercion and unfair practices, and partner with other (like-minded) states (Pisani-Ferry, Weder Di Mauro & Zettelmeyer 2024). Regarding EV production, it encompasses a number of policies designed to encourage battery production, safeguard critical raw material supplies, and regulate foreign investment and foreign subsidies (Sommerfeld Antoniou & Lebret 2024).

In response to the rise of electromobility, the V4 countries benefit from their traditional advantages in car manufacturing; however, these have been affected by the EU-level policies targeting green transition and addressing economic security. In particular, the efforts to derisk and increase domestic production and its resilience have enticed large greenfield investments of Chinese companies, which are proactively managing the risk of being left out of the European markets (Sebastian, Goujon & Meyer 2024).

Building the EV sector in Indonesia

Indonesia has long sought to develop its automotive industry, but the government's policies have yielded mixed success. The country has attracted a number of carmakers and their suppliers, but efforts to develop a homegrown car brand have failed (Natsuda, Otsuka & Thoburn 2015). The automotive industry has received

a significant boost with the transition toward electromobility, as Indonesia is endowed with large deposits of minerals critical for electric battery production (a top producer of nickel and the second-largest producer of cobalt). The Indonesian government is attempting to leverage this advantage, along with its large domestic market and increased reshoring activity, to restructure global value chains (GVCs) and pivot them towards the Indonesian economy (Negara & Hidayat 2021).

As a resource-rich developing country, Indonesia seeks to utilise natural resources for economic development. While historically, consumers and producers of metals tended to be the same countries, over the past fifty years, 'producers and consumers of metals have been slowly moving into separate camps' (Humphreys 2013: 341). Schröder & Iwasaki (2023: 1) argue that this shift has given suppliers increased leverage, which some countries seek to 'employ to capture more value-added inside GVCs'. Following this strategy, Indonesia revised the Mining Law in 2009 (Law no. 4 of 2009) to allow the government to restrict the export of mineral ores and require partial divestment of foreign mining corporations. One goal of the law was to 'increase nickel processing capacity and decrease reliance on resource exports' (Camba, Lim & Gallagher 2022: 2376). While the initial goal of the export restriction policy was to encourage domestic production of nickel intermediates, which would allow Indonesia to enter 'the stainless steel production stage' (Suherman & Saleh 2018: 69), the government policy has recently pivoted toward EV battery manufacturing. Negara and Hidayat (2021: 177) describe the government's visions by stating that 'Indonesia's grand ambition is to not just venture into the EVs industry but also become one of the world's largest lithium battery producers' (Negara & Hidayat 2021). The country thus aims to vertically integrate upstream activities within EV manufacturing, encompassing all production stages from nickel mining to EV car assembly (Schröder & Iwasaki 2023: 2).

In an effort to link upstream natural resources and downstream automotive industry, the government employs both regulations and incentives to attract FDIs and GVCs into the country. In the management of natural resources, the government cites domestic value production as a reason for using export restrictions to prohibit the export of mineral ore, requiring it to be smelted domestically. In the case of nickel, the export ban was first imposed in 2014 and reinstated in 2020 (Guberman, Schreiber & Perry 2024). Combined with government incentives, mostly in the provision of tax breaks and cheap energy, this approach has led to a substantial increase in FDIs into the country's nickel smelter capacity, with mostly Chinese firms investing almost 14 billion USD (Gupta 2023).

To attract battery and EV manufacturers, the government has largely turned to using incentives, such as tax breaks, removal of luxury taxes and reduction of VAT taxes on cars with more than 40% of domestic components (IEA 2024). Major Chinese, Korean and Japanese carmakers have already started EV production in the country and a lithium smelter, a crucial component in battery production, is

being constructed by a Korean consortium, even as there are no lithium deposits in the country (Medina 2023).

In pursuit of the 'downstreaming' policy, Indonesia's administration builds on the country's advantages in natural and human resources, its large consumer market and an advantageous position within the Indo-Pacific region. It employs a mix of regulations and incentives to attract and expand GVCs in the country. Headline figures indicating the volume of FDIs in the country suggest that this strategy is effective, although a number of analysts caution about the risks embedded in the current macroeconomic environment (Gupta 2023; Medina 2023).

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the impact of geopolitical events on global value chains in the V4 countries and Indonesia reveals both similarities and differences in their experiences and policy responses. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has significantly disrupted energy supply chains in the V4 region while impacting food supply chains in Indonesia. The semi-peripheral position occupied by both the V4 countries and Indonesia within their respective regional production networks has exposed them to higher vulnerability to geopolitical shocks. However, their policy approaches have diverged; the V4 countries leverage their closer integration with the European Union to pursue decoupling, while Indonesia has pursued a strategy that aimed at a reversal of decoupling from Eastern European agricultural imports. These differing approaches reflect the distinct economic structures and political dynamics of the two regions.

Both regions are seeking to capitalise on the transition of the automotive industry from internal combustion engines to EVs, leading to a restructuring of the industry. Trade wars and green transition policies are driving the reshoring of EV production, benefiting the manufacturing semi-periphery. The V4 countries are leveraging their existing automotive manufacturing base, supply chain integration and EU-level economic security policymaking, while Indonesia capitalises on its abundance of critical minerals. Both regions are using a mix of policy tools – regulations, incentives and partnerships – to attract investment in EV and battery manufacturing, as they strive to develop integrated EV value chains within their economies. This transition is significantly reshaping global automotive production and trade dynamics.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of understanding the interplay between geopolitics and global production networks in the semi-periphery of production networks. As the world economy remains highly interconnected, the ability of countries to navigate the complexities of GVCs and respond effectively to geopolitical disruptions will be a key determinant of their economic resilience and competitiveness. Further research is needed to explore the evolving dynamics of GVCs and the policy implications for countries occupying diverse positions within the global economic landscape.

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