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Two's Company, Three's a Crowd: Tripolarity and War

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Abstract

International systems of three great powers, tripolar systems, remain an understudied topic. In this article, I make three claims about tripolarity. First, it is more warlike than either bipolarity or multipolarity. Second, the two weaker poles of a tripolar system usually ally against the most powerful one. Third, when a pole abruptly declines, the two others have a strong incentive to race to prey on it. To demonstrate this, I develop three cases of past tripolar systems rarely discussed: the Epigoni period during the third century B.C. (Eastern Mediterranean system), the period of the Three Kingdoms during the third century A.D. and the period of the late Northern and Southern Dynasties during the sixth century (East Asian system). This study is thus of importance not only for international relations theory but also for understanding current great power relations since today's world also consists of three poles: China, Russia and the United States.

Keywords: balance of power, central war, China-Russia-US relations, international system, neorealism, tripolarity

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Introduction

With America's unipolar moment now behind us, polarity has become once again a hot issue. As international politics moved toward a new structure, competition among great powers now makes the headlines daily. Traditionally, international relations scholars distinguish between unipolar, bipolar and multipolar systems (Waltz 1979: 129–138).[1] Yet, many count in today's world three great powers: China, Russia and the United States (Allison 2020; Mearsheimer 2019: 8; Simón, Desmaele & Becker 2021: 96). Tripolarity – a system with only three great powers – arguably possesses features distinct from multipolarity.[2] In other words, the current tripolarity is likely to take on a life of its own. Compared to bipolarity and multipolarity, however, tripolarity has received little scholarly attention. This disinterest is understandable since no example of a tripolar system exists in the modern era. In this article, I investigate whether tripolarity will push the international system toward peace or conflict and attempt to bridge this gap in scholarship by describing the rare clear-cut cases of tripolarity in history.

This work not only advances the comprehension of past international systems but also helps explain the relations between today's three great powers. In opposition to researchers considering tripolarity benign, I show that it is often a violent power structure. Tripolarity is more prone to devastating great power wars than either bipolarity or multipolarity. I reach this conclusion by comparing the outbreak of such central wars throughout three cases: the period of the Epigoni, the Three Kingdoms, and the late Northern and Southern Dynasties. Moreover, I demonstrate through these cases that the two weakest powers show a strong tendency to ally against the strongest. Finally, when a great power collapses under tripolarity, the two remaining poles have a deep-seated interest in seizing as many resources as possible from that declining great power.

This article is organised as follows. In the next part, I clarify a few essential concepts and discuss the distinctive properties of tripolarity. After that, I develop the three main historical cases of tripolar systems, each having a dedicated part. Then, I discuss lessons from the case studies, and I conclude by applying these to the current tripolar relations.

Examining tripolarity
Key concepts
Before diving into tripolarity, I clarify a few definitions and ideas that structure this article. Offensive realism helps explain why the distribution of power and

1   Kegley and Raymond (2020: chap. 7) sum up well the debate on current polarity. 'Unipolar moment' is from Krauthammer (1991).
2   The seminal study concerning tripolarity is Schweller (1998). Other works are Haas (1970), Kegley and Raymond (2020: 149–150), Nogee and Spanier (1977), Wagner (1986), and Yalem (1972).

polarity matter (Mearsheimer 2014; also, Labs 1997). States exist in an anarchic world with no superior authority to guarantee their survival. They live alongside numerous other states, all capable of using force and inflicting harm. Hence, they need to wield their resources to defend themselves and maintain military forces. States are forced to care deeply about others' capabilities since it is impossible to confidently decipher other states' present or future intentions (Rosato 2015, 2021). The safest course of action is to maximise one's power to deter or, if necessary, defeat potential aggressors. When one cannot defend itself by its own means, it can try to find like-minded states with which to ally. States must think and act strategically to increase their share of world power, sometimes resorting to war. They all yearn to become the most powerful state since it is the most secure position. States are revisionist when they can and status quoist when they must.

Due to differential growth rates, military prowess and often pure chance, some states will be stronger than others. The top-tier states are called great powers. They possess the most formidable military forces and overwhelmingly determine the trajectory of international politics by making the most crucial decisions regarding war and peace. Therefore, the number of great powers, polarity, matters significantly for understanding the dynamics of the system (Zhang 2023). A great power must

> have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world. The candidate need not have the capability to defeat the leading state, but it must have some reasonable prospect of turning the conflict into a war of attrition that leaves the dominant state seriously weakened, even if that dominant state ultimately wins the war. In the nuclear age great powers must have a nuclear deterrent that can survive a nuclear strike against it, as well as formidable conventional forces. (Mearsheimer 2014: 5)

Great powers either 'have a superior military potential, which even with a moderate rate of mobilization generates commanding ready military strength' or are 'endowed with a moderate potential in terms of manpower and other resources [but] they mobilize to a greater extent than do states of comparable military potential' (Knorr 1970: 21). Power is accordingly 'the inability to inflict ... cost on another country's high-value interests, including territorial integrity and political survival, lives of its citizenry, and economic prosperity' (Ross 2006: 367). Hence, military might is the ultimate form of power and land forces are the ultimate form of military might. I take navies into account in the three case studies only when it is relevant for understanding the balance of power. One should also examine population and wealth — latent capabilities waiting to be used — because they are necessary inputs for generating military capabilities. States balance foremost against existing military capabilities, but they also consider latent power in their

calculations (Levy & Thompson 2005; Mearsheimer 2014: chaps. 3–4). However, if population and wealth are essential to building actual power, they are not power itself (Lobell 2018; Motin 2021).

Defined that way, the sole great powers in today's world are China, Russia and the United States. Many would disagree with that listing. Some argue that the international system remains robustly unipolar, especially due to America's technological lead (Brooks & Wohlforth 2023; also, Borges & Lucena 2023). But states need not be even in all indicators to qualify as great powers. In the pre-World War II era, some, like Austria-Hungary and Italy, were universally acknowledged as great powers despite lagging in industrial and technological prowess. The Cold War Soviet Union always remained far behind the United States in numerous economic indicators. Yet, few would deny its polar status because it could muster formidable military forces (Shifrinson 2023, also, 2018: 13–15). Others would call the current power distribution bipolar, with China and the United States as great powers (Maher 2018; Tunsjø 2018). Although China is far above Russia regarding latent power, Moscow manages to keep up thanks to its formidable military, large and autonomous military-industrial complex, and massive nuclear arsenal.

After the Cold War's end, many saw the European Union, Germany and Japan as potential great powers. But both Germany and Japan failed to live up to expectations. Although they remain economic powerhouses, they do not muster large militaries and nuclear weapons, the earmarks of a great power. The European Union never acquired statehood and remained an international organisation, which, by definition, has no armed forces or unity of command. It is not a great power and is nowhere near becoming one (Mearsheimer 2001: 392–400; Waltz 1993: 50–61). The European construction's initial impetus came from the overwhelming Soviet threat following World War II (Rosato 2011). Although an impressive case of pooled sovereignty, the EU remains an international organisation formed of independent states still vying for relative gains among each other (Byun 2022; Simón 2017). Without the United States' reassuring role as a last-resort security guarantor, the EU would probably lose cohesion and fall back to traditional patterns of security competition (Choi & Alexandrova 2020; Joffe 1984; Yost 2002). Hence, the EU is not a pole. China and Russia are the sole states beyond the United States to muster large and well-equipped militaries, survivable nuclear arsenals and defence industries capable of independently sustaining these forces (Motin 2024: 39–45, 71–76). India is likely the closest call (Pardesi 2015), but its dependence on foreign weapons, technologies and natural resources still impedes its ascent to great powerhood.

'System' is used here in the neorealist sense of the term. Several states interacting together form an international system. It is a grouping of states that enjoy relations sustained over time and where each could possibly take part in a system-wide general war. This grouping is called a system because 'the behavior of each is

a necessary factor in the calculations of others' (Bull & Watson 1984: 1; also, Aron 2004: 103; Mearsheimer 2014: chap. 2; Waltz 1979: chap. 5). Thus, such a system is self-contained: it is not a region or a part of a larger system. Indeed, the world has been divided into numerous separate international systems for most of history. The globalisation of the international system would not be completed until the Second Opium War's end in 1860, which marked the East Asian system's fusion with the Euro-centric one (Motin 2022c: 138).

This study uses the occurrence of central wars as its yardstick. A central war is a high-intensity conflict including most of the great powers of an international system where the very survival of one or several great powers could be at stake.[3] Such a war has the potential to change the structure (the polarity) of the international system itself. Large-scale military operations are the norm; it cannot be a bushfire war or a succession of skirmishes. The war's immediate cause or the warring states' initial intentions do not matter much in defining central wars. Indeed, central wars often start from limited stakes (Copeland 1996: 29; Gilpin 1988: 600–602; Levy 1985: 364–365). Theorists distinguish between peace as the absence of war and stability as the continued existence of the structure (Waltz 1993: 45). Since I am only concerned with the occurrence of central wars, I do not tackle stability and discuss only structural peacefulness.

There is also a more trivial reason for focusing solely on central wars: the poverty of the historical record. The most obvious cases of tripolarity are ancient, and many of the smaller events and details are lost. A study focused on war between great and small powers or limited great power war would risk missing many actual cases and bias the results. The sole possible yardstick for comparison is thus the central war.

Theoretical insights and hypotheses

In this section, I discuss the main features of a tripolar system.[4] Obviously, it is a system where only three states qualify as great powers. Although analysts usually only distinguish between unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity, tripolarity has features of its own that deserve a closer inspection.[5]

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3   Survival has here two meanings: the continued existence of the state itself and the possession of enough capabilities to remain a great power.

4   Some focus on 'strategic triangles'; although they have similarities, triangle and tripolarity are distinct. Triangles can form between all states and under any power configuration while tripolarity strictly designates the great power structure of the international system. The seminal work on triangles is Dittmer (1981). See also Lee, Muncaster and Zinnes (1994) and Woo (2003).

5   For bipolar and multipolar systems, see Motin (2020: 101–103). For unipolarity, see Hansen (2011) and Monteiro (2012: 13–36). For a criticism of the concept of polarity, see Brooks and Wohlforth (2016: 7–15) and Schweller (2010). Some believe in the advent of overlapping power structures, such as Huntington's (1999) 'uni-multipolarity'.

It is possible to depict tripolarity in a benign light. Wagner (1986) argues that tripolar systems are inherently peaceful. Assume that A, B and C have more or less equal resources. If A seizes B's resources, C would have no means to compensate for the resulting imbalance of power. Consequently, C has to assist B to prevent A's victory. In such a configuration, no great power would ever be eliminated. A great power under attack will always receive the unconditional assistance of the neutral third. Since coalitions against the aggressor emerge automatically and quickly, a pole has little incentive to attack another and should be content to keep the status quo. Following this logic, Niou, Ordeshook and Rose (1989: 94–96) add that tripolarity is more stable than bipolarity. In a bipolar system, a weakening pole is unlikely to survive for long since any power imbalance is impossible to correct.

Despite these arguments, the case for warlikeness is more compelling. The number of bilateral relations is three times larger than the single great power relationship characterising bipolarity. Statistically, the more bilateral relations there are, the greater the risk of conflict between two poles (Yalem 1972: 1054–1055). Tripolar systems are the most violent of all since an isolated power unable to find an ally may quickly be attacked and destroyed. Indeed, if the two others form an alliance, there is no way to compensate for the resulting power imbalance. If two poles stop worrying about each other, they can easily free resources to crush the third. Therefore, in a tripolar system of equals, any cooperation between two powers is an existential threat. Tripolar systems come with the same dangers as bipolar systems but not with the same stabilising features. Similarly to bipolarity, the three powers are constantly on alert, eyeballing each other's moves and ready to react to any crisis. Unlike multipolarity, however, uncertainty about potential threats does not exist. Doubt does not push decision-makers towards prudence and thus does not discourage war. Poles cannot balance threats alone; they must form an alliance or perish. Competition is intense and without the possibility of ever reaching a stable balance of power (Schweller 1998: 40–44). There is no flexibility in the choice of alliance partners. To sum up, tripolarity comes with the great tension of bipolarity but without the flexibility of multipolarity and with a larger number of potential conflicts (Nogee & Spanier 1977: 320–322).[6] Therefore, a straightforward hypothesis appears:[7]

H1. *Tripolar systems are more violent than other systems.*[8]

6   Saperstein (1991: 71), through mathematical modelling of the different systems, also finds tripolarity more violent than bipolarity.
7   Schweller advances more precise hypotheses concerning specific distributions of power. Nevertheless, he uses states' intentions as an independent variable, while I do not. Moreover, my cases offer only one type of tripolar power distribution (A stronger than B, B stronger than C), while Schweller (1993a: 77–81) identifies four.
8   This does not include unipolarity because, by definition, there can be no great power war.

Under tripolarity, the two weaker poles have a deep-seated interest in balancing against the strongest; there is no alternative partner to turn to. One could imagine that it is advantageous for a weak pole to bandwagon with the strongest, defeat the remaining pole, and share the spoils. Yet, it is a self-defeating strategy in the long term. The stronger ally will likely take the lion's share of the spoils for itself because it was the most powerful initially.

Imagine a tripolar distribution of power where A has nine points, B has six points and C has three points. If A and B cooperate to defeat C, A will gain eleven points overall, whereas B will get seven. If A and C ally against B, A rises to thirteen points and C is left with only five points. It means that, in both cases, A creates a large gap of power between itself and the remaining pole, which is then hopelessly outgunned. C would have been better off allying with the other pole against A. If B and C gang up on A and defeat it, B has twelve points, and C gets six. Even if C is still in a worrisome situation, it is better off than if it had joined with A (Schweller 1998: 52–53).[9] Although balancing against the strongest power is not proper to tripolar systems, it deserves to be reemphasised here because it is often lost on pundits expecting Russia to ally with the United States against China.[10] Accordingly:

H2. *The two weaker powers will ally against the strongest.*

If a great power, for whatever reason, is crumbling down, the two others have a tremendous incentive to intervene and secure as much as possible of that decaying power's resources. Indeed, if one power succeeds at seizing a large part of the territory or assets of the crumbling pole, the third one will be confronted with an imbalance of power that it will have a hard time reducing. Thus, two poles will tend to prey covetously on the third if it suddenly stumbles. The collapse of one pole heightens the risk of a war with the scavenging two others or among them. Consequently:

H3. *When a pole cannot maintain itself and threatens to collapse, the two others will attempt to seize as much of its power base as possible.*

Case selection and method
In this section, I explain what cases I chose to study and what cases I discarded. The cases used in this article are far from the traditional cases taken from the modern and contemporary era. This discrepancy stems from tripolarity being a rare structure. The first case is the Eastern Mediterranean system of the third

9   C is thus the most interested in the survival of the tripolar system, since it would have to cope with a large imbalance of power if the system moves to bipolarity.
10   I develop this in the last part of the article.

century B.C. known as the period of the Epigoni. The second is the East Asian system of the third century A.D. — the period of the Three Kingdoms. The last one is also the East Asian system, this time of the sixth century, and corresponds to the late Northern and Southern Dynasties era. All these systems were functional international systems with military capabilities concentrated among three poles.

These three cases differ in almost every regard. One is taken from the pre-Christian Mediterranean and the two others from first-millennium China. Everything from geographical arrangement and military technique to culture and political regime differs in each case. These cases were selected on the causal variable, polarity. They belong to the category of *most different systems*; all variables are different except polarity. If patterns recur while all other potential causal variables differ, we will have some confidence that polarity is the source of these patterns (George & Bennett 2005; Levy 2008: 6–10). For each case, I describe the balance of power and count the occurrences of central war. I then discuss the main features of great power politics to check whether my hypotheses hold up. In no way do I attempt a thick description of the cases. This work limits itself to a focused comparison to gain generic knowledge about tripolar systems (George & Bennett 2005: part 2).

A few potential cases have been discarded. Some describe the Cold War's second half as a tripolar system, with China, the Soviet Union and the United States as great powers (for example, Nogee & Spanier 1977: 319). Although China was impressive in size and population, it did not qualify as a pole. Even if we overlook the backwardness of its conventional forces, it did not possess an assured nuclear second-strike capability. In the nuclear era, a state deprived of such a capability cannot qualify as a great power. Schweller (1998: chap. 1) identifies Germany, the Soviet Union and the United States as the poles of a tripolar system after 1936 and throughout World War II. Nevertheless, our definition of great power also differs. Schweller's (1993b: 44) own data concerning military power in 1940 show that the system was closer to multipolarity, with France, Germany and the Soviet Union as leading powers. Even on the eve of World War II, the German military had no apparent edge over the French (Posen 1984: 82–85). Describing the 1930s as a tripolar system is thus far-fetched. Kopalyan, building on Wilkinson, identifies three tripolar international systems (cut into decades) from the ancient Near East, two from India, and three from medieval Europe and the Mediterranean (Kopalyan 2014: 106–107, 118–119, 126–127, 161, 172–173, 2017: 155–165; Wilkinson 2005: 97–99). Nevertheless, their definitions of what makes a pole do not match mine. Wilkinson (2004: 665) codes poles based on their appearance in historical records – following historical narratives. Kopalyan (2014: 41–49) also defines poles differently, including more abstract variables such as political and ideational power.

The period of Indian history known as the 'Tripartite Struggle' is sometimes considered tripolar (Majumdar 1977: 306). But the presence of the Arab Sindh as a significant actor makes this case closer to multipolarity. Haas (1970: 105–106)

describes a mid-eighteenth-century tripolar system in Hawaii. Isolated in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, this system is at least easy to delimitate. It was, however, closer to multipolarity than tripolarity, with four major powers (D'Arcy 2018: 65; Kuykendall 1938: 30). The actual tripolar period of Hawaiian history (1784–1795) was, in fact, short-lived. Motin (2022a) recorded a few other instances of tripolar systems in history, but all lasted only a few years, making it hard to extract convincing insights. In the following three parts, I develop the above-mentioned three cases.

The Epigoni period

The death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. led to the partition of his immense empire. Directly after this dislocation, successor kingdoms engaged in an intense competition to share the spoils and establish their own ruling dynasties over large expanses of territory. Among them, the three most notable were the Antigonids (Macedon), the Ptolemies (Egypt) and the Seleucids. The tripolar period of the Eastern Mediterranean international system starts with the destruction of Thrace by the Seleucids in 281 B.C. It ends with the collapse of Egypt and the start of the Fifth Syrian War in 202 B.C.[11]

Distribution of power

The strongest of the three great powers was Egypt. The Seleucid Empire and Macedon were, respectively, the second and third strongest (Thorne 2012: 118–124). Egypt's annual revenue was estimated at 14,800 talents, and the Egyptian population was close to seven million (Worthington 2016: 185). When mobilised, its land forces numbered around 70,000–75,000 troops (Eckstein 2006: 82). It also had the most impressive fleet of the ancient Mediterranean, including ninety 'sevens' or larger ships – four 'thirteens', a 'twenty' and two 'thirties' (Thorne 2012: 123).[12]

In comparison, the tax revenues of the Seleucids at their height were 11,000 talents annually, and the Seleucid population was around 14 million.[13] Their army was usually close to 30,000–35,000 troops in peacetime and closer to 60,000–70,000 after mobilisation. Although both Egyptian and Seleucid forces contained war elephants, the Seleucid elephant corps was larger, with up to 500 beasts. The Seleucids employed Indian elephants, while the Ptolemies used smaller African

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11 This chronology follows Eckstein's (2006: chap. 4).

12 A seven is a ship with seven men to each oar. Ptolemy IV even launched a 'forty', propelled by 4,000 oarsmen (Heinritzi 2017: 50).

13 Aperghis (2004: 57) gives a range of 12 to 16 million, with a flip to 9–12 million during the 230s and 220s due to territorial losses, while McEvedy and Jones (1978: 125) give Alexander's Empire in Asia at 13.5 million people. I accordingly settled on the 14 million figure. Populations and revenues of Egypt and the Seleucid Empire are discussed at more length by De Callataÿ (2004).

elephants. The Seleucids probably did not have any Mediterranean fleet from the 240s to 219; this hints that they were far weaker than the two others on the sea (Grabowski 2011: 118).

Last and least, Macedon's revenues were smaller by an order of magnitude, with around 200 talents annually, and its population was close to three million (McEvedy & Jones 1978: 125).[14] Its wartime army was also smaller than the two others, with around 40,000 troops. Although the exact strength of the Macedonian navy is unclear, it was more potent than the Seleucids' navy but weaker than the Ptolemies'.[15]

The period saw fluctuations in the balance of power. The Seleucid Empire weakened markedly during the 240s and 230s B.C. It lost Bactria (Central Asia) and then large swaths of Iranian lands. In addition to the corresponding reduction in land and population, communications with India were cut, resulting in a decline in its elephant force. Moreover, 'the sudden death of Antiochus II (in 246), the Seleucid defeat in the Third Syrian War (246–241), and the subsequent civil war for the throne (ca. 240–236) severely damaged the reputation and military might of the Seleucid Empire' (Overtoom 2019: 114–115). Overall, the Seleucid Empire was impressive on paper but failed to expand and entered a slow-motion decline. Most of its resources had to be used for internal stability. Dynastic instability, huge territory to guard and the lack of ethnic unity were a constant source of domestic trouble. The Seleucids managed, although temporarily, to reclaim some territories and stabilise the situation during the 210s and 200s. Macedon was the weakest but paradoxically the most secure, shielded by the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas from the two others. Egypt was arguably strong enough to balance both of them for over seven decades.

Central wars
We can identify four central wars in this tripolar system. First, the Seleucids attacked the Ptolemies but met defeat during what is known as the First Syrian War (274–271 B.C.).

Second, the Seleucids once again attacked the Ptolemies in 260, this time in coordination with the Macedonians. The Seleucids wanted to seize the Ptolemaic possessions in Asia, while Macedon targeted the Aegean Sea. This Second Syrian War ended in 253.

The Third Syrian War (246–241, a.k.a. the Laodicean War) started with a Ptolemaic attack on the Seleucids following court intrigues. The Ptolemies suffered a major naval defeat to the Macedonians at the Battle of Andros in 245, seriously shaking their domination over the Aegean Sea. Whether the Macedonians were

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14   The regular revenues discussed here do not account for spoils of war and miscellaneous revenues.
15   Sea power is touched on in more detail by Morrison (2016: chap. 2).

acting in coordination with the Seleucids is unclear. Nevertheless, the Ptolemies managed to defeat the Seleucids and take control of southern Asia Minor, Syria and some Aegean territories. The Ptolemaic Empire was then at its peak.

The Fourth Syrian War (219–217) saw the Seleucid Empire invading Palestine and putting Egypt into a difficult situation. Egypt, however, managed to beat the Seleucids decisively at the Battle of Raphia, one of the largest battles of that time.

The Chremonidean War (267–261) figures prominently in this period's historiography. The Ptolemies fought against Macedon for supporting Greek cities attempting to end Macedonian domination over them. During the 261 Battle of Cos, Ptolemaic naval power took a severe blow, and the Ptolemies failed to knock down Antigonid influence over Greece. Nevertheless, the Chremonidean War was not a central war but a limited conflict, as it did not seriously endanger the survival of either Egypt or Macedon (Hölbl 2001: 40–43; Kohn 2007: 126–127, 154, 547; McKechnie 2017: 648).

Main features

These three great powers all held to the dream of resurrecting Alexander's gigantic empire. The immediate objectives of the Egyptians were to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean, to preserve their possessions in the Levant and Asia Minor, and to contain Macedonian power in Greece. Macedon's main goal was to establish dominance over Greece. The Seleucids were mostly interested in pushing the Ptolemies out of Asia. Egypt constantly attempted to prevent the Macedonians (by building coalitions with the Greek city-states) and the Seleucids (by controlling the Levant and Southern Asia Minor) from expanding at its expense. Nevertheless, Ptolemaic control over its Asian and Aegean possessions was never stable, with ebbs and flows (Meadows 2013: 5625).

After a short war in 279, the Seleucid Empire and Macedon recognised each other's territory and signed an enduring peace. The period saw overall good relations between Macedon and the Seleucids, which had no significant grievances toward each other. In the 260s, a clear axis formed between Antigonus Gonatas of Macedon and his brother-in-law Antiochus I of the Seleucid Empire (McKechnie 2017: 648). Macedon was relatively safe from Egyptian invasion thanks to the Mediterranean Sea and spent most of this period battling against lesser Greek powers. Although Macedonian-Seleucid alliance warfare against the Ptolemies occurred at least once during the Second Syrian War, buckpassing by Macedon seems to have been recurrent. The rich Judaea-Lebanon-South Syria region was the main object of the above-mentioned central wars (Eckstein 2006: 90). Egypt attempted to compensate for its poor relations with the two other poles by cooperating with and financing small powers and rebellious forces hostile to Macedon and the Seleucids (Grabowski 2011, 2012: 83–97).

Eckstein (2006: 104–114) describes the last decade of the third century B.C. as the Hellenistic power-transition crisis. Indeed, Egypt was unable to maintain itself as a great power. In 207, a major rebellion engulfed Upper and Middle Egypt, and the Ptolemies failed to extinguish it. The death of Ptolemy IV in 204 aggravated this civil war. The dynasty and the capital Alexandria fell into turmoil. The Seleucids and the Macedonians soon became eager to exploit this Ptolemaic collapse. Egypt, anticipating such a fate, attempted diplomatic openings towards both Macedon and the Seleucid Empire. However, these efforts were to no avail, as the Macedonians and the Seleucids reached a secret agreement in late 203 to divide Egyptian territories and destroy Egypt's naval power (Hölbl 2001: 135).

Philip V and Antiochus III hence attacked Egypt in 202, starting the Fifth Syrian War. They hoped to finish off the Ptolemies once and for all and share their empire. Neither the Macedonians nor the Seleucids could allow the other to absorb Egypt in its entirety since it would have resulted in a large imbalance of power. Macedon made the most of the Ptolemaic collapse by building a powerful navy. It then went on a rampage throughout the Aegean Sea and conquered pro-Ptolemaic cities in Thrace. The Macedonians and the Seleucids also invaded Asia Minor (Vaidyanathan 2018: 16–17, 67). By mid-200, Antiochus had taken control of the Levant and threatened to overrun the Egyptian heartland. It seemed then that the Eastern Mediterranean system was destined to become bipolar. The Egyptians, to avoid destruction, and some Greek cities, to escape submission, sent embassies to Rome, asking for help. The Ptolemaic and Greek embassies requesting Roman help and the subsequent Roman intervention against Macedon and the Seleucid Empire were the final acts in the disappearance of the Eastern Mediterranean system.

Three Kingdoms

The East Asian tripolar system of the Three Kingdoms started in 214 with the conquest of the Yi Province by Shu and ended in 264 with the fall of the same Shu. The end of the Han dynasty in 220 is generally used to mark the start of the Three Kingdoms period. As the official end of the Han empire, this date is important symbolically. However, from a power politics perspective, the period began in 214 with Shu's annexation of Yi Province. It became clear on this occasion that China was counting three rival great powers, namely Shu, Wei and Wu (De Crespigny 2019a: 37).[16]

Distribution of power

The power distribution was unbalanced, with Wei as the first power, Wu the second and Shu the third. Wei was superior in territory, population, wealth and

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16 Wei (a.k.a. Cao Wei) was formally proclaimed in 220, Shu (a.k.a. Shu-Han) in 221 and
    Wu in 222. For simplicity, I use these names all along.

military strength. Its population was close to 35 million, and Wei had around 500,000 troops. It controlled the most productive regions of the Chinese heartland. Its first ruler, Cao Cao, notably succeeded in establishing an efficient taxation system in northern China, further strengthening Wei (De Crespigny 2019a: 33–37; Zhu & Sun 2010: 191).

Wu's population was close to nine and a half million people. Wu's geography was both a blessing and a curse. The Yangzi shielded it from Wei's superior military force, and its proximity to Southeast Asian states allowed for a profitable trade. Nevertheless, Wu's territory was not a coherent whole since it was formed of two core regions separated by mountains, complicating economic and military activities. The armies of Wu lacked martial efficiency, and the state's ability to mobilise resources for international competition was limited. Moreover, starting from the 250s, domestic political instability plagued the Wu court. At the time of its destruction in 280, Wu could count on 230,000 soldiers (Crespigny 1991: 17–19, 2019b: 57–60).

Shu had a population of around five and a half million people.[17] It enjoyed a territory which was coherent geographically and protected by mountains all around. It had a productive agriculture thanks to the Yangzi and its tributaries, quality soil and a favourable growing season. Underground assets also boosted Shu's economy. The wealth of the region and its secure geography compensated to some extent for its demographic inferiority. Shu's civilian administrative capabilities were limited, and the state was mainly focused on providing for warfare. Shu, immediately before its demise, mustered 102,000 soldiers (De Crespigny 1991: 23; Farmer 2019: 66–67).

Accordingly, the distribution of power during the Three Kingdoms period was unbalanced in favour of Wei. Shu was at first superior to Wu in military power after the conquest of the Yi Province in 214. This power relation changed in 219, with the defeat of the Shu general Guan Yu and the westward expansion of Wu (De Crespigny 2019b: 55–56). From 219 onward, Wei was the first power, Wu the second and Shu the third. Several factors impeded Wei from conquering all of China sooner. Although Wei had a clear lead in military forces, it had to deploy troops in all directions to protect its extended borders. Thus, it had little freedom to focus all of its forces against one adversary at a time.

Central wars
As high-intensity warfare raged almost unabated, this whole period could be considered a single large-scale conflict. Nevertheless, three episodes of central war shine out. First, in 219, Shu attacked Wei and threatened to enter its core

17   Population numbers are calculated based on a total Chinese population of 50 million people (De Crespigny 1991: 14–15).

territories. After declaring allegiance to Wei in 217 for having a free hand to deal with Shu, Wu attacked Shu and seized its eastern territories. Shu counterattacked in 221 but was beaten the next year. With Shu defeated, Wu felt secure enough to disown its allegiance to Wei. Displeased, Wei attacked Wu and tried to cross the Yangzi without success, withdrawing in early 223. Wei returned to the offensive in 224 and 225 but failed to advance. While Wei adopted a more defensive posture, Shu and Wu's relations bettered, and they moved against Wei together. In 227–228, they even conducted combined operations, although to little avail. Warfare continued until 234, after Shu failed to break through Wei's mountain defences.

Second, Wu took the offensive against Wei in 253. Shu also attacked Wei shortly thereafter. After a humiliating defeat at Hefei, Wu stopped major offensives and switched to more limited operations. Shu continued to launch offensives until 258 with no breakthrough and at the price of a great waste of troops and resources.

Third, contemplating that Shu had exhausted itself in continuous warfare, Wei decided to finish it off and mobilised for war. In 263, Wei seized the passes into the border region of Hanzhong and marched on Shu. Wu's diversionary attacks failed to disturb Wei. Shu finally surrendered in 264 (De Crespigny 1991: 17–23, 2018: xix, 339–341, 2019a: 38–42, 2019b: 62–63; Farmer 2019: 72–76).

Main features

At the very beginning of the period, Shu and Wu were rivals in their longing for territorial expansion. Wu, willing to avoid a two-front war, declared allegiance to Wei in 217. Indeed, since the frontline with Wei had stabilised along the Yangzi River, Wu felt secure enough to declare what was a paper allegiance to Wei. Wei was militarily unable to enforce it on the ground anyway. This allegiance was short-lived, as Wu broke it in 222 after the threat from Shu dissipated. In symbolic terms, a diplomatic alliance between two would-be Emperors of China was hard to justify. Nevertheless, the self-made emperors of Wu and Shu understood that symbolic refinements came second to power politics. From then on, wary of Wei's superior power, Shu and Wu remained allies, and the overall balance of power varied little (De Crespigny 2018: 300, 2019b: 55–59). From the end of the 220s, Wei-Wu relations became somewhat less competitive, as both sides perceived that decisive military victory was impossible. Indeed, Wu could hide behind the Yangzi, a formidable natural obstacle. On the contrary, Shu had to deal with a land border with Wei, which often moved back and forth, following military fortunes.

Wei was far more powerful than its rivals. Nevertheless, after the death of Emperor Cao Pi in 226, recurrent political instability limited its offensive capabilities and impeded it from throwing in all its weight for more than three decades (De Crespigny 1991: 34). People of that time were aware that Shu and Wu were markedly weaker than Wei and likely could not resist on their own. Their alliance was thought of as a deterrent against Wei. It signalled to Wei that it could not conquer

the South piecemeal and forced it into a more defensive posture. Geography also worked to limit Wei's margins for manoeuvre. Wei chose to play the long game: build up its domestic stability, develop its economy and wait for its hour to come. It finally opted for destroying Shu in the early 260s, after it saw a hole in Shu's defences and the opportunity for a quick victory. A victorious move would isolate Wu and give Wei the control of the upper Yangzi, a necessary step for supporting a downriver campaign against Wu and annihilating it quickly (Killigrew 2001: 98–110). With the fall of Shu imminent, Wu scrambled its forces to eastern Shu to seize as much territory as possible before Wei forces occupied it. But the resulting imbalance of power was now impossible to correct.

Late Northern and Southern dynasties

The last tripolar system formed after the northern Chinese Wei Empire collapsed in 534 and split into two separate states in 535. It was composed of Eastern Wei (called Northern Qi after 550), Liang (Chen after 557) and Western Wei (Northern Zhou after 557). This system came to an end in 577 when Northern Zhou conquered Northern Qi. Tripolarity followed a long bipolar stalemate between Northern Wei and the Southern dynasts. This period too was plagued by more or less constant warfare, as the three great powers were all willing to reunify China after more than three centuries of fighting.

Distribution of power

Eastern Wei/Northern Qi was the most powerful of the three states in all regards. It was populated by around 20 million inhabitants and had close to 200,000 troops. It was a territory of fertile lands. Nevertheless, as the quality of the leadership and military readiness declined in the 560s, late Qi was somewhat weaker than at the beginning of the period (Dien 2019a: 184–193; Eisenberg 2008: chap. 4).

Liang/Chen's population was close to 11 million, and it could count on nearly 100,000 troops. Starting with a civil war in 548, Liang experienced a stiff decline, which allowed Qi and especially Western Wei to take large swathes of land away from it. In 555, the newly installed Chen regime managed to stop the collapse. Nevertheless, it never recovered to its former level (Chittick 2019: 265–269; Graff 2002: 132).

Western Wei/Northern Zhou had a population of seven million. Zhou's military rose from around 50,000 troops in the 550s to over 100,000 in the 570s. In 575, while preparing for an assault on Qi, it could count on 170,000 troops. This expansion is explained in part by the manpower obtained through territorial conquests. It is also due to structural reforms that boosted both the size and the quality of its forces (Graff 2002: 109–114).[18]

18 I deduced Liang and Western Wei's population from Eisenberg (2008: 93).

At the beginning of the period, Eastern Wei was clearly the leading power, with Liang as number two and Western Wei as number three. While Western Wei was undertaking self-reinforcing reforms, the uprising of Hou Jing in 548 marked a major weakening of the South. This weakening is also explained by a gradual decline in military readiness and the low mobilisation capabilities of the state (Chittick 2019: 239–240, 264–265; Dien 2019b: 215–216). This allowed Northern Zhou's rise as the second power of the system. Although Western Wei had a harder time than the East in mobilising troops during the earlier part of the period, it became more and more capable of raising armies of over 100,000, thus progressively closing the gap. From the 560s, poor leadership began to cripple Qi's military readiness. The military power gap between Qi and Zhou was almost closed by the end of the period.

Central wars

At the beginning of the period, episodes of warfare were interspersed by short truces. Two central wars are then visible. The first one started in 547 when the governor of the southernmost region of Eastern Wei, Hou Jing, revolted and invited Liang to enter his realm.[19] After pushing back the Liang invasion, Eastern Wei turned against Western Wei in 548, which had also tried to benefit from the rebellion to make territorial gains against its eastern neighbour. Western Wei then marched into Liang in 550 and made significant territorial advances against a Liang plagued by domestic instability. Western Wei launched its final assault on Liang in late 554. After the capital Jiangling fell in 555, a Liang rump state was established, while most of Liang was taken over by the new Chen dynasty. Qi invaded Liang's remnants in 556, but this endeavour ended in a terrible defeat, marking the end of this central war.

Second, Northern Zhou launched a probing attack against Qi in 575 but was repulsed. Nevertheless, it kept preparing, and the second and final central war of the period started in 576. Northern Qi was soon overrun and disappeared in 577. Chen took the opportunity to seize as much territory as possible from Qi, although these conquests were short-lived (Chittick 2019: 270; Dien 2019a: 196–199, 207–208, 2019b: 221–223; Wallacker 1971: 615).

Main features

This tripolar system is the closest to a war of all against all. The two weaker states did not openly ally against Eastern Wei/Qi. Nevertheless, Western Wei/Zhou and Liang/Chen fought less against each other than against Eastern Wei/Qi. Indeed, the 547–556 central war is the only instance of intense fighting between the two.

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19 For the story of Hou Jing and his revolts, first against the Eastern Wei and then against the Liang, see Pearce (2000).

In the late 540s–early 550s, as the system threatened to return to bipolarity, the two northern states attempted to conquer as much of the falling Liang as possible before the other could take a decisive advantage. Aside from central wars, skirmishes and confrontations happened foremost between Western Wei/Zhou and Eastern Wei/Qi. There was an implicit agreement between the South and the Western Wei/Zhou about who the main threat in the system was.

The patterns of conflict evolved with the balance of power. Until about 560, the East was on the offensive and the West on the defensive. Mountainous terrain helped Western Wei significantly against its stronger neighbour. Nevertheless, the relationship changed due to Qi's dynastic weaknesses and Zhou's reinforcement, and the East shifted to a more defensive posture. Qi made openings toward Chen, which led to a decade of peace. In 568, it also used diplomacy to better its relations with Northern Zhou, to little avail. In the early 570s, Zhou, while preparing for the final confrontation with Qi, freed a number of Chen prisoners to ameliorate the relations with the South. Noticing Qi's internal distress, Chen took territories from it in 573 (Dien 2019a: 202–206, 2019b: 210–211, 230; Eisenberg 2008: 103–104). When the final blow came to Qi in 577, Chen tried to seize more lands but was pushed back by the triumphing Zhou. A few years later, with the additional resources of the Zhou state, the new Sui dynasty was quick to destroy Chen and reunify China.

Discussion

Summary

These three cases represent 174 years and nine central wars overall. That is a rate of a central war every 19 years.

In the Epigoni case, the power distribution corresponds to Egypt as number one, the Seleucid Empire as number two and Macedon as number three until the very end of the system. This configuration witnessed four central wars. Three were started by the Seleucids and one by the Egyptians. This represents a central war every 20 years.

The case of the Three Kingdoms started with Wei as number one, Shu as number two and Wu as number three. Shu initiated the first central war under that configuration. From 219 on, Wei was stronger than Wu and Wu stronger than Shu. Wu and Wei then initiated one central war each. Central war broke out on average every 17 years.

Until 548, the case of the Northern and Southern Dynasties had Eastern Wei as the strongest power, Liang as the second and Western Wei as the third; Liang started one central war. The system then moved to Northern Qi being the first power, Northern Zhou being the second and Chen being the third. The last central war occurred under this distribution of power at Northern Zhou's initiative. This means a central war every 22 years.

Analysis

In this section, I first demonstrate the validity of the three hypotheses. I then elaborate on a few other points related to the case studies.

H1. Tripolarity is far more violent than bipolarity and multipolarity. Motin (2020), building on Levy's (1985) data, finds that multipolarity witnesses on average the outbreak of a central war every 39 years, while bipolarity produces a central war every 35 years.[20] With a central war every 19 years, it is apparent that tripolarity is far more violent than multipolarity.

H2. A clear pattern of amity between the two weaker states and enmity between these two weaker states and the stronger pole is visible. The Macedonians and the Seleucids were allied throughout almost the whole period. Except for the very first years of the Three Kingdoms case, the same is true for Shu and Wu. Sixth-century East Asia did not see an open alliance between Western Wei and Liang. When Liang collapsed, Western Wei attacked it to seize as much territory as possible. If one looks at the whole period, however, both states were more often in conflict with Eastern Wei/Qi than with each other. They clearly refrained from attacking each other until after Northern Qi was defeated.

H3. In the three cases, a striking pattern appears four times: when one of the poles seems about to collapse, the two others rush to seize as much of its territory and resources as possible. 'Competitive preying' happened in 264, when Wu, failing to reinforce the collapsing Shu, tried instead to seize its eastern territories before Wei did. It also happened after 548, when the two Wei states preyed on the crumbling Liang dynasty. When Chen realised that Northern Qi was collapsing under Northern Zhou's offensive, it tried to seize some Qi territories, with little success. 'Cooperative preying' is visible in the late third-century B.C. Mediterranean system, when Macedon and the Seleucid Empire agreed on sharing Egypt.

We can also make several other observations. A surprising and unexpected result is that the number two states are especially prone to initiate central wars. Out of nine wars, seven were initiated by the number two, while only two wars were started by the number one power. I propose a simple explanation. The stronger side, since it is alone, wants to eliminate the two others. Nevertheless, it can be afraid to reinforce the other great powers' cooperation if it behaves too aggressively, as it would prefer to pick one enemy at a time. The weakest state has no interest in seeing any of the other two destroyed, as there would be a massive imbalance of power with the surviving pole. In the three cases, no central war was initiated by

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20 I use the collapse of the Habsburg empire in 1556 as the starting year. Levy (1985: 372) identifies ten central wars between 1556 and 1945. Motin (2020: 114–115) bases his study on six historical cases of bipolarity covering 1015 years of data. If one uses instead Motin's (2022a: 192) larger dataset, the discrepancy with bipolarity (one central war per 31 years) is slightly smaller but far larger with multipolarity (one central war per 85 years).

the weakest power. This is embodied by the behaviour of Macedon, which acted far less aggressively toward Egypt than the Seleucid Empire did. The number two state is more bellicose because it has a strong incentive to destroy the lone number one power and become hegemonic, and it knows that number three is unlikely to ally with number one for fear of breaking the balance.

The birth and death of tripolar systems also deserve a few lines. Gilpin (1981: 91) expects bipolar systems to naturally evolve into tripolar systems. Nevertheless, only my third case appeared from a bipolar system, while the two others came out of multipolarity. On the other end, Waltz (1979: 163) writes that the fate of tripolarity is to turn into bipolarity, as two powers should be quick to gang up against the third one and share the spoils of the conquest. Tripolar systems tend indeed to be short-lived and violent. There is a clear tendency to evolve toward either bipolarity or unipolarity depending on the initial distribution of power and the dividing of the spoil. Had the Romans not entered the Eastern Mediterranean, the system would have turned into a bipolar one centred on Macedon and the Seleucid Empire. Wei's victory over Shu overthrew the balance of power and made possible the swift annihilation of Wu. Northern Zhou, although initially weaker than Northern Qi, managed to absorb its huge resources and soon turned the system to unipolarity.

Conclusion: Tripolarity in our times

Is the above discussion relevant to the current tripolarity? I do not put an equal sign between these long bygone eras and nowadays: everything does not revolve around polarity. Military technique has changed quite a bit since the Ptolemies and Cao Cao. China, Russia and the United States have to deal with their share of potent regional powers. That said, structural pressure works the same regardless of the epoch or the situation's specificities. Tripolarity is a volatile power structure where relations between the leading pole and the two others are usually venomous.

For example, tripolarity is already affecting arms control agreements. The United States left the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 and withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies in 2020 because of Russian violations. In early 2023, Russia suspended participation in the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement, START. Moscow then withdrew its ratification of the global treaty banning nuclear weapons tests in November 2023. A few days after, it pulled out of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and the United States suspended its participation in it in response (Cole 2021; Hennigan 2023b; Osborn 2023; VOA 2023). Tripolarity complicates arms control and confidence-building measures, while bipolarity simplified them. Conciliating the interests of three powers and enforcing compliance is more difficult.[21] This is visible when

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21　Yalem (1972: 1061) made this point during the Cold War. See also Gibbons and Herzog (2022) and Miller (2020: 20–24).

US officials stress the need to move beyond bilateral agreements with Russia to include China as well (Allison & Herzog 2020; Barrie, Elleman & Nouwens 2020; Hennigan 2023a). Furthermore, tripolarity encourages increasing one's nuclear arsenal. A pole could fear that a nuclear exchange with another will leave its nuclear arsenal too depleted to deter or defeat the third, increasing the incentive to stockpile weapons.

Some commentators suggest that the United States played the Russian card against China the same way that it played the Chinese card against the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Crawford 2021; Ferguson 2020; Kaplan 2017; Kupchan 2021; Miller 2020). I argued above that the number two and three powers tend to ally against the number one because if the system evolves into bipolarity, the weaker pole will likely face a dangerous gap of power with that leading state. China and Russia thus have a clear impetus to work together against the United States to maintain a balance of power. In the long run, staying on Beijing's side makes good sense for Moscow, and it has no reason to jump on the American bandwagon. If China somehow collapses, Russia would still have to face US presence in Europe while it would also need to deal with a mainland Asia now opened to US influence, with no great power ally available. Oppositely, if American power was to recede markedly, the Kremlin would face a dominant China in East Asia, but its position would be strengthened in the Middle East, in the Caucasus and most importantly in Europe, where it would be near hegemonic. Indeed, Sino-Russian relations have been overall excellent in recent years, and both share a willingness to roll back US power (Blank 2020; Korolev 2019; Rolland 2019; Yoder 2020). Unsurprisingly, China has proven eager to bolster Russia's war effort in Ukraine to distract and exhaust the United States (Düben & Wang-Kaeding 2023).

The strongest counterargument against this conclusion is geography. Because Russia has a long border with China while the United States is an ocean away, it should be more concerned about China's rise than about distant America. Nevertheless, the Russians should know that reality better than anyone else and yet, they are still on the Chinese side of the fence. There is no sign that Russia is about to abandon ship and join a balancing coalition with America. Although Russia directly borders China, the European core of the Russian state is out of reach; Moscow is indeed at a distance of a few thousand miles from China.

States mainly focus on the balance of land forces. Hence, geography and distance matter tremendously in identifying threats (Boulding 1962; Porter 2015). Even though Chinese ground forces are modernising, they have lost a great part of their manpower in the process and Beijing has mostly channelled its money into its navy to defy US presence in the Western Pacific. A continental-scale attack to march on Moscow is a nonstarter. Russia is well aware that Asian states cannot threaten its survival in the way European states can. The only Asian force ever to invade European Russia was the thirteenth-century Mongolians. Meanwhile, the

list of European powers that rampaged Russia is far more impressive. During the interwar period, before Germany rebuilt its military power, Japan was arguably the single most powerful threat to the Soviet territory (Haslam 1992: chaps. 1–4).[22] Yet, the Soviet Union kept maintaining most of its military on its European side.

Nowadays, Moscow is still primarily concerned with European affairs and is laser-focused on the balance of forces with NATO (Cottey 2022; Haynes 2020; Korolev 2016; Marshall 2015: chap. 1; Ross 2020). Russia constantly points to the Alliance as its main opponent in its strategic documents (Brzozowski 2020). It worries that the expansion of NATO's infrastructures could allow the United States to deploy troops to its borders on short notice (Tass 2018). The Kremlin has a deep-seated interest in expanding westward and rolling back US influence in Europe. Accordingly, Washington wants to keep Europe's resources and wealth out of Russia's grip (D'Anieri 2019: 111–112; Popescu 2019: 385–388; Tabachnik & Miller 2021). The ongoing war in Ukraine is unlikely to allay these fears anytime soon.

A state that is the sole great power (like Russia) in its home region (here, Europe) tends to focus on its bid for regional hegemony and invests little energy in the affairs of other regions (Elman 2004; Motin 2022b, 2024: 39–45). Even if the United States could somehow make a grand bargain with Russia and abandoned Eastern Europe to its fate, Moscow would still be too preoccupied with European affairs to join a balancing coalition. If NATO retracted to its 1990 borders, the Russians would make a quick job of Belarus and Ukraine and establish hegemony over Eastern Europe. West European states, primarily France, Italy, and Germany, would be forced into a crash-course balancing effort to contain Russia, while Moscow would focus on putting Berlin, Paris, and Rome out of business. Hence, Russia would grow in strength but still have more interest in Europe than in East Asia.

I argued that central wars occur more often under tripolarity than in other configurations. The two weaker great powers of the system can be expected to ally against the stronger one. In the case studies, the same pattern repeated several times: when a pole weakens considerably in a tripolar system, the two others have tremendous pressure to move in and take over its resources. That said, much work remains. Further studies examining forms of competition other than central wars are needed. Research on the foreign policy decisions of both great and small powers under tripolarity would also prove valuable. Finally, more comparisons between tripolar, multipolar and bipolar cases could enhance our comprehension of today's environment.

The current tripolarity will likely be unstable, and the Sino-Russian rapprochement is here to stay. If one of the three great powers suddenly crumbles, the two others will probably take advantage of the situation aggressively. Chinese, Russian,

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22 Germany's army was smaller than Japan's from 1920 up to the mid-1930s (Rasler & Thompson 1994: 198).

and also Asian and Western decision-makers should bear this pattern in mind and act accordingly if the day comes that China or Russia suffers a crisis or a sudden collapse. A new bipolar system with a Russian pawn in Beijing or a Chinese protectorate over Russia would serve no one's interests. How the international structure will evolve in the coming decades is hard to divine. The rise of India could result in a multipolar system. China or Russia could stumble, sending the system back to bipolarity. Both of them could also face such internal difficulties that unipolarity makes a comeback. Until such a day comes, maintaining the tripolar peace will remain a daunting task.

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The Institutionalisation of Security Norms in the Context of Cyber Alignments: The Transatlantic Alignment in the Cyber Domain

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Abstract

Realists argue that security alliances are established to confront military threats posed by one state to others. In contrast, this study argues that nonmilitary cyberthreats have become a factor in establishing new security arrangements that do not necessarily take the form of an alliance, but rather emerge in the form of alignments. Cyberthreats lie in the political, economic, societal and military repercussions caused by the employment of cyber technologies, not these technologies themselves. Therefore, alignments are not automatic reflections of cyber capabilities, but depend on common perceptions and meanings that identify a certain behaviour as a security threat. The transatlantic alignment in the cyber domain, having been produced by common EU and US cyber norms, represents this type of security alignment. These norms have constructed common meanings and perceptions of cyberthreat patterns, which are primarily embodied in Chinese and Russian policies and behaviour in the cyber domain, involving a set of alternative and competing norms to those adopted by the former two, and through which China and Russia seek to alter the structure of the prevailing international order.

Introduction

Security alliances are studied through the realist theory, especially the 'alliance theory' presented by Snyder (1990), as a formal grouping of states for the purpose of employing (or not employing) military power, one which is designated for either security or maximising the influence of its members against nonmember states. Alliances achieve alignment among members, which organises their mutual expectations with respect to behaviours that ought to be taken by one member to support other members in times of conflict or war with nonmember states, and their ultimate end is to achieve security against enemies.

The realist emphasis on the military nature of threats that prompts states to establish security alliances has made alliances appear as if they automatically reflect the balance of powers between major states. Mearsheimer (2001) views alliances as a tool of maintaining state power, and since neorealism focuses on the structure of the international system as a unit-of-analysis of international interactions (Waltz 1979), alliances become the primary means of maintaining state power under an international system lacking a high authority (Jones 1999).

This study differs with the realist theory in dealing with the subjects of security arrangements, the mechanism of their establishment, and the patterns of threat they confront. First, alliances are not the only form of security arrangements between states, which, instead, emerge in several forms, such as security complexes (Buzan & Waever 2003), alignments (Miller & Toritsyn 2005), coalitions (Pierre 2002) and strategic partnerships (Kay 2000). Even though these patterns (including alliances) are established to confront a certain threat, no threat exists without the prior existence of a vision that deems a phenomenon or issue a security threat in the first place, indicating that perceptions and meanings applied to phenomena are in effect what leads to viewing issues as security threats. Constructivists, such as Wendt (1992), express this perspective. Wendt argues that the meanings and perceptions states adopt of the capabilities of one another are the deciding factor in determining whether or not the behaviour of any one state poses a security threat. Similar views are also expressed by Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde (1998), referring to the 'securitisation of phenomena' as caused by perceptions that view an ordinary issue as one of existential threat.

Security alignments arise only when a group of states have similar threat perceptions towards a phenomenon or behaviour that represents a security threat. Such a similarity of perceptions is produced by a number of factors discussed by

constructivists; Rousseau and Retamero (2007) view identity as the deciding factor in having common threat perceptions, since it represents the border line between one group and another. In a different context, Retamero, Müller and Rousseau (2012) argue that both divergence and convergence of values greatly influence the extent to which the economic and military behaviour of other actors or states is perceived as a threat. Additionally, there is an approach, represented by Farrell (2002), that focuses on the role of norms in shaping similar threat perceptions among several actors. Farrell holds the view that norms adopted by an actor shape the meanings of the actions of others with respect to whether or not they are suitable, and hence whether or not they pose a threat, which essentially relies on their accordance or conflict with social roles and the social environment. This relevance of norms in identifying security threat situations stems from the fact that norms are the desired behaviours to states through which their perceptions, ends and the instruments to achieve these ends are shaped (Florini 1996), and are also the fundamental rule in shaping state interests (Walling 2013). The more divergent the norms, the more divergent the ideas and ideologies, and hence the more intense the conflict of interests, leading to the emergence of mutual threat perceptions (Hass 2005). Moreover, norms determine which power instruments are best suited for dealing with perceived threats; Finnemore (2004) explains that the various instruments employed in confronting threats differ according to social purposes, which determine the benefit of these instruments by increasing their legitimacy, i.e., through aligning them with social norms.

Second, given that the nature of threats is identified through perceptions and meanings applied to ordinary issues, consequently viewing them as existential threats, then not only military issues are the subject of security studies, which now involve subjects as diverse as threat perceptions, ranging from societal risks embodied in identity clash (Posen 1993) to economic risks caused by basic-resources dependence (Cable 1995). This relative difference between states in identifying security issues is due to differences in their visions and valuations of the most significant issues that pose an existential threat, which necessitates the inclusion of nonmilitary elements. The Copenhagen School responds to such necessity by introducing the concept of 'expanded security' and including the political, economic, military, societal and environmental sectors as subjects of security studies (Buzan & Hansen 2009) and, at a later stage, by including cyberthreats (Hansen & Nissenbaum 2009). These diverse threat patterns are currently being employed in competition between major powers and represent the line between war and peace, and in dealing with such diverse patterns, states resort to, inter alia, security alignments (Monaghan 2022).

Third, this study differs with the realist focus on the structure of the international system as the primary unit-of-analysis in explaining the establishment of security alliances. Realism argues that states seek to maximise gains in the international

system and maintain the balance of powers to their interests through alliances. However, this argument fails to explain the establishment of security alignments in confrontation of nonmilitary threats, especially cyberthreats, since a state posing this type of threat in its behaviour does not directly influence the balance of powers in the international system. These 'hyper threats', as termed by Monaghan (2022), are aimed at threatening, circumventing and sabotaging the rules and norms on which international interactions are based. Therefore, the level of analysis through which it becomes possible to analyse the rationale behind the establishment of security alignments in confrontation of such threats is the level of the international order, which refers to the set of norms, values and institutions governing mutual interactions between major actors in the international system (Mazarr et al. 2016). In this sense, the ultimate purpose of state-grouping in security partnerships becomes the preservation of the prevailing international order, designed to serve and promote their interests in the international system.

The presented differences with the realist approach raise a major question that constitutes the focus of this study: what are the factors that led the US and EU to assume that the behaviour of China and Russia in the cyber domain poses a security threat, despite the fact that cybertechnologies do not in and of themselves pose security threats? This study argues that common, transatlantic cyber norms have created a common threat perception between the US and EU towards Chinese and Russian behaviour in this domain, since this behaviour is driven by cyber norms that counter those adopted on the transatlantic level. This, in turn, has made the cyber domain into a security threat domain, and prompted the establishment of transatlantic security arrangements. In order to prove this argument, the study relies on the Tracing Model, which establishes causal links between variables of the study and traces them through the studied case. The conflict of cyber norms between the two parties of the Atlantic on one hand, and China and Russia on the other, represents the independent variable, whereas forming the transatlantic alignment in confrontation of perceived cyberthreats constitutes the dependent variable. The links between the two variables can be traced by relying on previous literature, documents, strategies, laws and initiatives of all actors that this study is concerned with, and this shall be achieved by examining several issues: First, the emergence of US and European norms and the values and practices they involve towards the cyber domain. Second is the endeavour to generalise liberal cyber norms on the international level, and the inability to align Russian and Chinese behaviour with the requirements of such norms due to their adoption of counter-norms that incentivise them to put forth initiatives and policies influential to the prevailing international order. Last, it will be achieved by examining the emergence of a common threat perception between states of the Atlantic towards Chinese and

Russian behaviour due to a conflict of norms, which prompted the strengthening of Atlantic rapprochement by forming a cyber alignment and overcoming the contentions sparked by the cyber domain.

Perceiving Cyberthreats and Establishing Security Alignments

The influence of cyberthreats on the orientation towards forming security alignments should be analysed by identifying the premonitions that are the basis of perceiving the cyber domain as a security issue. States neither join nor establish alignments unless they perceive that they are facing threats that require collective confrontation alongside other states adopting the same vision. Therefore, special attention must be given to the nature of the elements of the cyber domain, which characterise this domain as either a threat or nonthreat, and to the role of norms in identifying the form of common threat premonitions themselves, hence institutionalising them by transforming them into security alignments.

Cybertechnologies: A State of Threat or Inter-threat

Nissenbaum (2005: 64) defines cybersecurity as the

> threats posed by the use of networked computers as a medium or staging ground for antisocial, disruptive, or dangerous organisations and communications. These include, for example, the websites of various racial and ethnic hate groups, . . . threats of attack on critical societal infrastructures, including utilities, banking, government administration, education, healthcare, manufacturing and communications media. . . . Potential attackers include rogue US nationals, international terrorist organisations, or hostile nations engaging in 'cyber-war'.

It becomes clear from this perspective that cybersecurity is of varying nature and dimensions. In order for security in the cyber sense of the word to exist, there must exist something to securitise against the risks of technology, which Dunn Cavelty (2013) terms 'cybersecurity representations'. This means that cybersecurity subjects vary in response to the variety of actors defining cyberthreats and producing various objects and references of security, which can be observed by analysing security discourse. Therefore, the cyber domain cannot absolutely be considered a security threat, but rather it is an issue of inter-threat, and that is since, in principle, technology itself is not an issue of security threat, and the cyber domain is viewed as one only when perceptions of the political authority assume that there is a reference object exposed to risks due to the misuse of technology.

The cyber domain, as illustrated in Figure 1, is determined whether or not it represents a security issue depending on how it is perceived. Eriksson and Giacomello (2007) argue that this state of threat is related to the meanings and

perceptions political authorities apply to technology and communications technologies and on the manner in which they are used. Their analysis concludes that identifying the actors responsible for cyberthreats and the entity that ought to deal with them depends on the contexts and frameworks in which these threats are involved, which, ultimately, reflect the nature of the perceptions and meanings applied to the cyber domain.

Figure 1. An illustrative figure of the manner in which the cyber domain becomes an issue
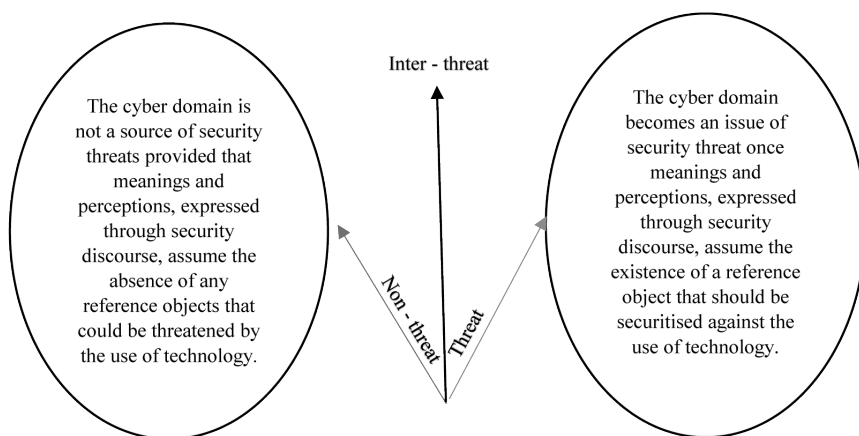
Source: Authors

The matter of greatest relevance to this study is the case in which the cyber domain becomes an issue of security threat. Figure 1 illustrates this case. Since the cyber domain is of a neutral nature, these threat patterns emerge and derail it from its neutrality, characterising it as a threat domain, and hence they represent distinct threat patterns. One analysis approach holds that the distinct domain around which perceived threats emanating from the cyber domain centre is related to the idea of 'conflict' in the military sense. Threats, in this sense, are perceived through what Branch (2020) terms 'foundational metaphors', which refers to using the experience of a different phenomenon as a reference to understand the opportunities and threats associated with the cyber domain. This is the case with the US military perspective, which views the cyber domain as a new dimension of conflict alongside the three traditional dimensions (land, sea and air), i.e., the metaphors that established the understanding of this domain as a space of conflict are essentially derived from US military experience in conflict over the three mentioned dimensions. Additionally, there is another approach, e.g., Gomes and Whyte (2021), that deals with malicious activities and attacks negatively impacting infrastructure differently, and that is through the context of

their political and social risks. Although such impacts on the political and social structure are limited, the lack of experience in this regard often leads to excessive securitisation of the cyber domain, and makes it into a threat issue involving greater risks than what reality indicates.

This lack of experience is evident in what Lawson (2013) terms 'scenarios of cyber doom', which are the supposed stories that warn of the potential impacts of cyberattacks, especially the supposed concerns about technology escaping human control. Such scenarios contradict what facts relating to cyberattacks indicate, and the capacity of these attacks to impact infrastructure, the economy and society appears to be exaggerated, consequently leading to overly exaggerated policies. Therefore, the process of building scenarios is related to a different process that Dunn Cavelty and Wenger (2019); and Balzacq and Dunn Cavelty (2016) term 'knowledge production', which refers to the specific knowledge forms resulting from the interaction between technical and political impacts. These knowledge forms work to include a certain cyber event in a specific social context, since the technical impacts of malicious cyberactivity are not by themselves sufficient to prove the political relevance of cybersecurity, dictating that there must be a technical matter rhetorically-linked to a different matter that has a social or political value.

Contrary to the two aforementioned approaches, which deal with identifying the threats associated with cyberactivity, there exists a third approach that associates cyberactivity with the threat of penetrating the privacy of computers and communications devices for the purpose of collecting confidential and sensitive information. For instance, Lindsay and Gartzke (2020) hold the view that cyber operations exploit technical vulnerabilities in order to achieve their goals of intelligence gathering (surveillance and espionage), network disruption (sabotage and covert action), or indirect influence (sabotage and disinformation).

It can be concluded that threats emanating from the cyber domain fundamentally revolve around either activity related to military conflict, malicious activity that has political and social impacts, or activity related to espionage and intelligence. Additionally, there is a threat pattern associated with employing the cyber domain in international competition. This pattern is of greater relevance than the former three, since they only emerge after such employment of the cyber domain takes place; the course of events is as follows. First, one state, or states, seeks to develop its technological base, and to own and employ the necessary cybertechnology for the purpose of maximising its political, economic and military gains at the expense of others. Second, a targeted state, or states, perceives or securitises this behaviour. Ultimately, once this behaviour is perceived or securitised, competition between the states in concern arises, and the three aforementioned threat patterns emerge in their mutual relations. Such a perception of competition is related to the degree of convergence or divergence of norms, and that is since

norms represent the fundamental standard for explaining the behaviour of others in the cyber domain as to whether or not it represents a threat and competition, and also since they prompt states to follow specific behaviour patterns in confronting the activity of competing states adopting different norms.

Cyber Norms and Shaping a Common Threat Perception
Several approaches that discuss cyber norms have emerged, i.e., that discuss the role of principles and notions in directing state behaviour towards the usage of cybertechnologies and the manner in which it is perceived. These approaches differ in establishing a suitable definition of cyber norms that best describes their nature, and can be divided into four major approaches. The first approach, termed the 'behaviour approach', starts with the idea that cyber norms achieve uniformity in the behaviour of states with respect to identifying the limits of using communications and internet technologies. This approach is represented by Kuebris and Badiei (2017), who conclude that norms are essentially a process consisting of a set of state efforts that aim to produce a common language for the behaviour of other states, which indicates achieving uniformity of behaviour towards cyberactivity. The second approach, known as the 'strategic construction approach', views cyber norms as notions that frame the costs and returns of employing cyber tools in achieving political interests of the state. Cyber norms, according to this approach, are more than just a means for coordination and cooperation. Instead, they serve the function of 'the normative saturation of strategic action', i.e., aligning strategic behaviour and rendering it justified and consistent with norms and notions (Kurowska 2014, 2019; Subotic 2016). The third approach is the 'regulation approach', which deals with cyber norms in terms of their capacity or incapacity to impose legal obligations on states, and views them as a necessary initial step, although not legally binding; Mačák (2017) argues that norms could be turned into a law that gives them a binding status through international agreements and treaties, which are considered binding sources of state behaviour that entail legal responsibilities in the event they are violated.

The fourth approach, termed the 'constructive approach', views cyber norms as collective expectations of what behaviour on the part of actors of certain identities in the fields of technology and communications ought to be, and considers norms to be essential for achieving cybersecurity; Finnemore and Hollis (2016) argue that norms consist of four major elements. First, there is the element of identity, i.e., the group to which the rule applies. Second is the element of behaviour, which refers to the measures that must be taken in order for norms to become effective, and these measures could be either regulatory (regulating the limits of the behaviour of actors), or foundational (establishing new institutions or acting entities). Third is the element of propriety – that is, the capacity of norms to meet the political, legal or cultural demands of the group adopting
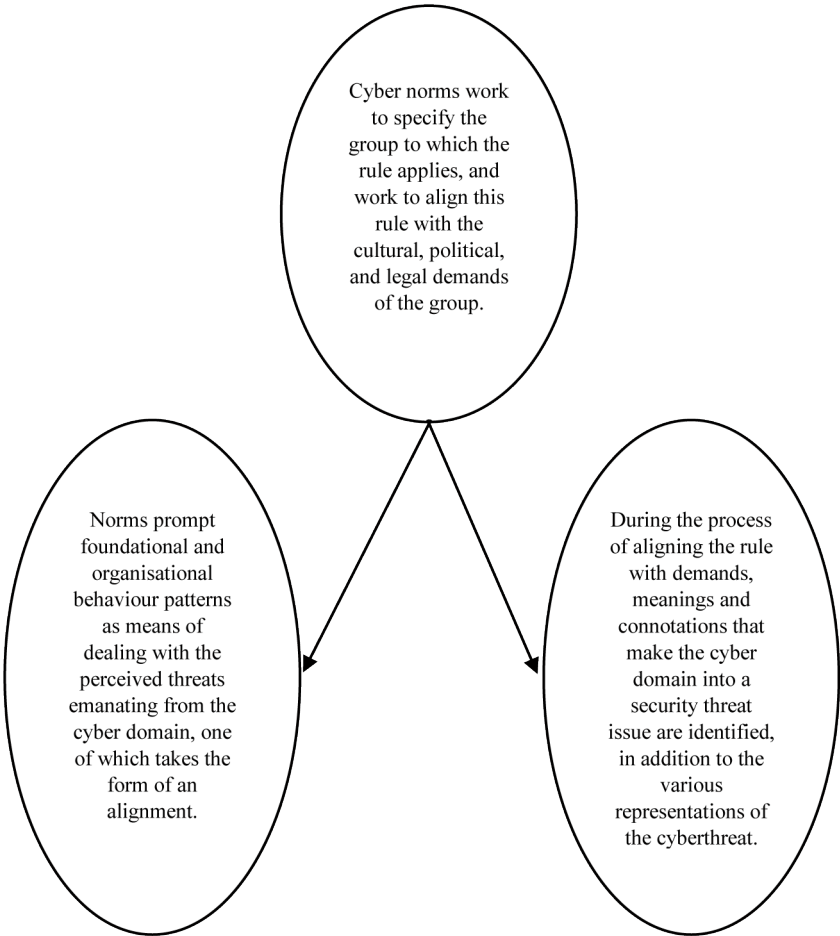
them, thereby advancing and strengthening these norms. Last but not least, is the element of collective expectations, and the capacity of norms to create common perceptions and understandings among members of the group with respect to the value that their behaviour towards one other involves. From this standpoint, the constructive approach appears to be the most suitable approach for dealing with the role of norms in the cyber domain, since it involves explaining two basic characteristics, namely convergence and divergence – that is, why some actors might adopt similar norms, whereas others might not. The three former approaches, however, deal with norms from a different perspective, which is the perspective of what their existence or creation achieves, whether it is uniformity in the behaviour of states, or framing the strategic action of the state. In contrast, the constructive approach focuses on how state behaviour in the cyber domain is shaped, and on the factors that lead to either a similarity of norms and thereby to cooperative behaviour, or to a conflict of norms and thereby to mutual threat perceptions and conflicting behaviours.

The emerging cyber norms within the framework of the NATO provide a clear model on how convergence and similarity of norms among members of a group arise, and on how the behaviour of a group of states towards the cyber domain is shaped. Atlantic norms arose among NATO states as the group to which these norms apply, and as a group of a distinct identity that reflects the adoption of common liberal values. These norms meet the cultural demands of NATO member states, which are to promote a free, open and peaceful cyberspace, in addition to the political demands of confronting the Chinese and Russian threat, which are adopting counter-norms and behaviours that pose a threat to the values of a free and open internet (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2023). Moreover, these norms have produced a security behaviour that involves determining the actions and activity that the alliance is permitted to conduct, as was declared during the 2014 'Wales Summit' that cyberattacks constitute an operational field and a part of collective defence activity against potential enemies (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2014), and also in 2020 when the 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Cyberspace Operations' considered the cyber domain to constitute the fourth operational dimension of the alliance alongside the land, air and sea dimensions (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2020). Moreover, Atlantic norms have also produced a foundational behaviour that involves establishing new structures and institutions as acting entities that perform a certain role in the cyberdefence of the alliance, such as the establishment of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) and the Cyberspace Operation Centre (CYOC) in 2018 (Maigre 2022).

The reviewed model clarifies the role of norms in creating collective behaviour expectations among group members of similar identities. However, it remains relevant, through this model, to point out the role of norms in creating a com-

mon threat perception. In this respect, arguably, identity works to specify the group that seeks to align cyber norms with their own cultural, political and legal demands. This produces common perceptions towards the behaviour and norms of other groups with respect to whether or not they align with these demands (particularly, as will become clear later on, during the stage in which the first group seeks to generalise its norms on the international level). In the event they contradict, not align, the first group is led to perceive the behaviour of others as a threat, prompting it to follow a foundational and organisational counter-behaviour. This

Figure 2. An Illustrative figure of the role of cyber norms as rules that govern the meanings, connotations, and representations of cyber-threats, and their role in incentivising behaviour in confrontation of the perceived threat

Cyber norms work to specify the group to which the rule applies, and work to align this rule with the cultural, political, and legal demands of the group.

Norms prompt foundational and organisational behaviour patterns as means of dealing with the perceived threats emanating from the cyber domain, one of which takes the form of an alignment.

During the process of aligning the rule with demands, meanings and connotations that make the cyber domain into a security threat issue are identified, in addition to the various representations of the cyberthreat.

Source: Authors

behaviour would be consistent with mutual expectations between its members with respect to establishing joint security arrangements to deal with the perceived state of insecurity caused by the behaviour of competitors. Norms, in this sense, serve as a governing rule, since they determine the meanings and connotations that states apply to the cyber domain, making it into an issue of security threat in the process. Furthermore, norms identify the various threat representations related to this domain, and work to produce a suitable behaviour among states of similar norms to confront the perceived threat situation in the cyber domain caused by adversaries, i.e., establishing joint security arrangements.

Cyber Alliances or Alignments

Common cyber norms, as illustrated in Figure 2, prompt certain multidimensional action patterns to confront various threat patterns posed by enemies or competitors using such technologies. However, of greater relevance is the resulting unified behaviour of a group of states having similar threat perceptions towards the cyber domain, i.e., the coordinated, organised behaviour that is based on the distribution of roles in confronting nonmilitary cyberthreats. Such security arrangements could be considered to either have the nature of an alliance or to constitute an alignment, and the latter appears to be more suitable for dealing with rapprochement in the cyber domain. The reason for such suitability, as expressed by Wilkins (2012), is that alliances are established for the purpose of using military-power resources under certain conditions, whereas 'alignment' is a broader, more fundamental term that indicates mutual expectations with respect to coordinating policies in dealing with situations involving multifaceted, multidimensional threats not limited to the military dimension under certain conditions. Moreover, alignments by nature depend on the degree of political, cultural and economic compatibility of the states between which they arise, and hence contradict alliances in terms of the mechanisms of their emergence. Whereas the existence of alliances as a military phenomenon is related to the balance and distribution of powers between states, the basis of alignments is the compatibility of national characteristics (values, norms and identities) that prompts states to establish this pattern of security arrangements (Erkomaishvilli 2019).

The proposed 'T10' grouping represents an alignment pattern the US and UK are seeking to form in confrontation of Chinese and Russian cyberthreats. This alignment is based on mutual expectations, produced by common liberal-values identities, of the behaviour that each state would follow in support of other states constituting this grouping. Confronting the mentioned threats would be achieved by coordinating security and intelligence policies aimed at ensuring that China does not gain leadership in emerging technologies, e.g., artificial intelligence and quantum computing, in addition to deterring cyberattacks,

and enhancing the promotion of democratic norms to counter 'authoritarian technology' promoted by Chinese firms (Feldstein 2020). The 'Chip 4' grouping provides yet another example on alignment patterns. First proposed in 2022, this alignment consists of the US, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, and aims to cooperate and coordinate policies among firms and governments of party states with respect to ensuring the security of the global semiconductor supply chain and blocking Chinese access to it (Davies, Jung, Inugak, & Waters 2022).

The major issue of concern remains to analyse the manner in which such a pattern of security arrangement arises. Arguably, the first step towards forming alignments between states is the existence of common norms that produce a common perception of cyberthreats. For this purpose, it is appropriate to use the model presented by Finnemore and Sikknik (1998) to simulate the manner in which common norms are transformed into security alignments under the presence of competing norms adopted by a different group. This model suggests that norms go through three stages leading to their institutionalisation. In the first stage, termed '*emergence of norms*', governments face mounting pressure from some domestic agencies that have their own notions of what appropriate behaviour in society ought to be (civil society organisations, political parties, etc.), and norms emerge domestically as governing rules of state behaviour towards certain issues and reflect the values it adopts. The second stage, termed '*norms cascade*', involves the transition of norms from a domestic to an international level. States seek to generalise their norms on other states and impose them as governing rules of their behaviour, which is achieved through various means, such as diplomatic support and economic sanctions or incentives. Norms, during this stage, experience both adoption and opposition, and this stage is characterised by the emergence of competing norms pushed towards generalisation on the international level. Ultimately, norms in the final stage are 'internalised' and transformed into certain institutional structures, i.e., international institutions that resemble frameworks under which a group of states adopt common behaviour rules towards one another, and these frameworks reflect the values these states adopt towards certain issues.

The framework of analysis through which forming security alignments or partnerships in the cyber domain can be explained, particularly the '*transatlantic alignment*', is obtained by applying the mentioned model. First, cyber norms emerged domestically in the US and EU as behaviour rules, and reflected the values they adopt towards this domain. These norms are fundamentally a framework that governs perceptions of national security threats, which can be inferenced from the security strategies of both parties towards the cyber domain. Subsequently, norms began to cascade, and the US sought to generalise its cybersecurity model on the international level based on its own perceptions of this field of security, leading to a conflict of norms with China and Russia, which simultaneously seek

to generalise their own norms and impose them as behaviour rules on other states, i.e., a pattern of international competition occurred on what norms governing the cyber domain ought to be. During the final stage, US norms were internalised and transformed into institutional structures that include EU members of similar orientations towards the rules and values ought to govern the cyber domain. This type of institution represents a security alignment between the US and EU, and aims to prevent China and Russia from generalising their cyber norms, an endeavour that poses a threat to American and European national security.

The Emergence of American and European Cyber Norms

Analysing US and EU cyber norms is a prerequisite of understanding the common meanings, connotations and perceptions through which the two parties identify the form of cyberthreats. These norms reflect American and European values, and establish rules that govern their behaviour in confronting cyberthreats and risks. Moreover, norms are used as a standard for determining the existence or absence of these types of threats, i.e., behaviours opposing norms are perceived as a security threat, since they violate the rule that governs behaviour and the values this rule involves. Therefore, discussing American and European norms necessitates analysing their origin and emergence on the domestic level by observing the cybersecurity strategies of each party.

American Norms and the Form of Cyberthreats

Cyberthreats were first identified as a threat to the US national security in the 2010 'National Security Strategy' (The White House 2010). Thereafter, norms governing the cyber domain have been continuously emerging in the US. These norms reflect American cyber values, and identify the meaning of threats the cyber domain poses to the US national security, in addition to being rules that govern US behaviour towards cyberthreats. Furthermore, this strategy establishes that values related to cybersecurity are primarily embodied in the protection of civil liberties and personal privacy, i.e., values of liberal, individual freedom. It also identifies cyberthreats as the use of technology for the purpose of damaging the US economy, such as hacking communications networks and e-commerce and intellectual property theft, in addition to inflicting damages on the military sector by hacking military networks, all of which are threats posed by various entities, from terrorist groups, to competing or hostile nations.

The 2011 'International Strategy for Cyberspace' discussed in greater detail the meaning of values related to the cyber domain, embodied in civil liberties and personal privacy, by indicating that they provide the rules of state behaviour towards this domain (The White House 2011). These values, as will be noticed, have played a major role in the US endeavour to generalise its norms on the international level. To the US, the nature of the cyber domain, and the communications networks

and internet it involves, represents a technical and a social decentralised pattern, i.e., no central entity exercises its authority on it, whether this entity is the political authority, or any other actor; instead, it is a multi-actor, multiclass domain, rendering it an open, free domain that must not be dominated by any one party. This characteristic is viewed as both important and necessary. The US considers that drafting international rules ought to be done through the 'multistakeholder approach', since this approach, as opposed to other approaches, requires states to involve private sector entities (communications and technology firms) in the process of drafting rules, which resembles the open and comprehensive nature of the cyber domain.

European Norms and their Transition to the Level of the European Union

Cyber norms began to emerge domestically in European states as values and rules that identify behaviour towards the cyber domain, and were then transitioned to and generalised on the level of the EU. European norms are closely related to those adopted by the US. For instance, the 'UK Cybersecurity Strategy'[1] of 2011 (Cabinet Office 2011) laid the foundation of the norms, values and rules that guide UK behaviour towards the cyber domain, all of which appear to be derived from the values of liberal freedom that it adopts. This is reflected in the strategy's affirmation that values involved in the cyber domain should be derived from British 'traditions' and guided by the values of freedom, justice and rule of law. Furthermore, it expressed that the widespread, expansive and interconnected nature of the cyber domain should lead to the promotion of these values.

The 2011 'Cybersecurity Strategy for Germany' laid the foundation of German norms that identify the values and behaviour of Germany towards the cyber domain, which are to a great extent similar to those adopted by the US and UK in terms of the freedom of this domain and state behaviour towards entities that should perform their respective roles within it (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2011). This strategy expressed that cybersecurity is derived from the values of freedom, and that ensuring cybersecurity leads to ensuring freedom and development in Germany, since state institutions, its vital infrastructure (energy, transportation, communications, etc.) and German firms are increasingly reliant on communications and information technologies, which consequently turns any threat posed to these technologies into threats to social and political life. Moreover, the rule that identifies the desired behaviour of Germany in achieving cybersecurity is based on the fact that the interactions governing the neutrali-

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1   It is worth noting that the reason for mentioning UK cyber norms within the context of discussing EU norms is that norms of the UK were produced prior to its withdrawal from the EU, i.e., when it had exercised an influential role in transitioning cyber norms from the national level to the level of the EU.

sation of threats emanating from the cyber domain must involve partnerships between governmental institutions and political authorities on one hand, and private sector firms and society on the other, with the deviation from this rule leading to an incapacity to achieve cybersecurity. Other European states, such as the Netherlands and Czech Republic, have also adopted cyber norms similar in nature to those adopted by Germany and the UK (The European Network and Information Security Agency 2012).

Domestic norms specific to each European state were transitioned to the level of the EU in 2013 when the 'EU Cybersecurity Strategy' was first adopted (The European Union 2013), which involved the same norms adopted by each state individually. This can be observed in the strategy's five guiding principles of EU policies towards cybersecurity, representing the values and behaviour rules the Union adopts towards issues of the cyber domain. First, core values of the EU apply to the 'cyberspace' to the same extent they apply to the 'physical world'. Second is preservation of fundamental rights, freedom of speech and protection of personal data of EU citizens, and that is since in order for cybersecurity to be effective, it must be based on the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the 'Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union'.[2] Third is freedom of accessibility to the internet, i.e., all individuals residing in the EU should be able to access the internet. Fourth, management of the cyber domain ought to be in accordance with the 'democracy' and 'multistakeholder' approach, which affirms the central role of the private sector in achieving cybersecurity, and the absence of a single dominant party (political authorities of EU member states, primarily). Lastly, the strategy refers to the joint responsibility in ensuring security, implying that all parties – governmental, individuals and firms – are jointly responsible for responding to cybersecurity threats.

The Cascade of Cybersecurity Norms and Emergence of their Competing Counterparts

Shifting the discussion on the emergence of norms from a domestic level to the level of international interactions requires analysing how these norms cascaded, i.e., analysing how the US sought to generalise the behaviour rules it adopts, the means it has employed to this end, the accompanied consent and dissent towards

2   The core idea of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union refers to the group of natural, civil and political individual rights that EU citizens enjoy. These rights include, interalia, the right of dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity, and they reflect the values and principles of liberalism, which generally serves as the core of western democracies. Moreover, referring to these rights in the 'EU Cybersecurity Strategy' makes clear the extent to which the values that the EU adopts influence its perception of the nature of threats emanating from the cyber domain and the extent to which they identify the rules governing its behaviour towards this domain. For further details on the Charter of Fundamental Rights, see European Parliament 2000.

these norms, and the emergence of competing norms that China and Russia seek to generalise. Since generalising norms, accepting and opposing them, and the emergence of competing norms are in effect what led to the establishment of the transatlantic alignment, such analysis of the cascade of norms is of great relevance.

Generalising American Cyber Norms and the Endeavour to Construct an International Order

The generalisation of US cyber norms on the international level can be analysed through the context in which the US seeks to construct an international cyber order, i.e., transform the norms it adopts into international rules and institutions of the cyber domain that promote its interests as a dominant power in international interactions. In this context, the 2011 'International Strategy for Cyberspace' indicates the manner in which the US has been seeking to establish rules that identify the behaviour of other states in the cyber domain (The White House 2011). This strategy expressed that the nature of norms and rules ought to govern international cyber interactions is defined in achieving peace and global stability (preserving the stability of the international liberal order and ensuring the absence of any alterations that might affect its status in it), and in establishing the fundamental rule that determines the mutual rights and duties of states. These rules include:

1. Upholding fundamental freedoms: states must respect the fundamental rights of individuals, entities and other states to speech and to connect through the internet.
2. Respect for property: states must, through domestic laws, respect the rights of intellectual property of individuals and firms, including patents and trade secrets.
3. Valuing privacy: which refers to protecting individuals from arbitrary or illegal state interference with their privacy.
4. Protection from crime: States must identify and prosecute internet criminals.
5. Right of self-defence: In accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, states have the right to defend themselves in the event of hostilities or attacks in the cyberspace.

Pursuing this vision, the US has resorted to various means to generalise these norms on the international level. One such attempt was to build a consensus within the United Nations, through its Groups of Governmental Experts, towards establishing rules that govern the cyber domain; it was able to achieve this end in 2011 by building a consensus on three fundamental principles of cybersecurity. These principles, as Mazarr et al. (2022) argue, represent behav-

iour rules that states must abide by, and entail three matters. First, they entail that states recognising these norms under the framework of the United Nations must neither support nor by themselves launch cyberattacks that undermine or damage the vital infrastructure of any state. Second, states must not hinder any response to cyber emergencies, and, lastly, should mutually cooperate in prosecuting internet crimes launched from within their respective lands.

The US endeavour to build international consensus on norms of cybersecurity was not limited to its efforts within the United Nations. Similar attempts can be observed in the 'Wassenaar Arrangements' between 2013 and 2015, which are agreements concluded by the US with 40 other states for the purpose of setting a multilateral export control regime on some cybersecurity products and technologies, including the exchange of software and physical communications technologies of a dual use, i.e., that could either be used in developing the vital technological and digital infrastructure, or as a means of espionage and censorship. The usage of these export-controlled technologies is what primarily leads to potential human rights violations, e.g., censorship on associations and opposition political parties (U.S. Department of Commerce 2017), which indicates that rules and norms established by the 'Wassenaar Arrangements' are nothing but a reflection of American domestic norms embodied in the principle 'freedom of the internet'.

It is worth noting that the US efforts to establish norms and rules of the cyber domain on the international level comprise only one part of its endeavour to construct an international cyber order, i.e., to establish a set of rules, norms and institutions that govern the cyber domain and reflect US interests as the dominant power of the international system. This has been necessitated by the existence of competing states seeking to construct an alternative order. China represents the major competing power, since it seeks to generalise its norms and construct an order that contradicts US norms, thereby prompting the latter to add a new cyber suborder to the prevailing international order, which was constructed in the post-WWII period and comprises of three suborders: the international economic order established by the Bretton Woods System and the World Trade Organisation, the international security order established by a series of treaties and rules, and the international human rights order (Kundnani 2017). What this all implies is that in the event the US fails to construct an international cyber order whereas China succeeds in doing so, both the prevailing liberal order and the status of the US as the sole dominant power of the international system could potentially become threatened.

The Competing Chinese and Russian Cyber Norms
Parallel to the US endeavour, competing Chinese norms, embodied in the notion of 'cyber sovereignty', have emerged and are being pushed towards generalisation on the international level as well. Such dissimilarity of norms

and visions does not merely imply a difference in identifying the technical rules of managing and functioning the cyber domain and the various internet and communications technologies it involves, but rather signifies contradictory visions of the international political order of the cyber domain (Lindsay 2014), i.e., competition over identifying the rules, norms and institutions of the cyber domain that each state seeks to establish. Consequently, the two states have been involved in an intense competition thereafter.

‘Cyber sovereignty’ is a notion that was adopted by Chinese ruling elites first on the domestic level, and at a later stage was pushed towards generalisation on the international level as the basis of the international order that China seeks to construct. It refers to the idea that the internet and all processes related to technology and communications developments must be subject to state sovereignty, that this domain is within, not outside of state control and is subject to its authority. Moreover, it implies that each state should respect the right of other states to choose their own course of developing their cyber capabilities and technologies with respect to the methods of managing this domain and the public policies through which it is organised and guided. Therefore, norms of ‘cyber sovereignty’ are designed to serve four major purposes of China. The first purpose is to preserve its critical infrastructure, which has become increasingly reliant on the developments of technology. Second, to preserve the ideology of the Chinese political system, i.e., to ensure that no anti-communist values and principles are promoted through the internet and communications networks. Third, to preserve high economic technology and technology industries of an economic aspect, and, lastly, to employ such industries in constructing an international cyber order as an alternative to the liberal order that the US is proposing (Wang 2020).

To achieve compatibility between these ends, a prerequisite of putting ‘cyber sovereignty’ norms into practice, China has taken advantage of its initiatives. One clear example of efforts aimed at establishing international institutions and rules of the cyber domain that reflect Chinese norms is the ‘World Internet Conference’ (WIC). Launched in 2014, this initiative emerged as an annual conference held in China. Participants of the WIC are states adopting similar visions of what principles and rules ought to govern the cyber domain, such as members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the states targeted by the ‘Digital Silk Road’ initiative. The first conference, held in 2014, promoted ‘cyber sovereignty’ norms by affirming that the challenges posed to national sovereignty by the cyber domain represent the most prominent issue to the WIC, which should prompt the international community to establish a pluralist ‘global governance system’, i.e., since the cyberspace is subject to state sovereignty, then states are the only actors with the right to shape the rules by which their behaviour in this space is governed (China Daily 2014). This approach represents

an alternative to the US approach, which is based on partnership between the state and stakeholders of the private sector in establishing cyber domain rules.

Chinese norms have been presented as an alternative through various other initiatives, including the 'Digital Silk Road' initiative of 2015. This initiative aims to establish a set of international rules and norms with China at the centre, and involves Chinese investments in building the necessary technological infrastructure in various Asian, African and European states, e.g., building 5G networks, installing fibre optic cables, and installing submarine communications cables. However, the 'Digital Silk Road' also has a political aspect primarily embodied in promoting regional and international correlation (Dekker, Heijmans, & Zhang 2020). This would be achieved through, first, building infrastructure and promoting trade and finance between China and participating states, and second through promoting Chinese innovations and technologies in these states, i.e., to render China the global source of technology. Last, it would be achieved through altering global technology supply chains so as to start from China rather than western states (the US, in particular), implying further integration between Chinese technology firms and African and Asian states targeted by the initiative.

Unsurprisingly, the US views both initiatives as a threat to its international interests, since China, through generalising 'cyber sovereignty' norms, seeks to become a 'great cyber power'. This latter term was first introduced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2015, when he implied that if China aspires to be influential in shaping international policies, then it must become the leading power in technology and control its global courses. Such a perspective is the product of associating dominating the 'waves of civilisation' with state power. For instance, Great Britain dominated the wave of industrial civilisation in the 18th century and became a dominant power on the international level, allowing it to construct an international order that serves its interests. China applies this experience to the wave of digital civilisation (Hemmings 2020), and dominating the age of 'information revolution' is considered by Chinese ruling elites to render China a dominant power with the capacity to construct an international order that serves its interests and dispose of the 'humiliation' it suffered in the 'Opium Wars' (Doshi et al. 2021). Therefore, by employing the information revolution to its interest, China would become an influential power in shaping the structure of the international system and order, instead of being influenced by the policies of the prevailing great power, as was the situation during the 18th century. Achieving this status is a threat to the US, since the latter would cease to be the sole great power, and the structure of the international order it has been constructing since the end of WWII would be altered.

Russia adopts cyber norms that are similar in nature to those of China, particularly the ones related to 'cyber sovereignty' (Security Council of the Russian

Federation 2016). However, this sovereignty involves different matters to each party, resulting in different ends to be achieved by employing cybertechnologies, and different mutual threat perceptions between the two states. Chinese cyber sovereignty involves state control over the cyber domain, and employing this domain towards establishing new rules and institutions of the international order, whereas Russian understanding of cyber sovereignty involves employing cybertechnologies to politically influence the West. This indicates a Russian preference of 'cyberattacks' and 'cyber warfare' to politically destabilise targeted states, an approach that has been used by Russia on several occasions, such as employing its cybertechnologies to influence the results of the 2016 US presidential elections, and also the results of the BREXIT referendum (Broeders, Adamson, & Creemers 2019).

Therefore, Russian notions focus on achieving superiority in 'cyber warfare' instead of focusing on the Chinese notion of 'great cyber power'. To Russia, 'cyber warfare' refers to a confrontation between two or more states in the cyberspace for the purpose of causing damage to the information systems, resources and critical infrastructure of opponents, thereby undermining their political, social and economic systems; it constitutes a psychological system that aims to destabilise the state and society (Pijović 2021). The cyberattack on Estonia in 2007 provides an example on how dependent Russia is on the pattern of cyber warfare. Subsequent to a political dispute between the two states, Russia launched a series of cyberattacks that targeted Estonian critical infrastructure and aimed to disrupt the country's banking sector (Ottis 2007).

Perspective differences between China and Russia on cyber sovereignty have also impacted Russian preferences with respect to its behaviour within regional security institutions and complexes in which both states participate (BRICS and SCO), as Russia appears to be unwilling to integrate its norms into such institutions. Whereas Chinese activity within the 'Digital Silk Road' initiative and the 'WIC' aims to generalise its antiliberal cyber norms, Russian behaviour has been primarily directed towards generalising the norms of 'cyber warfare' within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (Flonk 2021). This has led to a militarisation of Russian norms, which is consistent with the Russian perspective on what cyber sovereignty involves, giving norms a different aspect from the economic aspect of the cyber domain that China promotes within the mentioned blocs and initiatives. Integrating norms in this manner aims to reduce the military technological gap between Russia and the West, and achieve superiority in this field. The CSTO guidelines for internet and information security provide clear evidence on this. According to these guidelines, Russia provides training for information security specialists, and prepares military cadres for member states in the fields of information and cybersecurity (Sukhankin 2018).

The Internalisation of American Norms and the Transatlantic Alignment in the Cyber Domain

American and European cyber norms were internalised and made into institutional structures that resemble a security alignment, aiding the two sides to overcome their previous contentions raised by the cyber domain. These institutions have been putting forth their own alternative initiatives, and aim to contain and isolate China and Russia from technology that is necessary to build their cyber capabilities. This is related to the 'cascade' of American norms. Through this 'cascade', the US has sought to generalise its cybersecurity model on the international level. In response, competing Russian and Chinese norms emerged, through which the latter seeks to influence the structure of the prevailing international order. Such Russian and Chinese influence alters the current status of the US, and affects its endeavours to construct an international cyber order, hence the reason the latter perceives this influence as a threat. In this context, the transatlantic alignment has evolved from one form into another, that is, from the 2014 'EU-US Cyber Dialogue' (European Union Websites 2014), into the 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council', which was established in 2021.

The Evolution of Transatlantic Cyber Relations

Establishing the CCDCOE in 2008 represented the first wave of US-EU cooperation within NATO in confronting the Russian behaviour of employing the tools of 'cyber warfare'. This response is consistent with how Russia defines the cyber domain, i.e., an aspect of military conflict. Therefore, the major purpose of establishing the CCDCOE was to manage potential cyber warfare and conflict between NATO and adversaries, particularly Russia. Despite this cooperation, however, the cyber domain has for a relatively long time raised contentions between the two sides, hindering any attempts to deepen this cooperation, let alone form an alignment. These contentions are embodied in US misconduct in terms of employing the cyber domain against allies, in concerns related to data privacy, and in economic competition. Nonetheless, with the establishment of the 'US-EU Trade and Technology Council', the two sides appear to be working towards overcoming their contentions and reaching a mutual understanding. Such an understanding constitutes both a test and a decisive result of the role of similar norms in producing a similar form of threat perception towards Chinese and Russian behaviour in the cyber domain, consequently working to form a transatlantic alignment to confront these threats.

The first point of transatlantic contention was embodied in US misconduct with respect to data privacy breaches and the conduction of espionage activities against several EU members. Edward Snowden, a former US National Security Agency (NSA) officer, exposed this behaviour through what became known as

the 'Snowden leaks' or the 'Snowden incident'. The leaks revealed that the NSA had been collecting phone records and using a spy programme called PRISM to collect and transfer data on Facebook and Google users in Europe (Solms & Heerden 2015), and to spy on EU diplomats for the purpose of gaining influence during the talks on reaching a 'Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership' agreement with the EU, which were scheduled in July of 2023, leading to calls by European Parliament members to cancel the talks (European Union Centre for North Carolina 2014). Consequently, trust between the two sides was undermined, and the EU began to perceive the risks of excessive dependence on US technology and networks, leading to a shift in views on cybersecurity, data protection and privacy (Renard 2018). This was evident in the European endeavour to issue new rules aimed at limiting questionable data transfers from EU member states to the US (Traynor 2013).

The issuance of such rules in 2016 under the 'General Data Protection Regulation' (GDPR) revealed the second transatlantic contention, that is, concerns over data privacy. Data protection mechanisms of the GDPR contradict the US vision on how employing data in competition with adversaries ought to be. Under the GDPR, which represents the European approach to data protection, the EU exercises a central role with respect to data belonging to its members, whether in terms of preventing unauthorised access by third parties to information stored on the internet and servers located in EU member states, or in terms of restricting data transfers to nonmembers by requiring prior approval of the European Commission (EC) (The European Parliament, The Council of the European Union 2016). On the other hand, the US strategic approach divides data into three areas: the 'blue cyberspace', 'red cyberspace' and 'gray cyberspace'. According to this approach, achieving superiority over adversaries in this field requires the US not only to protect the 'blue cyberspace' (networks, data and internet servers owned and controlled by the US), but also to exercise influence on the 'red cyberspace' (networks, data and internet servers owned by adversaries), and to employ the 'gray cyberspace' (internet infrastructure owned by allies, but used as a conduit for data outgoing towards adversaries or enemies) in serving its interests. Within the 'gray cyberspace', the US has worked towards accessing data of enemy parties through the digital infrastructure of allied states, e.g., the US Cyber Command deleted ISIS propaganda material from German servers without obtaining prior consent, leading to tensions between the two states (Smeets 2020). Such approach differences had disrupted any attempt to regulate the flow of data between the US and EU, as was the case when the Court of Justice of the European Union invalidated the proposed 'Privacy Shield' framework between the two sides on grounds of the absence of adequate guarantees within US law, and data surveillance on the part of the latter during transfers (Marconi 2023).

The third transatlantic contention is economic competition in the digital domain, particularly with respect to the tax policies known as 'digital services taxes' (DSTs). First proposed by the EC in 2018, these taxes would be imposed on US technology firms operating in the EU and included a tax rate of 3%, but faltered due to disagreement between party states (Lowry 2019). Nonetheless, European states have individually adopted a digital tax outside the framework of the EU. For instance, France imposed a 3% tax on gross revenue resulting from digital interfaces and targeted advertisements, which applies to large firms generating 25 million euros in revenue from their operations in France and 750 million euros from global operations (Frieden & Stephanie 2021). Similarly, other European states followed suit by adopting similar tax rates, such as Spain and Italy, in addition to Austria and Hungary adopting a 5% and 7.5% tax rate, respectively; the French measures remain the most relevant as the only measures that were put into effect (Geringer 2021). These measures led to tensions between France and the US, and prompted the latter to announce in 2020 that it would impose a tax with a value of 1.3 billion USD in 2021 in the event France resumes collecting the DST (Asen 2021).

Establishing the 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council' represented a major step towards overcoming these contentions and forming a transatlantic alignment between the two sides, in which the similar form of EU and US cyber norms was a major factor. Through these norms, Chinese and Russian behaviour in the cyber domain has been identified as a security threat, since it is driven by norms that counter those adopted on the transatlantic level. In confrontation of this threat, both sides have followed a behaviour of launching several initiatives under the framework of the transatlantic alignment, such as investing in developing 5G technologies, installing submarine cables and investing in critical infrastructure. These initiatives appear to be designed as a means of competing with the aforementioned Chinese initiatives, through which China seeks to promote its norms and construct an international order that serves its interests. Furthermore, the semiconductors initiative appears to be aimed at isolating China and Russia from this technology, thereby impeding the development of their cyber capabilities. Arguably, the transatlantic alignment, in its entirety, is ultimately designed as a means of increasing EU and US influence, and hence containing China and Russia, in the cyber domain.

Alternative Initiatives under the Framework of the Transatlantic Alignment
The 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council' is based on, inter alia, 'cooperation on emerging technologies', 'building resilient semiconductor supply chains', 'promoting values worldwide and reaching out to partners', 'further growing transatlantic trade', 'enhancing security through export controls and investment screening', and investing in 'digital infrastructure and connectivity', i.e., initia-

tives in the cyber domain, such as 5G communications (European Commission Website 2022). To these ends, various working groups operate, such as the working groups of 'Technology Standards', 'Misuse of Technology Threatening Security and Human Rights', 'Cooperation on Export Controls of Dual Use Items', 'Secure Supply Chains', 'Data Governance and Technology Platforms' and other groups that deal with different cybersecurity issues (U.S. State Department Website 2022).

Investing in critical and emerging infrastructure involves investing in developing 5G technologies and the necessary infrastructure for advanced technology, and installing submarine cables in the US, the EU and third-party states, which represents a parallel initiative to the 'Digital Silk Road'. Investments in such technologies and launching initiatives thereof are considered by the US and EU a prerequisite of exercising international influence. The absence of these investments renders both parties incapable of shaping policies and establishing the required rules, norms and institutions of the cyber domain, and only states that invest in critical and emerging technology would then be able to exercise such influence (primarily China) (Torreblanca & Ricart 2022). Therefore, it is necessary for the transatlantic alignment to invest in producing and developing such technologies in its two parties and in third-party states, since this both enhances the tendency of these third parties to accept the rules of the cyber domain that are established by the alignment, and balances Chinese influence in this domain.

This vision has prompted the 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council' to invest in building and developing technology infrastructure in third-party states since 2022, primarily targeting Jamaica and Kenya (The White House Website 2022b). Projects in Jamaica aim to encourage and support the use of digital technology by all governmental and nongovernmental institutions, expand the wireless communications infrastructure and support the wide usage of communications networks provided by EU and US 'trusted' technology firms. On the other hand, the initiative towards Kenya aims to provide the necessary technical support for the purpose of developing and modernising the Kenyan 'Information and Communications Act'. It also aims to form a strategy of building 5G networks in line with the principles and standards of global infrastructure projects.

The indication that such investments and initiatives must be undertaken by 'trusted' EU and US technology firms implies that balancing and undermining Chinese influence in the cyber domain requires undermining the capacities of Chinese technology firms – Huawei and ZTE, in particular- and limiting their international expansion. These firms represent the major tool of implementing Chinese initiatives and achieving its vision of constructing an international order. The joint statement of the second meeting of the 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council' in 2022 expressed this perspective (U.S. Department of

Commerce 2022) by affirming that building, developing and installing the announced 6G communications networks, besides from 5G networks, whether in alignment parties or in third-party states, must involve diversifying the suppliers of these technologies, which should be as limited as possible to 'non-high-risk', 'trusted suppliers' of technology projects.

Isolating China and Russia and Reshaping the Global Semiconductor Supply Chain

The second end of the transatlantic alignment, lying at its core, is to boost US and EU capacity to manufacture semiconductors and control their major stages of production. Semiconductors are the basis of all technology projects and initiatives launched by the alignment. They also represent the foundation of all Chinese technology industries, and are the basis of its ability to trigger political alterations. The idea of 'building resilient semiconductor supply chains' aims to render China neither capable of accessing this technology nor affecting its production process, and to prevent Russia from owning and employing these technologies in developing its military capabilities and capabilities related to information warfare.

A global supply chain refers to all economic institutions, entities and individuals existing in different states and having a certain role in producing a certain good, starting from its raw materials, to the final product delivered to the end consumer (Hayes 2022). 'Bottlenecks', as they are often referred to, are the most important link of any supply chain, and in the case of the semiconductor supply chain, they are, in order, as follows (Ragonnand 2022):

1. Electronic design automation (EDA): the software and applications installed on semiconductors fabrication machinery.
2. Design: determining the specifications of semiconductors, such as their production materials and sizes.
3. Fabrication tools: refers to producing the required machinery and technology for semiconductors fabrication.
4. Fabrication: in this stage, designs take a physical form as ‚semiconductor wafers'.
5. Assembly, testing and packaging (ATP).

Figure 3 illustrates production shares within the global semiconductor supply chain. These statistics indicate the dominant role of the US within the first two links (EDA and design), whereas the EU plays a major role alongside the US within the third link (fabrication tools), e.g., the Dutch firm ASML is recognised as one of the most important global suppliers of highly sophisticated and complicated machinery used in fabricating semiconductors (Shead 2021). China, in contrast, plays a somewhat puny role that is limited to the fourth and fifth links

(fabrication and ATP), which prevents it from increasing its own production of semiconductors and enhancing its position in this industry so long as it remains reliant on the first three links primarily dominated by the US.

Figure 3. Production shares within bottlenecks of the global semiconductor supply chain
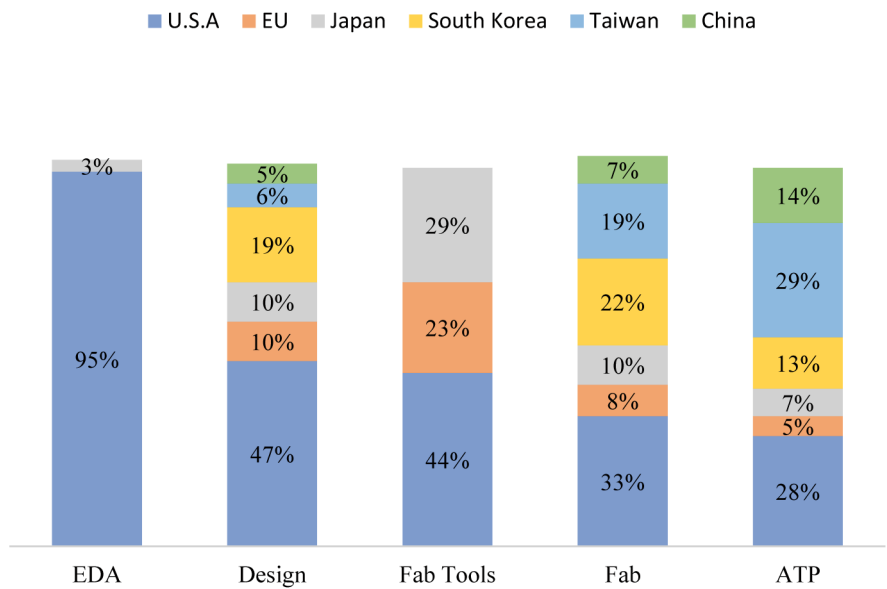
Source: Ragonnand (2022)

　　Whereas blocking Russian access to these technologies is unchallenging, since Russia has no capabilities within the bottlenecks of the supply chain, achieving the pronounced end of 'building resilient semiconductor supply chains', one the other hand, requires two things: first, to ensure that China is unable to enhance its existing capacities within the fourth and fifth chain links, and second, to ensure its inaccessibility to the technologies of the first three links so as to render it incapable of manufacturing semiconductors on its own. The US and EU have taken various measures with respect to the first requirement, so as to enhance their capabilities in 'design' and 'ATP'. Such measures would simultaneously increase their capacities within all links of the supply chain, which necessitates reshaping this chain by shifting fabrication and assembly from east Asia (Japan, Taiwan and South Korea) to the US and EU, thereby rendering the supply chain centred around the transatlantic alignment. This approach can be concluded from the US 'CHIPS and Science Act' passed by the US Senate in 2022, and 'European Chips Act' passed by the European Commission in 2021.

The US 'CHIPS and Science Act' aims to boost US semiconductor manufacturing capacity, i.e., enhance its capacities within the fourth link (Fabrication). It also provides the necessary investment incentives that work to promote US leadership in developing and manufacturing semiconductors, promote its current leading position within the technology domain, and reduce reliance on vital technology sourced from China and other states that could experience tensions disruptive to the supply of semiconductors (The White House Website 2022a). To this end, 52.7 billion USD were allocated, including 39 billion USD as financial incentives to boost US semiconductor manufacturing capacity, and 11 billion USD for research and development. These incentives primarily target foreign firms desiring to contribute to increasing US production of semiconductors, in return for their commitment to not expand any activity related to the semiconductor industry in China for a duration of ten years (Dorsey and Whitney Lep Website 2022). In response, Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturer TSMC, the largest manufacturer of semiconductors globally, announced that it would build two fabrication plants in the US, the first of which is to start production in 2024 and is set up to produce 5nm semiconductors, while production in the second plant is due to start in 2026 and will produce 3nm semiconductors (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company 2022).

Passed by the European Commission in 2021, the 'European Chips Act' sets objectives that are similar in nature to those implied by its US counterpart, i.e., to promote the position of the EU within the global semiconductor supply chain and overcome any flaws it experiences in this respect. To this end, the 'European Chips Act' puts forth the 'Chips for Europe' initiative, which allocates 43 billion euros as investment incentives for technology firms (Council of The European Union 2022), and aims to build highly developed capabilities in semiconductor designing and ATP, further boost the manufacturing capacity of existing firms and establish new ones, and develop the capabilities of SMEs to manufacture semiconductors by facilitating their access to designs (Council of The European Union Website 2022). In this respect, it is of a great necessity for the EU to become oriented towards firms that are capable of supporting its aims. The US semiconductor manufacturer Intel, for instance, announced in 2022 that it would invest a total of 80 billion euros in EU member states, which includes establishing fabrication plants in Germany, a designing facility in France, and an additional fabrication plant in Ireland, not to mention other investments in Italy, Poland and Spain. Similar tendencies can be observed in the negotiations currently underway between semiconductor manufacturing giant TSMC and Germany for the purpose of establishing a new fabrication plant in the latter (Cherney 2022).

It becomes clear that the US and EU have been pursuing a policy of providing investment incentives that attract foreign investments at the expense of China, thereby preventing it from boosting its semiconductor manufacturing capacity.

This well achieves the first component of 'building resilient semiconductor supply chains', that is, to undermine Chinese capabilities within the fourth and fifth links of the supply chain (fabrication and ATP). However, towards achieving the second component, namely ensuring the inaccessibility of China to the technologies of the first three link (EDA, design and fabrication tools), the US has taken different measures; In 2022, the Bureau of Industry and Security established new export controls that regulate the exportation of design, automation and fabrications tools to China. Under this regime, US technology firms, and all foreign firms within the supply chain using US technology, face licensing requirements for the exportation to China of advanced semiconductors and the necessary tools, technology and equipment to manufacture them (machinery, designs, software, etc.). This includes 14nm to 16nm logic semiconductors, 18nm DRAM memory semiconductors and NAND memory semiconductors of 128 layers or more, all of which are crucial and key technologies in artificial intelligence and advanced technology industries (The U.S. Bureau of Industry and Security 2022). In this context, the US initiated negotiations with the EU at the end of 2022 for the purpose of integrating these export controls into the framework of the 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council', and that is since some European states produce semiconductor manufacturing machinery, particularly the Netherlands with its ASML plant (Financial Post Website 2022).

Similar export controls were imposed on Russia under the framework of the 'EU-US Trade and Technology Council' during its second meeting in 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine was first launched. Aiming to undermine Russian military and industrial capabilities, these controls included restrictions on the exportation of semiconductors used in the development of military capabilities or the development of capabilities related to cyberattacks and surveillance (European Commission 2022). However, although controls imposed on Russia are similar in their form to those proposed under the framework of the Council to be imposed on China, these controls represent different responses based on how each targeted party perceives the cyber domain under prevailing norms. Russia understands building its cyber capabilities from the perspective of achieving superiority in information warfare against the West, and hence the imposition of export controls coincided with its war on Ukraine so as to block its access to critical technologies that would allow it to develop its cyber-military capabilities and achieve such a superiority. China, on the other hand, views building its cyber capabilities from the perspective of attaining the status of a 'great cyber power', and hence the US endeavour to impose controls on the exportation of semiconductors to China aims to influence Chinese initiatives and projects in the cyber domain that would allow it to attain such a status. Therefore, despite following a similar behaviour towards Russia and China, embodied in export controls, the ultimate ends pursued are not similar whatsoever, and they differ according to how each targeted party perceives these technologies.

Conclusion

The main findings of this article can be summarised as follows. First, norms represent the deciding factor in the arising of common perceptions and meanings of threat, which transform the cyber domain from a neutral issue into one of a security threat, and prompt the establishment of a security alignment between states adopting common norms. Second, the similarity of the form of US and European cyber norms, defined in 'internet freedom' and 'cyber democracy', has produced a similarity in the perceptions and meanings of cyberthreats, defined as violating these norms by third parties adopting counter-norms and behaviour.

Third, the US endeavour to generalise its liberal norms and construct an international cyber order, through establishing a group of international arrangements, was a prompting factor for the existence of competing Russian and Chinese norms embodied in the notion of 'cyber sovereignty', which advocates an alternative vision to the international liberal order. Fourth, perceiving the norms and behaviour of Russia and China to be producing a security threat has incentivised the US and EU to overcome their contentions in the digital domain, and to adopt a common behaviour within a security alignment between the two sides in order to confront these perceived threats.

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Geopolitical Positioning of a Small State: Serbia in the Shadow of Yugoslavia's 'Third Way'

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Abstract

This article examines Serbia's positioning in the East-West axis during the post-Cold War era. This is a specific example of the 'third way' in twenty-first century geopolitical behaviour. The small country remains non-aligned within the existing alliances of the East and the West, trying to find a balance between their influence and remaining faithful to its national interests. Although with far more modest resources, the situation of the Serbian state is reminiscent of the fate of Yugoslavia, which was among the initiators of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Relying on substantial empirical evidence, this article claims that being a small state is not an insurmountable obstacle to pursuing an assertive foreign policy, albeit at the cost of complicated relations with neighbouring countries and those geopolitical forces dominating the current world order. Summarising the Serbian experience in 'third way' geopolitics, a model of multiple asymmetries in interrelations between the small state and great powers is elaborated.

Keywords: *small states, geopolitics, third way, non-alignment, multiple asymmetries, Serbia, Yugoslavia*

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Introduction

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, several small, newly-emergent European states found themselves in the epicentre of the reordering of power relations on the East-West axis. Most post-socialist countries have chosen the course of supra-national integration or bandwagoning as an option for identification; and/or look for stability and protection among the great powers. These frontier nations can decide if they prefer to join the Western structures such as the EU and NATO or keep close relations with the post-Soviet East, limited to Russia and its attempts to create counter, less successful, models of political and economic integration.

In empirical terms, this research concentrates on the case of Serbian geopoliti-cal positioning after the Cold War. To consider Serbia as a small state should not be met with serious counter-arguments. Although in the literature there are no generally accepted quantitative or normative criteria allowing a given country to be labelled a 'small power' (Neumann & Gstöhl 2006), those states with less than 10 or 15 million inhabitants and which are not great powers are usually recognised as such (Baldacchino & Wivel 2020; Thorhallsson & Steinsson 2017). Contemporary Serbia, excluding Kosovo, has a population of seven million and thus meets these basic criteria.

During the last three decades, Serbia's complex geopolitical location and un-resolved territorial disputes have been the drivers forcing this country to find a balance between dominating supranational blocs in the light of the 'third way' concept. This is an option for the international positioning of a small country in a world of asymmetric relations in a region where the interests of the world's most influential powers collide. The Serbian geopolitical development evokes associations with its larger, multinational predecessor Yugoslavia's look for alter-native international behaviour. Despite its high relevance for theory and practice, the Serbian case was not sharply articulated and approached in the small states' academic discourse. Serbia, located 'between a rock and a hard place' (Gajić 2018), is a small state with uncertain geopolitical and civilisational identity, dealing with several challenges in an area with a centuries-old tradition of divergence between the interests of global powers. All these current circumstances make Serbia, perhaps, the most intriguing example in modern Europe, both in terms of the formal self-determination of the state and society and the rival approaches of the great powers in attracting the non-aligned post-communist states to their spheres of influence. Despite its high relevance for theory and practice, with a few exceptions (Kovačević 2016, 2019; Radoman 2021; Guzina 2022), this case was not sharply articulated and approached in the small states' academic discourse. Taking Serbia as an example, the current article deals with how the complex geopolitical location and ambivalent ideas on a nation's civilisational identity of its leaders translate into the practical and institutional dimensions of the state's political and economic cooperation.

The article is structured as follows. It first raises issues that revolve around the 'third way's' specificity and outlines how theory and empirical research reflect contemporary small states' behaviour. The following section presents the article's research design, including its primary purpose and research questions. After that, the socialist Yugoslavia's ideological economic security positioning as a non-aligned state under conditions of a bipolar system is discussed. Next, relying on some empirical evidence, an attempt is made to answer whether, and if so how, the Yugoslav way of geopolitical self-positioning was embodied in the post-Cold War evolution of Serbian geopolitics. A model of multiple asymmetries is presented in the next article's section. The following section formulates differences and similarities between Yugoslavia's and Serbia's geopolitical 'third way', emphasising the aspects of their geography, security, economic orientation and cultural-ideological complementarity. The article's conclusion contains some general remarks that are important for small states' 'third way' and underscores the difficulties in defining and predicting Serbia's location in the international order unequivocally.

'Third way' and the small state positioning in theory and empirical research

Although the discourse on small states has developed intensively in recent geopolitics and international relations (Henrikson 2001; Crowards 2002; Maas 2009; Steinmetz 2016; Cottey 2018), scholars have rarely addressed the 'third way' of post-socialist countries as a possible option of supranational identification (McSweeney 1987; Inbar & Sheffer 1997; Soni 2018; Makili-Aliyev 2021), which is associated mainly with security issues. In the sphere of security, it is believed that the constant concern of small states has often induced them to seek the protection of great powers and military assistance from larger states or alliances (Braun 1983; Brady & Thorhallsson 2021). Several terms that are more or less closely tied to the 'third way' concept circulate in the scholarly literature. Small states have also deployed a number of diverse strategies in their asymmetrical relations with the most powerful powers and alliances, including bandwagoning, balancing, integration, neutrality and non-interference (Kurecic 2017). When bandwagoning or integration are not appropriate options, it is believed that the state seeks to keep its interests, to mitigate external influences, or even to survive by 'balancing', 'remaining neutral', 'hedging' and, in some cases, 'omnibalancing' (Schweller 1994; Levick & Schulz 2020; Szalai 2022). What distinguishes the omnibalancing concept is the assumption that the governments/ruling power consider there are both internal and external threats to their existence. What distinguishes the omnibalancing concept is the assumption that the governments/ruling power consider there are both internal and external threats to their exist-

ence (David 1991). The author emphasised that the determinants of alignment overwhelmingly come from the structure of the international system. Hedging is another term frequently applied in recent decades to describe a state's behaviour in international politics, mostly South-Asian countries (Kuik 2008; Ciorciari & Haacke 2019; Korolev 2019). Despite the fact that the concept 'entails a degree of ambiguity' (Plagemann 2019: 740), it is associated with a middle position between balancing and bandwagoning (Kuik 2021). The concept of hedging seems less appropriate to describe the situation of countries whose behaviour could be depicted as a 'third way'. Hedging could also find an application to changing tactics in foreign security or economic policy of every kind of country, both large and small, allied and non-allied. Most importantly, to 'hedge' does not imply the presumption that states search for their place in world politics outside regional integrational associations.

While great power status is attributed on the basis of how central, strong or influential a state is in the running of international peace and security and the general maintenance of international society, small states achieve status through making themselves useful to greater powers

Neumann and de Carvalho (2015) described the mechanism of small states' participation in big politics. They usually 'achieve status through making themselves useful to great powers' and 'seek to be noticed [...] by taking (an admittedly small part of the) responsibility for matters of international peace and security' (Neumann & de Carvalho 2015: 1–2). In this context, the question arises whether, in times of globalisation and the high variability of the international environment (Vaicekauskaitė 2017), smallness forces these types of countries to seek partners and guardians among great powers and influential organisations, or whether they can afford to balance and benefit from privileged relations with several partners? This topical theoretical and empirical issue is particularly vital in the context of supranational regions, as the Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia, concentrating geopolitically fragile small countries, whose space is a battlefield for fierce struggles for zones of multiple influence between the global and regional powers. While this type of country is often overlooked by researchers, well-known examples, which for a long time have been presented as the geographical focus of a small state's 'third way' positioning, include countries belonging to Western civilisation, i.e. Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Finland. Scandinavian countries in particular serve as evidence that an essential aspect of 'third way' policy – institutional non-alignment – is highly dependent on the changing security environment (Pentiilä 1991; Can 2021; Radoman 2021). As Simpson (2018) pointed out, under the conditions of bi-polarity, the Soviet Union viewed the European Community as part of the West in tandem with NATO. This meant – the author noted – that Austria, Finland and Sweden could not apply for membership, fearing this would negate their neutrality. Remaining militarily non-aligned, these

countries became members of the European Union in the post-Cold War period (Simpson 2018). Sweden, for example, was later labelled 'allied partner' or 'partner number one' in NATO Headquarters in Brussels (Petterson 2018: 74). Moreover, Western civilisational affiliation, democratic political system and market economy of these states continued during the Cold War and made them less compatible to the extensive understanding of a 'third way' followed in this study. Today, these states also do not constitute a proving ground for direct confrontation between political and economic alliances, including competition in energy projects, as is the case of Serbia and other post-socialist countries.

In recent years, the 'third way' seems relevant in the South Caucasus. Along with the Balkans, this region is perceived as one of the world's geopolitical and civilisational hotspots where divergent interests and values of some global and regional powers intersect. Azerbaijan sees multivectorism as the best strategy for its political, economic and security interests. Such a strategy is largely explainable given that three geopolitically significant states (Iran, Russia and Turkey) are its immediate neighbours, with which the state has established multidimensional historic, economic and geopolitical ties, including large Azerbaijani diasporas in all three mentioned countries. One also cannot deny the primary importance of a common religion, which favours deepening economic and political ties with Turkey and Iran. Interestingly, Azerbaijan joined Non-Alignment movement (NAM) in the early 2010s (Makili-Aliyev 2021: 364), which is best understood as a natural extension of the 'balanced foreign policy' doctrine introduced in the early 1990s (Strakes 2015). Another, even more remote geographically practical example is Mongolia. As a landlocked state neighbouring only two others – China and Russia – it represents a compelling example of an attempt to follow the third way. Mongolia remains highly dependent on its neighbours: 80% of its fuel it receives from Russia, and 80% of its exports go to China (Soni 2018). Seeking a balance outside Northeast Asia, Mongolia developed the 'third neighbour' concept, which emerged after the Cold War and was initially linked with the United States. In fact, all such potential partners/balancers that would favour a possible 'third way' are geographically remote; this third neighbour serves only as a theoretical option. With an aim to 'maintain balanced relations with Russia and China', Mongolia seeks to establish 'mutually advantageous ties with other countries that may well be treated as "third neighbors"' (Soni 2015: 41), including India, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, Thailand, Singapore and other ASEAN member countries.

From a conceptual point of view, two main aspects of the 'third way' could be specified. In more general terms, as a concept of international positioning of the state, the 'third way' emerged in conditions of a bipolar world in which non-aligned countries had to choose between two options for integration. However, the term was also grasped more broadly, as 'the theory and practice of Non-align-ment reveals that it remains relevant to the changing world scenario, irrespective

of the fact that whether there is cold war or detente whether the world is unipolar, bipolar or multipolar' (Shukla 1995: 47). From the viewpoint of the domain of the external interaction of geopolitical entities, both states and international organisations, the 'third way' can be explored from at least two angles: first, as an option to protect national sovereignty and interests in a specific external environment, marked by confrontation between existing geopolitical alliances; and second, as a specific way to keep positive relations between both parties and gain the benefits of such a balanced position. Some authors insist that the merits of NAM, in order to achieve 'a fairer international economic order' were linked with reducing the military-political division of the world, strengthening solidarity among developing countries (South-South cooperation), as well as in conducting a North-South dialogue (Dimitrijević 2021: 55).

In more specific (sectoral) terms, the 'third way' traditionally refers to the defence and strategic-military sphere (e.g. Mates 1989; Coaty 2019), including the neutrality of small European countries (Binter 1989; Radoman 2018, 2021). However, more attention should be paid to the positioning of non-aligned states concerning trade and economic alliances, and to considering factors such as national traditions and nations' supranational identification, which are actively expressed by public opinion in small states and in the vision of domestic stakeholders. The aspects beyond defence matters have also rarely been addressed, even in Cold-War era literature (e.g. Karunanayake 1976; Sengupta 1976).

In this research, the 'third way' concept is applied more broadly, beyond the issues of security, defence alliances, threats, and war and peacekeeping, which dominate the most significant portion of the debates on small states' positioning. Even so, this concept seems appropriate to examine the geopolitical path of post-Yugoslav Serbia, whose predecessor's 'third way' strategy is often referred to by political and academic elite (NSPM 2011; Gajić & Janković 2012; Lekić 2017; Dimitrijević 2021). In the current historical context, the 'third way' concept also implicates the link between the two states. Concepts with a narrower application, such as balancing or neutrality, are undoubtedly among the key pillars of 'third way' geopolitics and foreign policy. Still, in the practical activities of the state, such strategies are limited to the political-military sphere.

Conceptually, I rely on the assumption that nation states are driven by the wish to follow their own way, which is rooted in domestic traditions, prevailing worldview and traditional identity; thus, the 'third way' is not limited only to deliberated actions and playing games to balance foreign influences. These factors, which conditionally could be labelled 'soft', impact the formulation of the geopolitical strategies and behaviour positioning of the state in regional and global geopolitical environments. Thus, the 'third way' is understood as a concept referring to the interplay of the following pillars of geopolitical/foreign policy activities: security, economy and cultural-ideological complementarity.

While the first directly relates to the very existence of small states, the second determines the conditions of their prosperity/backwardness, and the third is associated with emotions and lack of pragmatism. It should be specified that the last dimension comprises issues of identity, civilisational traditions, stereotypical imaginations of international order, and deeply rooted codes involving external friends and enemies. Cultural-ideological complementarity is undoubtedly that pillar of state geopolitics, which stands out with relatively long-term stability and undergoes slower evolution over time. Its influence over geopolitical positioning usually increases in periods of fundamental transformation of internal and/or international order. Every one of the single 'sectors' of international order and the policies directed towards them are tightly intertwined and affect each other in various time-space configurations.

It is worth emphasising one more, often overlooked, aspect of small state identification. It concerns the mutual interdependencies between the small states' domestic expectations of their main political and other public stakeholders, and their formulation of geopolitical priorities (Deets 2009; Doeser 2011; Ejdus 2011; Proroković 2015), and, in some cases, even the blurring of the lines between them (Szalai 2022). Thus, this article turns attention to the fact that international positioning also depends on the internal competition between values and visions for optimally placing one's own state in the world: how much distance must be kept from different poles of international politics, and how deep must the cooperation go?

Research design
This study focuses on two closely related questions: Is the 'third way' a matter of course that Serbia followed during all the decades after the Cold War? And, if yes, to what extent was it determined by a consciously formulated, purposeful strategy, or was it rather the outcome of *ad hoc* decisions following long-lasting reconfigurations in the geopolitical and economic map of (Eastern) Europe? To answer these questions, the article's main purpose is to frame the stages of the post-Cold War evolution of the Serbian state, its positions and attempts to adjust its politics to the changing international environment.

Thus, following substantial empirical evidence, the article first sought to determine whether military and political non-alignment have been accompanied in recent years by a respective symmetry in investment inflows and trade exchange between Serbia and its main political partners. And, second, an attempt is made to establish whether, and, if so, to what extent, the activity in these spheres is affected by cultural-ideological factors and how they serve as prerequisites for foreign policy positioning. To fulfil these two tasks, this research considers the intensity of bilateral cooperation with global powers and supranational structures, primarily the EU and NATO. The study combines analyses of strategic state

documents, statesmen's speeches and selected political party programmes with empirical data concerning Serbia's bilateral economic exchange.

The study also made to draw parallels between the geopolitical path of post-Cold War Serbia, and search for similarities and differences between the policy of Yugoslavia's 'third way' under the conditions of a bipolar system (Mladenov 2014; Lekić 2017). In broader terms, an attempt was made to formulate some general regularities in the geopolitical positioning of small states. These are synthesised in the model of multiple asymmetries in the interrelations between the small state and leading world and/or regional powers and organisations, whose mutually hostile activities collide in the territory of this state.

Yugoslavia's 'third way': the non-aligned geopolitics of a socialist state

After the First World War, the 'Serbian lands', as part of Royal Yugoslavia, geostrategically became part of the 'sanitary cordon' in Central Europe aimed at blocking the expansion of the Sovietised Heartland to the west and the Germans to the Middle East. Russia did not play a major role in setting the political boundaries in the Balkans after the First World War. France and Great Britain imposed their visions of the geopolitical organisation of this area, supporting the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which is often treated as an extended 'Greater Serbia'.

During socialist Yugoslavia, the South Slavic and other peoples making up the federation had limited opportunities for public externalisation of their cultural-religious identities and their projection in the country's geopolitical activity. Apart from the ideology of socialism, emphasising solidarity with workers and peasants from all over the world, the main drivers of the orientation of the Yugoslav state were economic ties and positioning towards the two leading military blocs. Turbulent events marked the very beginning of this era. If the alliance with Moscow was a strategic priority for the Yugoslav communists in the first years after the Second World War, the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 led to a change in policy towards the Soviet Union and its satellites. At the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris in 1949, Edvard Kardelj, Yugoslavia's foreign minister, used confrontational rhetoric towards Moscow. He talked about 'the discrepancy between words and deeds' and referred to the anti-democratic practice of the Soviet Government towards Yugoslavia (Dragojlović et al. 2011: 188). In February 1953, the Balkan Pact between Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece was established. This agreement meant deepening cooperation with two countries that had joined NATO a year before and was considered a significant step in reversing Yugoslavia's international isolation and mitigating conflict with the Eastern bloc countries (Manić, Torlak & Simeunović-Bajić 2011).

The economic dimension of Yugoslavia's 'third way' orientation was established as follows. In addition to the high degree of dependence on the supply of Soviet

military technology and natural resources, relations with the US were necessary for the country's economic prosperity (Lampe, Prickett & Adamovic 1990). In some opinions, the Tito regime survived thanks to US military aid and economic assistance from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the US Export-Import Bank, and the restoration of trade relations with the West in 1949. In exchange, Yugoslavia was assigned an important role in the anti-Soviet policy of the United States in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, the United States refused to reconsider Yugoslavia's request for inclusion in the Marshall Plan, and the USSR blocked its participation in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Woodward 1995: 26). From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, Yugoslavia received about USD 70 billion from the West in various forms and was dependent on financial and commercial credits from Western banks. At the same time, Yugoslavia was also turned to the East since it needed a socialist market for its sub-standard industrial exports and relied on Soviet oil and military hardware (Paparela 1989).

The security dimension of the country's 'third way' geopolitics was associated with the policy of military neutrality, which was more clearly expressed with the creation and development of the NAM (Kilibarda 2010; Kullaa 2012; Mišković, Fischer-Tiné & Boškovska 2014). The official policy of socialist Yugoslavia was not to seek a buffer position between the integrated blocs of the East and the West. In the opinion of the rulers, those in an independent position and outside the military blocs had an obligation to cooperate with all countries based on free choice and equal rights (Dragojlović et al. 2011).

The road to establishing contact with many non-European countries was launched by Tito in 1954, during his meetings with Nasser, the president of Egypt, and Nehru, the prime minister of India. Later, when tensions in the global confrontation between the socialist and capitalist worlds was culminating, Yugoslavia, in September 1961, hosted the first NAM conference and became one of the leading proponents of this organisation. This loose alliance of states, which had to mobilise and unify 'the materially less powerful nations' (Mates 1989: 167), played a prominent role in Yugoslavia's political and economic relations with the outside world until the federation's dissolution in the early 1990s (Bogetić 1990; Trültzsch 2021; Lopandić & Milikić 2021). Yugoslavia, as one of the most developed member countries of the NAM, financed loans for the purchase of equipment, machinery and transport vehicles, while simultaneously accepting foreign loans, mainly from the United States and Western European states. Foreign trade with these countries increased throughout the Cold War (Manić, Torlak & Simeunović-Bajić 2011). Yugoslavia's location in between the two political systems is best illustrated by the geographic structure of trade relations in the advanced phase of the Cold War. In 1983, capitalist countries accounted for 33.3% of Yugoslavia's exports and 46.1% of imports, while the trade exchange with socialist countries provided 46.7% of exports and 36.9% of imports (Mileta 1986).

Yugoslavia remained outside the supranational organisations of the two rival blocs (the European Community and NATO, and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact) until 1991 (Figure 1). Its 'third way' meant, first, balancing between the influence of great powers, and, second, striving to remain non-aligned in defence and economic blocs. The special status it had obtained in relations with the two superpowers provided advantages to relations both with the capitalist West and the socialist East. Yugoslavia's 'third way' was the result on the one hand of the country's geographic position vis-à-vis the bipolar geopolitical system and, on the other, of the very philosophy of pursuing an independent foreign policy under Josip Broz Tito's leadership. Rapprochement with the West was considered a potential threat to the position of Tito's communist regime, while integration with the socialist bloc would push Belgrade towards Soviet domination and loss of sovereignty.

Figure 1. Yugoslavia in the geopolitical environment of the late Cold War era
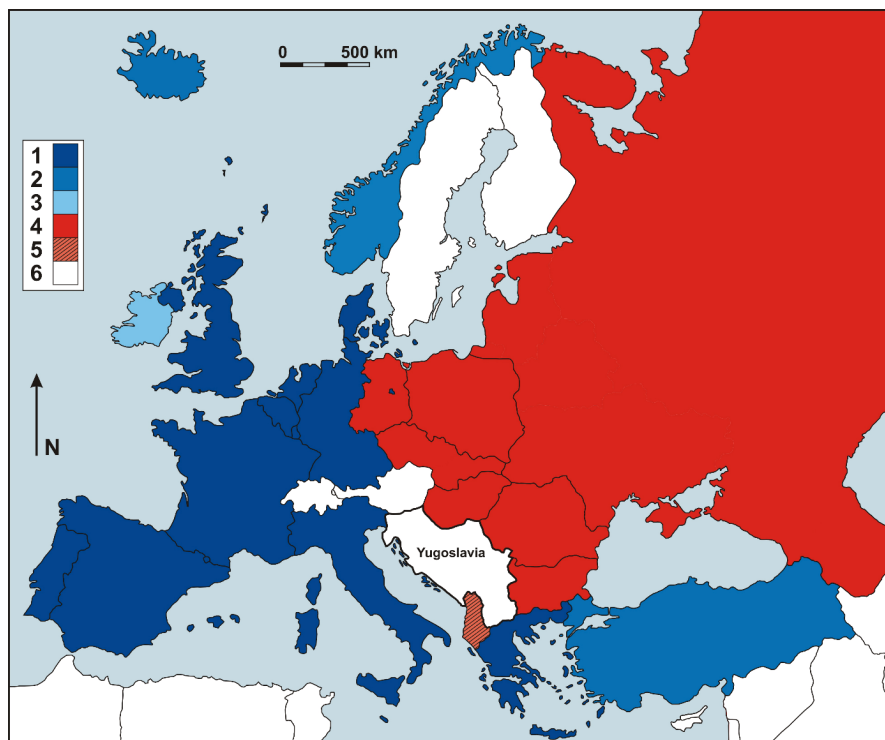
Source: Author
1 -Members of the European Community and NATO, 2 – NATO members, 3 – the European Community members, 4 – members of the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, 5 – a socialist country withdrew from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact in the 1960s, 6 – non-aligned states

Attention should also be given to the relationship between the internal divisions and traditional civilisational affiliations of the republics and regions of Yugoslavia, on the one hand, and the external cultural and political centres, on the other (Mihailov 2011). Despite recognising the leading role of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, individual federal units also participated in foreign policy. Each republic and autonomous region had its own constitution that regulated their participation in relations with foreign countries, although they had to be consistent with the established foreign policy of the state: 'permanent and strict adherence to non-alignment, as an independent, non-bloc and global orientation in international relations' (Petković 1986: 9). It is worth mentioning the opinion that the character of Yugoslavia's internal organisation necessarily determined its foreign policy orientation, and that 'insisting on the principle of different paths to socialism, depending on specific national conditions and needs, was the only alternative for preserving internal order from growing hegemony in the international community' (Bogetić 1990: 34–35). These were the conditions when constructed ideological unity pushed the real cultural-historical, ethnic and economic differences in the multinational federation into the background.

Post-Cold War geopolitics: the 'third way', like being in a 'geopolitical ghetto'

This section examines to what extent the relationship between the dynamics of Yugoslav and Serbian geopolitical orientations and changes in the global balance of power is observable in the post-Cold War period, and how these changes force this country to take an alternative 'third way' option of identification. Tactical re-definitions of Serbian geopolitical priorities can be linked to the evolution of the international order from 1990 onwards. The last decade of the twentieth century was a time of political and economic isolation when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbian nationalism clashed with separatist republics, which found more robust international support for their aspirations for independence. At the very end of this decade, Serbian authorities turned symbolically into the East. Later, during the pro-EU forces' transition to power, Serbian geopolitics faced an 'East or West' choice. After many years of volatile relations with the EU, real Serbian geopolitics had fallen into an 'East and West' formula, which integrates the policy to remain neutral and to follow other quintessential symptoms of the 'third way'. Thus, several strategic steps that show how Serbia, despite its formal pursuit of EU membership, cooperates with a number of political, economic and technological centres is – to one degree or another – consistent with its traditional in-betweenness regarding East and West.

The 1990s: 'inward-looking nationalism' and a symbolic turn towards the East
After the Cold War, the sphere of influence in the Balkans of the global geopolitical powers underwent a radical reconfiguration. Most countries in the region changed their geopolitical orientation by integrating into the West's economic and defence structures. Serbia is now the country with the most complicated relations with the EU and NATO – organisations with geostrategic initiative in the military, political and economic spheres. The post-Cold War Serbian geopolitical orientation is not only a direct result of the global changes, its geographic location and inherited civilisational peculiarities in the perception of the world. The main factor driving national strategic thought was the geographical distribution of the Serbs, who were divided among several newly-formed states. This time was marked by conflicts and 'inward-looking nationalism' (Kovačević 2016: 124).

Serbia found itself in a situation where it encouraged the armed struggles of its compatriots in the former Yugoslav republics, and the territorial integrity of the latter was supported by the most influential countries of the Euro-Atlantic community. During the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia lacked support from the West, who did not recognise the ruling socialists/nationalists as close partners (Thomas 1999). The European Community was guided by the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, and, on this basis, recognised the independence proclaimed by the Yugoslav republics, which was contrary to Serbia's interests (Dimitrijević 2010).

Essential changes affected the relations between what remained of the multi-national federation and NAM. Even though Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) was not formally excluded from its membership at the time, in 1992 it was de facto denied the right to participate in the work of the organisation. Non-aligned countries took different positions towards the Yugoslavian crisis: while Islamic states blamed Yugoslavia for the ongoing crisis, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, African and Latin American countries supported the position of authorities in Belgrade. This was the reason that the question of the legitimacy of further participation in NAM was 'an open political question' (Dimitrijević 2021: 50). It is worth recalling that the 'third', smallest Yugoslavia was not recognised for a long time and was accepted as a member of the United Nations only in 2000. During the period under consideration, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Serbia in particular, had to redefine its opponents and the states supporting its vital interests. Mired in a series of regional conflicts, the state structures ruled by Slobodan *Milošević* had no formulated international strategy. However, Russia and China acted as Belgrade's main supporters in the global arena. In most cases, these states supported the Serbian position on the UN Security Council, but failed to prevent either NATO military intervention or the de facto secession of Kosovo. Historical ties and civilisational closeness (expressed in the concept of Slavic and Orthodox 'brotherhood'), which replaced socialist internationalism in the 1990s, became undoubtedly the driving factor that enforced old geopolitical

complementarity between Serbia and Russia. Despite friendly diplomatic gestures and the participation of Russian soldiers in the KFOR mission, Russia not only lacked the resources of military support (Ambrosio 1999) but, at a time of difficult economic transition, it was also not in its interest to confront the West directly. Russia's positions, however, were more nuanced and changed over this decade. Moreover, in the early 1990s, Russia supported UN economic sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It is worth mentioning that in April 1999, two weeks after the NATO war campaign against Yugoslavia, the country's parliament passed a resolution 'On the accession of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Union of Belarus and Russia'. This was a symbolic act of desperation that was formally approved by the Russian and Belarusian parliaments, but remained without any practical consequences. Under such conditions, numerous stereotypes about the North Atlantic Alliance (Vraneš 1999) as a 'union of imperialist states' and the 'military machine of the West' were reinforced in Serbian society. This picture became even stronger after the alliance military intervention in 1999. As Đukanović (2015: 116) noted, this public attitude was often only a reflection of the deep anti-Western sentiment in Serbia, which was then gradually transferred to the image of the European Union.

Without adequate support from Yugoslavia's main foreign supporter under Slobodan Milošević, the preservation of Yugoslav unity or the building of a Greater Serbia was doomed to failure. After the wars of the 1990s, which were unsuccessful for Serbia, the use of military means gave way to soft power, emphasising a policy of supporting the rights of the Serbian population in the newly-formed states by showing them comprehensive support. This is one of the main reasons for the continued suspicion towards Serbia among the neighbouring post-Yugoslav states, which led them to follow a course of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The 2000s: an irresolute turn towards the West

During the 2000s, Serbia's 'third way' was marked by hesitation between the desire to join the EU and a desire to keep and develop its ties with Russia. After European integration emerged as a priority of the new democratic authorities, it gave rise to expectations of overcoming the policy of isolationism and of a symbolic and political return to Europe (Kostovicova 2004). The waves of enthusiasm after the overthrow of Milošević brought hopes for smooth integration into Europe (Ramet & Pavlaković 2005), but this proved to be a short-term phenomenon. In the mid-2000s, insufficient cooperation by the Serbian authorities with the International *Criminal Tribunal* for the former Yugoslavia led to the postponement of the start of negotiations for EU membership. In the ideas of some more conservative domestic authors, the traditional identity of Serbia comes into conflict with the aspiration of the more liberal circles for rapprochement with the West. From this time onwards, one of the critical challenges of Serbia's international posi-

tioning remains how to adjust this purpose with the steps to keep close relations with Russia. Stepić (2012: 34), for example, believes that 'in the ethno-national, religious, cultural and civilisation sense, the traditional affiliation of Serbs and Serbian lands to the East is indisputable' and that of 'transfer of the Serbian factor in the Balkans' to incompatible Euro-Atlantic integrations is noticeable. In turn, such attitudes served as a suitable ground for deepening ties with Russia. Serbia was interested in attracting Russian capital, joint energy projects and increasing trade with Russia, which used this opportunity to strengthen its presence in the Balkans (Jović-Lazić & Lađevac 2018).

Figure 2. Serbia in the geopolitical environment of Europe (January 2024)
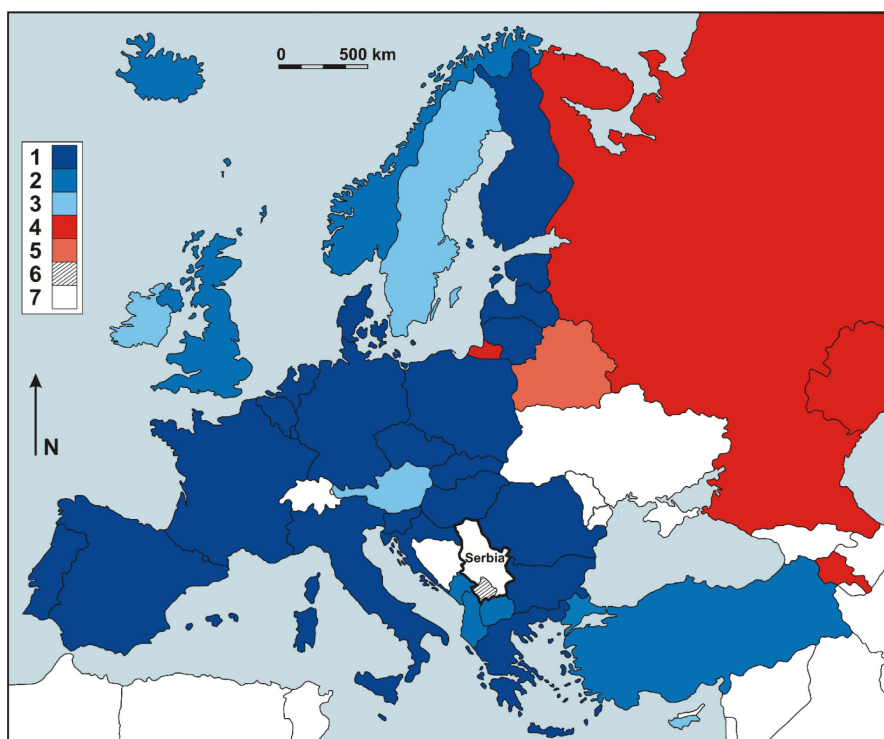
Source: Author
1 – Members of the European Union and NATO, 2 – NATO members, 3 – the European Union members, 4 – members of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 5 – members of the Eurasian Economic Union, 6 – partially recognised states, 7 – non--aligned states

Territorially shrunk, Serbia was gradually encircled by member states of the EU and NATO (Figure 2). Excluding Kosovo, the country accounts for just 30% of the territory and population of the former Yugoslavia. Some Serbian experts

assessed this situation as being a specific form of 'geopolitical ghetto' (Gajić 2015). With the changing external and internal environment, the new, pro-Western course seemed to be a logical continuation of the essential shifts taking place in the domestic political arena. At the beginning of the post-Milosevic era, democratic, pro-European parties held dominant positions. Under their rule, attempts to establish Serbia's military and political neutrality have been based on: (1) the publicly-expressed wishes of Serbia's highest political representatives, as well as other public figures, and (2) a parliamentary resolution designating Serbia as a military-neutral (Lekić 2017).

The state's declared strategic aim of military neutrality testified to a willingness to follow its 'third way', at least in the sphere of security. Interestingly, according to some calculations, the budget incurs fewer costs in the case of neutrality towards defence alliances (see Stojković & Glišić 2020). The position of staying separate from existing military alliances can only await changes after a national referendum (Resolution of the National Assembly...). Against this, Serbia does not give up cooperation with military alliances. Serbia does not perceive other states or alliances as enemies, or look for further cooperation with EU and NATO members (Radoman 2021). Earlier, in 2006, Serbia joined the NATO Partnership for Peace Program. The question of possible candidature for NATO membership will undoubtedly remain an unpopular option for the public opinion in Serbia for a long time (Đukanović & Lađevac 2009). This option is currently supported by only a few Serbian experts. In contrast to the 2000s, when support for membership reached over 70% (Pjevović & Subotić 2009), the level of Euro-enthusiasm among citizens is declining. According to a survey from 2023, 43% of Serbs would vote for EU membership, 32 against, while another 12 find it difficult to answer the question (PTPC 2023).

In 2004, the newly-elected president, Boris Tadić, outlined his foreign policy philosophy which, according to him, depended on the geographical location of the country. That is why Serbia should be the centre of friendship and peaceful politics in the region. Thus, its foreign policy priorities are European integration, good neighbourliness, as well as equal relations with the three centripetal forces in world politics: Brussels, Washington and Moscow (Dragojlović et al. 2011). A few years later, in 2008, Tadić's vision became more varied. The president formulated a thesis of four strategic pillars of Serbia; the EU, Russia, USA and China (Gajić & Janković 2012). In the following decade, this thesis began to take real shape. The initial pro-Western course was replaced by a more irresolute view of Serbia's supranational positioning, preserving the scars of a specific, non-aligned, 'third way'.

After Milosevic was removed from power, Serbia 'was unwilling to raise the issue of renewed membership in the NAM'; the European integration was recognized as more significant than the relations with NAM (Svilanović 2001, as cited in Dimitrijević 2021: 51). These relations were intensified after the NAM

Ministerial Conference held in Tehran in 2008, when '[...] Serbia asked for the support of non-aligned countries in the UN General Assembly in order to address the International Court of Justice for an opinion on the legality of the unilaterally declared secession of [...] Kosovo [...]' (Dimitrijević 2021: 49).

The 2010s: East and West

In the 2010s, efforts to implement its multivectoral vision of foreign relations intensified decidedly. It should be emphasised that, in terms of its institutional engagement, Serbia only has observer status in the NAM. It is worth mentioning that in 2011, the 50th jubilee summit of the ministers of the member states took place in Belgrade. President Tadić said in front of the summit participants that Serbia's foreign policy at that time was also based on 'respect for the universal principles of non-alignment' (NSPM 2011). In the context of updated relation with NAM 'it was considered that the revival of that cooperation is not incompatible with Serbia's aspirations to join the European Union and to build constructive relations with the great powers (USA, Russia and China)' (Dimitrijević 2021: 52).

A symbolic end to the participation of liberal parties in the governance of the Serbian state took place in 2012. The leading role in the new government was taken by the right-wing conservatives (Serbian Progressive Party) and socialists, which continued the policy of a multivectoral partnership. Paradoxically, it was during this period that negotiations with the EU began. The European integration course follows the logic of geography and economic interests, but its intensification coincided with the rapid shrinkage of Europe's role in global affairs (Haukkala 2021). The main concern of the democratic forces in Serbia was that the policy of nationalists might lead to isolation from the West (Seroka 2010). However, thanks in part to active cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, it so happened that in 2014 the former nationalists and Milošević's party started negotiations for EU membership. Another important reason for this was the conclusion of the Brussels Agreement in 2013. The slow pace of accession negotiations (Subotić 2010; Stahl 2013) and the internal crisis in the EU, including the negative attitude of some community members to further enlargement in the Balkans, strengthened the Eurosceptic sentiment among Serbs (Bazić 2019). The main obstacle – both normative and psychological – on the road to the EU is that the leading countries of the community expect Serbia to accept Kosovo's independence. The EU-Serbia-Kosovo knot, however, is more entangled and unpredictable. The recognition of the *de facto* independence of a southern province that is not controlled by Serbian authorities is not a formal condition for membership (Baracani 2020).

The changing internal and external policy imperatives remain in line with the 'cognitive dissonance' of Serbian society (Ejdus 2011), which cannot choose its geopolitical and civilisational orientation, while unequivocally expecting simulta-

neous cooperation with different countries and regional alliances. More precisely, just as their political representatives did, 'the citizens have built a consensus that their country should become a member of the EU, that it should remain militarily neutral, and that it should never, at any cost, recognise Kosovo's independence' (ibid.: 16–17). This behaviour is tied to a national tradition, grasped by Savić (2014: 688) as a 'conjuncture of an outward-looking irredentist orientation and an internal East-West "disorientation"'. In the period under consideration, Serbia continues to recognise friends and makes partnerships with all countries that are against Kosovo independence considered a 'red line' in the state relations with the outside world. The activity of Serbian diplomacy in recent years has managed to impose its vision of Kosovo's political status. Thanks to Serbia's deliberate campaign, Kosovo has tried unsuccessfully to join Interpol several times. By early 2024, 13 countries had withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo's independence (Status of Kosovo: recogniton & derecogniton). These are indeed primarily small and medium-sized Third World countries, with little influence on global politics, e.g. Ghana, Suriname, Burindi, Togo or Papua New Guinea, but the change in these countries' position over Kosovo in favour of Serbia proves the determination of this small state and its ability to persuade other governments to support its position on such a knotty geopolitical issue.

The profound dilemmas observed in the supranational values and the traditional East-West dichotomy of the national consciousness can also be illustrated by the intensive domestic debate on the strategic vectors of cooperation. Here, attention is given to how the East-West dichotomy has been reflected in Serbia's changing geopolitical positioning as described in the strategic positions of the country's most prominent political parties. President Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party sets out visions of multi-vector geopolitics; the primary directions of Serbian foreign policy activity should be joining the European Union and developing the closest relations with the Russian Federation, the USA, China, India and the Arab countries (Srpska Napredna Stranka 2013). European Union membership is also seen as 'Serbia's top strategic interest' by the Social Democratic Party, which additionally advocates a multivectoral (Program Socijaldemokratske stranke). Against this background, the pro-Russian and *anti-Occidentalist* nature of the Serbian Radical Party and the Dveri political movement stand out. The Serbian radicals oppose a membership in the EU, which 'does not recognise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our country', and is in favour of 'Eurasian integration and comprehensive cooperation with the Russian Federation, China, and other friendly countries' (Program Srpske Radikalne Stranke). Anti-EU positions are also taken by one of the new political movements, Enough is Enough (Dosta je bilo). Along with the declaration that 'Serbia should cooperate with both the East and the West', the fundamental values of the party's platform are expressed through the slogan 'For Europe, against the EU, against joining NATO' (Dosta je bilo 2016).

Despite various visions of domestic stakeholders, in line with the 'four strategic pillars' vision, Serbia maintains close relations with Russia and China and, to a lesser extent, with the USA. In addition to dependence on Russian oil and gas and investments in the fuel sector, cooperation also includes purchasing Russian weapons and a series of joint exercises with the Russian army. Since 2013, Serbia has had visitor status in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Subotić & Igrutinović 2019), but joining the alliance is not on Belgrade's security policy agenda. Serbia received military technology for free, including MIG-29 planes, BRDM-2 armoured vehicles and T-72 tanks. To modernise outdated technology which dates back to the Cold War, the Serbian government is buying modern Mi-17V-5 and Mi-35M helicopters and the Pancir S missile system (Đurđević 2020). Bilateral cooperation is gaining momentum in institutional terms as well. In addition to the Russo-Serbian Humanitarian Centre operating in Niš, in 2021 the Russian Balkan Centre was established in Belgrade, whose officially declared aim is 'development of dialogue between civil societies of Russia, Serbia and other countries of the Balkan region' (Teller Report 2021). Symptomatically, Serbia has consistently remained indifferent to the appeals of EU countries to expel Russian diplomats as a sign of solidarity with the EU. Serbia was the only country west of the former Soviet border not to impose sanctions on Russia after 2014 (Proroković 2017). Simultaneously, the adopted strategy of defence (2019) gave special attention to the potential for armed aggression against Serbia in the future. A state's defence policy may reduce such a threat 'based on military neutrality' (Strategija odbrane Republike Srbije 2019).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, in pursuit of its new geo-economic priorities, including the 'One Belt, One Road' project, China has been actively promoting its interests in the Balkans and has become more noticeable in the Serbian geopolitical discourse. In this context, Serbia promotes itself as an 'open door' for Beijing into the Balkans (Le Corre & Vuksanovic 2019) and was recognised as 'the country with the most intensive cooperation with China of all the Balkan states' (Karaskova et al. 2020: 22). China invested in a few strategic heavy industry manufacturers, including the takeover of the Smederevo steel plant from which the previous owner, US Steel, withdrew in 2012. The question remains whether the cultivation of many strategic partners is the result of awkward tactical steps or a thoroughly thought-out strategy of proper, multilateral relations oriented towards both the global West and the East. However, there is growing evidence that the traditional partnership with Russia and the deepened cooperation with China are not the only priorities for Serbia. For example, the agreements signed in Washington at the beginning of September 2020 by President Vučić on economic normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo caused much confusion among Serbia's traditional partners. There were attempts by the US administration to bring the positions of Serbia and Kosovo closer together (Danas 2020).

If, in terms of security, politics and ideology, Serbia in many respects resembles the Yugoslav non-alignment then, in the case of economic relations, the situation is more clear-cut. From 2010 to 2020 the EU member states invested EUR 17,4 billion in the Serbian economy; 67,6% of total direct foreign investment (FDI). Russia comes second with 9.3% (Direktna strana investicija u Srbiji 2020). In turn, the foreign trade of Serbia is more EU-oriented. According to 2019 data, exports and imports to EU countries accounted for 63% of Serbia's total trade exchange or EUR 24.9 billion. The volume of trade with Russia (EUR 2.7 billion) and China (EUR 2.4 billion) is ten times lower (EU i dalje daleko najveći trgovinski partner Srbije 2020).

Summarising the Serbian 'third way' experience: the model of multiple asymmetries

The above-presented, chronologically ordered empirical analysis allows us to summarise the chief aspects of Serbia's 'third way'. The results may further serve as a stimulus for deeper comparisons of this particular experience with other states whose international positioning hesitates between two or more external vectors of geopolitical gravity, including Azerbaijan and Mongolia, mentioned earlier as appropriate examples. The conducted exploration of Serbia's geopolitical behaviour allows one to generalise its chief manifestations within a model of multiple asymmetries (Figure 3).

It is difficult to elaborate on a concept that can be equally applied to all small states, even those located in one region and sharing comparable military power, and economic and demographic characteristics. The asymmetry is usually linked to the existing dominance of a great state in terms of military, power and hegemony (Morrow 1991; Mouritzen 1991; Long 2015; Can 2021); but this is rather an obvious facet of these interrelations. Practice allows one to underline the existing asymmetry in the power of attraction between the small country and the geographically closest powers/coalitions. This asymmetry is bidirectional. It concerns the strength of geopolitical connections, manifested in the differences between interests and real possibilities for establishing favourable partnerships or entering into stronger alliances, the realisation of which is limited by size and geography. For example, apart from gestures of goodwill and support at the UN Security Council, Russia maintains its pro-Serbian position, but cannot support the Serbs in implementing their ethno-territorial policy in the post-Yugoslav region, in order not to risk further antagonising its relationships with major European and global players.

As the experience of Serbia during the post-Cold War period suggests, the 'third way' is, instead, a combination of policies for establishing strategic international partnerships in the three dimensions of geopolitics and international policy, constituting the foundation of the conceptual model: security, economy

and cultural-ideological complementarity. On the one hand, the asymmetry on the side of the small state concerns the uneven balance between identification and desire for rapprochement in each of these spheres (Figure 3). On the other hand, the potential of the main external powers to attract small non-aligned countries into the sphere of their interests varies greatly. In accordance with the empirical data revealing the practical outcomes of Serbian geopolitical positioning, the influence of the West in terms of economic cooperation/dependence, investment and technology far exceeds what the East could currently offer. In turn, the Serbian vision of military non-alignment as being the best solution for its territorial integrity, as it has gradually been surrounded by NATO members, will, sooner or later, face increasing isolation in the sphere of security. Moderate political circles in Serbian society support a possible 'marriage of convenience' with the West, which today has a decisive strategic advantage over players such as Russia, China and Turkey in terms of geographic closeness, soft power, security and economic attractiveness. What is causing some discomfort in the triangle Serbia – ex-Yugoslav space – Euro-Atlantic community is that Western states and organisations openly side with Serbia's regional opponents. Therefore, the path of full Euro-Atlantic integration (the EU + NATO formula) is supported by marginal political groups and is not on the current international security agenda. The Serbian model also implies a noticeable contrast in the small states of the whole of post-communist Europe. They first joined the North Atlantic Alliance, followed by EU membership, while the Serbian way deviates from this common model. The intensity of trade exchange is another asymmetrical dimension of mutual relations between small and great powers. It concerns the desire to join a particular economic organisation that could be, but is not always, mirrored by equal levels of cultural-ideological complementarity. After all, such aspirations are not a linear process in a Huntington-inspired sense, which postulated that nations will make alliances based on their civilisational (mainly religious) identity (Huntington 1996). An appropriate illustration here is the strategic behaviour of Orthodox countries such as Romania and Bulgaria (Mihaylov 2019, 2024). When they aspired to membership of Western political and defence structures, the highest politicians in these states employed a new rhetoric called 'civilisational choice' in reasoning their post-communist re-orientation. This still serves as evidence for the significance of soft factors in justifying a nation's international positioning. However, Serbia's path of using its cultural identity does not fit this pattern, and it still places great importance on its relations with Russia and continues the Slavic brotherhood rhetoric (Kovačević 2016).

Despite asymmetries in military and trade potential and soft power, being a small state does not automatically translate into a passive attitude towards areas of strategic national interest. It does not necessarily reflect the conformist or clientelistic behaviour both in the self-identification of the national elite and the

state's relations with key international stakeholders. Moving closer to advanced economies, which are the main source of investment and technologies, is not a target pursued at all costs. National(-istic) sentiments, often associated with irrationality, still take precedence over prospective political gains. The constant postponement of an acceptable compromise in Serbian policy towards the status of Kosovo has slowed the pace of accession negotiations with the EU. In this respect, the Serbian attitude is consistent, and there are also no compromises, even when it comes to its most complementary external supporters. A confirmation can be found in the negative Serbian attitude towards Crimea's annexation as well as the lack of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in which separatism and independence are promoted by Russia, the state which is still widely perceived as the main foreign patron for Serbs and their interests.

Figure 3. The model of 'third way' multiple asymmetries
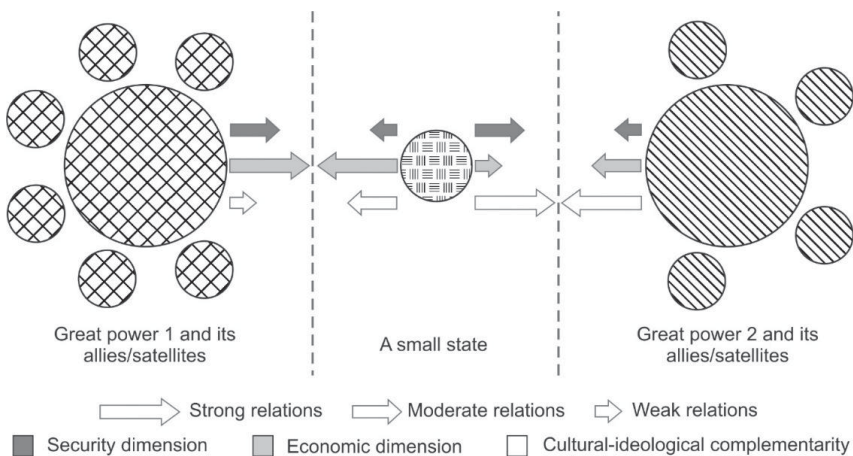
Source: Author
Clarification: arrow size expresses: for great powers and their allies/satellites, connections between the potential and willingness for cooperation or expanding its influence and the convergence of interests in a given direction and the capabilities to make a real impact; for the small state, connections between the potential and willingness for cooperation and the convergence of interests towards a given direction and the capabilities to attract the attention of the other side.

Similar inspirations, asymmetric outcomes: Serbia and Yugoslavia's 'third way'

One of the study's main tasks was to compare the Yugoslav and Serbian Third Ways, mapped out in academic discussions and practical geopolitics. It could be assumed that there are more significant differences than similarities between the geopolitics of socialist Yugoslavia and independent, post-socialist Serbia. In

particular, this observation is grounded on many existing gaps in the asymmetrical positioning of both discussed states.

Regarding the changing political geography of Southeast Europe and the adherent regions, Serbia's positioning is influenced by less favourable conditions for building its 'third way'; it is surrounded by several unstable, post-Yugoslav states integrated into the structures of the Western political and civilisational pole. Serbia is a much smaller and strategically less significant country and a landlocked one. During the Cold War, its geographic location and more significant resources allowed Yugoslavia to be more ambitious in its global political and economic goals, i.e. pursuing the policy of creating a more peaceful international system (Igrutinović 2018). Moreover, its 'third way' is underway in a different international environment in which the old, bipolar ideological confrontation has given way to far more diverse, temporary and fluid constructions of international partnership.

What concerns the security dimension is that, like Yugoslavia, Serbia keeps its neutrality towards the existing defence alliances, but is less effective in maintaining beneficial relations with the East, West and partly with NAM members. During the process of Yugoslavia's dissolution, Serbia turned to establish antagonistic relations with Western countries. As a long-lasting legacy from this period, the country's international image is still associated with responsibility for the wars in the 1990s. The notable differences include the incomparably better reputation of Yugoslavia as a country fighting on the side of the Allies in World War II, which was a valuable asset in international negotiations. One more distinction concerning the cooperation with NAM should be emphasised. While Yugoslavia was among the organisation's most active members, relations relating to post-Yugoslavia Serbia underwent different phases. Most recently, these relations have been developing in an upward direction. The most important, however, is the status of an EU candidate and its integration has been formally accepted as a strategic purpose. Yet, this is just one of the geopolitical priorities, as Serbia is deepening its ties with Russia and China, which see the Balkan country as a springboard for their influence in the region. Paradoxically, the Serbian state has better relations with these Eastern powers than with many key EU countries. Despite the formal policies and declarations, it was Kosovo itself, not the EU, that was the chief priority of Serbian external strategy. Serbia's importance to the EU's leading powers is difficult to overestimate: Serbia's prosperity is a pre-requisite for implementing a common euro-Atlantic security policy in the Western Balkans.

It is also intriguing that, in economic terms, Serbia is more connected economically with the West than Yugoslavia; however, its strategic sectors depend on Russian natural resources, which, in the face of the global energy crisis and international isolation of the Russian Federation, directly raises Serbia's 'third-way' vulnerability. New (dis)balances were noticed between the economic and cultural-ideological determinants of geopolitical orientation and willingness to

cooperate with external partners. Representing a three times smaller country, compared to multi-religious Yugoslavia, Serbia is more homogeneous in terms of cultural-civilisational identity. Also, the country's cultural and geopolitical codes are more explicitly expressed. In Yugoslavia, internally generated nuances in the sympathies towards external civilisational and political poles, although not directly manifested, were grounded in ethno-religious and historical argumentation that varied among its constitutive nations and federal units. As an external projection of internal differences, the 'third way' of today's Serbia has another background. First of all, it is a state with a strong national identity. All the ideas of neutrality, non-alignment and balanced multivectoral geopolitics circulating among the Serbian political elite have been inspired by the Yugoslavian 'third way'. A conclusion could be drawn that, owing to their more limited resources, the efforts of Serbian statesmen are *less fruitful* and thus remain in the shadow of its multinational predecessor's achievements.

Conclusion

The classical meaning of the 'third way' refers to a non-alignment policy towards two competing (security) alliances. However, the main assumptions of the article's conceptual framework and its empirical application suggest that the 'third way' means not only the country placing itself between third parties (great powers and formal alliances) but also defining its own position towards their civilisational values and vital economic interests. The Serbian case testifies to the intertwining of the main dimensions of the 'third way' – security, economy and cultural-ideological (civilisational) complementarity, and, what is more, that the weight of any of them could not be neglected. This sphere is especially relevant in the early twenty-first century's, vaguely configured, world geopolitical and geocultural map, which challenges the national communities traditionally positioned *in-between* in their choice of the most optimal supranational identification. The 'third way' concept allows the international positioning of states to be broadly analysed in academic research and approached in practical activities by considering ideology, civilisational traditions, cultural codes and other aspects of cultural-ideological complementarity more decidedly.

This study examined the complex ties between the permanent geographical position and changing geopolitical positioning of a small, post-socialist state, which does not formally belong to any of the main supranational alliances which are presented or try to expand their influence in a complex European region. An effort was made to answer how Serbia's geopolitical identification is perceived, defined and performed by this small state elite in the context of ongoing relations with the constantly transforming external environment. The research revealed that the current distribution of both hard and soft power in the existing international order and the diverse nature of cooperation with neighbouring countries

(relations vary from moderate-friendly, to cold and enmity) shapes a complex environment for the weakened Serbia in creating its own, 'third way'. Geostrategic partnerships and the asymmetric geography of political and economic ties became highly dependent upon the commitment of other countries to the Serbian state in their politics towards the geopolitical heritage of former Yugoslavia.

The answer to the first research question concerning whether the geopolitical positioning of post-Yugoslav Serbia can be labelled a 'third way' is rather positive. This Balkan state de facto follows the 'third way' and non-alignment model of geopolitics in particular: in searching for benefits from both Eastern and Western geopolitical poles, Serbia remains outside them. Then, the answer to the second research question is more nuanced. Serbia's geopolitical positioning is highly dependent on domestic geopolitical and civilisational codes. Whether by accident or design, the dynamic changeability observed in Serbia's international behaviour is a combination of ad hoc decisions with strictly followed steps toward one or another power or coalition states. However, continuing to follow its historical 'East-West "disorientation"' (Savić 2014), during the late 2000s and 2010s Serbia tried to adjust its geopolitical reasoning to the changing international conditions, including through formally declared national interests. Taken together, these interests, such as political multivectorism, military non-alignment, diversification of strategic trade partners, and the external projection of domestic cultural-historical sentiments, in one way or another, shape what was grasped in this article as a 'third way' geopolitical positioning.

Serbia's 'third way' is not a certain, rigid position within the asymmetrical competition between East and West in post-Cold War Europe, but a series of unfinished alliances and undecided choices of geostrategic orientation. Regardless of whether the small state from the Balkans receives new, pragmatic 'offers' or empty gestures from the most prominent global powers, the uncertainty of its 'third way' will remain the main feature of its geopolitical identity in the entire third decade of the 21st century and maybe even for longer. The ongoing regional and world geopolitical dynamics bring unexpected challenges to the map of supranational alliances. In the context of the current 'hypersecuritisation' of the whole contact zone between the ex-Soviet space and the EU (Andžāns 2023), enforced by the continuous Russian war against Ukraine, states such as Sweden and Finland have been forced to apply for NATO membership. Their partial 'third way' policy has been changing in the face of the rising security threats, while some newly emerged countries, such as Azerbaijan, confidently conduct their multi-vector and non-alignment policy. It also becomes evident that the Serbian policy requires rethinking and adjusting to the new international circumstances. Undoubtedly, this country is entering a time of difficult decisions, facing external expectations to define more clearly its geopolitical orientation. However, it can be expected that the (current) Serbian authorities will continue their balancing policy for as long as possible.

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Being Small but Smart in the International Arena

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Small states have attracted the attention of researchers for decades. Historians and political scientists have analysed small states within the context of international relations, delving into facets encompassing foreign affairs, security, power relations and antagonism, diplomatic engagements, as well as peace and conflicts. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the situation for small states was transformed. Soft power became the primary political tool for small states, replacing hard power. While there is no common definition regarding the parameters that distinguish small states from larger ones, there are some common criteria to be considered such as population size (typically below 1.5 million), geographical expanse, military capabilities, GDP, availability of natural resources and geopolitical positioning. Furthermore, the proposed definitions often overlook the relative political influence used by a state, thus failing to encapsulate the full spectrum of its capabilities. Small states have proven to have to have a strategic adaptation and resilience to counter and mitigate multilayered vulnerabilities. Small states have tailored their strategies based on their challenges. By leveraging their unique strengths and maximising their advantages, small states can indeed demonstrate exceptional smartness and competitiveness in the global arena.

In this book, Professor Litsas presents a groundbreaking examination of state behaviour in the contemporary international system. Except for the traditional small states theory, which suggests that small international actors exercise significant influence, the author introduces the concept of the smart states theory instead to better capture the complex dynamics in today's international arena. Through a synthesis of structural and neoclassical realism, he proposes the smart

states theory, which emphasises the importance of adaptability, tolerance, strategic decision-making and effective governance in navigating the challenges of the modern geopolitical landscape.

At the heart of the analysis lies the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a nation that epitomises the principles of smart statecraft. By delving into the UAE's transformation from the Trucial States to a modern and tech-oriented nation-state, the author illustrates how smart foreign policy, visionary leadership and inclusive domestic politics have propelled the country onto the global stage. Notably, the UAE's response to the recent pandemic serves as a testament to its resilience and forward-thinking approach to addressing multifaceted crises. Moreover, the author provides readers with a multilayered understanding of this pivotal actor in the Gulf region through a comprehensive examination of the UAE's history, politics, society and leadership. By intertwining theory with empirical analysis, the book not only advances the discourse in international relations but also offers invaluable insights into the complexities of contemporary statecraft. It offers a thoroughly researched, well-structured and thought-provoking analysis. What sets 'Smart Instead of Small' apart, is its ability to seamlessly blend theoretical rigour with real-world examples, making it accessible to scholars, policymakers and general readers alike. The authors' coherent writing style and accurate arguments make readers embrace a more nuanced understanding of state behaviour in the 21st century.

Dr. Litsas argues that a state's size does not necessarily determine its strength or vulnerability in the international arena. He suggests that the concept of 'smallness' should be considered qualitatively rather than quantitatively, with emphasis placed on how existential challenges threaten a state's survival. In addition, the book highlights the impact of asymmetric interdependency on a state's ability to navigate the international system, emphasising the importance of effective self-help policies. So, it highlights that the fundamentals for a state to be considered smart should include the following – the right to experience happiness which provides confidence to its people, the investment in new technologies to create a smart city, the boost of national unity, the provision of economic prosperity, the promotion of creative diplomacies, the adoption of progressive leadership and the enhancement of tolerance. The aforementioned factors can be considered a success for its state, especially the case study of the book, which is the UAE.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The initial chapter of the book delves into the theoretical underpinnings of the small states theory, examining its classification as either a comprehensive theoretical framework, a prevailing trend or merely a pragmatic assumption. Following this, the second chapter is dedicated to laying the groundwork for the formulation of a novel theoretical framework regarding smart states, which is based on an array of empirical illustrations, clarifying the distinguishing attributes of smart conduct within the realm of

international relations. It presents a series of criteria regarding smart power and offers necessary examples. In the third chapter, the narrative shifts to an examination of the historical course of the UAE, tracing its evolution from the era of the Trucial States in the Arab littoral of the Gulf to its eventual unification into a singular federal state. This historical progression is essential to analyse through the lens of smart ontology, positing that the UAE's consolidation process epitomises smart governance practices. Subsequently, the fourth chapter examines the leadership paradigms embodied by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, which are mainly considered the epitomes of respective and smart leadership, while introducing modernising dimensions to prevailing leadership theories with smart orientation. The fifth chapter focuses on the intersection between positivism and smart state theory, particularly within the context of Emirati foreign policy in the regional and international arena. The sixth chapter diverges from the conventional discourse surrounding smart power, exploring the distinct role of resilience within the UAE's smart ontology. Finally, the seventh chapter undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the significant internal and external challenges facing the UAE. This entails an assessment of the existential risks posed by these challenges, alongside an exploration of adept methods to effectively mitigate them, thus embodying the essence of smart governance.

Professor Litsas manages to present complex ideas and theories accessibly without sacrificing historical, theoretical and analytical depth. He consciously adds his personal touch to the writing by avoiding exaggerations, by sticking to the facts and by providing evidence to support his claims. The book's structure allows readers to navigate its chapters independently and based on their interests. Likewise, the content of the book addresses a wide and diverse audience which are interested in comprehending the dynamic field of international relations of small and smart states and an analysis of the Gulf region. This book offers a valuable addition to the literature on international relations and international politics that shaped the contemporary landscape of the Gulf region. On the one hand, the author challenges existing paradigms and offers a fresh perspective on the active and influential role of small states in global politics, and on the other hand, he highlights the UAE as an epitome of smart statecraft.