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THEMATIC SECTION

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The Internationalisation of Jina Mahsa Amini Anniversaries: Memory, Diaspora and Human Rights Politics (2023–

Haunted Independence: The Ghost of Ambazonia in Cameroon's National Memory

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Contents

Volume 20, Issue 3, September 2026

Research articles

5 Signalling and Balancing in the Conflict in Ukraine from 2014 to 2016: Ukrainian Actors, Russia and the European Union
Jan Niklas Rolf, Oliver Serfling

39 Individual Threat Perception and Limits of Household Preparedness in Helsinki, Riga and German Cities
Ieva Birka, Didzis Kļaviņš

77 From Civilian Power to Emerging Security Provider? The European Union's Evolving Role in Southeast Asia
Andrea Passeri

107 The Politics of Water Security in the Nile Basin: From Hydrohegemony to Community of Hydrosecurity?
Zelalem Tesfaye Sirna

Thematic section

Politics of Anniversaries in International Relations

133 Silenced Anniversaries, Stateless Memories: Rohingya Women's Oral Histories as Counter-Commemoration
Nadia A. Firoz

155 The Internationalisation of Jina Mahsa Amini Anniversaries: Memory, Diaspora and Human Rights Politics (2023–2025)
Amir Reza Emami

181 Haunted Independence: The Ghost of Ambazonia in Cameroon's National Memory
Nfor N. Nde Nyambi

Central European Journal of International and Security Studies
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Research article

Signalling and Balancing in the Conflict in Ukraine from 2014 to 2016: Ukrainian Actors, Russia and the European Union

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Abstract

This paper analyses the conflictual and cooperative signals of two domestic actors – the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian separatists – and two international actors – the European Union and the Russian Federation – during the first three years of the conflict in Ukraine. Previous studies largely treated the actions of domestic actors as a dependent variable and the actions of international actors as an independent variable. Our results demonstrate that the European Union and the Russian Federation, far from being independent players, assume the role of an 'error correction mechanism' by counterbalancing and counteracting the unbalanced and non-reciprocal interactions of the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian separatists, thereby transforming an otherwise asymmetric conflict into a symmetric one. The paper discusses liberal institutionalist, social constructivist and offensive realist explanations for the observed behaviour and demonstrates why the offensive realist explanation fares best in light of Russia's massive escalation in 2022.

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Keywords: *Ukraine, Russia, European Union (EU), separatists, conflict, signals, reciprocity, realism*

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Introduction

This paper provides a quantitative analysis of the signals that were exchanged in the conflict in Ukraine between 2014 and 2016. While after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the conflict is clearly an interstate war, this remains contested for the period under investigation.[1] For Arel and Driscoll (2023), the initial conflict was one between the Ukrainian government and Ukraine-born separatists, with the latter possessing considerable agency of their own. For Kazdobina, Hedenskog and Umland (2024), on the other hand, Ukraine and Russia were the main conflict parties from the very beginning, with the Russian-infiltrated separatists hardly possessing any autonomy. Tracking the parties' signals during the first three years of the conflict, our study promises valuable insights into the conflict's protagonists and, hence, the nature of the conflict.[2]

We find that the unbalanced and non-reciprocal signals exchanged between the Ukrainian government (henceforth Government) and the Ukrainian separatists (henceforth Separatists) are largely redressed by the European Union (henceforth EU) and the Russian Federation (henceforth Russia).[3] Through this 'error correc-

1 For samples of the different views, see the contributions in Hauter (2021a). For an overview, see Hauter (2021b, 2022).

2 Previous studies tried to determine the protagonists of the conflict through chronological analysis (Mitrokhin 2021; Schneckener 2021; Arel & Driscoll 2023), an expert survey (Matsiyevsky 2021), an analysis of casualty figures (Hosaka 2021), digital forensic process tracing (Hauter 2022) and an analysis of leaks (Kazdobina, Hedenskog & Umland 2024).

3 While it might be more intuitive to refer to the Ukrainian government as Ukraine, we decided against it for two reasons: firstly, to account for the fact that before Viktor Yanukovych fled to Russia on 21 February 2014, Ukraine was led by a pro-Russian government and, secondly, to avoid confusion with the Ukrainian separatists. The term Ukrainian separatists shall refer to the largely south-eastern Ukrainian people who seek unification with Russia. According to a poll carried out in February 2014, this applied to 41% of the people in Crimea, 33% of the people in the Donetsk province and 24% of the people in the Luhansk and Odessa provinces (see Malyarenko, 2016: 351). Another poll from February 2014 reports 28% of Donetsk residents and 30% of Luhansk residents being in favour of joining the Russian Federation (see Matsiyevsky 2021: 170). Despite this considerable support for union with Russia, there was no significant separatist movement before 2014 (Malyarenko 2016: 361–362; Matsiyevsky 2021: 170–172). Many separatists attained their goal with the Russian annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol in March 2014 and large parts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia in September 2022.

tion mechanism', the two international actors create a more symmetric exchange of conflictual and cooperative signals between 'the West' (including the Government and the EU) and 'the East' (including the Separatists and Russia). Russia's unilateral escalation of the conflict to a full-blown war in 2022 creates a puzzle to liberal institutionalists and social constructivists that explain the country's previous actions with a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness, respectively. We argue that offensive realism and its logic of opportunity can solve this puzzle as it attributes Russia's changed behaviour to a mere change in instruments, rather than a less likely change in the country's interests and identity.

The contribution of our paper is threefold: Based on our empirical evidence, we, firstly, argue that Russia already was a key player in the early period of the conflict and that, therefore, even the pre-2022 war was primarily an interstate war. As Russia's actions contributed to a more symmetric conflict, we, secondly, suggest that balancing is not only practiced in times of peace, where it works to prevent conflict, but also in times of war, where it works to prolong conflict. Moving from theory building to theory testing, we, thirdly, demonstrate that numerous International Relations (IR) paradigms can explain the observed pattern of reciprocity, but that only one of these paradigms can also account for Russia's breaking of that pattern.

We divided our paper into five sections. Section one defines key terms and traces general trends in events data analysis. Section two introduces our case study and research design. Section three contains our graphical analysis, while section four presents the results of our regression analysis. Section five discusses these results in light of liberal institutionalist, social constructivist and offensive realist approaches.

Key terms and general trends

In his seminal article 'Reciprocity in International Relations', Keohane (1986: 8) defines reciprocity as 'exchanges of roughly equivalent values in which the actions of each party are contingent on the prior actions of the others in such a way that good is returned for good, and bad for bad'. Reciprocity, thus conceived, has two distinctive elements: rough equivalence and contingency.

Contingency, on the one hand, means that there is a reaction to an action whereby the party responds to cooperation with cooperation and to conflict with conflict. If the action remains unanswered, scholars speak of 'policy inertia' (Goldstein & Freeman 1990) or 'bureaucratic routine' (Goldstein & Freeman 1991). If a cooperative (conflictual) action evokes a conflictual (cooperative) reaction, talk is of 'bullying' (Hirshleifer & Coll 1988) or 'inverse response' (Goldstein & Freeman 1991). In a sequential analysis of cooperative (conflictual) signals, an inverse response is evident when one party increases its cooperative (conflictual) signals and the other party decreases its cooperative (conflictual) signals, while a

reciprocal response is evident when both parties increase, decrease or maintain their cooperative (conflictual) signals. This paper shows that in most months, Government-Separatist interaction was reciprocal, and that in several months in which it was not, West-East interaction as a whole was, because the EU and Russia counteracted non-reciprocal responses.

Rough equivalence, on the other hand, means that the reaction must be roughly on the same level as the initial action. If the reaction is exactly on the same level, we can speak of 'strict equivalence' (Keohane 1986) or 'symmetry' (Richardson, Kegley & Agnew 1981). For reciprocity to be given, though, it is sufficient that the exchanged goods and bads are proportionate to the parties' capabilities. As such, 'reciprocity can also characterize relations among unequals' (Keohane 1986: 6). This paper shows that due to the asymmetric capabilities of the domestic actors, the exchanged signals of the Government and Separatists are not strictly equivalent, but roughly equivalent. However, if we add the EU and Russia, the aggregated signals of the West and East are approaching symmetry.

Having defined reciprocity, its distinctive elements of contingency and rough equivalence, and the related concept of symmetry, the remainder of this section traces some general trends in events data analysis from the Cold War to today.

After it had been found that arms races (Richardson 1960) and cooperative games (Axelrod 1984) are marked by a pattern of reciprocity, researchers set out to determine whether a similar pattern can be detected in international conflicts. Whereas some identified a tendency of states to respond in kind, others observed only a weak pattern of reciprocity or no reciprocity at all.[4] The mixed empirical findings seem to be partly due to the fact that many events data analysts, inspired by the events of their time, opted for an analysis of US-Soviet interaction,[5] which constitutes a 'weak case study' (McClelland 1983: 173–174) in that most superpower contests were carried out by proxies.

The post-Cold War years were characterised by the transformation of the bipolar system into, first, a unipolar and, later, a multipolar one. In response, events data analysts came to extend their bilateral to triangular studies, mostly by including China.[6] In their studies of the cooperative and conflictual signals sent by the US, USSR and China toward each other, Rajmaira and Ward (1988, 1990) found that each of the three dyads was marked by long-term reciprocal behaviour.

4 For tabular overviews, see Goldstein and Freeman (1990: 27) and Crescenzi, Best and Kwon (2017: 8–9).

5 See, for example, Holsti, Brody and North (1964), Corson (1970), Gamson and Modigliani (1971), Leng and Wheeler (1979), Thompson and Rapkin (1982), Ward (1982), Leng (1984), Dixon (1986) and Williams and McGinnis (1988).

6 In fact, these researchers were among the first to anticipate the rise of China, as the short-lived 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer 1990) did not allow for action-reaction-style superpower analysis.

Goldstein and Freeman (1990, 1991) also found evidence for short-term reciprocity and, more ground-breaking, detected an inverse Soviet-Sino triangular response in that friendly interaction between the US and USSR evoked hostile reactions by China toward the USSR and that friendly interaction between the US and China evoked hostile reactions by the USSR toward China. While the evidence of triangular responses remains contentious (see below), triangular studies like these paved the way for the analysis of domestic conflicts with third party intervention.

A second characteristic of the post-Cold War years was a greater Western concern for human rights, giving rise to the 'golden era' (Wheeler & Bellamy 2008) of humanitarian intervention and to studies of internationalised domestic conflicts. In their analysis of the Bosnian war, Goldstein and Pevehouse (1997) found some support for a reciprocal triangular response by the West whose behaviour toward Serbia reflected the way in which Serbian forces behaved toward Bosnia. The two authors also confirmed the earlier finding of an inverse triangular response: NATO's air strikes caused the Serb forces to cooperate with the Bosnian government, effectively ending the war. In 1999, when NATO conducted another air campaign against Serbia to protect ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Pevehouse and Goldstein (1999) repeated their study. This time, Serbian actions toward Kosovo showed no inverse triangular response to Western actions toward Serbia, making the two authors 'predict that bombing alone will not induce Milosevic to become cooperative toward the Kosovo Albanians' (Pevehouse & Goldstein 1999: 544). Another two years later, Goldstein et al. (2001) conducted an extensive analysis of triangular responses to US actions in the Middle East, reporting one inverse response, two reciprocal responses and 16 non-responses. In the spirit of these studies, Gleditsch and Beardsley (2004) examined how the actions of third parties affected the interactions of warring parties in Central America, discovering a mix of inverse and reciprocal influences of the US, the Contadora Group and neighbouring countries on the triangular responses by the Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Salvadorian governments and guerillas.

What all these studies of internationalised domestic conflicts have in common is that they focus on how domestic actors respond to the actions of international actors, rather than on how international actors respond to the actions of domestic actors. Even Moore (1995: 136), who – in an earlier study of the 'Rhodesia Problem' – made the case for a 'domestic-international conflict nexus', was 'primarily interested in the behavior of the state in its conflict with dissidents and the dissidents in their conflict with the state' as they 'respond to the behavior of relevant states in the international system'. The general neglect of international actors' reactions to domestic actors' actions constitutes a gap in the literature that could not be filled by subsequent studies that (re)turned to the analysis of bilateral reciprocity in international (Lebovic 2003; Li 2009; Blinka & Kriz 2017) and domestic (Jaeger & Paserman 2008; Lyall 2009; Fielding & Shortland 2010) conflicts. Most recently,

the 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies has sparked interest in the spatial analysis of events (see Brigg & George 2020), producing a number of micro-level studies on county (Kibris 2021), district (Linke, Witmer & O'Loughlin 2012), municipality (Weidmann & Ward 2010) and grid cell (O'Loughlin & Witmer 2012) level that, while extremely valuable, tend to miss the bigger picture.

Case study and research design

One potential reason for the current lack of events data research on internationalised domestic conflicts is that said conflicts have become increasingly complex. The conflict in Syria, for example, was for a long time marked by at least four domestic actors – government, opposition (itself disintegrating into various, partly competing, groups), Kurdish forces (which are also divided) and the Islamic State – with at least four different goals – staying in power, seizing power, seceding from the state and supplanting the state. The conflict became even more diffuse when an increasing number of international actors with multiple interests – Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States, to name just a few – entered the scene. The actors' multilayered relations and intricate alliances make it extremely difficult for events data analysts to correctly assign the coded events.

The initial phase of the conflict in Ukraine, in contrast, was marked by two domestic actors – the Government and Separatists – that were backed, first and foremost, by two international actors – the EU and Russia. While the Government sought greater association with, up to membership of, the EU, the Separatists sought greater association, up to unification, with Russia. In fact, the trigger of the conflict was when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, torn between European and Eurasian integration, suspended the signing of the EU-Ukrainian Association Agreement in November 2013. In protest, people wrapped in EU flags took to what became known as the Euromaidan. After the fleeing of Yanukovych, now in Russian exile, a controversial referendum was held in Crimea that led to the annexation of the peninsula by Russia. When people in the Eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk tried to break away, too, major fighting broke out in April 2014. By the end of 2016, open combat was largely replaced by trench warfare.

We drew our data from the daily updated but by now discontinued 'Ukraine Crisis Timeline' by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that covers more than 2,000 events that were reported by an international panel of newspapers from November 2013 to February 2017. While CSIS is an independent think tank, it is a US-based institution and, as such, prone to a certain coverage bias (Weidmann 2015, 2016). Moreover, not every newspaper in the international panel might have the necessary regional expertise. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, for example, has been criticised for its partly inaccurate depiction of events in the conflict in Ukraine (Brik 2021: 183–188). However, the CSIS timeline

is arguably more reliable than datasets that draw directly on reports from Russian and Ukrainian news sources[7] and certainly more comprehensive than datasets that do not focus on the conflict in Ukraine.[8]

Events were coded on a cooperation-conflict scale from 1 to 15 that was developed by the Conflict and Peace Data Bank (COPDAB).[9] Recognising the strengths and weaknesses of events data coding and scaling procedures, we will not recapitulate the debate about validity here.[10] Instead, we will focus on another quality criteria of scientific research – objectivity – which has received scant attention from events data analysts.[11] Objectivity is given when different coders obtain identical results.

In order to determine inter-coder reliability, we conducted a number of pilot studies. CSIS events data for the conflict in Ukraine was coded by six teams, three at a 'Western' university and three at an 'Eastern' university. All teams were composed of advanced undergraduate students of International Relations who had a decent knowledge of the conflict and who had been instructed with the coding practices. While students cannot be assumed to be as informed about the case and the method as country experts and experienced coders, we ensured that they had at least a common baseline of knowledge. A comparison of the results of the three coding teams at the Western university shows that coders agreed in 87% of the coded events. Inter-coder reliability for the three coding teams at the Eastern university was slightly lower with 85%.

In addition to intra-university variance, there was evidence of inter-university variance, hinting at the existence of a cultural bias. At the Western university, 94% of coders were EU citizens. At the Eastern university, 81% of coders were ethnic Russians. Although coders at the Western university and the Eastern university coded the same material, the mostly EU citizens at the Western university found the ratio of conflictual signals sent by the West to conflictual signals sent by the East to be nine percentage points smaller than their predominantly Russian

7 See, for example, the recently created Violent Incident Information from News Articles (VIINA) dataset.

8 See, for example, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP GED), the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT), the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) dataset and the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) dataset.

9 The 15 event categories are shown in Figure 1 below. For a list of exemplary events for each event category, see the COPDAB codebook (Azar 1993).

10 See Howell (1983), Vincent (1983) and McClelland (1983).

11 One explanation for this is that many events data analysts using the World Event/Interaction Survey (WEIS) coding scheme have substituted manual coding with machine coding, which is less susceptible to human biases (Gerner et al. 1994; King & Lowe 2003). Machine coding, however, is less suitable for researchers using the COPDAB coding scheme and, in any event, less sensitive to the con- and subtext of event descriptions.

counterparts at the Eastern university. Western coders, thus, deemed Western actions as less hostile and Eastern actions as more hostile than Eastern coders did.

Sensitised by these exploratory studies, CSIS events data for the period of January 2014 (the month before the escalation of the crisis) to December 2016 (when front lines had stabilised and the volume of exchanged conflictual signals almost returned to the pre-crisis period; see Figure 4 below) was coded separately by two proficient coders, yielding an inter-coder reliability of 94%. Most disagreement was in regard to the sender, as the boundary between Russian forces and their Ukrainian proxies was occasionally quite blurry. In the few cases in which differences existed among the coders that could not be resolved by resorting to the pretest results and the relevant literature, including the 'Glazyev Tapes' (Umland 2016) and 'Surkov Leaks' (Shandra & Seely 2019), the respective signals were being left out. Further excluding signals whose sender and target were identical, signals whose sender or target was one we did not study, and signals that could not be attributed to a sender or target, we were left with a total of 1,626 signals (1,273 conflictual, 329 cooperative, 24 neutral) that were coded by category and sender (see Figure 1 below).

Probably the greatest controversy surrounding events data analysis revolves around the – ultimately arbitrary – temporal unit over which to aggregate the coded signals.[12] The advantage large units have over small units is that they are able to capture long-term responses. Unlike Russia, who tends to interpret reciprocity in a simultaneous way (i.e. actions are reciprocated immediately), the EU has been found to adhere to a more sequential understanding (i.e. actions are reciprocated with some delay) of it (Romanova 2014). To give one rather extreme example: In response to the Crimean referendum on 16 March 2014 that sealed Russia's annexation of the peninsula, the EU adopted travel bans and asset freezes for a number of Crimean and Russian officials on 17 March, cancelled a planned EU-Russia summit on 20 March, imposed an import ban on goods from Crimea on 23 June, suspended the signature of new financing operations in Russia by the European Investment Bank on 16 July, and eventually agreed on a first round of far-reaching economic sanctions against Crimea and Russia on 29 July. With annual units, we would capture all five responses; with monthly units only the ones on 17 and 20 March; with weekly units (Wednesdays to Tuesdays, as 1 January 2014 was a Wednesday) only the one on 17 March; and with daily units none at all.

Events data analysts using small units have helped themselves by assuming that the sent behaviour in the present unit is a function of the received behaviour in some previous unit(s). Daily units with a time lag of one day, for instance, would

12 For researchers of arms races who compare annual military budgets it makes good sense to use the calendar year as a time unit. This cannot be said of events data analysts who code the signals of conflicting parties because these signals are usually not bound to a year or, in fact, any other unit of time.

capture the response on 17 March. In order to capture all five responses, however, one would have to include 135 time lags. As statistical power tends to decrease with an increasing number of lagged terms (Goldstein & Pevehouse 1997: 523), this does not seem to be a viable option. Employing annual units for an observation period of three years, however, is not a viable option either. Compromising between the two, we deemed the month and one lagged term as the most appropriate unit and lag to capture as many responses as possible while, at the same time, having a sufficient number of observation points. Robustness checks by weeks and quarters as well as by more than one lagged term confirmed us in our choice. Aggregating the data into monthly units left us with 36 observation points over a total period of three years.

Graphical analysis

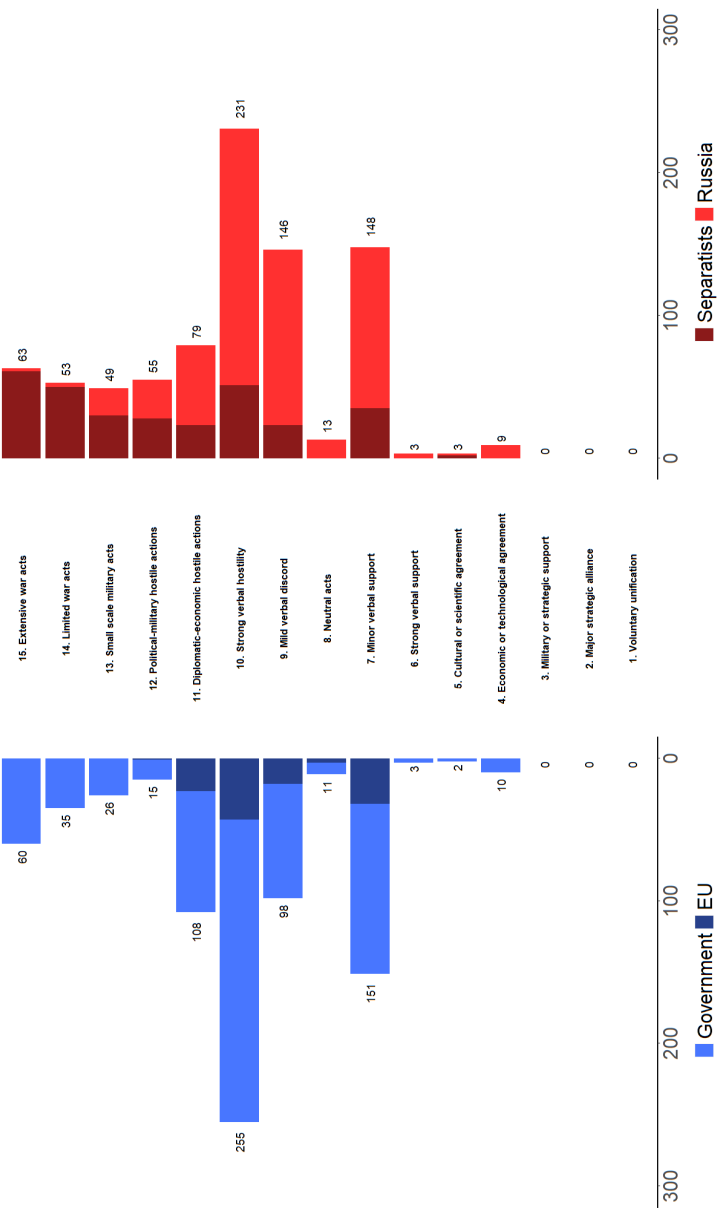
Figure 1 below presents the total volume of signals by category and sender. In the conflictual domain (scale points 15–9), we find signals of all categories, with 'strong verbal hostility' (scale point 10) being the most frequent one. In the cooperative domain (scale points 7–1), we only find signals of the four least cooperative categories, with 'minor verbal support' (scale point 7) being the most frequent one. Whereas the Government, Separatists and Russia make use of the full scale of signals in the conflictual domain, the EU does not move beyond 'political-military hostile actions' (scale point 12). Unlike the other three parties, the EU does not move beyond 'minor verbal support' (scale point 7) in the cooperative domain.

Figure 1 illustrates that the signals are mostly reciprocated in the same category in which they occur but not necessarily by the same actor: The Government's signals at the upper end of the conflictual scale are largely matched by the Separatists, whereas its signals at the lower rungs of the escalation ladder and in the cooperative domain are largely matched by Russia. If we compare the aggregated signals of the two blocks, we can see that the twelve bars to the left, by and large, are a mirror image of the twelve bars to the right – a first sign that the signals of the West and East are more or less symmetric.[13]

To substantiate this finding, we turn from a static to a sequential depiction of the data and analyse the resulting curves with a view to reciprocity and symmetry. Remember that reciprocity has two distinctive elements: contingency and rough equivalence. Contingency, on the one hand, requires that there is a reaction to an action whereby the party responds to more (less, unvaried) cooperation with more

13 As noted by an anonymous reviewer, the discovered symmetry in signals could also be due to efforts of international news media to present a balanced view – feeling obliged to mention an action by one side (however insignificant it may be) for every action by the other side. While this cannot be ruled out, the fact that signals are largely matched in the same event category (see Figure 1) and the finding that signals of the direct opponents (i.e. Government-Separatists and EU-Russia) are rather asymmetric (see Figures 2 and 3) suggest that this is not a big factor.

Figure 1: Total volume of signals by category and sender



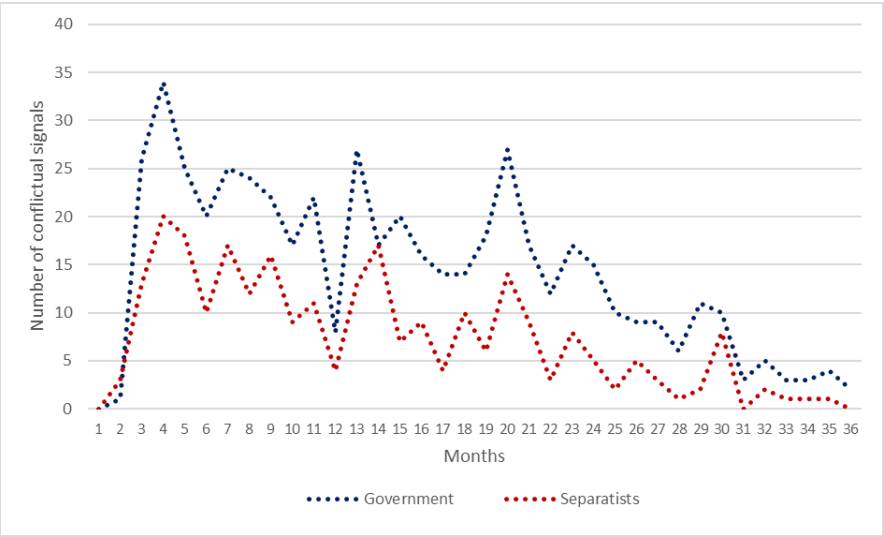
Source: Authors

(less, unvaried) cooperation, and to more (less, unvaried) conflict with more (less, unvaried) conflict – that is, both parties increase (decrease, maintain) their signals. Rough equivalence, on the other hand, allows the parties to do so on roughly equal levels. If they do so on exactly the same level – that is, if the curves are congruent – we have reached symmetry.

Figure 2 below presents the monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the Government and Separatists between 2014 and 2016. In every month except for months 1, 2 and 14, the Government outperformed the Separatists, often sending twice as many conflictual signals. This is what can be expected from a conflict that pitches a well-equipped army against poorly-equipped rebels. Figure 1, however, reveals that the Government's lead in conflictual signals stems not so much from physical than from verbal signals.

Figure 2 further shows that the two curves are largely moving up and down together. In 25 out of 35 months the Government and Separatists simultaneously increased, decreased or maintained the number of conflictual signals. In seven months, one party increased the number of conflictual signals while the other decreased theirs (months 9, 14, 15, 16, 19, 26 and 30), and in three months one party maintained the number of conflictual signals while the other increased or decreased theirs (months 18, 27 and 35).

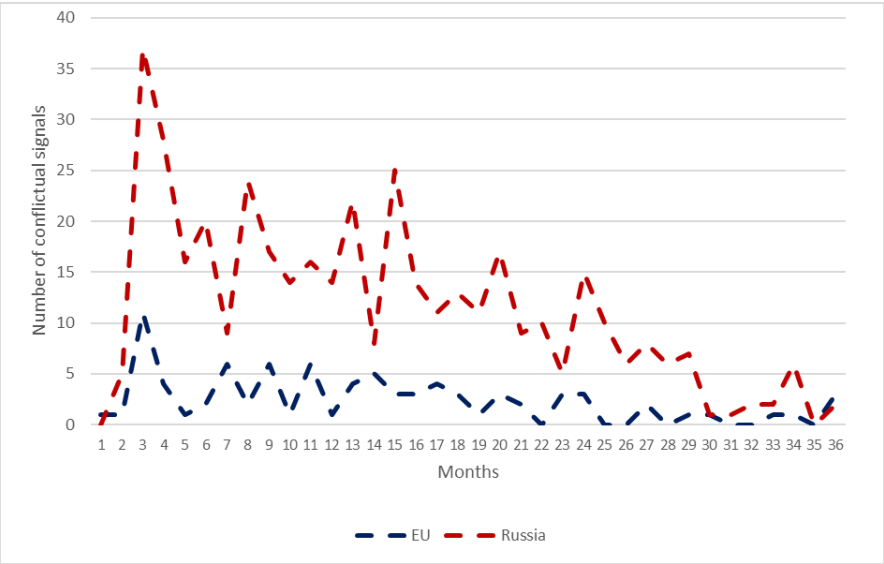
Figure 2: Monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the Government and Separatists



Source: Authors

Figure 3 below presents the monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the EU and Russia between 2014 and 2016. In every month except for months 1, 30, 35

Figure 3: Monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the EU and Russia



Source: Authors

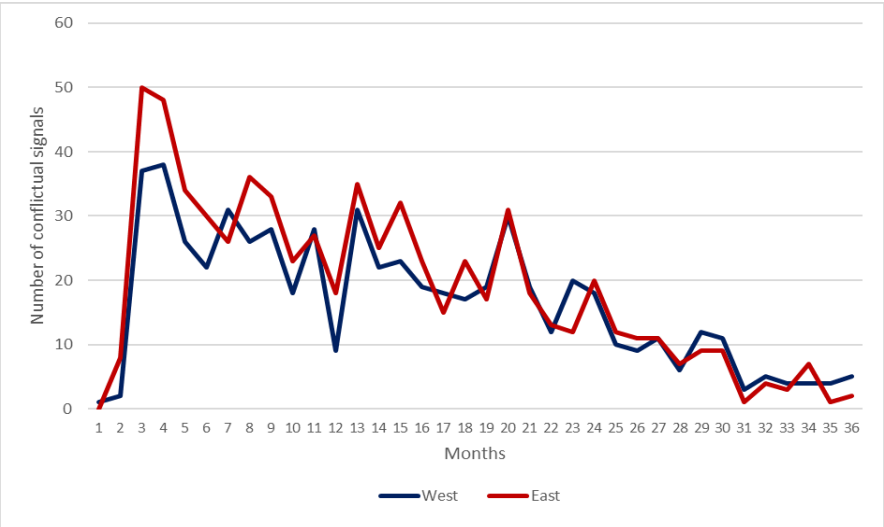
and 36, Russia outperformed the EU, sending up to 16 times as many conflictual signals. Comparing the curves of the EU and Russia to those of the Government and Separatists in Figure 2, it stands out that the former reached their peaks one month before the latter did, which is reflective of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the EU's resolute response in March 2014 (month 3).

Figure 3 reports reciprocal interaction for 17 months, inverse interaction for nine months (months 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 18, 22, 23) and the constellation where one party maintained the number of conflictual signals while the other increased or decreased theirs for another nine months (months 2, 16, 24, 26, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34).[14] This seems to make reciprocity a better predictor for Government-Separatist interaction than for EU-Russia interaction. To get an idea of what else drives EU-Russia interaction, we have to turn to Figure 4.

Figure 4 (being the sum of Figures 2 and 3) below presents the monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the West and East between 2014 and 2016. Notably, the curves in Figure 4 are much closer together than the curves in Figures 2 and 3. The EU compensates for the high number of conflictual signals by the Government

14 Inverse responses often occur in a row (see, for example, months 14, 15, 16 for Government-Separatist interaction and months 7, 8, 9 for EU-Russia interaction). This suggests that the general pattern of reciprocity, once interrupted, takes a few months to be restored.

Figure 4: Monthly volume of conflictual signals sent by the West and East



Source: Authors

compared to the Separatists with a low number of its own conflictual signals compared to Russia. Conversely, Russia compensates for the low number of conflictual signals by the Separatists compared to the Government with a high number of its own conflictual signals compared to the EU. As a result, the conflictual signals of the West and East are almost symmetric: Whereas in the first half of our observation period (months 1–18) the East sent slightly more conflictual signals than the West, in the second half of our observation period (months 19–36) the two curves are more or less congruent.

It is also noteworthy that seven of the ten non-reciprocal responses in Government-Separatist interaction are offset by non-reciprocal responses in EU-Russia interaction. Although neither Government-Separatist interaction nor EU-Russia interaction is reciprocal for the months 14, 15, 16 and 26, West-East interaction as a whole is.

Lastly, we also consider and compare the monthly volume of cooperative signals.[15] As the total volume (329) of cooperative signals is rather low, the observations must be treated with greater caution. For this reason and for reasons of space, we decided to describe but not to depict the curves.

15 Whereas some researchers combine conflictual and cooperative signals on a single dimension by subtracting one from the other, we have chosen to depict them separately. This is because an account of net conflict/cooperation does not discriminate between an even volume of conflictual and cooperative signals, and no signals at all, reporting a zero for both.

In most months, the curve of the Government lies well above the curve of the Separatists, with only one month in which the Separatists sent more cooperative signals than the Government. The curves of the EU and Russia, too, are drifting far from another, with no single month in which the EU sent more cooperative signals than Russia. The curves of the West and East, in contrast, are intersecting several times and for the months 28–32 they are even overlapping. Accordingly, not only the conflictual signals, but also the cooperative signals of the two blocks are nearly symmetric.

Although on different levels, the curves of the Government and Separatists are largely moving up and down in tandem, with more than half of all responses being reciprocal in nature. The curves of the EU and Russia peak every few months but rarely in the same months, resulting in less than a third of reciprocal responses. Seven of the 15 non-reciprocal responses in Government-Separatist interaction are transformed into reciprocal responses when considering West-East interaction as a whole. This lends further support to the observation that the EU and Russia adjust their signals to 'correct' for non-reciprocal responses.

Regression analysis

As mentioned above, the second element of reciprocity – contingency – consists of two parts: It requires 1) that there is a reaction to an action and 2) that this reaction is in the same direction as the action. While we find substantial evidence for parties acting in line with one another, we have yet to determine whether this was mere coincidence or whether the parties were reacting to one another. To test the reactivity of the parties, and to further inquire into the reciprocity and symmetry of their (re)actions, we conduct a multiple linear regression analysis.

We start out by estimation of the classical 'mix-begets-mix model' of Ward (1982) with the following functional form:

$$(1) \quad \Delta X_t = a_1 X_{t-1} + a_2 Y_t + a_3 W_{t-1} + a_4 Z_t + C_1 + \mu_{Xt}$$

$$(2) \quad \Delta Y_t = b_1 Y_{t-1} + b_2 X_t + b_3 Z_{t-1} + b_4 W_t + C_2 + \mu_{Yt}$$

$$(3) \quad \Delta W_t = c_1 W_{t-1} + c_2 Z_t + c_3 X_{t-1} + c_4 Y_t + C_3 + \mu_{wt}$$

$$(4) \quad \Delta Z_t = d_1 Z_{t-1} + d_2 W_t + d_3 Y_{t-1} + d_4 X_t + C_4 + \mu_{zt}$$

where: Δ = first difference operator, X = number of conflictual signals of Separatists or Russia, Y = number of conflictual signals of Government or EU, W = number of cooperative signals of Separatists or Russia, Z = number of cooperative signals of Government or EU, C = intercept, μ = error term, t = month with 1 (January 2014) to 36 (December 2016).

We test all results on autocorrelation by employing the Breusch-Godfrey Test with lag orders 1 to 7 and on heteroskedasticity as detected by the Breusch-Pagan

Test. Additionally, we test for the normal distribution of the error term based on the Jarque-Bera Test and seek for possible misspecification of the model as indicated by the RESET Test. It turns out that the mix-begets-mix model yields considerable explanatory power as measured by an adjusted R-squared with values ranging between 0.44 (for the model with EU cooperative signals as dependent variable) and 0.88 (for the model with Government conflictual signals as dependent variable). Looking at the specification tests, we see some autocorrelation in two and heteroskedasticity in three models. There is some indication of non-normality of the error term and possible misspecification of the functional form.

Furthermore, we want to test whether there is a memory effect and additionally whether past behaviour of the opponent might also have an effect on the own current signal. Thus, we add the first order lags for all other variables to the mix-begets-mix model, leading to the following specification:

$$(5) \quad \Delta X_t = a_1 X_{t-1} + a_2 Y_t + a_3 Y_{t-1} + a_4 W_t + a_5 W_{t-1} + a_6 Z_t + a_7 Z_{t-1} + C_1 + \mu_{Xt}$$

$$(6) \quad \Delta Y_t = b_1 Y_{t-1} + b_2 X_t + b_3 X_{t-1} + b_4 W_t + b_5 W_{t-1} + b_6 Z_t + b_7 Z_{t-1} + C_2 + \mu_{Yt}$$

$$(7) \quad \Delta W_t = c_1 W_{t-1} + c_2 X_t + c_3 X_{t-1} + c_4 Y_t + c_5 Y_{t-1} + c_6 Z_t + c_7 Z_{t-1} + C_3 + \mu_{wt}$$

$$(8) \quad \Delta Z_t = d_1 Z_{t-1} + d_2 X_t + d_3 X_{t-1} + d_4 Y_t + d_5 Y_{t-1} + d_6 W_t + d_7 W_{t-1} + C_4 + \mu_{zt}$$

On average, the adjusted R-squared increases slightly, while the magnitude of the autocorrelative structure could be slightly reduced. With respect to heteroskedasticity-, normality- and specification-tests, the results are comparable to the previously estimated set of models. In order to immunise our statistical inference against the malicious standard errors, we present Newey-West heteroskedasticity- and autocorrelation-robust (HAC) standard errors along with the estimation results in the annex. For the ease of reading and for reasons of space, tables 1 and 2 below include a schematic overview of our results with respect to sign and level of significance.

Table 1 shows that all immediate responses to the direct opponent (i.e. Government-Separatists and EU-Russia) are positive and statistically significant on a 1%-level. The Government responds to every conflictual signal by the Separatists with 0.79 conflictual signals and the Separatists respond to every conflictual signal by the Government with 0.54 conflictual signals. The EU returns 0.29 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of Russia, while Russia returns 1.09 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of the EU.

Table 1 further demonstrates that all immediate responses to the indirect opponent (i.e. Government-Russia and Separatists-EU) are positive and statistically significant on a 1%-level or 5%-level. The Government counters every conflictual signal by Russia with 0.53 conflictual signals and the Separatists counter every

Table 1: Schematic presentation of results (conflictual signals)

	Rus	Sep	EU	Gov
Rus		-0.133	0.291	0.525
lag Rus	-0.975	0.172	0.047	-0.001
Sep	-0.252		0.275	0.788
lag Sep	0.294	-0.905	0.043	-0.153
EU	1.089	0.546		-0.347
lag EU	0.551	-0.289	-1.146	-0.047
Gov	0.677	0.537	-0.119	
lag Gov	-0.480	0.184	0.007	-0.951
Rus		0	+ + +	+ + +
lag Rus	- - -	0	0	0
Sep	0		+ +	+ + +
lag Sep	0	- - -	0	0
EU	+ + +	+ + +		0
lag EU	0	0	- - -	0
Gov	+ + +	+ + +	0	
lag Gov	- - -	0	0	- - -

Legend
0: coefficient included but not significant on 10%-level
+, ++, +++: positive and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively
-, --, ---: negative and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively

Source: Authors

conflictual signal by the EU with 0.55 conflictual signals. *Vice versa*, Russia sends 0.68 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of the Government, and the EU sends 0.28 conflictual signals for every conflictual signal of the Separatists. Besides these reciprocal responses, there is evidence of a lagged inverse response in that Russia not only responds to every conflictual signal by the Government with 0.68 conflictual signals in the same month, but also with -0.48 conflictual signals in the subsequent month.

If we add the conflictual signals with which the Government (0.79) and the EU (0.28) respond to a conflictual signal by the Separatists, we can see that together (1.07) they send about as much conflict as they receive. If we add the conflictual signals with which the Separatists (0.54) and Russia (0.68) respond to a conflictual signal by the Government, we can see that together (1.22) they send only slightly more conflict than they receive. Given that Russia also decreases its conflictual signals in the following month, we arrive at an approximate ratio of 1:1 over the

Table 2: Schematic presentation of results (cooperative signals)

	Rus	Sep	EU	Gov
Rus		-0.113	-0.110	-0.220
lag Rus	-0.769	-0.081	0.142	0.255
Sep	-0.108		-0.192	0.895
lag Sep	0.883	-0.958	-0.094	1.074
EU	-0.119	-0.218		0.267
lag EU	-0.038	0.014	-0.913	-0.024
Gov	-0.119	0.505	0.133	
lag Gov	-0.313	-0.083	0.063	-1.469
Rus		0	0	0
lag Rus	- - -	0	0	0
Sep	0		0	+ + +
lag Sep	+ + +	- -	0	0
EU	0	0		0
lag EU	0	0	- - -	0
Gov	0	+ + +	0	
lag Gov	- - -	0	0	- - -

Legend
0: coefficient included but not significant on 10%-level
+, ++, +++: positive and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively
-, --, ---: negative and significant on 10%, 5%, 1%-level, respectively

Source: Authors

long haul. These one-by-one retaliations testify to the symmetry of the two blocks' conflictual signals.

Table 2 shows that the responses of the Government and Separatists to the cooperative signals of each other are positive and statistically significant on a 1%-level. With a coefficient of 0.9, the Government returns almost as much cooperation as it receives, and with a coefficient of 0.51, the Separatists return about half as much cooperation as they receive. With coefficients of -0.11 and -0.12, respectively, the responses of the EU and Russia to the cooperative signals of each other are negative, weak and, at any rate, not statistically significant even on a 10%-level. Except for a lagged inverse response of Russia to a cooperative signal of the Government, there are no statistically significant responses to the cooperative signals of the indirect opponent. This seems to confirm Azar's (1972: 186) remark that actors are 'more sensitive to the relatively hostile signals of their opponent than to the relatively cooperative ones' and Leng's (1993) finding that

coercive strategies have a higher tendency to be reciprocated than cooperative ones. The lower responsiveness to cooperative signals, however, could also be due to the small number of cooperative signals that we analysed.[16]

Discussion

The regression analysis has shown that all parties were responsive to the conflictual signals of their opponents. More than that, it could be established that the parties not only responded, but also responded in kind, at least if we consider their immediate responses. For the two blocks, there is even some evidence that they not only responded in kind, but also in magnitude. While this is not to suggest that foreign policy officials and commanders-in-chief monitor and analyse each and every signal – much as we did in this study – only to determine their reciprocal or symmetric response, there seems to be a general tendency to give tit-for-tat. In the following, we will discuss liberal institutionalist, social constructivist and offensive realist explanations for this tendency, apply them to the case at hand and demonstrate why offensive realism has the least problems to account for Russia's one-sided escalation of the conflict in 2022. While our previous analysis of exchanged signals from 2014 to 2016 can hardly tell us why Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, we suggest that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can tell us something valuable about the suitability of the three explanations under consideration.

Interests: Liberal institutionalism and the logic of consequences

Lacking a central authority, the international system is commonly seen as being anarchic. And yet it hardly resembles the Hobbesian state of war of all against all, which led Bull (1977) to speculate that states live in an anarchical society. The scholar of the English School identified the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, limited war and great power management as the five institutions that maintain international order. Regulating state conduct in the absence of a central authority and capturing the normative structure of the anarchical society, these institutions are also referred to as rules or norms.

Conspicuously absent from Bull's list is the norm of reciprocity. In times of war, in which at least two of Bull's institutions – international law and diplomacy – tend to break down, reciprocity becomes even more important as an ordering principle: While Russia violated international law by annexing Crimea, and diplomatic ef-

16 Tables 1 and 2 also attest to a negative memory effect on one's own signal in that the lagged endogenous variables are negative and significant on a 1%-level throughout. Except for the EU, who reacts to its own conflictual signal with a 1.15 reduction in the next month, and the Government, who reacts to its own cooperative signal with a 1.47 reduction in the next month, all other lagged endogenous variables assume a value that ranges between -0.77 and -0.98, implying a reverberation of the signal.

forts came to a standstill soon after they had begun, the conflicting parties still adhered to the norm of reciprocity. Indeed, following the work of the sociologist Gouldner (1960), who proposed the existence of a universal norm of reciprocity, scholars have come to recognise reciprocity as the 'linchpin' of international relations (Goldstein & Pevehouse 2017: 5). For Ward (1981: 230), reciprocity constitutes a 'golden rule of international politics' and for Keohane (1984: 214), it 'seems to be the most effective strategy for maintaining cooperation among egoists'.

What makes reciprocity particularly appealing to liberal institutionalists like Keohane is that it grounds international order in selfish motives.[17] While there might be occasions in which it appears beneficial to break the rules, the negative consequences of doing so are likely to outdo any short-term gains. As an illustration, Keohane (1986: 21) cites Gouldner:

> It is obviously inexpedient for creditors to break off relationships with those who have outstanding obligations to them. It may also be inexpedient for debtors to do so because their creditors may not again allow them to run up a bill of social indebtedness.

The same can be true of conflicts. As Schelling (1960: 99) notes:

> One side or both may be willing to accept limited defeat rather than take the initiative in breaching the rules, and to act in a manner that reassures the other of such willingness. The "rules" may be respected because, if they are once broken, there is no assurance that any new ones can be found and jointly recognized in time to check the widening of the conflict.

One possible explanation for the reciprocal behaviour of the parties to the conflict in Ukraine, then, is their common attempt to set limits and bounds to a war that threatens to spiral out of control and descend to mere anarchy (Käihkö 2021). Following a logic of consequences, the parties sought to uphold minimum standards and expectations of legitimate behaviour in an otherwise unchecked and unpredictable conflict.

Identities: Social constructivism and the logic of appropriateness

For social constructivists, rules and norms are not only of regulative but also of constitutive value 'in that they specify not just what an actor can do but, more

17 Even Hobbes (1998 [1651]: 104–105), who saw the solution to the problem of order in a central authority, believed egoistic individuals in the state of nature to come up with laws of nature that can be summarised by the golden rule of 'do not that to another, which thou wouldest not have done to thyself' and that oblige at least '*in foro interno*'.

fundamentally, what kind of actor that actor actually *is*' (Jackson & Jones 2017: 108). Reciprocating the actions of others, thus, is not so much a question of interest, but rather one of identity; not so much the result of a rational choice, but rather that of an acquired habit. Seen in this way, the norm of reciprocity is more than just another institution in the service of international order; it is part of our cultural values system – a *social* institution around which actor expectations converge (Kratochwil & Ruggie 1986: 764).

Even Keohane (1986: 21) seems to allow for this social constructivist reading when, citing the sociologist Blau, he writes:

> In the long run, reciprocity based on self-interest can generate trust based on mutual experience as a result of the "recurrent and gradually expanding character" of processes of social exchange.

It is through socialisation processes like these that the norm of reciprocity becomes internalised. As Onuf (1998: 59) puts it, 'social relations *make* or *construct* people – *ourselves* – into the kinds of beings we are'. Being part of our identity, the norm of reciprocity acts like a filter that narrows our actions. Since states generally want to be (seen as) 'good' states, they hardly escalate their conflictual signals unilaterally. This may explain why Russia initially sought to conceal the presence of its troops in Ukraine, sending infantry without insignia, and why the shooting of flight MH17, killing 283 passengers and 15 crew members, is being denied to this day. Because states care about their reputation, their actions tend to be driven by what is seen as appropriate behaviour (March & Olsen 1998).

In sum, the institutionalist logic of consequences and the constructivist logic of appropriateness provide powerful explanations for the observed tendency of Russia to play tit-for-tat, or at least its attempt to maintain the impression of doing so. But can they also explain Russia's massive escalation of the conflict in 2022 that violated the rules of the game? Although constructivist scholarship sees interests and identities as socially constructed and, hence, changeable, empirical research on national interests and strategic cultures suggests that interests and identities are fairly robust (Johnston 1995; Chafetz, Frankel & Spirtaz 1999), with fundamental change only occurring in light of critical events such as internal upheavals or external shocks (Katzenstein 1996; Chafetz, Abramson & Grillot 1996) – neither of which happened to Russia in 2022. In this context, Harnisch, Frank and Maull (2011: 253) distinguish between a rather uncommon 'role transformation', which entails a change in interests and identities, and a more common 'role adaptation', which includes a change in strategies and instruments. All other things being equal, paradigms that explain Russia's defection in 2022 with changing interests and identities are therefore less compelling than a paradigm that does so in terms of changing strategies and instruments. It is to such a paradigm that we will turn now.

Instruments: Offensive realism and the logic of opportunity

Structural realists commonly believe that a state's ultimate goal is survival. Where they part ways is over the question of how much power is enough to achieve that goal. Defensive realists like Waltz (1979: 126) assume that a state's attempt to maximise its power will be met with fierce resistance by other states. Expecting great power politics to be marked by a tit-for-tat pattern, Waltz argues that the best way to guarantee survival is not to try to break out of this pattern by seeking excessive power, but to play on it by establishing and maintaining a balance of power. If power is balanced, Waltz reasons, no state or alliance of states has an incentive to go to war, as it cannot act on the assumption to prevail. It is little wonder, then, that Bull identified the balance of power as one of the institutions that sustain international order in the absence of a central authority.

Although balance of power theory is a theory of state behaviour in times of peace, it may also explain the first years of the conflict in Ukraine insofar as the EU and Russia redressed the unbalanced interactions of the Government and Separatists, establishing overall equilibrium. Anxious about climbing up the escalation ladder, the parties' initial desire to score a quick victory was pushed aside by a desire to maintain a stable equilibrium. As DeRouen Jr., Newman and Bellamy (2025: 223) note:

> The contradictions inherent in intervening to ensure one's domestic client prevails without escalation can turn an intervener's objective of winning into simply not losing. Stalemated conflicts, and prolonged interventions, then occur as interveners do not provide the level of support required to win a decisive military victory. Instead, they provide support only sufficient to enable continued fighting . . . . Intervention leading to a balance of power between the warring parties will probably lengthen fighting as neither side can defeat the other.

Balance of power theory might thus not only be applicable to peacetime, where balancing helps to prevent conflict, but also to wartime, where balancing helps to prolong conflict. Like liberal institutionalists and social constructivists, though, defensive realists have difficulties to explain the abrupt breakdown of balancing in 2022.

In contrast to defensive realists, offensive realists like Mearsheimer (2011: 80) maintain that 'the best way to survive is to be especially powerful' because if a state has superior power, other states will be deterred from attacking it. 'This simple logic', Mearsheimer (2011: 80) goes on to argue, 'drives great powers to look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favour'. If we assume with Mearsheimer that the anarchic structure of the international system forces great powers to 'think and act when appropriate like a revisionist

state' (Mearsheimer 2011: 80), the question is no longer *why did Russia launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022?*,[18] but *why did Russia not launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2014?* when, after the ousting of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, the momentum was on Russia's side, at least more than in 2022.[19]

An offensive realist would argue that after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and the Snow Revolution of 2011–2013, Russia was in a position of weakness.[20] In this position, neutralising the Ukrainian conflict – after having annexed Crimea and inflamed the situation in Donbas – by giving tit-for-tat seemed to be the best option to maintain its relative power vis-à-vis the West. In fact, if we further assume with Mearsheimer (2014) that Russia's primary goal is to prevent NATO (and, to a lesser extent, the EU) from expanding eastwards,[21] neutralising the Ukrainian conflict to the effect that there is no victor and, hence, no end in sight actually looks like a solid strategy. Although there is no clause in the North Atlantic Charter that forbids the alliance to admit a country with an ongoing conflict,[22] Article 6 of NATO's (2008 [1995]) 'Study on Enlargement', commissioned by its member states to set out

18 Käikhö (2023: 244–246) offers three explanations: resolving the conflict with Ukraine once and for all, affirming Russia's great power status and boosting Putin's popularity. Ultimately, all three explanations remain unsatisfactory, as they cannot account for why the invasion happened in 2022 and not at an earlier or later point in time.

19 For Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Russo-Ukrainian War since 2022 is a 'postponed war'. On the concept of postponed war, see Ilin and Nihmatova (2023) in the pages of this journal.

20 See, for example, Mearsheimer 2014: 9; Imedashvili & Siroky 2023. A similar argument could be made with regard to the United States, which, after Bush's costly adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, steered a more isolationist course under the following administrations. This might explain why neither Russia nor the West under the leadership of the United States went 'all in' in 2014.

21 This assumption has been fiercely contested by liberal thinkers such as Michael McFaul. As shown elsewhere (Rolf 2025), McFaul's contestation stands on rather shaky grounds: By arguing that 'NATO expansion has not been a *constant* source of tension between Russia and the West, but a *variable*' (Person & McFaul 2022: 18–19; see also McFaul & Person 2024: 48; emphases added), McFaul undermines his earlier argument that NATO expansion, because of its constancy, cannot explain the alternation of Russian cooperation and confrontation with the West (McFaul 2014: 167). While we find merit in the argument that Putin perceives the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU as a threat to national security and regime stability, we do not share Mearsheimer's (2014, 2022) provocative assertion that the conflict in Ukraine is the West's fault.

22 Article 1 of the North Atlantic Treaty merely states: 'The Parties undertake, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, to settle any international disputes in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered, and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations' (NATO 2023 [1949]).

the principles that would govern decisions regarding accession, explicitly states that accession countries with

> ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.

This article was included with a particular view to the post-Soviet states that, once admitted, could easily draw the alliance into a direct (nuclear) confrontation with Russia. Acting on the assumption that NATO will avoid such a risk, the creation of frozen conflicts from Transnistria to Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Crimea and Donbas has become an effective Russian strategy of preventing NATO from expanding eastwards. As Grossman (2018: 56) notes: 'What started as an accident in Moldova and evolved into an opportunity in Georgia would culminate as dedicated strategy in Ukraine.' For Shandra and Seely (2019: 79), too, there is 'no doubt that the separatist "states" plaguing each of Russia's reform-minded neighbours – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – are part of a Russian strategy to prevent their further integration with the West.'

This strategy was only changed in 2022 when Vladimir Putin – after consolidating his own power by crushing the opposition and rewriting the constitution, after increasing Russia's foreign exchange by flooding Europe with oil and gas, and after raising the country's military power by investing in its armed forces and external alliances – saw the opportunity to use that amassed 'latent power' (Mearsheimer 2001) to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All of this suggests that states follow what may be called a logic of opportunity, constantly 'looking for opportunities to gain more power' and doing so 'whenever it seems feasible' (Mearsheimer 2011: 81). Accordingly, Russia's contained war in Crimea and Donbas must be interpreted as a strategic choice in the face of limited capabilities. As soon as the country was in a position to maximise its power, it did so by changing towards an offensive strategy.[23]

Conclusion

Over the last years, a heated debate has arisen over the question of whether the early phase of the conflict in Ukraine should be classified as a civil war or an inter-

23 This is not to suggest that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a rational act. Putin, whom Mearsheimer (2014: 8) describes as a 'first class strategist', seems to have underestimated both the will of the Ukrainians to resist and the resolve of the West to assist. Offensive realism tries to account for this by allowing for some miscalculation: 'Because states operate with imperfect information in a complicated world, they sometimes make serious mistakes' (Mearsheimer 2011: 80).

state war. While on the civil war reading of it, propagated by Russia, the conflict was a domestic conflict between Ukraine and the Separatists; on the interstate war reading of it, popular in the West, the conflict was an international conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Our analysis supports the latter reading. Sending almost twice as many conflictual signals as the Separatists, Russia already was the driving force in the early phase of the conflict. This being said, we can discern a 'division of labor' between Russia and the Separatists: While Russia engaged in all conflictual event categories, including extensive war acts, most of these signals came in the form of strong verbal hostility (including threats and accusations) and mild verbal discord (including objections and protests). While the Separatists, too, engaged in all conflictual event categories, these signals mostly came in the form of extensive war acts (including occupation of territory and causing many deaths and dislocations) and limited war acts (including shelling of military and industrial facilities). It thus seems that Russia initially tried to delegate the 'dirty work' to its Ukrainian proxies, which is why the early phase of the conflict can be best conceptualised as a 'delegated interstate war' (Hauter 2022).

Our analysis further indicates that the behaviour of international actors is conditioned by the behaviour of domestic actors in that the former 'corrected' for the unbalanced and non-reciprocal interactions of the latter. The EU counterbalanced the high number of conflictual signals by the Government compared to the Separatists with a low number of own conflictual signals compared to Russia. Conversely, Russia counterbalanced the low number of conflictual signals by the Separatists compared to the Government with a high number of own conflictual signals compared to the EU. Moreover, in several months in which Government-Separatist interaction was not reciprocal, West-East interaction as a whole was, because the EU and Russia counteracted the domestic actors' non-reciprocal interactions. Through this 'error correction mechanism', the international actors transformed an otherwise asymmetric conflict into a symmetric one. This suggests that balance of power theory is not only applicable in peacetime but also in wartime. Russia's unprovoked escalation of the conflict in 2022 creates a puzzle to liberal institutionalists and social constructivists that explain the country's previous actions with a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness. Offensive realism and its logic of opportunity promises to solve that puzzle as it can account for both Russia's reciprocal behaviour in the first years of the conflict and its abuse of reciprocity in 2022. Attributing Russia's changed behaviour to a mere change in instruments, offensive realism tends to fare better than liberal institutionalist and social constructivist approaches that demand a less likely change in the country's core interests and very identity.

In order to substantiate our findings, one could not only consider the frequency but – looking for appropriate weights – also the intensity of exchanged signals. Another promising avenue for future research is to extend the study to the time

period after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as to actors – most notably, the US and Belarus – that assume a greater role in more recent events.

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Data appendix

Full presentation of results (conflictual and cooperative signals)

	Dependent variable:							
	Conflict				Cooperation			
	dX_Rus	dX_Sep	dY_EU	dY_Gov	dW_Rus	dW_Sep	dZ_EU	dZ_Gov
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
X_Rus		-0.133	0.291***	0.525***	0.221***	-0.014	0.054	0.169**
		(0.142)	(0.067)	(0.117)	(0.072)	(0.048)	(0.078)	(0.078)
lag(X_Rus)	-0.975***	0.172	-0.047	-0.001	-0.024	-0.043**	-0.092	0.081*
	(0.072)	(0.154)	(0.107)	(0.113)	(0.046)	(0.020)	(0.066)	(0.046)
X_Sep	-0.252		0.275**	0.788***	-0.058	-0.050	0.129	-0.113
	(0.220)		(0.117)	(0.160)	(0.074)	(0.075)	(0.137)	(0.086)
lag(X_Sep)	0.294	-0.905***	-0.043	-0.153	0.058	-0.010	-0.141	0.012
	(0.327)	(0.249)	(0.100)	(0.190)	(0.098)	(0.111)	(0.109)	(0.239)
Y_EU	1.089***	0.546***		-0.347	-0.262	0.080	-0.117	-0.183
	(0.230)	(0.175)		(0.357)	(0.156)	(0.130)	(0.163)	(0.188)
lag(Y_EU)	0.551	-0.289	-1.146***	-0.047	-0.054	-0.065	0.197	-0.212
	(0.328)	(0.334)	(0.210)	(0.358)	(0.126)	(0.070)	(0.153)	(0.147)
Y_Gov	0.677***	0.537***	-0.119		-0.022	0.031	-0.044	-0.013
	(0.132)	(0.144)	(0.105)		(0.078)	(0.063)	(0.077)	(0.060)
lag(Y_Gov)	-0.480***	0.184	0.007	-0.951***	0.115*	0.078	0.076	0.130
	(0.154)	(0.192)	(0.099)	(0.216)	(0.061)	(0.058)	(0.068)	(0.117)
W_Rus	1.536**	-0.212	-0.486*	-0.118		-0.113	-0.110	-0.220
	(0.672)	(0.296)	(0.281)	(0.463)		(0.129)	(0.228)	(0.509)
lag(W_Rus)	-0.832***	-0.133	0.423**	0.304	-0.769***	-0.081	0.142	0.255
	(0.281)	(0.270)	(0.174)	(0.409)	(0.099)	(0.135)	(0.114)	(0.167)

W_Sep	-0.093	-0.177	0.143	0.161	-0.108		-0.192	0.895***
	(0.359)	(0.318)	(0.320)	(0.379)	(0.193)		(0.191)	(0.153)
lag(W_Sep)	-1.305	1.119**	0.332	-0.937	0.883***	-0.958**	-0.094	1.074
	(0.768)	(0.508)	(0.424)	(0.549)	(0.268)	(0.367)	(0.338)	(0.737)
Z_EU	0.407	0.515	-0.235	-0.258	-0.119	-0.218		0.267
	(0.334)	(0.469)	(0.333)	(0.380)	(0.196)	(0.240)		(0.396)
lag(Z_EU)	0.314	-0.176	0.006	-0.356	-0.038	0.014	-0.913***	-0.024
	(0.277)	(0.394)	(0.186)	(0.297)	(0.200)	(0.140)	(0.249)	(0.251)
Z_Gov	0.634***	-0.225	-0.183	-0.038	-0.119	0.505***	0.133	
	(0.220)	(0.219)	(0.198)	(0.188)	(0.215)	(0.084)	(0.159)	
lag(Z_Gov)	0.209	-0.736***	-0.120	0.958***	-0.313***	-0.083	0.063	-1.469***
	(0.290)	(0.250)	(0.291)	(0.223)	(0.100)	(0.196)	(0.176)	(0.331)
Constant	-0.728	-1.268	0.906	1.226	0.833**	-0.215	0.299	0.246
	(0.817)	(1.284)	(0.638)	(1.609)	(0.365)	(0.337)	(0.434)	(0.627)
Observations	35	35	35	35	35	35	35	35
R^2	0.935	0.904	0.863	0.928	0.862	0.845	0.659	0.904
Adjusted R^2	0.883	0.828	0.755	0.871	0.754	0.722	0.390	0.828
Residual Std. Error (df = 19)	3.078	2.238	1.589	2.710	1.167	1.192	1.120	1.587
F Statistic (df = 15; 19)	18.146***	11.883***	7.967***	16.300***	7.936***	6.891***	2.452**	11.887***

Note: *p **p ***p<0.01

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Individual Threat Perception and Limits of Household Preparedness in Helsinki, Riga and German Cities

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Abstract

European security policy increasingly relies on comprehensive defence and responsibilisation, expecting households to follow contingency protocols and sustain themselves for at least 72 hours. Using 2025 urban survey data from Helsinki (Finland), Riga (Latvia) and the German cities of Berlin, Hamburg and Munich, this article shows that urban populations are underprepared. Further, we examine whether threat salience, identifying a hazard as a personal concern, translates into threat-appropriate preparedness. We assess both material and cognitive indicators. Findings show a persistent perception–action gap across all sites. Helsinki exhibits comparatively higher cognitive awareness but low material readiness; Riga and the German cities display even weaker alignment across cognitive and material domains. Among respondents worried about specific hazards, preparedness does not improve for recommended actions. We argue that responsibilisation is under-communicated and under-operationalised for urban realities even in high responsibilisation models like Finland. Meeting EU/NATO ambitions requires clear thresholds, local scaffolding and behaviourally savvy interventions that make preparedness feasible within the everyday constraints of city life.

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Keywords: *comprehensive defence, civil preparedness, threat perception, total-defence, 72-hours, individual responsibility, crisis resilience, NATO Article 3, Baltic security, urban preparedness*

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Introduction

Across Europe, the security landscape has become increasingly volatile, shaped by overlapping geopolitical, environmental, technological and societal risks. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, escalating hybrid operations across the EU, intensifying climate-related disasters and the weaponisation of information ecosystems have collectively undermined long-standing assumptions about stability in the European neighbourhood. Scholars and policymakers alike argue that the complexity of contemporary crises demands whole-of-society resilience (Rhinard 2021; Wither 2020; Saxi, Bengt & Swaney 2020). Within this strategic environment, European governments have increasingly embraced models of comprehensive or total defence, where the capacities of individuals and households form a foundational layer of national security (Berzina 2020; Cimermanis 2025).

In 2025, the Commission's Preparedness Union Strategy (2025) set out a coordinated framework to strengthen societal resilience by improving foresight and anticipation, safeguarding vital societal functions and promoting population preparedness, including guidance to reach minimum 72-hour self-sufficiency for households during disruptions. Building on the Niinistö Report (2024), the Strategy positions citizens at the core of preparedness, emphasising public awareness, empowerment and concrete, guidance-based measures that households can enact in the first 72 hours of a crisis (Niinistö 2024). These developments reflect a consensus that Europe's security challenges cannot be met by institutional capacity alone, and that they require an active, informed and prepared population.

A parallel transformation has unfolded within NATO, where the civilian dimension of defence has been elevated to a strategic priority. Civil preparedness has been a foundational pillar of NATO's collective defence since the Alliance's inception. Article 3 of the Washington Treaty established each Ally's obligation to develop and maintain the capacity to resist armed attack beyond military means alone, an obligation that NATO operationalised as early as the 1950s through a network of civil wartime planning agencies covering shipping, transport, food, industry and refugee management (Jacuch 2024). After a post–Cold War contraction, this commitment was renewed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, where Allies agreed on seven baseline requirements for national resilience, covering continuity of government and critical services, energy, population movements, food and water, mass casualties, civil communications, and transport, thus providing

a shared framework against which member states assess and strengthen their own preparedness (NATO 2016; Jacuch 2024). It is important to note that these baselines are directed at the national level: They define state-level capabilities and institutional continuity, not the behaviour of individual households. The Alliance is striving to develop a whole-of-society approach to resilience (Garriaud-Maylam 2021), and the EU's Preparedness Union Strategy (2025) complements NATO's national-level framework by explicitly extending preparedness obligations downward to the population level, incorporating the 72-hour household self-sufficiency standard as the operational expression of societal readiness (European Commission 2025; Niinistö 2024). It is therefore at this EU policy level, rather than directly through NATO's baseline requirements, that the expectation of household-level preparedness is formally anchored. For frontline and near-frontline states in the Baltic region, these expectations have accelerated reforms that assign clearer responsibilities to municipalities, social institutions and, increasingly, to individual citizens (Larsson 2021).

Yet despite these converging policy pressures, there is limited evidence that households across Europe possess the knowledge, resources or behavioural readiness envisioned by EU and NATO strategies. Research consistently finds that individual preparedness often lags behind official guidance due to psychological avoidance, information ambiguity, structural constraints and mismatches between perceived and official risk priorities (European Commission 2024; Eiser, Bostrom & Burton 2012; Kohler et al. 2020; Scolobig et al. 2015). As a result, a persistent implementation gap remains between the expectations embedded in comprehensive defence doctrines and the actual capacities of ordinary residents, particularly in dense and infrastructure-dependent urban settings.

This article examines that gap using original 2025 survey data from three key urban centres in the northern and central Baltic Sea region – Helsinki (Finland), Riga (Latvia) and the German cities of Berlin, Hamburg and Munich (Birka 2026). These countries represent distinct civil-protection traditions. Finland, with its long-standing total-defence model, embeds individual responsibility for preparedness in both constitutional expectations and practical guidance. Latvia, while historically focused on military defence, has recently incorporated Finnish-style civil preparedness expectations, including 72-hour self-sufficiency, into national doctrine and education policy. Germany's approach, rooted in its federalist system and less explicit emphasis on citizen responsibility, relies more on institutional protection and a whole-of-government framework. These differences provide a fertile basis for exploring how national strategies translate into individual perceptions and behaviours.

We first map threat perception and preparedness at the urban level. We then test country-anchored hypotheses derived from our theoretical discussion of responsibilisation and behavioural risk dynamics, examining whether the align-

ment between identifying a threat as personally salient and taking threat-appropriate actions varies systematically by national approach: stronger in Helsinki's high-responsibilisation model, moderate in Riga's transitional model and weak or absent in the German cities' institution-centred model.

Our findings highlight a persistent misalignment between policy ambition and public readiness. While several threats are widely recognised across the cities, actual preparedness actions remain limited regardless of the exposure and duration of civil-protection strategies. Further, this remains applicable even in instances when individuals rate a threat as personally salient. These insights contribute to ongoing debates on comprehensive defence, crisis governance, and the ethics and effectiveness of responsibilisation in European security policy, reinforcing the need to align household-level guidance with realistic behavioural pathways. Ultimately, we argue that EU and NATO expectations for household-level resilience will remain unmet without clearer, more operational communication; actionable, low-cost guidance; and supportive mechanisms that reflect the constraints of urban life.

Resilience, comprehensive defence and the expanding role of the individual

Resilience has become a central paradigm in contemporary security governance, reflecting a shift toward managing complex, interconnected risks through distributed rather than centralised capabilities. Originating in ecological systems theory (Holling 1973), resilience has since been adopted in disaster studies, critical infrastructure protection and national security as a framework for ensuring the continuity of essential functions under stress (Adger 2000; Comfort et al. 2010). In the European context, resilience is embedded in civil-protection cooperation (Widmalm, Parker & Persson 2019) and emerging models of whole-of-society security (Wigell et al. 2022).

Within comprehensive and total-defence models, resilience is operationalised across governmental, municipal, private-sector and societal actors. Northern European states have institutionalised a systemic approach in which preparedness responsibilities are dispersed across all sectors of society, including households (Bachmann & Gunneriusson 2015; Wither 2020). These frameworks emphasise both material readiness and cognitive readiness. As Rhinard (2021) argues, societal security increasingly hinges on fostering 'prepared subjectivities', in which individuals understand themselves as integral components of crisis management.

Yet research in disaster studies demonstrates that individual preparedness is highly uneven and influenced by emotional, structural and informational variables. Lindell and Perry (2012) show that household readiness depends not only on risk awareness but also on socio-economic capacity, prior experience and trust in authorities. Eiser et al. (2012) emphasise that risk interpretation is

shaped by cognitive filters, social norms and heuristics rather than objective probabilities. These insights suggest that the individual's role in comprehensive defence cannot be assumed; it must be understood within broader behavioural and institutional contexts.

Responsibilisation and neoliberal governmentality in crisis preparedness

The growing emphasis on individual preparedness aligns with a wider political shift toward responsibilisation, wherein states encourage or expect citizens to assume responsibility for managing risks previously handled by public institutions. This concept, rooted in Michel Foucault's work on governmentality (Foucault 1980; 1985), has been elaborated by scholars examining how contemporary governance increasingly seeks to shape autonomous, self-managing subjects (Rose 1999; 2000).

Responsibilisation operates through soft instruments, public awareness campaigns, guidance documents, preparedness booklets and discourses of civic duty rather than mandates or coercion (Rose & Miller 1992; Rose 1999). Löwenheim (2007) and Tsinovoi and Adler-Nissen (2018) illustrate how governments externalise elements of security provision to individuals through informational tools, reframing protection as a matter of personal choice and responsibility. In crisis management, this shift positions individuals as both beneficiaries and producers of security.

Critical scholarship has interrogated the normative implications of this trend. Rådestad and Larsson (2020) argue that Swedish crisis-preparedness discourse moralises individual responsibility, extending biopolitical governance by requiring citizens to anticipate and manage disruptions. Baker and Ludwig (2016) describe disaster preparedness as a form of social ordering that legitimises the retrenchment of state responsibility. Pyysiäinen, Halpin, and Guilfoyle (2017) similarly highlight how neoliberal governance frames vulnerability as an individual problem, thereby obscuring structural inequalities that constrain households' preparedness capacities.

These perspectives illuminate the tension between policy expectations and practical feasibility. While responsibilisation seeks to empower individuals, it may also produce unrealistic expectations. Research across behavioural public policy further shows that intention does not easily translate into action without clear, actionable guidance and supportive environmental cues (Sunstein 2021; Thaler & Sunstein 2008).

Threat perception, behavioural dynamics and the preparedness gap

A central theoretical puzzle concerns the relationship between threat perception and preparedness behaviour. Conventional models of risk assume that individuals who perceive risks as serious will act accordingly (Rosenstock 1974); however,

decades of empirical work suggest otherwise. Research in the psychology of risk shows that affective responses such as fear, avoidance and fatalism frequently override rational assessments and can inhibit protective action even when perceived severity is high (Slovic 1987). Disaster-preparedness studies similarly find that readiness is shaped by motivational factors, self-efficacy, prior experience, social networks and trust and not merely by assessments of hazard probability (Paton 2003; Tierney 2014).

Information ambiguity also plays a critical role in shaping whether concern becomes behaviour. When guidance is vague or generic, people struggle to evaluate what being prepared concretely entails, often over-estimating their own readiness (Boin et al. 2020; Kohler et al. 2020). Scolobig et al. (2015) further show that initiatives falter when they neglect how people process risk information by relying on abstract exhortations instead of translating recommendations into simple, actionable steps that fit everyday constraints.

These dynamics carry weight in comprehensive or total-defence systems, which presume that households will autonomously internalise preparedness responsibilities. Empirical studies, however, indicate that preparedness behaviour is moderated by institutional trust, contextual threat histories and cultural narratives about state protection versus self-reliance (Adger et al. 2009; Tierney 2014). As a result, perceiving a threat as severe does not reliably produce proportionate action, especially when protective tasks are complex or aversive, when instructions are ambiguous, or when individuals lack confidence or knowledge (Slovic 1987; Paton 2003; Eiser et al. 2012).

At the same time, there are well-specified conditions under which identifying a threat as personally salient can trigger preparedness. First, when risk appraisal is paired with clear, concrete guidance, individuals are more likely to translate concern into behaviour because ambiguity and perceived complexity are reduced (Boin et al. 2020; Kohler et al. 2020). Second, coping appraisal matters. Recommendations that are simple, affordable and demonstrably effective increase self-efficacy and dampen avoidance (Paton 2003; Tierney 2014). Third, social and institutional cues such as school curricula, municipal drills, workplace routines and trusted messengers convert abstract fear into procedural knowledge, narrowing the intention–action gap (Scolobig et al. 2015; Adger et al. 2009). In short, personally salient threats induce action when communication is specific rather than generic, when households believe the steps will work and are within reach, and when local institutions scaffold learning (Slovic 1987; Paton 2003).

Resilience in urban conditions

Urban resilience must be theorised with the distinct material and behavioural constraints of cities in view. Dense, service-intensive urban environments foster just-in-time household routines rather than stockpiling, while interdependent infrastructures mean that cascading failures can occur when one system falters.

Accordingly, urban risk-governance scholarship emphasises localised warning, early-action protocols and design measures that reduce ambiguity for residents facing rapid-onset events (Siliézar et al. 2023; Sáenz de Tejada et al. 2024; Miner et al. 2013). Cities also impose physical constraints – notably limited domestic storage in apartments – that shape the feasibility of holding bulky essentials and of maintaining equipment for outages, which implies that guidance must be operationalised into space-efficient thresholds and routines rather than generic exhortations (Kong et al. 2022; Rezvani et al. 2023). Reviews of urban planning health-centred resilience further argue for institutional innovation, risk communication tuned to local conditions and micro-scale design choices, because residents cannot be assumed to enact preparedness without concrete cues in dense settings (Sáenz de Tejada et al. 2024; IFRC 2010).

Behavioural research consistently shows that perceived risk alone seldom yields preparedness where ambiguous instructions, low self-efficacy and response costs are high (Zamboni & Martin 2020; Levac, Toal-Sullivan & O'Sullivan 2012). Urban households are especially sensitive to these costs given everyday constraints and competing demands. Comparative public-health and household-preparedness syntheses therefore recommend tailored, actionable interventions that reduce ambiguity and build efficacy (Lindell 2019). This is directly relevant for cities where limited storage and high opportunity costs make stockpiling atypical even when concern is high. In addition, the diffusion of cashless transactions in metropolitan areas increases dependency on digital payment systems, making offline contingencies both behaviourally uncommon and insufficiently specified in policy. Scholarship on cashless transitions and emergency communications thus highlights the value of low-tech redundancies to maintain autonomy and situational awareness during communications or power outages (Kitamura 2022; Carreras-Coch et al. 2022; Douvinet et al. 2019; Siliézar et al. 2023). These requirements that are especially salient in dense urban cores where network load and physical masking can degrade alerts.

The urban resilience literature therefore implies that responsibilisation must be paired with operational support, or scaffolding, adapted to city life, such as specific thresholds for supplies, mapped and marked shelters, standardised siren instructions, community or building-level micro-drills, and redundant communication modes that remain audible and interpretable amidst urban noise and complexity. If these elements are absent, city households face structural and cognitive barriers that render preparedness difficult to enact, even when perceived severity is high (Miner et al. 2013; Douvinet et al. 2019).

Taken together, this literature implies that the alignment between perceived threat and threat-appropriate preparedness is not automatic but conditional, varying with the clarity of guidance, the ease and cost of recommended behaviours, and the strength of institutional and social supports.

Finland, Latvia and Germany

This conditionality underpins our subsequent case selection. Finland, Latvia and Germany offer a compelling lens through which to examine how responsibilisation and comprehensive-defence logics are interpreted, institutionalised and communicated. While all three countries share commitments to NATO's Article 3, which obliges Allies to maintain the capacity to 'resist armed attack' through resilient civilian structures (NATO 1949; NATO 2016), and all operate within the EU's deepening civil-protection framework (Niinistö 2024; European Commission 2025), their approaches to the role of the individual differ in historically and institutionally meaningful ways.

Finland: A mature total-defence system built on individual responsibility

Finland represents one of Europe's most developed models of total defence, with roots in Cold War mobilisation doctrine and a long tradition of societal resilience (Raitasalo 2023). Comprehensive security represents an inclusive, cooperation-based preparedness model where the essential functions of society are safeguarded through joint efforts by government authorities, private sector actors, civil society organisations and individual citizens (Government of Finland 2017). Its Security Strategy for Society defines preparedness as an integrated, multi-level responsibility shared by government, municipalities, businesses, NGOs and citizens (Government of Finland 2025). Crucially, individuals are positioned as active security actors responsible for maintaining emergency supplies, participating in training and supporting household continuity during crises (Finland Ministry of Defence 2025). The state provides clear, detailed and highly operationalised guidance, including the well-known 72-hour rule, concrete household checklists and survival-skills education (Finnish National Rescue Association, 2025).

This clarity reflects Finland's broader political culture of high institutional trust, clear communication and consensus-based security governance. Scholars note that Finland represents the 'archetype' of a societal-security regime in which individual responsibility is embedded in national identity and civic norms (Berzina 2020; Rhinard 2021; Wither 2020). Finland thus serves in the comparative design as the high-responsibilisation benchmark: a context where state expectations for household preparedness are explicit, institutionalised and socially legitimate. To test the penetration of the responsibilitisation strategies, we chose to look at the urban centre of Helsinki.

Latvia: An emerging hybrid

Latvia's civil-protection model has historically emphasised military defence, reflecting its geopolitical exposure, historical memory of occupation and proximity to Russia. However, since 2022–2024, national strategy documents demonstrate

a clear shift toward a comprehensive-defence model, with Finland's example as an important reference point (Latvia Ministry of Defence 2023; 2024; 2025).

Latvia now expects individuals to ensure 72-hour self-sufficiency, maintain basic emergency supplies and learn survival skills (Latvia, Ministry of Defence 2022). Preparedness has been incorporated into school curricula, and municipalities are increasingly tasked with local information responsibilities (Latvia, Ministry of Defence 2023). This 'Finnicisation' of Latvian civil preparedness has been noted in emerging research (Friede 2025; Cimermanis 2025).

Yet Latvia remains institutionally distinct. Its communication ecosystem is more fragmented, levels of institutional trust lower and societal inequalities more pronounced (Pan et al. 2025). As a result, responsibilisation is emerging in a context where the state's expectations may exceed citizens perceived capacity or resources, a dynamic that we propose to test in Riga. Latvia thus functions as the intermediate case: adopting comprehensive-defence responsibilities but still transitioning from a militarised security paradigm toward a truly societal one.

Germany: A federalist, institutionally-centred model

Germany contrasts sharply with Finland and Latvia. While the German defence and civil-protection strategies acknowledge the importance of civilian readiness and the need for a whole-of-society approach, the role of the individual remains comparatively weakly defined. The federal structure places responsibility for disaster response primarily on states (Länder) and municipalities, with the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance coordinating guidance and public information (German Federal Government 2022; German Ministry of Defence 2023; German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance 2025).

Preparedness recommendations have recently been updated to acknowledge that the potential of military conflict exist (German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance 2025), but communication tends to be less prescriptive, less centralised and less embedded in national identity than in Finland. Public debates following BBK's guidance reforms show frequent scepticism about state messaging, and Germany's risk landscape has tended to prioritise natural disasters, infrastructure resilience and terrorism over societal mobilisation (Deutschland in English 2025). Germany therefore represents the low-responsibilisation case: a model where individuals are encouraged, but not strongly expected, to prepare. Because of the federal structures, to test the assumptions we chose to look at a sample drawn from three urban centres in Germany: Berlin, Hamburg and Munich.

This combination of shared structural context and diverse governance logics creates an ideal basis for comparing how households interpret and act upon preparedness expectations. The three cases collectively form a structured comparative triad, from high to low responsibilisation, allowing us to examine how

institutional, cultural and behavioural dynamics shape individual preparedness within Europe's evolving resilience agenda.

The theoretical debates outlined above concerning the limits of responsibilisation, the behavioural and cognitive dynamics of preparedness, especially in urban environments, and the distinct national civil-protection models in Finland, Latvia and Germany lead to the formulation of the following hypothesis to be evaluated using the 2025 survey data:

H1. (Finland – High Responsibilisation)

Individuals in Helsinki who identify a threat as 'major' will demonstrate higher material and cognitive preparedness for that threat.

H2. (Latvia – Transitional Responsibilisation)

Individuals in Riga who identify a threat as 'major' will demonstrate moderate material and cognitive preparedness for that threat.

H3. (Germany – Low Responsibilisation / Institutional Emphasis)

Individuals in German cities who identify a threat as 'major' will demonstrate weak or no association with material and cognitive preparedness for that threat.

2025 Survey Data

The analysis draws on an original survey conducted in May 2025 among urban residents aged 18–74 in Helsinki, Riga, Berlin, Hamburg and Munich using the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method (Birka 2026). The instrument included items on threat perception, material and cognitive preparedness, and perceived obstacles to readiness. Sampling and recruitment were carried out by Norstat, a professional panel provider operating under ESOMAR/ICC standards and an ISO 9001:2008-certified quality management system, ensuring rigorous identity verification, controlled recruitment and high data integrity. Norstat employs quality controls such as single-IP protections, duplicate checks and the removal of respondents showing unusually rapid completion patterns.

The 2025 samples comprised approximately 1,000 respondents per country and were balanced to reflect the demographic structure of each country's urban population. While not nationally representative, the focus on cities is analytically appropriate given the study's interest in urban resilience, infrastructure dependence and exposure to crisis communication environments. The questionnaire captured perceptions of eleven potential threats and measured preparedness via indicators such as the availability of supplies and knowledge of emergency procedures.

Threat perception

Using the 2025 urban survey, we first map the overall threat landscape as perceived by residents in Helsinki (Finland), Riga (Latvia) and the German cities of Berlin, Hamburg and Munich. In the survey, the question used to analyse individual

threat perception was phrased in the following way: 'Personally, how significant do you think each of these threats is?' Respondents had the option to rate eleven suggested potential threats as either a 'major threat', 'minor threat', 'not a threat' or select the 'prefer not to say' option. Table 1 below illustrates the top five threats.

Table 1: Top 5 Major Threats Identified by Urban Residents (2025)

Rank	Riga (Latvia)	German Cities (*Berlin, Hamburg, Munich*)	Helsinki (Finland)
1	Latvia's economic situation (58%)	Organised crime (56%)	Spread of false information (50%)
2	Disrupted critical supplies (57%)	Spread of false information (55%)	Disrupted digital services (45%)
3	Military attack (56%)	Impact of climate change (52%)	Impact of climate change (44%)
4	Spread of false information (54%)	Terrorism (51%)	Organised crime (38%)
5	Use of chemical, biological or nuclear substances (49%)	Disrupted digital services (48%)	Finland's economic situation (37%)

Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data.

Urban residents in Riga, the German cities and Helsinki converge on a risk landscape dominated by informational/digital vulnerabilities and hard-security or basic-needs concerns, but the top-five hierarchies are distinctly national. In Riga, respondents worry about Latvia's economic situation, disrupted critical supplies and military attack, followed by the spread of false or misleading information, and the use of chemical, biological or nuclear substances. This is a profile that blends geopolitical anxiety with worries about infrastructure continuity and household welfare. In the German cities, the list centres on organised crime, false/misleading information, the impact of climate change, terrorism and disrupted digital services, reflecting an internal-security and climate-resilience framing alongside sustained concern about information disorder and cyber risk. In Helsinki, informational and digital threats are most salient for respondents, false/misleading information and disrupted digital services lead, with climate change, organised crime and Finland's economic situation rounding out the top five issues respondents worry about.

Taken together, the 2025 results indicate shared exposure to hybrid threat domains, mis/disinformation and cyber disruption, while national contexts also influence common worries such as supply continuity and defence in Riga, internal

security and climate related weather events in the German cities, and information/cyber paired with weather worries in Helsinki.

Individual preparedness

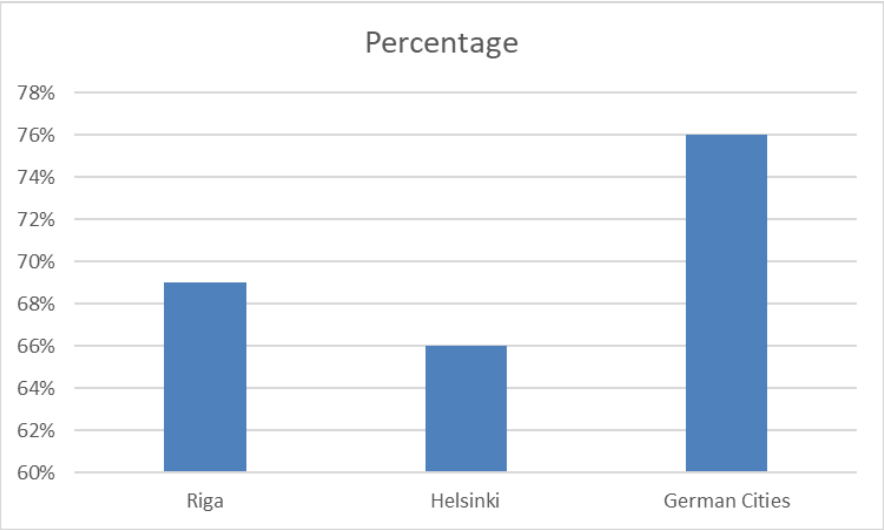
The three countries have issued official guidance to civilians on how to prepare for crisis scenarios (Finland Finnish National Rescue Association 2025; Latvia Ministry of Defence 2022; German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance 2025). To assess the extent of individual preparedness, we formulated survey questions based on the content of national civil-protection booklets and public information campaigns, aiming to evaluate the degree to which this guidance has been internalised by the population. Finland and Latvia emphasise the importance of being self-sufficient for 72 hours (Finland Finnish National Rescue Association 2025; Latvia Ministry of Defence 2022), while Germany's guidance recommends stockpiling supplies sufficient for up to ten days (German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance 2025). These recommendations typically include necessities such as water, food, medicine and cash reserves. Additionally, all three countries advise households to possess a battery-powered AM/FM radio to receive emergency information in the event of power outages. Beyond material provisions, preparedness also encompasses cognitive dimensions, such as awareness of appropriate actions during a crisis, knowledge of shelter locations and prearranged communication and meeting strategies with family members. Taken together, these indicators offer a comprehensive picture of individual readiness to respond effectively in emergency situations.

As the first indicator of preparedness, we asked respondents whether they had reserves of essential supplies such as food, water and medicine. Respondents were given multiple-choice options ranging from 'no supplies' to 'more than a week'. When asked in this general manner, most respondents across all three countries reported having at least some supplies. Image 1 below illustrates the percentage of individuals who claimed to have essential supplies sufficient for at least 72 hours.

Although these figures indicate what appears to be a relatively high level of basic preparedness, they likely overstate respondents' actual readiness. When preparedness is assessed through a general, broadly framed question, respondents often overestimate their level of supplies, answering based on assumptions or impressions rather than concrete details. Moreover, having some supplies does not necessarily equate to having sufficient resources to sustain a household for 72 hours or longer, particularly in the absence of electricity or access to external support. This highlights the importance of clear preparedness communication and indicators of supplies.

However, when the survey probes further, asking respondents to specify quantities and duration of use, it becomes clear that many households are less prepared than they initially believed. We delved deeper into respondents' understanding

Image 1: Essential supplies 72 hours self-estimate



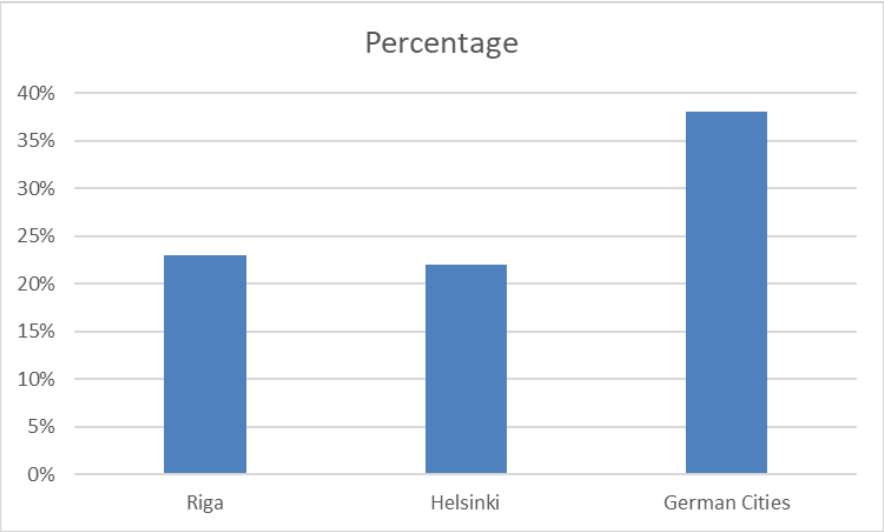
Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

of essential supplies by asking a more specific question: 'How long would water supplies in your home last (3 litres of water per household member per day)?' This more precise framing revealed a significantly more pessimistic picture of actual preparedness. Only 38 percent of respondents in the German cities reported having sufficient water for at least 72 hours, while the figures for Riga and Helsinki were markedly lower – just 23 percent and 22 percent, respectively. See the illustration below in Image 2.

Furthermore, a substantial portion of the population reported having no water reserves whatsoever: 27 percent in Riga, 30 percent in Helsinki and 20 percent in the German cities. This indicator is particularly concerning given the German preparedness booklet's warning that 'a person can manage for three weeks without food, but only for four days without liquid' (Germany 2018: 11). The discrepancy between general claims of preparedness and specific resource availability suggests that many individuals may overestimate their readiness. Water, being the most critical resource in any emergency, is a fundamental benchmark of crisis resilience. The data underscores the need for clearer public communication and education on what constitutes adequate supply levels, especially in urban environments where access to clean water may be disrupted during crises.

The national crisis preparedness booklets in Finland, Latvia and Germany all emphasise the importance of maintaining cash reserves for essential purchases if electronic payment systems or ATMs become unavailable. However, none of the booklets specify the exact amount of cash individuals should keep on hand,

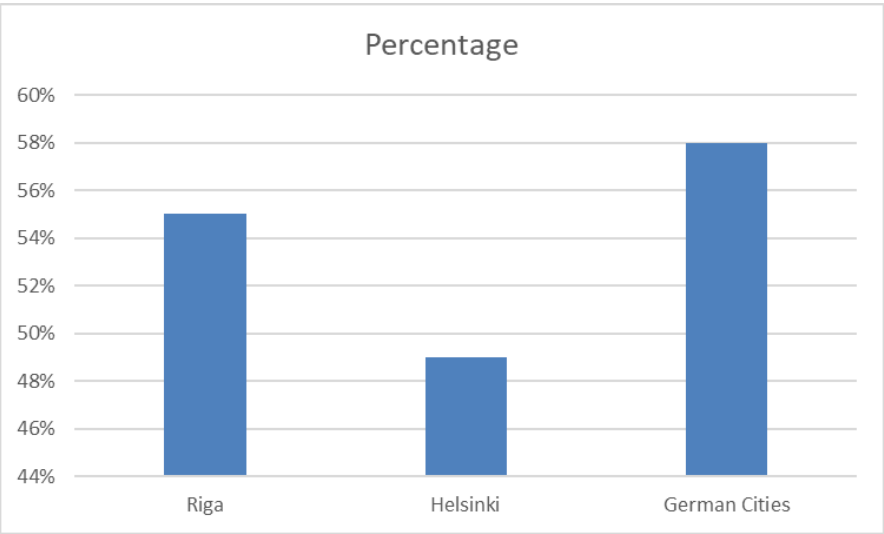
Image 2: Water supplies 72 hours



Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

leaving room for interpretation and variability in preparedness. To gauge actual readiness, we asked respondents to estimate how long their cash reserves would last for essential purchases. Image 3 below shows the percentage of individuals who reported having enough cash for at least 72 hours.

Image 3: Cash reserves 72 hours

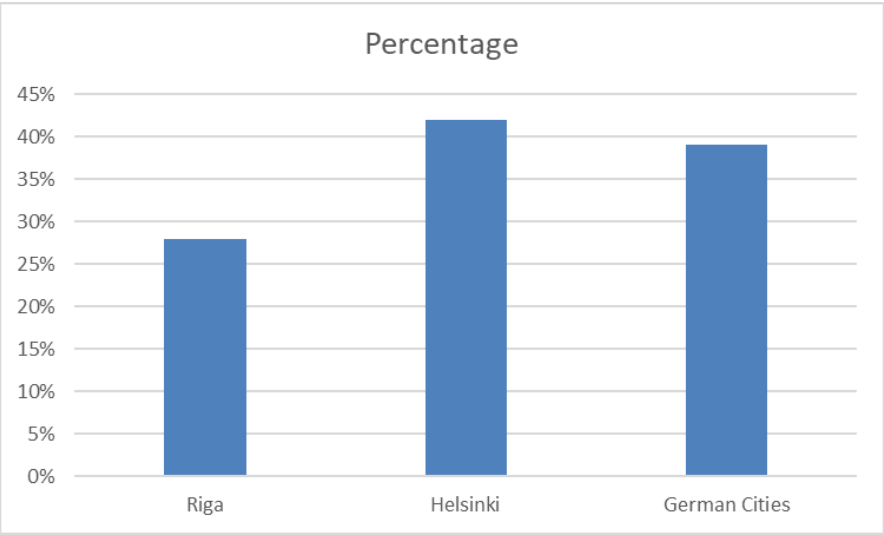


Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

The situation is particularly concerning in Helsinki, where fewer than half of the respondents reported having sufficient cash reserves. This trend reflects the broader societal shift toward cashless transactions and appears especially pronounced in Finland. While digital payment systems offer convenience, their vulnerability during crises, such as power outages or cyber-attacks, makes physical cash a critical component of individual resilience. The data suggests that public awareness of this risk remains limited, and that current guidance may not be sufficiently emphasised or internalised. Strengthening communication around the importance of cash reserves, and clarifying recommended amounts, could help bridge this preparedness gap.

All three national preparedness booklets stress the importance of including battery-powered AM/FM radio in emergency kits. Radios are highlighted as one of the most reliable means of receiving information during a crisis, particularly in situations where electricity and internet services are disrupted. To assess public adherence to this recommendation, the survey asked respondents: 'Do you have a battery-powered AM/FM radio at home?' The results, illustrated in Image 4 below, show that fewer than half of the households in Helsinki and the surveyed German cities possess such radios, while in Riga, only about a quarter of respondents reported having one.

Image 4: Battery-powered AM/FM radio ownership

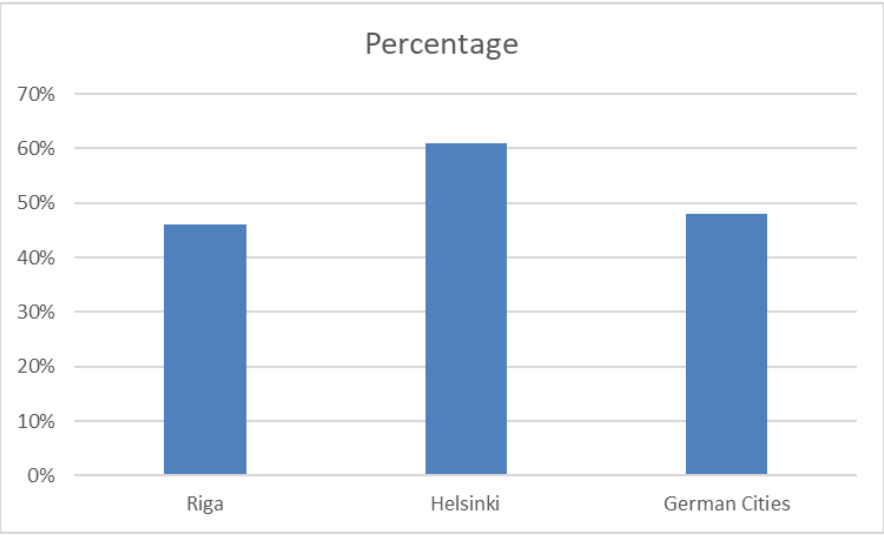


Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

These figures suggest that despite clear guidance, the penetration of this basic preparedness item remains low. The data indicates that many urban households lack access to critical communication tools during emergencies. This gap could severely limit the effectiveness of public warning systems and hinder coordinated crisis response efforts.

In addition to assessing material preparedness, the survey also examined individual awareness of necessary actions during a crisis or cognitive preparedness. Respondents were asked whether they knew what to do upon hearing emergency public sirens, the location of their closest emergency shelter and whether they had an agreed meeting place with close ones in case communications were disrupted.

Image 5: Knowledge of sirens



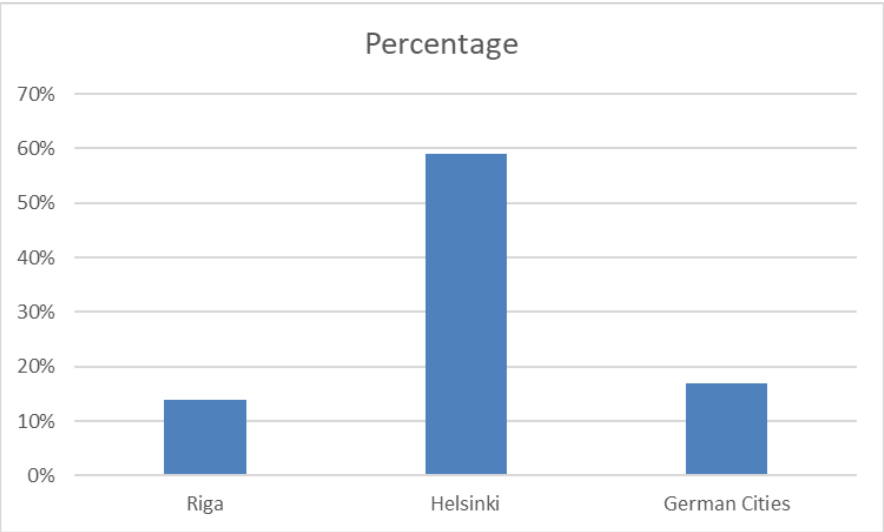
Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

These results, illustrated above in Image 5, paint a concerning picture of civilian awareness of preparedness measures. The data reveal a clear cognitive preparedness deficit across all three urban settings. In Helsinki, 61 percent of respondents reported knowing what action to take when public sirens sound, reflecting the long-standing investment in civil-defence communication and the routine integration of preparedness messaging into Finnish public life. Yet even in this high-responsibilisation context, awareness is far from universal, suggesting that familiarity with guidance does not automatically translate into internalised procedural knowledge. In Riga, fewer than half of respondents reported knowing how to respond to sirens. The German cities show a comparable pattern, with siren knowledge also falling below the majority threshold. Across all three

contexts, the data underscore a structural weakness: urban residents who lack procedural knowledge of siren response are, in effect, unreachable by the very alert mechanisms designed to protect them.

Image 6, below, illustrates the percentage of respondents who self-reported knowing where the closest emergency shelter is located. Knowledge of the nearest emergency shelter represents perhaps the most operationally consequential form of cognitive preparedness, as it determines whether individuals can physically act on a public alert rather than simply recognise that one has been issued. The figures here are markedly lower than those for siren awareness across all three cities, pointing to a secondary cognitive gap that compounds the first. Helsinki again shows the comparatively strongest performance, with 59 percent of respondents reporting knowledge of their nearest shelter. In Riga, however, only 14 percent of respondents could identify the location of the nearest emergency shelter. Similarly low rates in the German cities reinforce the pattern observed elsewhere. In dense urban environments, where built infrastructure and population mobility can rapidly disorient residents during disruptions, not knowing the location of the nearest shelter is not a minor gap, it is a foundational obstacle to any coordinated protective response.

Image 6: Knowledge of closest emergency shelter

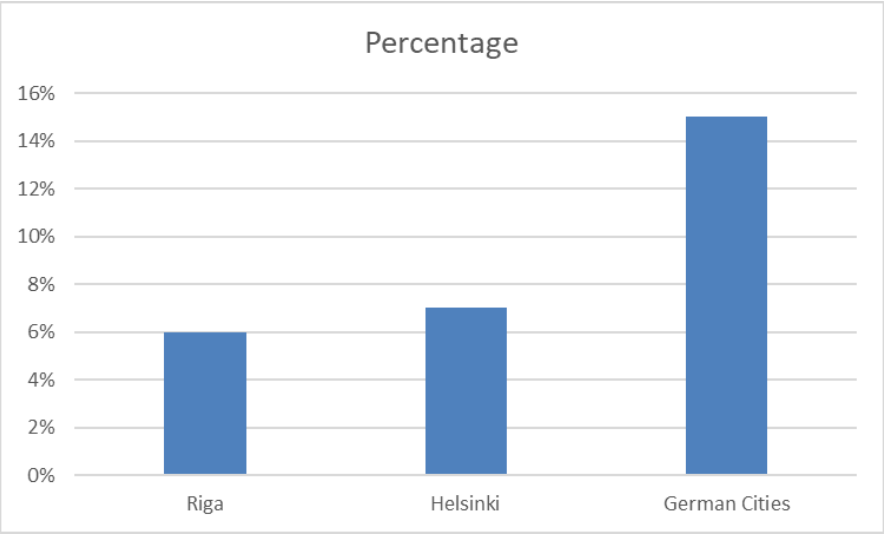


Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

Further, Image 7, below, illustrates the extremely low percentages of individuals with agreed family meeting points. Of all the cognitive preparedness indicators assessed, agreed family meeting points record the lowest rates across all three

urban settings. This measure is particularly significant because it represents a form of preparedness that requires no financial investment, no physical storage and no specialist knowledge, only prior coordination among household members. Yet even this low-barrier action appears to have been neglected by the majority of urban residents surveyed. The failure to agree on a meeting point in advance is especially consequential in scenarios involving communication disruptions, precisely those situations most likely to accompany the threats such as military attack, cyber-attack and severe weather events, that respondents across all three cities rate as most personally salient. The contrast with the theoretical expectation embedded in comprehensive-defence doctrine is stark: national guidance in all three countries assumes that citizens will be capable of acting autonomously and maintaining household coordination during the first critical hours of a crisis. The data suggest that this assumption is largely unwarranted. Without clear knowledge of procedures and safe locations, the assumption that citizens can effectively respond during the first 72 hours of a crisis becomes highly questionable.

Image 7: Agreed meeting point



Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

Obstacles to individual action

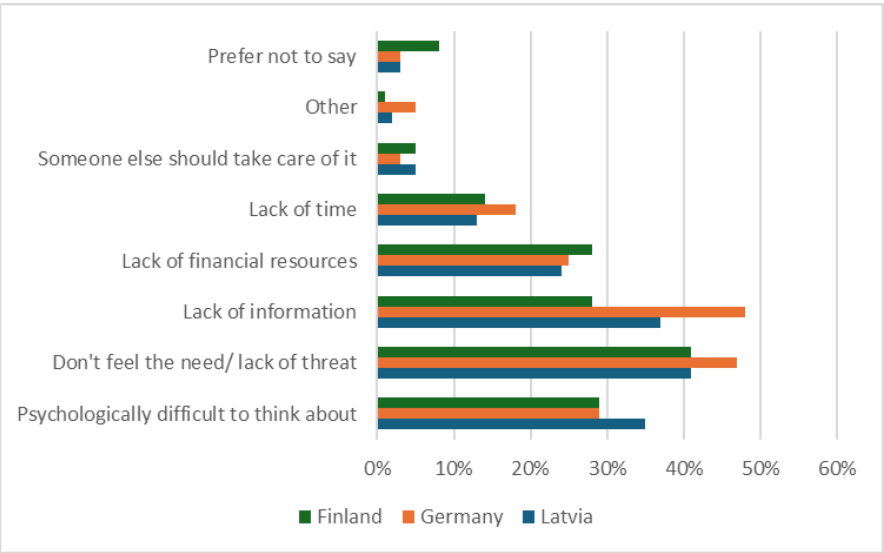
The 2025 results indicate that national responsibilisation strategies have not, in practice, produced commensurate household readiness in the surveyed cities. Despite extensive guidance and explicit expectations for 72-hour self-sufficiency, most urban residents still lack basic supplies and procedural knowledge. The notable exception is Helsinki's comparatively higher awareness of siren responses

and shelter locations, suggesting that long-standing, operationalised messaging and local institutional scaffolding can improve cognitive, though not necessarily material, preparedness. In Riga and the German cities, awareness and supplies remain consistently low across the same indicators.

These patterns suggest that the national approach to civil defence alone is not a reliable driver of household action, specifically in urban settings. In Finland, a mature total-defence model and concrete checklists have helped translate salience into procedural knowledge, but material benchmarks are still missed by large shares of Helsinki residents. In Riga, where 72-hour guidance is newer and communication ecosystems are more fragmented, threat salience does not manifest in either procedural knowledge or supplies. In the German cities, an institution-centred, less prescriptive model coincides with weak individual readiness despite high concern for digital and information risks. Taken together, the country models (high/transitional/low responsibilisation) do not map cleanly onto higher material or cognitive preparedness, with the partial Helsinki exception limited to awareness.

In the survey, we asked the respondents about the obstacles that prevent them from preparing for crisis situations. The question read 'What hinders you from adequately preparing for crisis/emergency situations?' The illustrated results in Image 8 below provide critical insight into why individuals are not taking the necessary steps to prepare. Across all three countries, the most frequently cited barriers include psychological considerations, threat perception and lack of information.

Image 8: Obstacles to preparedness



Source: Compiled by authors from 2025 Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer data

The highest percentage of respondents, across the sample, with 1 percent difference in Germany, indicate that the main reason they have not taken the necessary steps to prepare for a crisis is because they 'don't feel the need/lack of threat'. This pervasive absence of perceived threat, shared across urban contexts, thus represents a profound behavioural and political hurdle, underscoring how future preparedness strategies will need not only to build capacities but to confront the deeper motivational gap that inhibits societal engagement in the first place.

Data analysis

Given that a substantial share of individuals across countries report no felt need to prepare, reflecting the broader behavioural gap identified above, we therefore focus our hypothesis-testing specifically on those respondents for whom the threat registers as personally salient. Specifically, we assess whether the alignment between identifying a threat as personally salient ('major') will result in respondents taking the necessary steps to prepare. Further, we want to establish whether taking threat-appropriate actions varies systematically by national approach: specifically, whether Finland's long-standing comprehensive defence tradition, with its deep community-level embeddedness and decades of normalised preparedness practices, translates into higher levels of action among those who perceive a threat as personally salient in Helsinki; whether Riga's more recent but increasingly coordinated attempts to promote whole-of-society readiness have begun to shape behaviour in a measurable, intermediate way; and whether, in contrast, the institution-centred model prevailing in Germany continues to yield weaker or negligible behavioural effects even among individuals who recognise a threat as major. We operationalise threat-appropriate actions by pairing each salient threat with its relevant preparedness indicator, gathered from the crisis booklets of Finland, Latvia and Germany. The threat to action Table 2 is presented below.

We used the 2025 CAWI survey to test pre-specified 'logic pairs' that link specific perceived threats to matched household preparedness actions, as illustrated in Table 2 below. Threat perception was measured for eleven hazards on a three-point ordinal scale (1 = not a personal threat; 2 = minor; 3 = major), with 'don't know/prefer not to say' coded as missing. For hypothesis tests contrasting 'major' versus 'non-major', we created a binary indicator (major = 1; otherwise = 0). Preparedness outcomes comprised binary indicators of cognitive and material readiness, knowledge of what to do when public sirens sound, ownership of a battery-powered AM/FM radio and whether the household has a pre-agreed family meeting point (each coded 1/0), and capacity measures derived from categorical durations, namely water and cash 'days of coverage'. For policy-relevant interpretation and cross-country comparability, we harmonised sufficiency cut-offs at ≥72-hours to form binary outcomes for water (≥3 litres per person per day for three days) and cash (ability to cover essential purchases for at least 72-hours during electronic

Table 2: Threat to action mapping

Threat (survey item)	Preparedness action(s) (survey indicator)	Rationale (policy and operational)
Disrupted digital services/ cyber-attack	1) Cash reserves 2) Battery-powered AM/FM radio 3) Agreed meeting point	Payments/ATMs may fail; cash needed for essentials. Internet/mobile networks may be down; radio is the resilient broadcast channel. Comms outages impede coordination; pre-agreed meeting point reduces separation risk.
Severe weather (e.g., floods, storms)	1) Siren knowledge 2) Water supplies	Sirens and public alerts guide rapid action (shelter-in-place/evacuate). Outages and contamination disrupt water.
Disrupted critical supplies	1) Water supplies 2) Cash reserves	Supply chains and retail availability can fail; water is most time-critical resource. Cash enables purchases when POS/ATMs are down or card systems fail.
Military attack	1) Siren knowledge 2) Battery AM/FM radio 3) Water supplies 4) Agreed family meeting point	Sirens and public alerts guide rapid action (shelter-in-place/evacuate). Radio remains a primary channel under power/telecom disruption. Water continuity at risk, most time-critical resource. Comms outages impede coordination; pre-agreed meeting point reduces separation risk.

Source: Authors' own elaboration (2026)

payment/ATM disruption). The threat to action pairs followed national guidance and operational logic.

Primary models were selected according to outcome type. For binary outcomes, siren knowledge, radio ownership and pre-agreed meeting point, we used logistic regression, reporting odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals, a standard approach for modelling dichotomous dependent variables (Hosmer, Lemeshow & Sturdivant 2013). For capacity outcomes, days of water and cash coverage, we used ordinary least squares regression with robust, heteroscedasticity-consistent, standard errors to accommodate potential violations of homoscedasticity (Long & Ervin 2000). Spearman rank correlations were computed as a complementary, distribution-free measure of monotonic association between the ordinal threat scale and preparedness indicators, appropriate given the ordinal nature of the threat perception measure (Myers, Well & Lorch 2010). Given the number of threat–action tests conducted, we controlled familywise error rates using the Holm–Bonferroni sequential correction procedure, which offers greater statistical power than the standard Bonferroni adjustment while maintaining control of the familywise error rate (Holm 1979). Finally, because the design is cross-sectional, results should not be interpreted causally; negative associations may reflect reverse

causation or unmeasured factors such as low self-efficacy. Future longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to identify mechanisms linking threat perception to preparedness behaviour.

To test the hypothesis *H1, Individuals in Helsinki who identify a threat as 'major' will demonstrate higher material and cognitive preparedness for that threat*, we took the two major threats identified by the respondents that can be prepared for in the traditional sense, according to the guidance issued by the Finnish crisis booklet. First, we looked at the 450 respondents who identified disrupted digital services due to a cyber-attack as a major personal threat. As threat appropriate actions, we identified having cash reserves in instances when electronic payment systems or ATMs become unavailable, agreed meeting place with family members in case communications networks are compromised, and having a radio as a means of receiving information during a crisis when communication channels and internet services are disrupted.

Table 3: Helsinki major threat disrupted digital services/cyber-attack (n=450)

Action	Correlation	P-value	Regression Coef. (*controls: age, gender*)	Regression p-value	Result
Cash Reserves	−0.078	0.042	−0.040	0.086	Marginally significant (Negative)
Meeting Place	0.006	0.855	0.007	0.596	Not Significant
Radio	0.034	0.294	−0.014	0.590	Not Significant

Source: Authors' calculations based on Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 data

As shown in Table 3 above, the relationship between perceiving cyber-attacks as a major personal threat and keeping cash reserves was marginally significant and negative in both the correlation and regression models, suggesting that even among those who worry about cyber-induced service disruptions, higher expressed threat does not correspond to greater material preparedness – in fact, it trends slightly in the opposite direction. By contrast, no significant associations emerged for having an agreed meeting place with family or owning a radio, indicating that increased concern about cyber threats did not predict higher cognitive or material preparedness for these actions.

Next, we conducted a separate analysis focusing on the 410 respondents who identified climate change related severe weather, such as floods or storms, as a major personal threat. Consistent with preparedness guidance in the Finnish crisis booklet, two key actions were selected as appropriate responses to this hazard: knowing what to do when emergency sirens function and maintaining adequate water supplies. As shown in Table 4 below, neither preparedness behav-

iour demonstrated a statistically meaningful relationship with perceiving severe weather as a major threat. Taken together, these findings offer no support for H1: Even among individuals who consider severe weather a major threat, there is no observed increase in either material or cognitive preparedness behaviours recommended for this scenario. Overall, these findings provide no evidence in support of H1 and instead highlight a disconnect between threat awareness and the recommended preparedness behaviours.

Table 4: Helsinki major threat climate change weather (n=410)

Action	Correlation	P-value	Regression Coef. (*controls: age, gender*)	Regression p-value	Result
Sirens	−0.044	0.163	−0.007	0.750	Not Significant
Water	−0.037	0.271	−0.010	0.352	Not Significant

Source: Authors' calculations based on Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 data

To assess hypothesis H2, *Individuals in Riga who perceive a given hazard as a major threat will demonstrate moderate material and cognitive preparedness for that threat*, we examined the 573 respondents who identified disruption to critical supplies as a major personal concern. Guided by the recommendations in the Latvian national crisis preparedness booklet, two preparedness actions were considered relevant for this scenario: maintaining adequate water supplies and having cash reserves available if access to essential goods or electronic payment systems becomes limited. As shown in Table 5, the analysis revealed no significant association between perceiving disrupted supplies as a major threat and having sufficient water storage. In contrast, the relationship between threat perception and maintaining cash reserves was marginally significant and negative. This pattern mirrors the trends observed in Helsinki and indicates that even among those who consider disruptions to essential supplies a major personal threat, higher perceived threat is not associated with greater preparedness and may even correspond to slightly lower levels of readiness.

Table 5: Riga major threat disrupted critical supplies (n=573)

Action	Correlation	P-value	Regression Coef. (*controls: age, gender*)	Regression p-value	Result
Water	0.009	0.772	−0.004	0.723	Not Significant
Cash Reserves	−0.061	0.104	−0.036	0.088	Marginally Significant (Negative)

Source: Authors' calculations based on Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 data

To continue evaluating hypothesis H2 for Riga, we next examined the 563 respondents who identified a military attack as a major personal threat. In line with the preparedness guidance outlined in the Latvian crisis booklet, four actions were considered relevant indicators of material and cognitive readiness: understanding what to do if sirens operate, having a radio for receiving emergency information, maintaining adequate water supplies and designating a meeting place to reconnect with family members should communication channels fail. As shown in Table 6 below, three of the four actions – sirens, radio and meeting place – showed no significant association with perceiving a military attack as a major threat. All factors displayed negligible and statistically non-significant relationships, indicating that greater perceived threat does not predict higher cognitive or material preparedness for these actions. In contrast, the analysis revealed a significant negative association between perceiving a military attack as a major threat and maintaining water supplies. Taken together, these findings provide no support for H2 within either of the scenarios analysed in Riga. Even among respondents who view the threat of a military attack as major, preparedness behaviours do not increase and, in the case of water reserves, appear to decrease slightly, underscoring a persistent disconnect between perceived threat severity and recommended preparedness actions in the Riga context.

Table 6: Riga major threat military attack (n=563)

Action	Correlation	P-value	Regression Coef. (*controls: age, gender*)	Regression p-value	Result
Sirens	–0.005	0.868	0.003	0.902	Not Significant
Radio	–0.028	0.387	–0.004	0.839	Not Significant
Water	–0.069	0.034	–0.020	0.031	**Significant (Negative)**
Meeting Place	–0.035	0.282	–0.008	0.444	Not Significant

Source: Authors' calculations based on Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 data

To evaluate hypothesis H3, *Individuals in German cities who perceive a threat as 'major' will exhibit only weak or no association with material and cognitive preparedness*, we analysed respondents who identified either climate change related severe weather or disrupted digital services from a cyber-attack as major personal threats. For the severe weather scenario, we looked at 524 respondents, and two preparedness actions recommended in the German crisis preparedness guidelines: understanding sirens and maintaining adequate water supplies. As shown in Table 7 below, both actions demonstrated negative associations with perceived threat. Knowledge of sirens showed a significant negative correlation and regression coefficient, indicating that greater perceived threat was associated with lower, not higher, cognitive preparedness. Water supplies also showed a marginally

significant negative relationship, again suggesting that heightened concern did not translate into increased material readiness.

Table 7: German cities – major threat climate change weather (n=524)

Action	Correlation	P-value	Regression Coef. (*controls: age, gender*)	Regression p-value	Result
Sirens	–0.101	0.001	–0.063	0.004	**Significant (Negative)**
Water	–0.074	0.021	–0.023	0.065	Marginally Significant (Negative)

Source: Authors' calculations based on Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 data

A similar pattern emerged for the cyber-attack scenario of 483 respondents, illustrated in Table 8 below. Among the three preparedness actions assessed, maintaining cash reserves, designating a family meeting place, and owning a radio, two exhibited no statistical relationship with threat perception. Only one action, agreeing on a meeting place with family, showed a significant negative association, indicating again that higher perceived threat corresponds to lower preparedness.

Table 8: German cities major threat disrupted digital services/cyber-attack (n=483)

Action	Correlation	P-value	Regression Coef. (*controls: age, gender*)	Regression p-value	Result
Cash	–0.029	0.421	–0.020	0.314	Not Significant
Meeting Place	–0.066	0.038	–0.036	0.046	**Significant (Negative)**
Radio	–0.008	0.805	–0.018	0.474	Not Significant

Source: Authors' calculations based on Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 data

Taken together, these results are partially consistent for H3. Across both German city scenarios, preparedness behaviours show either no relationship or a significant negative association with perceived threat. Rather than displaying moderate or high preparedness, individuals who view these hazards as major threats tend to be no better prepared, and in some cases, slightly less prepared, reinforcing the broader pattern observed across the three countries.

Discussion of findings

Across the 2025 urban samples, we find that threat perception varies across the Baltic Sea region's urban centres, with Riga prioritising economic volatility, supply disruption and defence; the German cities emphasising organised crime, climate risk and information/cyber threats; and Helsinki highlighting disinformation and cyber disruption alongside climate concerns. Despite these differences, general preparedness is low across all three settings. The data shows that supplies are

limited, and procedural knowledge on sirens, shelters and family action plans remains uneven, with Helsinki's siren and shelter awareness a partial exception.

Even in our country-specific hypothesis, when we concentrate on evaluating threats that are personally salient to the respondents, we find no evidence that threat salience improves preparedness; in several cases, higher salience is associated with slightly lower preparedness. This is clearest where preparedness requires material provisioning – that is, even in the cities where specific threats dominate public concern, household supplies remain modest. By contrast, cognitive preparedness shows somewhat stronger, but still uneven, uptake, suggesting that information and routines are easier to acquire than supplies that demand time, money and storage. These patterns are consistent with the theoretical literature outlined earlier, which predicts that affect, ambiguity and structural frictions dampen translation from risk salience to behaviour (Paton 2003; Tierney 2014; Eiser et al. 2012). This broad result is consistent with public-health and household-preparedness syntheses showing that households more readily complete action-based items than resource-based ones and that tailored, actionable guidance is needed to bridge the intention–action gap (Zamboni & Martin 2020; Levac, Toal-Sullivan & O'Sullivan 2012).

Helsinki's comprehensive-security model is associated with comparatively higher cognitive awareness as a clear majority know what to do when sirens sound, and 59 percent of respondents' report knowing the nearest shelter. At the same time, material preparedness remains limited with only 22 percent reporting supplies of drinking water for 72 hours, 42 percent owning a battery AM/FM radio, and cash sufficiency for outages remaining mixed, reflecting the city's cash-light routines. When we tested perception to preparedness alignment for the city's most salient actionable threat (cyber disruption), we found no significant association with radio ownership or agreed meeting points, and a small, non-robust negative relationship with cash once age and gender are controlled. The inference is that Finland's long-standing guidance and municipal scaffolding have succeeded in procedural learning but have not overcome the logistical and psychological costs of provisioning in dense urban life. These findings reinforce the theoretical claim that salience translates more readily into procedural knowledge than into stockpiling, especially in urban environments where storage, cost and habit frictions are pronounced (Zamboni & Martin 2020; Levac et al. 2012).

Riga's threat profile does not translate into procedural knowledge or supplies commensurate with concern. Only 14 percent report knowing the nearest shelter, less than 50 percent know what to do if sirens sound and only 23 percent meet the 72-hour water benchmark. The obstacle structure, 'don't feel the need', 'lack of information', 'psychologically difficult', maps onto well-documented behavioural barriers that highlight ambiguity about what counts as 'enough', avoidance in the face of aversive tasks and low perceived efficacy, all of which depress uptake in the absence of concrete thresholds and locally scaffolded routines (Zamboni & Martin

2020; Levac et al. 2012). In theoretical terms, Riga exemplifies the conditionality of responsibilisation where elevating expectations without operational supports is insufficient to move households from salience to action.

Berlin, Hamburg and Munich show pronounced concern for climate change severe weather and cyber-attacks, but household-level preparedness remains modest. A radio is owned by 39 percent of urban respondents, siren knowledge is below 50 percent and water reserves for 72 hours are held by 38 percent. The most frequently reported barrier, 'lack of information', is consistent with a decentralised, less prescriptive guidance environment, in which responsibilities are distributed across states, and municipalities and household-level expectations are comparatively under-specified. This is the low-responsibilisation end of the triad where institutional continuity is emphasised, but perception to preparedness alignment at the household level is weak or absent. The risk-communication literature argues that in such settings, multi-motive, localised approaches and redundant channels are needed to convert awareness into practiced action (Eriksson 2024; Carreras-Coch et al. 2022; Douvinet et al. 2019). Our results therefore fit the theory's prediction that institution-centred continuity without clear household thresholds yields weak perception to preparedness alignment.

Our results corroborate the theoretical expectation that risk salience alone rarely induces proportionate action when the recommended tasks are aversive or complex, the guidance is generic rather than specific, and households lack self-efficacy and local cues that make action feel doable. Helsinki's cognitive advantage reflects specific long-term instructions and routine municipal engagement; yet the same advantage fades for material tasks because costs and frictions are higher. Riga and German cities exhibit both instructional ambiguity and lower scaffolding, which alongside strong psychological obstacles dampens both cognitive and material uptake. This is precisely the conditional pathway the theory anticipates that clear, concrete communication plus coping appraisal and local cues convert salience into action; if these are absent then avoidance and fatalism dominate.

The urban environment magnifies the costs of material preparedness. Cities are service-intensive and infrastructure-dependent and they cultivate just-in-time household routines rather than stockpiling. Urban dwellings also impose limited storage capacity and normal-time digital payment habits make offline contingencies behaviourally atypical. Radios look obsolete in normal times. These everyday logics underpin why urban respondents, despite high concern, remain under-provisioned for disruptions. Without concrete thresholds and local cues that reduce ambiguity and boost coping appraisal, responsibilisation under-delivers in dense settings (Sáenz de Tejada et al. 2024; Miner et al. 2013; Kitamura 2022; Carreras-Coch et al. 2022; Douvinet et al. 2019; Siliézar et al. 2023). The Helsinki case shows that even within a high-responsibilisation model, urban frictions are powerful enough to cap material uptake.

The evidence suggests that even if worried residents remain underprepared, then messaging must move from general exhortations to concrete thresholds, such as specifying recommended quantities and providing clear checklists. The evidence aligns with risk-communication theory that emphasises that when guidance is generic rather than operational, individuals struggle to translate salience into behaviour, often over-estimating their readiness or deferring action (Boin et al. 2020; Kohler et al. 2020). Specificity reduces ambiguity and strengthens individuals' sense of efficacy. Operationalisation also requires localising access to preparedness information and resources, including mapping nearby emergency shelters, reviewing instructions for responding to sirens, and lowering the practical barriers to acquiring recommended supplies, such as offering community-level radio kits or subsidies. In addition, preparedness can be reinforced by embedding low-effort routines into everyday life, encouraging households to agree on family meeting points, promoting annual micro-drills in residential buildings or workplaces, and organising neighbourhood briefings that turn abstract guidance into practiced behaviour in urban settings (Sáenz de Tejada et al. 2024; Carreras-Coch et al. 2022; Douvinet et al. 2019). These interventions follow directly from the theory's core claim that salience alone seldom yields preparedness. Instead, clarity, efficacy and local cues are the necessary conditions for responsibilisation to work in urban Europe.

Our 2025 results point to a clear conclusion, that responsibilisation for self-sufficiency in crisis situations has not been adequately communicated or operationalised in the surveyed urban contexts. The consequence is a security gap between policy ambition and household capacity. Even in Helsinki, where Finland is often presented as the flag-bearer of comprehensive defence, most residents would be unable to meet 72-hour self-sufficiency if an unexpected crisis struck. Comparable shortfalls are visible in Riga and the German cities, confirming that the expectation of 72-hour independence is unrealistic under current urban conditions.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, EU and NATO policy have converged on a comprehensive, whole-of-society model of security and crisis management. NATO has long recognised civil preparedness as an enabler of collective defence under Article 3 of the Washington Treaty, a commitment dating to the Alliance's founding and renewed with fresh urgency at the 2016 Warsaw Summit through the seven baseline requirements for national resilience (NATO 2016; Jacuch 2024). It is important to note that these requirements operate at the national level, defining state and institutional capabilities rather than prescribing behaviour for individual households. The EU's Preparedness Union Strategy (2025) bridges this gap, explicitly embedding an all-hazards, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach

that extends preparedness obligations downward to the population level, including guidance to reach minimum 72-hour household self-sufficiency as a core pillar of European resilience (European Commission 2025; Niinistö 2024). It is therefore primarily at this EU policy level that the expectation of household-level preparedness is formally anchored.

That strategic shift, manifesting in responsibilisation, places a new burden on individuals and households, expecting them to hold supplies, adopt contingency routines and convert risk awareness into practical, threat-appropriate action. Yet our 2025 urban evidence reveals a structural gap between these policy expectations and household realities. Across Helsinki, Riga and the German cities, both material and cognitive preparedness remain uneven and consistently fall short of official guidance thresholds. Crucially, even among those who say they are personally worried about the very threats they are advised to prepare for, preparedness remains inadequate, the classic perception–action gap anticipated in the risk-behaviour literature.

These findings speak directly to the theoretical debates outlined at the outset and yield a clear pattern of confirmation alongside one result that warrants closer scrutiny. The core finding that threat salience does not improve preparedness, and in several instances is associated with slightly lower readiness, is consistent with the central claims of the risk-behaviour literature. Slovic (1987), Paton (2003) and Eiser et al. (2012) all anticipate that affective responses to threat, including avoidance and fatalism, can suppress protective action even when perceived severity is high, and our data fit this prediction across all three national contexts. The confirmation that cognitive preparedness, such as siren knowledge and shelter awareness, proves more accessible than material preparedness, such as water stocks and cash reserves. This also aligns with prior synthesis work on household emergency readiness, which consistently finds that action-based items are completed more readily than resource-based ones (Levac, Toal-Sullivan & O'Sullivan 2012; Zamboni & Martin 2020). Similarly, the finding that Helsinki's long-standing, operationalised guidance produces a cognitive advantage but not a commensurate material one is consistent with theoretical expectations. Boin et al. (2020) and Kohler et al. (2020) predict that specificity reduces ambiguity and improves procedural learning but cannot on its own overcome the logistical and financial costs of stockpiling in dense urban environments.

The result that demands closer attention is the direction of significant associations where they do emerge. In several cases, including cash reserves in Helsinki and Riga, siren knowledge in the German cities, and water supplies among those perceiving military attack as a major threat in Riga, higher threat salience is associated with lower preparedness rather than simply a null relationship. This negative direction sits in some tension with protection motivation theory (Rosenstock 1974), which predicts at minimum a neutral rather than inverse relationship. Two

explanations are plausible. First, reverse causation: individuals who have not prepared may experience higher residual anxiety that expresses itself as elevated perceived threat, while those who have taken steps feel a degree of reassurance that moderates rated salience. Second, the avoidance pathway described by Slovic (1987) and Paton (2003) may be operating more forcefully than anticipated: In the absence of clear, actionable guidance and coping self-efficacy, high salience may intensify paralysis rather than motivate action. The cross-sectional design does not allow us to distinguish between these mechanisms, and future longitudinal or experimental work is needed to establish whether these negative associations reflect genuine psychological inhibition or statistical artefacts of reverse causation.

Finland, which is often held up as the flag-bearer of comprehensive defence, illustrates both the promise and the limits of responsibilisation in urban settings. Helsinki residents exhibit comparatively higher cognitive awareness, but not proportional material readiness. Even among Helsinki respondents who rate cyber disruption as a major personal threat, we find no improvement in radio ownership or family meeting-point planning, and a small, negative association with cash reserves once age and gender are controlled. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical claim that Finland's long-standing guidance and municipal scaffolding have succeeded in procedural learning but have not overcome the logistical and psychological costs of provisioning in dense, service-intensive city environments (Zamboni & Martin 2020; Levac et al. 2012). In Riga and the German cities, where institutional communication is more fragmented and guidance less prescriptive, both cognitive and material uptake remain consistently weak, fitting the conditionality argument that responsibilisation without operational supports is insufficient to move households from salience to action (Scolobig et al. 2015; Boin et al. 2020).

The urban environment magnifies these challenges throughout. Cities cultivate just-in-time household routines rather than stockpiling, impose limited domestic storage, and normalise cashless and digitally dependent habits that make offline contingencies behaviourally atypical. These everyday logics explain why urban residents, despite expressing genuine concern, remain under-provisioned for the very disruptions they fear. Without concrete thresholds, locally mapped resources and scaffolded routines that reduce ambiguity and strengthen coping appraisal, responsibilisation systematically under-delivers in dense settings (Sáenz de Tejada et al. 2024; Miner et al. 2013; Douvinet et al. 2019).

For EU and NATO goals on household-level resilience, the implication is clear: Responsibilisation without urban-specific operational supports will continue to fall short. Closing the gap requires moving from general exhortations to concrete thresholds, specified quantities, mapped shelters and standardised siren instructions paired with local scaffolding such as building-level micro-drills, neighbourhood briefings and community-level access to recommended supplies.

These are not optional refinements; they are the necessary conditions for the EU's whole-of-society ambitions and NATO's Article 3 resilience commitments to succeed at the household level in Europe's cities. Until preparedness guidance is operationalised for the realities of urban life, the security gap between policy expectation and household capacity will persist, even in the countries that have worked hardest to close it.

Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to all stages of the research and writing.

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No conflict of interest was reported.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in DataverseLV at https://doi.org/10.71782/DATA/HQANMQ, title Baltic Individual Crisis Preparedness Barometer 2025 (Urban Preparedness for Emerging Risks in the Baltic Sea Region).

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Research article

From Civilian Power to Emerging Security Provider? The European Union's Evolving Role in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the European Union has articulated increasingly explicit ambitions to act as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asia constitutes a particularly revealing arena in which to assess this evolution, as the region sits at the geopolitical core of the Indo-Pacific while remaining anchored in ASEAN-centred security practices, non-alignment and sensitivity to external power projection. This article examines whether the EU's expanding security engagement in Southeast Asia reflects genuine role learning, understood as a transformation of its international identity, or a more limited process of role adaptation within an essentially civilian and normative framework. Drawing on role theory, the analysis adopts a triadic approach linking role conception, role performance and role recognition. Empirically, it combines an examination of EU strategic documents and policy initiatives with elite perception data from regional surveys and a systematic analysis of ASEAN official statements and plans of action. The findings show that while the EU has broadened its security-relevant activities in the Indo-Pacific, these developments remain layered onto pre-existing civilian-oriented roles. As such, Southeast Asian actors continue to recognise the EU primarily as a normative and stabilising partner rather than as a provider of regional security. The article concludes that the EU's trajectory in Southeast Asia is best understood as adaptive adjustment rather than deep role learning, highlighting the possibilities and limits of stretching a civilian role in a competitive Indo-Pacific order.

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Introduction

Once widely regarded as a 'civilian' or 'normative' power, the European Union (EU) increasingly presents itself as an actor with security ambitions extending beyond its immediate neighbourhood (Pugliese 2023; Michalski & Parker 2024). In recent years, this evolution has become particularly visible in the Indo-Pacific, a strategic frame through which Brussels now articulates its responses to geopolitical competition, maritime insecurity and challenges to the rules-based international order. Within this broader strategic horizon, Southeast Asia occupies a distinctive position, lying at the geopolitical heart of the Indo-Pacific while remained anchored in ASEAN-centred norms of non-alignment, consensus and strategic autonomy (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin & Kolmaš 2025). It is therefore in Southeast Asia that the EU's evolving security posture becomes both most observable and most politically consequential, as the Union seeks to translate a traditionally dialogue-driven and values-oriented presence into more tangible contributions to regional stability. The publication of the 'Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' (2021) and the 'Strategic Compass' (2022) marked an important moment in this trajectory, projecting an EU that aspires not only to economic and normative engagement, but also to a more visible role in safeguarding maritime order and regional security (Lin 2021; Crabtree 2022). This duality makes Southeast Asia not merely a sub-region of the Indo-Pacific, but a critical testing ground for assessing whether the EU's expanding security ambitions amount to a meaningful transformation of its international role.

Against this backdrop, existing scholarship has long debated the foundations and evolution of the EU's international identity. Early conceptualisations such as François Duchêne's notion of 'civilian power' and Ian Manners's 'normative power Europe' framed the Union as an actor deriving influence primarily from persuasion, law and example rather than coercion (Manners 2002; Orbie 2006). More recent analyses, however, point to the emergence of a 'geopolitical Europe', one that seeks to reconcile its normative ethos with a growing emphasis on strategic autonomy and security provision (Kilic 2024; Naeni & Kaunert 2025). Yet, while this debate has generated significant theoretical reflection, empirical analyses often remain Eurocentric or policy-specific, with limited attention to how this transformation is perceived and negotiated in other regions. In such regard, Southeast Asia provides a particularly revealing vantage point for observing the EU's ongoing role metamorphosis, given the region's adherence to the principles

of consensus, non-interference and strategic autonomy, which makes it both a mirror and a test case for the EU's evolving external identity, as well as a space where European discourse on multilateralism and security is acknowledged, but also critically scrutinised.

Accordingly, this article takes Southeast Asia as a case-study for assessing how the EU's role conception, performance and recognition are changing as the Union seeks to expand its security engagement beyond Europe's immediate neighbourhood. It argues that the EU's shift from a normative to a security-oriented actor does not necessarily represent a departure from its foundational ethos, but rather a process of role adaptation or learning, the nature of which remains to be determined. While the Union's growing security presence in the Indo-Pacific reflects adjustment to systemic pressures and strategic opportunities, the central question is whether this evolution also entails deeper learning, intended as a redefinition of self-understandings, values and responsibilities that reshapes the Union's international identity. Closely related to this is the question of how such a transformation is perceived and interpreted within Southeast Asia, particularly by ASEAN and key regional partners, and to what extent the EU's claim to a new security role is recognised, conditionally accepted or contested. Together, these two interrelated puzzles link the internal evolution of the EU's role conception and performance to the external dimension of recognition, providing a comprehensive understanding of how the Union's strategic identity is constructed, enacted and negotiated in the Southeast Asian context.

Theoretically, the study is grounded in role theory, an approach that seeks to explain how foreign policy identities emerge and evolve through the interplay between self-perception and the expectations of others. Rather than viewing international behaviour as the product of material capabilities or institutional design alone, role theory understands it as a socially constructed process in which actors continuously define who they are and how they should act in relation to their environment (Aggestam 2006: 12–14). Within this framework, three interdependent dimensions can be distinguished (Harnisch 2011). Role conception refers to how actors interpret their place in the international system and the responsibilities they believe they ought to assume. Role performance, in turn, captures the policies and practices through which these self-understandings are enacted and projected externally. Finally, role recognition denotes the feedback loop of acceptance, contestation or reinterpretation that arises as other actors respond to these performances. The interaction among these three dimensions creates a dynamic process through which identities are not only expressed but also reshaped over time.

Such a perspective is particularly well suited to the study of the EU, whose external behaviour cannot be reduced to the sum of its member states' preferences. As a composite and evolving polity, the EU's foreign policy roles are constantly

negotiated within and beyond its institutional boundaries. Internally, tensions between supranational and intergovernmental logics generate competing role conceptions and uneven role performances (Maurer & Wright 2021). Externally, the Union's pursuit of legitimacy and recognition compels it to adapt its self-understanding to changing geopolitical contexts and the perceptions of international partners (Stoddard 2015). In this sense, role theory provides a nuanced framework for examining both the internal contestation and the external validation that shape the EU's international actorness. It also highlights the mechanisms of change that underpin these processes – namely role adaptation, involving incremental adjustments in behaviour or strategy to maintain relevance, and role learning, implying a deeper cognitive and normative transformation that redefines the actor's identity and sense of purpose (Harnisch 2011: 12–14). Together, these insights offer a powerful conceptual lens through which to interpret the EU's evolving foreign policy identity in Southeast Asia.

Empirically, the analysis focuses on the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia between the adoption of the 'European Security Strategy' in 2003 and the 'Strategic Compass' in 2022, a period that captures the Union's gradual shift from a primarily diplomatic and developmental actor to one with explicit security ambitions. In its attempt to investigate how the EU's self-understanding and external behaviour have evolved amid intensifying geopolitical competition, and how these changes are interpreted by regional partners, the article follows the triadic framework developed earlier. Accordingly, it first explores the role conception dimension, assessing whether strategic discourse and official documents indicate a redefinition of the EU's self-image from civilian power to security actor. It then examines role performance, evaluating to what extent concrete initiatives, such as the 'European Peace Facility' (EPF) and the 'Coordinated Maritime Presence' (CMP), reflect adaptation to systemic pressures or genuine learning. Finally, it scrutinises role recognition through a combined analysis of ASEAN's official discourse and regional elite perception surveys, capturing how the Union's evolving security role is received, negotiated or questioned within Southeast Asia. Taken together, these dimensions clarify whether the EU's evolving engagement in Southeast Asia reflects pragmatic adjustment or deeper identity change.

By linking role conception, role performance and role recognition within a single analytical framework, the study contributes to two interconnected strands of scholarly debate. First, it speaks to ongoing discussions on the nature of EU global actorness and the uneasy coexistence between the Union's normative self-understanding and its emerging strategic ambitions (Engelbrektet et al. 2020; Simão 2022). Rather than treating these dimensions as mutually exclusive, the analysis demonstrates how they interact in practice, producing patterns of engagement that are neither purely civilian nor fully securitised. Second, the article advances the application of role theory to composite actors whose identities are

not fixed, but continuously negotiated across multiple institutional levels and external arenas. In doing so, it shows how role change cannot be inferred solely from shifts in discourse or policy instruments, but must also be assessed through the lens of external recognition and contestation. The case of Southeast Asia illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly: far from being a passive recipient of European policies, the region emerges as an active arena of mutual role construction, where the EU's evolving claims to strategic relevance are interpreted, filtered and selectively validated by regional actors. As a result, Southeast Asian responses play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and limits of the EU's international identity, underscoring the importance of analysing role change as a relational process, grounded not only in what the EU seeks to become, but also in how that aspiration is received beyond Europe.

Role conception, performance and recognition: A framework for analysis

Role theory offers a particularly well-suited framework for analysing how the EU's foreign policy identity is constructed and transformed through the interaction between self-understandings and external expectations. Originating within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), role theory was first articulated by Kalevi Holsti, who defined 'national role conceptions' as policymakers' subjective understandings of their state's appropriate purposes and conduct in international relations (Holsti 1970: 245–246). These conceptions, grounded in beliefs and ideas rather than material capabilities, shape foreign policy choices by defining what an actor considers legitimate, desirable or appropriate behaviour within the international system. Subsequent constructivist scholarship reconnected this insight to broader social theories of identity and recognition, emphasising that international roles are not fixed attributes but intersubjective positions formed through ongoing interaction with others (Cantir & Kaarbo 2012). Roles thus acquire meaning relationally, emerging from the intersection between self-expectations and how external actors interpret, respond to and validate those expectations.

To render this relational process analytically tractable, later contributions have sought to operationalise the concept of 'role' into distinct yet interrelated components. Sebastian Harnisch's formulation is particularly influential in this respect and provides the core analytical framework adopted in this article. Building upon Holsti's seminal work, Harnisch conceptualises roles as social positions that arise from the interaction between ego expectations, referring to an actor's self-perception and role claims, and alter expectations, referring to how others respond to, accept or contest those claims within a structured social environment (Harnisch 2011: 8). On this basis, he distinguishes three analytically separable dimensions. Role conception refers to how an actor interprets its own position, responsibilities

and appropriate behaviour in international politics. Role performance captures the concrete policies and practices through which these self-understandings are enacted. Lastly, role recognition denotes the external feedback loop through which other actors validate, reinterpret or resist those performances. Together, these dimensions allow for a systematic examination of how foreign policy identities are formed, expressed and socially embedded over time.

Significantly, Harnisch also emphasises that roles, while often characterised by strong path dependency, are inherently dynamic. As both cognitive frames and social constructs, they evolve through interaction, learning and contestation (Harnisch 2011: 10–11). Role change may occur abruptly in response to major systemic ruptures, such as the post-1945 renunciation of militarism by Germany and Japan (Maull 1990). More commonly, however, it unfolds incrementally, as actors adjust their behaviour in response to shifting contexts, misalignments between expectations and outcomes, or sustained external feedback. A frequently cited example of this latter pattern of incremental role change is the gradual transformation of the United States from a predominantly isolationist power in the late nineteenth century to a globally engaged security provider after 1945, a process that unfolded through successive crises, overseas commitments and contested domestic debates rather than through a single decisive break (Ambrose 2010; Wertheim 2024). Accordingly, it can be argued that not all role change is of equal depth. Role metamorphosis may affect only surface-level behaviour, or may extend to more fundamental elements of identity and self-understanding. This dynamic understanding of roles is thus essential for analysing the EU's gradual and uneven evolution from a predominantly civilian and normative actor toward a more security-conscious posture.

Against this backdrop, the distinction between adaptation and learning is central to understanding the different degrees of role change experienced by international actors. Adaptation refers to incremental adjustments in behaviour, instruments or rhetoric undertaken to preserve relevance within an unchanged role conception. In foreign policy terms, adaptation may involve recalibrating policy tools or expanding functional engagement without redefining underlying values or purposes. Learning, by contrast, implies a deeper cognitive and normative transformation, whereby an actor revises its beliefs, preferences and sense of responsibility in light of new experiences (Harnisch 2011: 10). Moreover, it entails qualitative change, signalling the emergence of a revised identity and a rearticulated understanding of legitimate international conduct. This dichotomy provides the analytical lens through which the article's empirical puzzle is examined. As the EU broadens its security-related engagement in Southeast Asia, the core question is whether these developments signal genuine role learning, or whether they instead reflect adaptive adjustments that extend a fundamentally civilian role into emerging strategic domains.

Building on the crucial difference between adaptation and learning, subsequent scholarship has explored how role change is shaped by the interaction between agency and structure. Lisbeth Aggestam (2006: 14–18), for example, introduces a structurationist perspective that situates role evolution within institutional and social contexts. Drawing on Anthony Giddens, she argues that foreign policy roles are produced and reproduced across three interconnected levels. At the institutional level, norms, rules and bureaucratic routines anchor expectations of appropriate behaviour. In the EU's case, long-standing commitments to multilateralism, legalism and a rules-based order have sustained its self-image as a civilian and normative power. At the interactional level, roles evolve through sustained engagement with others, as dialogue and cooperation generate feedback that may reinforce or challenge existing self-understandings. In this regard, the EU's long-standing interaction with ASEAN illustrates how repeated engagement can both socialise partners and expose tensions between self-perception and external recognition. Finally, at the intentional level, actors may consciously redefine their roles when existing scripts lose relevance. The EU's increasing emphasis on 'strategic autonomy' can be interpreted as such a reflexive response, aimed at reconciling its normative identity with the realities of intensified geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific.

While these perspectives illuminate the structural conditions of role change, other contributions highlight the importance of contestation within domestic and institutional arenas. Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (2012) argue that roles are rarely unitary and are often contested vertically between elites and publics, as well as horizontally among bureaucratic, partisan and institutional actors. As a result, their framework foregrounds domestic politics as a key source of role instability and incoherence, emphasising how competing actors and institutional arenas generate overlapping and sometimes contradictory role expectations. This insight is particularly relevant for the EU, whose composite and multilevel governance structure multiplies sites of contestation across the European Commission, the Council, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the member states. Authority over external action is fragmented rather than centralised, while responsibility for defining strategic priorities, allocating resources and bearing political costs is unevenly distributed (Freudlsperger & Weinrich 2022; Rakutienė 2025). This institutional dispersion not only complicates coherent role articulation, but also increases the likelihood that external partners encounter inconsistent signals regarding the EU's intentions, capabilities and willingness to act. Hence, understanding these tensions as instances of internal role contestation helps explain the EU's incremental, uneven and occasionally ambiguous evolution toward greater security engagement.

Equally important is the relational dimension of role legitimacy, elaborated by Rikard Bengtsson and Ole Elgström (2012). They argue that the credibility of an

actor's international role depends on the degree of congruence between internal role conceptions and external recognition. Persistent misalignment between rhetoric and practice, or between self-ascribed roles and external expectations, undermines legitimacy and weakens influence. In this perspective, their analysis of the EU highlights how inconsistencies between normative discourse and policy behaviour can erode credibility, particularly when values are invoked selectively or instrumentally. Although their empirical focus lies on regions such as Eastern Europe and the 'African, Caribbean and Pacific' (ACP) countries, their insights are directly applicable to Southeast Asia, where normative claims are often scrutinised against concrete practice. In such contexts, a perceived gap between values and action constrains recognition and limits the effectiveness of role projection. This dynamic is central to the ASEAN case examined in this article, where official discourse and elite perceptions provide a critical lens through which the EU's evolving security claims are evaluated, qualified or contested.

The concern with coherence and legitimacy resonates also with Sonia Lucarelli's normative reading of the EU's role conception and performance. Lucarelli argues that the EU's distinctiveness lies not in the originality of its values, but in their specific interpretation and hierarchy. These 'interpreted values', including legalism, multilateralism, solidarity and harmony with nature, constitute the ideational substance of the Union's political identity and inform its external roles (Lucarelli 2006: 49–56). From this perspective, role conception and role performance are co-constitutive elements of an ongoing process of self-identification. In parallel, Lucarelli also underscores the link between internal identification and external credibility, showing how fragmentation or contestation within European societies weakens the coherence of Brussels' international role and undermines its legitimacy abroad. This insight is particularly salient for a polity like the EU, whose authority and identity are distributed across multiple institutional and political levels, which renders congruence between values and action a particularly demanding condition for sustaining role credibility.

Collectively, these theoretical contributions portray the EU as a reflexive actor whose international identity is continuously reconstructed through dialogue, contestation and performance. Role change, in this view, is rarely abrupt, as it more commonly unfolds through processes of layering and recalibration, whereby new elements are added to existing role scripts without fully displacing them. In such context, the EU's gradual shift from a civilian power toward a more security-oriented posture in Southeast Asia offers a revealing testing ground for assessing whether recent developments signal substantive identity change or an incremental stretching of an established civilian role. To address this question, the study examines the EU's evolving role through a triadic analytical framework linking identity, behaviour and recognition. Methodologically, role conception is traced through a structured discursive analysis of key strategic texts that articulate

the Union's evolving self-understanding in international politics, including the 2003 'European Security Strategy' (ESS), the 'Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy' (2016), the 'Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' (2021) and the 'Strategic Compass' (2022).

These documents were selected because they represent the EU's most authoritative strategic statements during the period under examination, and collectively reflect how the Union has progressively reframed its security ambitions in response to a changing geopolitical environment. Through a close reading of the language, priorities and policy prescriptions embedded in these texts, the investigation identifies how the EU defines the scope of its international responsibilities and how this evolving understanding of its international role relates to its engagement in Southeast Asia. To this end, the study engages in an interpretive analysis of strategic discourse, focusing on recurring themes, conceptual framings and policy priorities through which the EU articulates its security ambitions and regional engagement. Particular attention is paid to references to the Indo-Pacific, maritime security, partnership with ASEAN and the broader framing of the EU as a security actor beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Building on this analysis of role conception, role performance is then assessed by examining selected policy initiatives and operational practices through which these strategic role conceptions are translated into concrete action. In particular, the analysis focuses on initiatives such as the already recalled EPF and CMP, and participation in multilateral security exercises, which illustrate the practical instruments through which the EU has expanded its security-related engagement in the region.

The third analytical dimension concerns role recognition. This specific realm is examined by combining regional elite perception data with an analysis of ASEAN's institutional discourse. The study draws, in particular, on the 'State of Southeast Asia Survey' conducted annually by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, which provides one of the most comprehensive sources of elite perceptions across the region. These perception data are complemented by a focused corpus of ASEAN–EU institutional documents adopted between 2018 and 2023, including the joint statement establishing the 'ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership' and the most recent 'ASEAN–EU Plans of Action'. Such texts were selected because they constitute high-level institutional expressions of ASEAN's collective position toward the EU during the period in which the Union's Indo-Pacific engagement became more visible. While such diplomatic documents inevitably reflect negotiated language between partners and therefore capture only part of the broader regional debate, their analysis nevertheless provides valuable insight into how the EU's evolving role is formally framed and recognised within ASEAN's institutional discourse. Taken as a whole, the combination of documentary analysis and regional perception data makes it possible to capture both the formal and informal dimensions of external validation. On the basis of this analytical and methodological framework,

the following section turns to the analysis of role conception, examining how the EU's strategic discourse has articulated and redefined its security ambitions in relation to Southeast Asia.

Changing narratives: The EU's evolving conception of its international role

For much of its post–Cold War history, the EU saw itself as a civilian and normative power, deriving influence less from military capabilities than from its ability to project values, law and institutions (Lenz 2013). In International Relations, a civilian power shapes world politics through diplomacy, economic engagement and the promotion of shared norms. Rather than relying on coercion, its authority derives from attraction and example, and is legitimised by international law, multilateral institutions and a sustained commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. Accordingly, such actors do not renounce the use of force, but they subordinate it to collective decision-making and legal constraint, viewing it as a last resort within a broader political strategy. This conception found particularly fertile ground in the EU, whose integration project was born of a rejection of power politics and a belief that interdependence and law could replace balance-of-power rivalry as the foundation of peace. In such a context, the notion of Europe as a 'civilian power', first articulated by François Duchêne in the early 1970s, became a key conceptual pillar for understanding the Union's global posture (Duchêne 1972). The concept posited that Brussels' distinctiveness lay in its reliance on economic leverage, diplomacy, legalism and multilateralism rather than on coercive instruments typical of other great powers. As mentioned, this framing later gained further prominence through Ian Manners's concept of Europe as a 'normative power', which cast the EU's role as an exporter of liberal-democratic values as constitutive of its legitimacy and effectiveness.

The 2003 ESS codified this worldview at the doctrinal level, offering the clearest articulation of how the Union understood its role in global politics at the turn of the century. Published under the optimistic title 'A Secure Europe in a Better World', the document opened with the assertion that 'Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free', and that 'large-scale aggression against any Member State is now improbable' (Council of the European Union 2003). Rather than rival powers or territorial threats, it identified diffuse, transnational challenges such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime as the main dangers to European security. Interestingly enough, these were portrayed as problems of governance rather than of geopolitics, to be addressed through prevention, development and international cooperation. Such logic was emblematically captured by the claim that 'the best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states', which suggested that peace and stability were expected to flow from democracy, law and effective institutions,

rather than deterrence or military strength (Council of the European Union 2003: 6). As a result, the ESS advanced a normative-institutionalist conception of order, seeing insecurity as the product of weak governance and prescribing collective action, multilateral cooperation and stronger international rules as remedies.

In line with this view, the document also suggested that Europe's comparative advantage lay in its wide range of diplomatic, economic and developmental instruments, insisting that none of the 'new threats' that characterised the international arena at the turn of the century were purely military in nature. In doing so, the ESS thus presented the Union to domestic and global audiences as a champion of an 'effective multilateralism' anchored in the United Nations and regional partnerships, consolidating the EU's self-image as a normative actor projecting influence through law, dialogue and assistance rather than through power projection (Bailes 2005). Consistent with this logic, the EU's model of integration was portrayed as a source of external stability, grounded in enlargement and the emerging neighbourhood policy, which aimed to export prosperity and good governance rather than pursue narrow geopolitical ambitions. As such, the strategy linked Europe's security to 'a ring of well-governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean', implying that stability would come from transforming, not containing, its periphery (Council of the European Union 2003: 5). In this perspective, the notion of a 'ring' of like-minded partners embodied a clear civilian-power ideal, with security achieved through cooperation, conditionality and interdependence. As a result, the ESS concluded that the EU's influence ultimately resided in its ability to socialise neighbours into its norms and institutions, extending stability outward by attraction and soft power.

Yet, the strategy also exposed the limits of this identity. By defining threats largely in non-military terms and privileging long-term prevention, the EU assumed a cooperative international environment where development, governance reform and multilateral institutions could reliably manage crises. This outlook reflected both the optimism of the early 2000s and the institutional design of the Union, which was not equipped for rapid or coercive action. References to 'early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention' remained subordinate to the broader normative narrative, since military means, when envisaged at all, were framed as complements to diplomacy and reconstruction rather than as instruments of strategic competition (Council of the European Union 2003: 6). Moreover, the strategy offered no sustained reflection on the possible return of great-power rivalry or the geopolitical consequences of rising authoritarianism, namely the blind spots that would become increasingly evident in the decade that followed. Therefore, the ESS codified Europe's role as a post-geopolitical actor whose legitimacy rested on law, persuasion and comprehensive crisis management rather than deterrence and force, anchoring a self-image that proved difficult to adjust as the international system grew more contested.

This orientation remained largely intact between 2003 and 2016, even as the Union's institutional architecture evolved. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty, in particular, entrenched democracy, the rule of law and human rights as guiding principles of external action, reinforcing the ethos embedded in earlier doctrines. At the same time, several structural factors further reinforced continuity in its external projections as a civilian power. These underlying conditions included the absence of a supranational military command, the persistence of strategic divisions between 'Atlanticist' and 'autonomist' preferences, and continued reliance on NATO's protective umbrella, which allowed Europe to prioritise soft security while depending on US deterrence (Maurer & Wright 2021). Still, the configuration put forward by the ESS suited the relatively benign post–Cold War environment and encouraged partnerships aligned with the EU's cooperative ethos. In Southeast Asia, its emphasis on dialogue and institution-building resonated with ASEAN's principles of non-interference and consensus. Through mechanisms such as the 'ASEAN Regional Forum' (ARF) and the 'Regional EU–ASEAN Dialogue Instrument' (READI), the Union promoted collaboration in education, environmental governance and public health, while deliberately avoiding hard-security issues like the South China Sea disputes. As a result, this posture preserved Europe's legitimacy as a cooperative partner, offering capacity-building and normative reassurance without military entanglement.

By the mid-2010s, however, geopolitical disruptions including Russia's annexation of Crimea, China's growing assertiveness, Brexit and uncertainty over US commitment undermined the liberal order on which the European approach had rested, forcing the Union to reconsider its global role and lending new weight to the emerging discourse on strategic autonomy (Varma 2024). This reassessment found its first coherent expression in the 2016 Global Strategy, which marked a rhetorical and conceptual departure from the optimism of the early 2000s by recasting the EU's identity around resilience, pragmatism and strategic autonomy. The document, more specifically, portrayed the Union as facing 'times of existential crisis' and a 'more connected, contested and complex world', where the European security order had been violated in the east and security tensions were rising in Asia (EEAS 2016: 7). At the same time, it insisted on the need for a 'stronger Europe', noting that partners increasingly expected the Union to act as a global security provider, thus broadening the scope of the EU's international responsibilities beyond civilian and developmental functions. Even more importantly, the strategy reaffirmed the importance of multilateralism and rule-based order, but no longer defined the Union primarily as a civilian power. Instead, it argued that 'soft and hard power go hand in hand' and explicitly nurtured the ambition of 'strategic autonomy' in security and defence (EEAS 2016: 4).

Such language, coupled with calls for more investment in defence capabilities, resilience and integrated crisis management, signalled an identity shift towards

a more comprehensive security actor. Thus, in terms of role theory, it can be claimed that the 2016 Global Strategy redefined the EU's role conception by layering a security provider dimension onto its traditional image as a normative and civilian power, suggesting that credible defence capabilities and a more assertive presence were now part of what the Union considered appropriate behaviour in a turbulent environment. This evolving self-understanding acquired a more concrete regional focus with the 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While reiterating familiar themes of an 'open and rules based regional security architecture', the document framed the Indo-Pacific as a theatre where European interests and values were directly at stake, citing challenges such as coercive maritime behaviour, cyber threats and strategic competition (European Commission 2021). In parallel, it called for secure sea lines of communication, enhanced naval presence and expanded maritime capacity building, thereby normalising the idea that the EU should maintain a visible security footprint in a region far beyond its immediate neighbourhood. More importantly, the document envisaged more frequent joint exercises and port calls with regional partners and considered the extension of the already recalled CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific, with the aim of making a European naval presence a regular feature of the regional landscape.

At the level of role conception, the Indo-Pacific Strategy marked a departure from a purely normative script by articulating a vision of the EU as an engaged security partner tasked with protecting common goods, such as freedom of navigation, through a combination of diplomacy, development and operational presence. This trajectory was further consolidated by the 2022 Strategic Compass, the most ambitious statement to date of the Union's identity as a security and defence actor. Framed as a response to a 'new world of threats' and shaped by the shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the document called for a 'quantum leap' toward a more assertive and decisive security role (EEAS 2022: 5–7). In addition, it advanced a comprehensive threat assessment extending beyond Europe, explicitly identifying the Indo-Pacific as a region where European security interests are engaged and where naval exercises, regular port calls and enhanced security partnerships should become routine (EEAS 2022: 55–57). The Compass also outlined plans to strengthen rapid deployment, joint exercises, defence investment and tailored capacity-building for partners, linking these tools to the protection of European citizens, values and interests. Conceptually, this completed the shift from a post-geopolitical narrative centred on civilian power toward a hybrid role that combines internal security provision with external stabilisation. At the same time, the persistent emphasis on multilateralism, international law and a rules-based order indicated that this role is framed less as a rupture with the EU's normative legacy than as its recalibration under more adverse conditions. How this layered role conception translates into concrete action in Southeast Asia, and how it is received by regional actors, therefore becomes a critical test of whether the EU's

evolving self-understanding is matched by substantive behavioural change and external recognition.

From rhetoric to action: EU role performance in Southeast Asia

This section examines the evolution of the EU's behaviour in Southeast Asia to address the key research question that shaped the study, namely whether and to what extent the Union's external action has shifted from the traditional parameters of a civilian and normative actor toward the profile of an emerging security provider. Whereas the preceding part of the analysis traced the rhetorical and conceptual evolution of the EU's self-understanding as an international actor, the present discussion turns to the realm of practice by examining how this evolving identity is translated into action. In doing so, it shifts attention to the concrete policies and initiatives through which the Union sought to shape regional dynamics in Southeast Asia and to give operational meaning to its emerging role ambitions. Scrutinising these initiatives and their relative weight is essential to determine whether the EU's engagement reflects adaptation, understood as incremental behavioural adjustment within a stable role identity, or learning, implying a deeper transformation of its purpose and external role. By examining developments across development cooperation, non-traditional security, political dialogue, maritime cooperation and emerging defence instruments, this section assesses whether the EU's role performance remains an expanded civilian repertoire or points to a more substantive behavioural reorientation, in line with its recent strategic ambitions.

In this regard, it is worth recalling that throughout much of the post–Cold War period the EU's behaviour in Southeast Asia remained closely aligned with its civilian and normative self-conception. From the early 1990s to the mid-2010s, the Union emerged primarily as a development and trade partner, as well as a supporter of ASEAN's regional integration efforts, channelling resources into institution-building efforts, educational exchanges, legal and regulatory cooperation, environmental governance and connectivity (Camroux 2008). Early frameworks of cooperation, such as the 'Nuremberg Declaration on an Enhanced Partnership' (2007) and subsequent plans of action, reinforced the perception that the EU's comparative advantage lay in the provision of public goods rather than in traditional security commitments. In parallel, European initiatives through programmes such as Erasmus+, SHARE, Horizon 2020 and READI equipped ASEAN states with technical expertise, regulatory models and capacity building mechanisms that deepened interregional socialisation, but did not signal a willingness to engage in hard security. This mercantilist approach that shaped the EU's regional posture came once again to the fore in 2007 with the launch of negotiations for the EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, which dominated the bilateral agenda for the following years (Meissner 2016).

In this phase, security surfaced mainly through the lens of non-traditional threats, including disaster management, climate change, pandemics and transnational crime. Because these issues overlap substantially with development and governance agendas, the EU could present its long-standing activities as contributions to regional security, without altering its underlying civilian posture. Yet, this very framing limited external recognition of the EU as a security actor. Although Brussels funded projects in counter-terrorism, food security, environmental protection and disaster preparedness, and participated in relevant multilateral fora such as the ARF, the Union was not regarded as a strategic player, partly because it remained absent from bodies such as the 'East Asia Summit' (EAS) and refrained from involvement in sensitive matters like the South China Sea. Against this backdrop, analyses of ASEAN–EU relations during this period consistently emphasise that, despite such contributions, Southeast Asian policymakers continued to view the EU largely as a development and governance partner rather than a meaningful security actor (Jetschke & Portela 2013: 5–6). From a role theory perspective, this period thus illustrates a strong alignment between role conception and performance, inasmuch as the EU behaved as a civilian power and was perceived as such, with little evidence of significant behavioural evolution.

From the mid-2010s onwards, however, the EU introduced new instruments and practices that expanded its security-relevant activities, even if much of this evolution remained anchored in its civilian toolkit. The Union's accession to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2012 signalled a symbolic step toward embedding itself in the region's diplomatic security architecture and opened the way for cooperation in maritime security, peacekeeping training, humanitarian assistance, military medicine and counter-terrorism (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin & Kolmaš 2025: 423–425). In parallel, the 'Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace' (IcSP), introduced in 2014 as the EU's main financial tool for crisis prevention, peacebuilding and security-related capacity-building, enabled more substantive support for border management, crisis response and rule-of-law initiatives, while several member states also began participating more regularly in multilateral naval exercises and confidence-building measures, particularly in maritime domain awareness and coast-guard training (Maier-Knapp 2018: 4). Taken together, these developments point to an incremental securitisation of the EU's regional presence, in which security concerns were addressed through civilian mechanisms such as technical assistance, capacity-building and non-binding dialogues. Yet this expansion still amounted to adaptation rather than learning, as the Union stretched existing instruments to meet new demands, without rethinking its broader approach to power projection or operational engagement. As a result, despite greater visibility in selected functional areas, Southeast Asian elites continued to view the EU primarily as an economic and normative partner, reinforcing its profile as a provider of soft security rather than a substantive strategic actor.

Nonetheless, a more pronounced behavioural shift began to take shape from 2020 onwards, most notably with the elevation of EU–ASEAN relations to a Strategic Partnership. This step opened unprecedented avenues for cooperation in the security domain, albeit primarily in the area of non-traditional and asymmetrical security challenges such as counter-terrorism, cybersecurity and maritime security. Building on this institutional upgrade, the adoption of the EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021 and the Strategic Compass in 2022 further reinforced a more assertive and security-oriented posture, progressively reshaping the Union's engagement with Southeast Asia. The most visible manifestation of this shift has been the gradual intensification of the EU's maritime profile, particularly in and around contested naval spaces such as the South China Sea (Michalski & Parker 2024: 275–276). Several EU member states have also developed their own regional strategies, increased naval port calls, participated in freedom-of-navigation operations and engaged in joint maritime activities in support of a rules-based order at sea (Wacker 2021). This trend was further institutionalised in 2022 with the extension of the EU's CMP blueprint, initially launched in the Gulf of Guinea, to the Indo-Pacific through the establishment of a CMP in the North-Western Indian Ocean (Nováky 2022). Within this framework, August 2022 marked the first EU–Indonesia joint naval exercise in the Arabian Sea, involving the Indonesian Navy corvette KRI Sultan Iskandar Muda and the Italian frigate ITS Virginio Fasan (Pejsova 2023). Focused on anti-piracy and interdiction scenarios, the exercise illustrated both the EU's expanding operational footprint and Southeast Asian openness to practical security cooperation with European forces.

At the same time, the EPF scheme, launched in 2021 as the EU's first instrument allowing military support to partner states, opened avenues for security assistance in the Indo-Pacific that would have been politically unthinkable a decade earlier, ranging from equipment provision to maritime surveillance capabilities and comprehensive 'train and equip' programmes (Mustasilta & Karjalainen 2025). These initiatives connected directly to the expectations articulated in the Strategic Compass, which portrays the EU as a future 'security provider' responsible for protecting both its own interests and broader international stability. Despite the reorientation of European defence spending toward the Eastern flank following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several EU member states have simultaneously expanded their role as providers of military hardware in Southeast Asia, as illustrated by Indonesia's 2022 purchase of 42 French Rafale fighter jets, Germany's deepened 2024 Strategic Partnership with Singapore accompanied by EUR 1.2 billion in approved arms transfers, and Italy's 2025 agreement to supply Malaysia with Leonardo maritime patrol aircraft (Ballestracci 2025; Hutt 2025). Yet even with these advances, the emerging security posture remains layered, for although it signals a clearer willingness to assume a security role, it continues to rely on functional cooperation and modest operational steps rather than on the kind of

defence commitments that would mark a decisive break with the EU's longstanding civilian identity.

As a result, the EU's role performance in Southeast Asia as an emerging security provider reveals a trajectory of incremental but cumulative expansion in the defence domain, which has significantly deepened and stretched Brussels' repertoire of tools and diplomatic priorities, without yet amounting to a fundamental redefinition of its external identity. Although the EU has begun to behave in ways that are more consistent with the ambition to play a more incisive role in global security endorsed in recent strategic documents, much of its engagement continues to rely on developmental and normative instruments, and its operational footprint remains limited. Accordingly, initiatives such as the CMP and the EPF have in practice extended long-standing logics of civilian rather than military engagement, by relying on low-intensity deployments rather than the build-up of credible coercive capabilities. In a similar fashion, the scope of Brussels' assistance has broadened to encompass the military domain, but the focus of such efforts is still directed toward capacity-building, governance reform and the enabling of partners' resilience, rather than toward the creation of hard balancing coalitions or binding defence commitments.

In light of the above, it can be argued that what appears at first glance as a significant 'security turn', in reality represents a calibrated extension of long-standing practices. The EU continues to frame its actions through the language of partnership, multilateralism and the protection of global commons, avoiding positions that would require clear alignment in regional rivalries or active participation in deterrence architectures. Moreover, member state participation remains highly uneven: while France and, increasingly, Germany and Italy contribute to a more visible maritime and defence footprint, many others remain reluctant to prioritise Indo-Pacific security over commitments in Europe's neighbourhood (Keßler 2024). This unevenness further constrains the emergence of a cohesive, Union-wide strategic role. Finally, the absence of hard security guarantees, a unified military command structure or sustained deployments capable of altering regional balances of power underscores the continued dominance of civilian logics in EU foreign policy practice (Bouffaron & Blandin 2025). As a consequence, the Union's initiatives broaden its presence and deepen cooperation, but they do not constitute the type of sustained military engagement or strategic risk-taking that would signal a deeper identity transformation of the kind associated with genuine learning. The resulting pattern is therefore one of gradual behavioural adjustment within an essentially stable identity, where adaptation helps the EU respond to a more contested Indo-Pacific environment without fundamentally revising the normative foundations of its external action. Yet, whether this adaptive trajectory can evolve into deeper role learning ultimately hinges not only on European choices and capabilities, but also on how the Union's expanding security posture is interpreted, validated or contested by Southeast Asian actors.

Southeast Asian perceptions and the external recognition of EU role claims

A core insight of role theory is that no international role is fully realised unless it is acknowledged by others. The meaning and effectiveness of an actor's self-ascribed role depend not only on its internal conception and behavioural performance, but also on the degree of recognition granted by external partners. In the case of the EU, whose identity is defined as much by its normative ambitions as by its capacity to shape international outcomes, Southeast Asian perceptions constitute a crucial test of whether its emerging security posture is seen as credible, legitimate or strategically consequential. As for any evolving role in global affairs, regional actors did not merely observe the progressive evolution of the EU's role claims, they interpreted, negotiated and at times contested them, thereby influencing the trajectory of the Union's external identity. For these reasons, analysing ASEAN and regional reactions offers indispensable evidence to assess whether the EU's shift toward a more security-oriented profile amounts to genuine role learning or remains confined to adaptation. If regional counterparts continue to frame Brussels primarily as a development and governance partner, despite its expanding security-related instruments and operational aspirations, this would suggest that the underlying role transformation is not externally validated. If, by contrast, Southeast Asian actors begin to recognise the EU as a credible contributor to regional order and maritime stability, this would indicate a deeper shift in the Union's socially acknowledged role.

To investigate how Southeast Asian counterparts perceive the EU's emerging security role, this section adopts a dual-source methodological approach that integrates regional perception data with official documentary evidence. The first pillar draws on annual elite perception surveys conducted across Southeast Asia, specifically the 'State of Southeast Asia' survey series produced by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, which captures the views of policy-influencing respondents from government, think tanks, academia, the private sector and civil society. These surveys provide insight into how actors directly involved in shaping national and regional policy debates assess the EU's influence, credibility and strategic relevance. For the purposes of this study, the analysis focuses on the 2020–2025 editions and concentrates on indicators that speak to the EU's perceived political influence, leadership in upholding the rules-based order, trustworthiness as a global actor and attractiveness as a 'third-party' partner amid the intensifying US-China rivalry. Considered together, these indicators allow us to assess whether the EU is recognised merely as a legitimate normative actor, or it is also increasingly perceived as strategically relevant in security-related terms. A second layer of analysis, based on a corpus of ASEAN official documents, situates these perceptions within the discursive frameworks through which Southeast Asian institutions articulate expectations toward extra-regional partners. As such, these

two sets of sources provide a robust basis for evaluating the external recognition dimension of the EU's evolving role performance.

Across the six survey cycles examined, a clear pattern emerges: Southeast Asian elites continue to perceive the EU primarily as a normative and governance-oriented partner, yet they increasingly acknowledge elements of strategic relevance associated with its more active posture in the Indo-Pacific (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2020–2025). While the EU never rises beyond a modest share in rankings of actors with the greatest political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia, its position is strikingly stable over time and comparatively insulated from the sharp fluctuations experienced by larger geopolitical players. More tellingly, when respondents are asked to identify the most reliable champions of the rules-based order, the EU consistently occupies one of the top three positions, at times overtaking the United States and significantly outpacing China. This resilience underscores a strong regional expectation that the Union will continue to play a central role in sustaining the normative foundations of regional order. Trust indicators reinforce this picture. Despite year-to-year oscillations and moments of decline, particularly in the editions published after 2022, confidence that the EU will 'do the right thing' remains structurally high and rebounds in 2025, signalling the persistence of reputational capital that is not easily eroded by internal European turbulence or global crises (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2025: 60–61). The distribution of trust further suggests that the EU's appeal is strongest among actors seeking predictable, non-coercive partners capable of enhancing governance standards while respecting sovereignty, a combination closely aligned with Brussels' self-ascribed identity.

Yet, what is most revealing for this study is how the region situates the EU within the strategic landscape shaped by intensifying US-China competition. When respondents are asked which 'third party' ASEAN should turn to in order to hedge against superpower rivalry, the EU is repeatedly placed at or near the top of the list between 2020 and 2023, highlighting its attractiveness as a stabilising actor capable of broadening Southeast Asian strategic options without imposing hard alignments (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2023: 37–38). Although this preference moderates somewhat in the 2024–2025 editions, as Japan and, to a lesser extent, India gain prominence, the EU remains a preferred partner for diversification and for insulating ASEAN autonomy from the pressures of bipolar competition (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2024: 47–49). This pattern indicates that the Union's incremental operational initiatives, including maritime presence schemes and security-related capacity-building, are noticed and valued, even if they do not yet suffice to reclassify the EU as a security guarantor. Instead, regional elites appear to interpret the EU's evolving posture as a phenomenon that blends continuity and cautious adjustment. Against this backdrop, Brussels continues to be valued primarily for its civilian clout and normative leadership, while its expanding

engagement in maritime security and crisis-response cooperation has begun to modestly enrich its strategic profile.

A closer examination of survey editions published after 2022, moreover, reveals an important nuance that complicates any linear reading of the EU's growing security engagement. While trust in the Union's normative leadership remains comparatively strong, a rising share of respondents expresses doubts about its strategic capacity in the context of mounting global instability. In the surveys conducted in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU is increasingly perceived as preoccupied with internal and proximate challenges, including energy insecurity, inflation, political fragmentation and the material demands of sustaining military support for Ukraine (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2025: 60–61). These assessments, most notably, are closely associated with the view that the Union lacks the political bandwidth or operational resources to sustain a long-term security role in distant theatres such as the Indo-Pacific (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2024: 66). Although the 2025 survey registers a partial recovery in overall confidence, the underlying sources of scepticism remain consistent, portraying the EU as institutionally complex, strategically overstretched and unlikely to prioritise Asian security over pressing commitments in its immediate neighbourhood. From a role-theoretic perspective, this pattern therefore reinforces the interpretation that recent European initiatives are understood primarily as adaptive adjustments, rather than as evidence of a deeper strategic transformation.

A complementary perspective on Southeast Asian perceptions emerges from the official documents through which ASEAN articulates its expectations toward external partners and defines, in formal diplomatic language, the boundaries of their recognised roles. While elite perception surveys capture informal and often candid assessments, ASEAN joint statements, leaders' declarations and plans of action represent the institutional voice of the region and thus provide an authoritative gauge of how the EU is framed within ASEAN's normative and strategic imagination. To capture this dimension, the analysis examines four key texts adopted between 2018 and 2023, namely the 'ASEAN–EU Plan of Action' (2018–2022), the 'Joint Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership' (2020), the 'ASEAN–EU Commemorative Summit Leaders' Statement' (2022) and the 'Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership' (2023–2027). Taken together, these documents span a period marked by intensifying geopolitical competition and by the EU's growing ambition to assume a more explicit security role in the Indo-Pacific. Their discursive framing therefore offers a critical benchmark against which to assess whether ASEAN's official recognition has evolved in step with the Union's changing posture.

Interestingly, the analysis of these texts reveals a striking degree of continuity in how ASEAN officially conceives of the EU's external role. Across all four documents, the Union is overwhelmingly portrayed as a normative, developmental

and governance-oriented partner rather than as a security provider. The 2018–2022 Plan of Action defines cooperation primarily in terms of 'sustainable economic development, connectivity, good governance, climate change and environmental protection', while the section on political and security cooperation focuses on disaster management, human security and dialogue-based conflict prevention (ASEAN & EU 2017: 1–5). Maritime security is framed through technical and legal cooperation, notably the promotion of maritime safety and adherence to international law, including UNCLOS. This normative register persists in the 2020 joint statement on the establishment of the ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership, which foregrounds shared commitments to democracy, human rights and the rules-based international order, while describing security cooperation in functional terms such as enhancing 'maritime domain awareness, peacekeeping training, and counter-terrorism capacity-building' (Council of the European Union 2020). Although the statement acknowledges the EU's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific, it explicitly situates this involvement within ASEAN-led frameworks and affirms that cooperation should proceed in support of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

The same pattern is visible in documents adopted after 2021, even as the EU's own strategic vocabulary became more assertive. The 2022 Commemorative Summit Leaders' Statement repeatedly emphasises cooperation on sustainable development, digital transition, health security and climate action, while situating security collaboration within a non-traditional paradigm. It reaffirms commitments to 'maintain peace, security, and stability through dialogue and cooperation' and welcomes EU support for ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ARF and the 'ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus' (ADMM-Plus) (ASEAN & EU 2022a: 3). However, security-related references remain firmly embedded in language of capacity-building, information-sharing and maritime governance, notably encouraging cooperation to 'promote maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight, and adherence to UNCLOS', without any suggestion of a deterrent or force-projection role for the EU (ASEAN & EU 2022a: 3). The 2023–2027 Plan of Action further expands the spectrum of cooperative activities to include cyber resilience, law-enforcement cooperation, peacekeeping training and exchanges among defence officials, yet it remains anchored in civilian and technical modalities (ASEAN & EU 2022b: 1–5). In line with this approach, references to the EU's Strategic Compass are framed as a basis for enhanced dialogue and practical cooperation, rather than as evidence of a redefinition of expectations regarding the Union's security role. Even more significantly, nowhere across these four documents does ASEAN describe the EU as a 'security provider' or articulate expectations comparable to those associated with established security actors in the region.

Considered together, these findings therefore demonstrate that ASEAN's official discourse has not undergone a significant reorientation in response to the

EU's evolving strategic posture. While the Union is increasingly recognised as a constructive contributor to maritime governance, cyber resilience and crisis-response cooperation, these acknowledgements remain firmly embedded within the normative and civilian paradigms that have long defined the relationship. The absence of any explicit discursive upgrade recognising the EU as a provider of regional security suggests that external validation has not kept pace with the Union's self-ascribed ambitions. Instead, ASEAN continues to frame the EU primarily as a longstanding partner in development, connectivity and institution-building. This discursive continuity mirrors the cautious optimism and persistent scepticism captured in elite perceptions, confirming that Brussels' behavioural innovations have yet to translate into a transformed external identity. The resulting misalignment between expanding role performance and stable patterns of recognition highlights the structural constraints facing the EU's security ambitions, whilst also underscoring the conditions under which adaptive role stretching might, in the future, give way to genuine role learning.

Conclusions

This study sought to assess whether the EU's evolving engagement in Southeast Asia reflects a genuine transformation from a civilian and normative power toward an emerging security provider, or whether it should instead be understood as a more limited process of adaptation within an essentially stable role identity. By combining role theory with a three-level empirical analysis of role conception, role performance and role recognition, the article has shown that while the EU's posture in the Indo-Pacific has expanded in scope, visibility and functional ambition, these developments do not yet amount to deep role learning. Rather, they point to an incremental recalibration of behaviour that stretches pre-existing civilian and normative instruments to respond to a more contested strategic environment, without fundamentally revising the Union's external identity or redefining its core understanding of international responsibility. At the level of role conception, the analysis documented a clear rhetorical evolution from the optimism of the early post–Cold War period to a more sober and security-conscious reading of international politics. The 2016 Global Strategy, the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass all reflect heightened awareness of geopolitical competition, coercion and strategic vulnerability. Yet, this evolution remains layered rather than substitutive. Security concerns are articulated primarily as enabling conditions for safeguarding the rules-based international order and preserving the EU's normative influence, rather than as autonomous strategic ends. As a result, the Union continues to conceive its international role as distinct from that of traditional security providers, emphasising multilateralism, legalism and non-coercive engagement even as it acknowledges the need for greater presence, resilience and strategic awareness in the Indo-Pacific.

The examination of role performance reinforced this interpretation. Over the past decade, the EU has undeniably broadened its security-relevant activities in Southeast Asia, particularly through maritime cooperation, capacity-building initiatives and the deployment of new instruments such as the EPF and CMP. These measures have increased the Union's operational visibility and diversified its policy toolbox, signalling a growing willingness to engage with security-related domains. However, they remain largely embedded within established civilian and functional frameworks that privilege training, governance support and co-ordination over enduring defence commitments or sustained power projection. Furthermore, several of the most consequential developments associated with this security turn have been driven primarily by individual member states, rather than by the EU acting as a unified strategic actor, as illustrated by France's sustained naval presence in the region or by bilateral defence agreements concluded by Germany and Italy with Southeast Asian partners. This continued reliance on nationally driven initiatives underscores the absence of a fully integrated European security posture, and reinforces the perception that the EU's engagement remains incremental rather than transformative, as Brussels responds to a more contested Indo-Pacific environment by recalibrating existing mechanisms rather than redefining its strategic purpose or hierarchy of priorities.

Emblematically, the recognition dimension provides the most decisive evidence in support of this interpretation. Drawing on elite perception surveys conducted among policy-relevant actors across Southeast Asia, as well as on ASEAN's official discourse, the analysis showed that Southeast Asian actors continue to frame the EU primarily as a normative, developmental and governance-oriented partner. While regional elites increasingly acknowledge the Union's strategic relevance as a stabilising third party amid the intensifying US-China rivalry, neither survey data nor formal ASEAN documents point to a reclassification of the EU as a provider of regional security. Instead, ASEAN's institutional language consistently situates cooperation within civilian, technical and ASEAN-led paradigms, reinforcing continuity in how the EU's role is understood and recognised. In other words, such data goes to show that in the case of EU-ASEAN ties, external validation has not kept pace with the Union's more ambitious role claims. Nevertheless, the conclusion that the EU's evolving engagement in Southeast Asia reflects adaptation rather than learning does not deny the significance of recent innovations, nor does it exclude the possibility of deeper transformation in the future. Rather, it rests on the observation that the Union's security-related initiatives remain largely embedded within established civilian frameworks, and are not accompanied by material risk-taking or institutionalised security commitments in the region.

From an empirical standpoint, the analysis has also allowed to highlight that the distinction between adaptation and learning advanced in this article rests on a set of observable criteria. A transition toward genuine role learning would

require, first, a sustained re-prioritisation of security objectives across multiple EU instruments and policy domains, rather than their incremental accommodation within existing civilian frameworks. Second, it would entail a willingness to incur durable political and material costs in Southeast Asia, including long-term operational commitments and strategic trade-offs vis-à-vis other theatres. Third, learning would be reflected in the institutionalisation of security partnerships that move beyond episodic port-calls, exercises and capacity-building programmes. Finally, such a metamorphosis would need to be externally validated through a discursive shift in ASEAN's formal documents, explicitly framing the EU as a contributor to regional security rather than primarily as a governance partner. As none of these conditions are currently met in a sustained and convergent manner, the recent evolution of the EU's presence in Southeast Asia seems to reflect a case of role adaptation rather than learning.

Seen in this light, the findings presented here should be read as capturing a specific stage in the EU's evolving external role, rather than a settled or final outcome. The analysis does not imply that the Union is incapable of deeper transformation, but rather that, under current political and strategic conditions, its expanding security engagement has not yet resulted in a fundamental redefinition of its international identity. Beyond Southeast Asia, this insight carries broader implications for how EU global actorness is understood and evaluated. In particular, the study demonstrates that the EU can widen its involvement in security-related activities without departing from the civilian and normative foundations that have long shaped its external action, especially in regions where it lacks historical primacy, entrenched military presence or formal alliance commitments. In such contexts, security engagement tends to complement existing modes of influence grounded in governance support, legal frameworks, and capacity-building, rather than displacing them. At the theoretical level, the study also underscores the value of role theory in distinguishing observable behavioural change from deeper processes of learning and identity transformation. This distinction is especially important when examining composite actors such as the EU, whose ambitions, capabilities and external recognition evolve unevenly across policy domains and geographic theatres. By systematically tracing the interaction between role conceptions, role performance and role recognition, role theory enables a more precise assessment of when change reflects strategic adjustment and when it signals a genuine reordering of purpose.

Looking ahead, the trajectory identified in this study thus points to an EU that is incrementally more present in Southeast Asia, yet structurally constrained in its ability to convert presence into strategic authority. While the Union has expanded its operational visibility and diversified its security-related engagements, these steps remain deliberately calibrated to minimise political exposure, material risk and binding commitments. Such caution reflects enduring features

of EU external action, including fragmented decision-making, consensus-driven security policy and a persistent preference for procedural legitimacy over strategic assertion. However, as geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies, this calibrated ambiguity may increasingly undermine the credibility of the EU's security claims. In a regional environment where expectations toward meaningful security contributors are rising, a posture characterised by limited operational depth and indeterminate strategic intent risks being interpreted as symbolic engagement rather than substantive commitment. The Southeast Asian case therefore underscores a broader constraint on the EU's global actorness, namely the difficulty of sustaining relevance in security-sensitive regions without clearer prioritisation, deeper investment and more explicit role definition. Absent such shifts, the Union's evolving presence is likely to remain perceived as supportive but secondary, reinforcing the conclusion that its current trajectory represents adaptation under constraint rather than a transition toward a fully recognised security provider role.

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Research article

The Politics of Water Security in the Nile Basin: From Hydrohegemony to Community of Hydrosecurity?

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Abstract

The politics of transboundary water security (TWS) reflect a complex interplay of power, discourse and competing national interests. Focusing on the Nile Basin and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), this paper examines how water security has become a contested political and security concept between upstream and downstream riparian states. Drawing on primary data generated through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with senior Ethiopian officials, GERD negotiators and transboundary water experts, the study offers an empirically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of TWS, an area that remains underexplored within both security studies and transboundary water governance scholarship. The paper conceptualises TWS as an intersubjective field of struggle in which competing hydro-concepts: hydrosovereignty, hydrosecurity, hydrohegemony, hydropolitics and hydrosolidarity/hydroharmony are mobilised to advance divergent political claims. These hydro-concepts correspond to distinct security paradigms, including competitive, cooperative, collective, common and community security, revealing how water governance debates are embedded within broader security imaginaries. The analysis shows that the GERD has intensified these contestations while simultaneously exposing the limits of unilateral and securitised approaches to Nile governance. The paper argues that hydrosolidarity, grounded in cooperative sovereignty, where sovereignty is reimagined as hydrological interdependence rather than absolute

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territorial control, offers a viable pathway toward the emergence of a transboundary water security community in the Nile Basin.

Keywords: *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), hydrosolidarity, Nile Basin, security paradigms, transboundary water security*

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Introduction

Transboundary water governance increasingly demonstrates that co-riparian practices can shape the evolution of international water law, creating what has been described as 'normative security', where states engage through cooperative principles and cultivate a 'community of interests' (Cullet et al. 2021; Gobana 1985; McCaffrey 2019; Ziganshina 2014). However, this general understanding does not fully capture the diversity of transboundary water security contexts. For example, the Nile River Basin exemplifies a competitive water security environment, where historical, political and geographical factors have limited the development of a cohesive basin-wide regime. In this context, prevailing sovereignty-centric approaches (hydrosovereignty, hydrohegemony and hydropolitics) have struggled to evolve into frameworks grounded in hydrosolidarity or a broader water security community.

The limitations of international water law in addressing water security are reinforced by the influence of traditional realist perspectives hindered cross-fertilisation among relevant branches of international law that integrate water security discourses (Cullet et al. 2021: 13). Furthermore, water security cannot be adequately understood through the narrow lens of river management alone; it is inherently interdependent, operating within ecological, political and socio-economic systems. This recognition underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that moves beyond state sovereignty (Wouters 2000: 202).

Building on these insights, this paper situates transboundary water security within the broader security studies literature, framing transboundary water security as a relational and collective practice. To operationalise this perspective, it employs five security paradigms – competitive, cooperative, collective, common and community security – as analytical lenses. These paradigms are complemented by five concepts – hydropolitics, hydrosovereignty, hydrosecurity, hydrohegemony and hydroharmony/hydrosolidarity – which act as interpretive tools to explain how actors define threats, prioritise resources and negotiate institutional arrangements in transboundary river basins. Where competitive water security is underpinned by hydrosovereignty, hydrosecurity and hydrohegemony (Nagheeby 2020), common water security paradigm is operationalised through

hydrosolidarity and hydroharmony; where cooperative security is facilitated by hydropolitics, collective and community water security is grounded in hydroharmony/hydrosolidarity (Magsig 2017; Meissner & Warmer 2017). Taking the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a case, this paper examines how these security paradigms and hydro-concepts interact to produce overlapping, conflicting and competing water security regimes.

The paper is structured in three sections. The first section provides a comprehensive review of the literature, details the methodological approach adopted and then reframes the politics of water security as a conceptual framework. The second section discusses how the water security paradigms interact with hydro-concepts and helps to illuminate the transboundary water security dynamics. The third section applies this framework empirically on the Nile Basin, especially taking the GERD. By linking security paradigms, hydro-concepts and empirical practice, this paper offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of transboundary water security, highlighting the potential for hydrosolidarity and relational security to guide more equitable and sustainable management of shared water resources.

Literature review: Transboundary water security

The concept of security has undergone significant theoretical expansion since the 1980s, reflecting evolving social, economic, geopolitical and environmental contexts (Buzan 1987; Buzan et al. 1998; Wæver 1998). Within security studies, this evolution has produced nuanced approaches that consider security not only as a function of material capabilities but also as socially constructed, relational and discursive. This paper situates transboundary water security within this broader theoretical landscape, highlighting how the governance of shared rivers embodies the complex interplay of objective, subjective and discursive dimensions of security.

This paper has benefited from the well-established transboundary water security discursive pluralism (Bakker 2012; Grey et al. 2009; Meissner 2016; Lautze 2012; Pahl-Wostl et al. 2016). Transboundary water security in liberal understanding has been framed in terms of human security (Al-Otaibi et al. 2007; Cook & Bakker 2013; Tarlock and Wouters 2010; Zeitoun, 2008) or as the web of climate–food–energy–human security matrix (Cook & Bakker 2013; Bogardi et al. 2012; Maganda 2019). Transboundary water security is also linked with a (neo-)realist understanding of state security, i.e. dams or water as a weapon (Al-Muqdadi 2023: xxiii; Fröhlich 2012: 321). Moreover, water security and hydraulic mega projects on international rivers are inextricably linked with development security (Arsano 2007; Grey & Sadoff 2007; Cook & Bakker 2012: 18).

Other literatures approach water security from the perspective of environmental security (Barbosa et al. 2012; Boyer 2019; Gunda 2017; Ghoreishi et al. 2024).

Transboundary water security in the context of ecosystem security has also been implicated in different treaties (UN Watercourse Convention 1997; UNECE Convention 1992; AU Nature Conservation 2003). Other literatures link transboundary water security with 'societal security', i.e. as a threat to or security of group identity (Ayeferam 2021; Gebresenbet & Wondemagegn 2021; Oestigaard, 2016). For example, the reduction of Nile flooding in Egypt may constitute a threat to Nile celebrations *Wafaa el-Nil* (Endaylalu & Arsano, 2024).

However, this paper reframes the transboundary water security as the politics of water security where co-riparian states exercise competitive, collective, cooperative, common and community water security paradigms (Väyrynen 2023). This paper concurs with these five water security framings and tries to cross-fertilise these concepts with concepts such as hydrosovereignty, hydrosecurity and hydrosolidarity and apply them in the context of the Nile water dispute following the GERD construction.

For the purposes of this paper, the politics of transboundary water security (TWS) refers to the ways in which upstream and downstream co-riparian states strategically appropriate the concept of water security to advance their political, economic and developmental interests. TWS is not a neutral technical concept; it is an intersubjective and socially constructed practice. Downstream states often frame TWS as an existential concern, vital to survival, whereas upstream states may frame it as a collective enterprise, emphasising equitable benefits for all riparian actors.

Methodology

The article adopts an interpretive, constructivist research design combining discourse analysis with theory-guided process tracing (Walt 2020; William 2024). Discourse analysis is used to examine how Nile Basin states construct and contest the meaning of transboundary water security across legal texts, policy documents, official statements and elite interviews. Process tracing structures the empirical analysis temporally, enabling the study to identify critical junctures – such as the negotiation of the CFA, the announcement and construction of the GERD and the post-2024 institutional developments – through which competing hydrosecurity logics have been institutionalised or resisted.

This paper utilised primary data collected through key informants' interviews with thirty research participants (annex I). In particular, 13 in-depth interviews and 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key officials from the Ethiopian Ministry of Water and Energy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, transboundary water scholars, Ethiopian GERD negotiators, GERD Project Office and the Eastern Nile Basin Technical Office (ENTRO). The in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews were conducted in three rounds: in December 2024, in August and in October 2025. The research participants were purposively selected based on their experience and expertise in transboundary water issues in the Nile Basin.

However, attempts to interview the Egyptian and Sudanese ambassadors to Ethiopia were unsuccessful. The position and interests of Egypt and Sudan are not hidden but explicitly stated in their press briefings and official reports. To fill the gap, this paper relied on the positions and interests of Egypt and Sudan as indicated in their respective letters written to the UN Security Council (between 2020 and 2024).[1] Thus, the limitation of primary data from the Egyptian and Sudanese political elites' side does not fundamentally affect the findings of this study.

Reframing the politics of transboundary water security

Objective security in transboundary water contexts refers to tangible, material factors such as infrastructure, hydrological control and ecological stability (Ayoob 2002). For instance, the construction of a large upstream dam constitutes a brute fact with measurable impacts on downstream flows and livelihoods. However, the meaning and implications of such infrastructure are mediated through discourse (Buzan et al. 1998; Wæver 1995). Downstream states may frame an upstream dam as existentially threatening, while upstream actors may narrate it as a sovereign development project, illustrating the discursive construction of threats (Cascão & Zeitoun 2010; Tekuya 2024). This duality underscores that transboundary water security cannot be reduced to material control alone.

The security dilemma is central to understanding transboundary water dynamics. Actions by one state to enhance its water security – through dam construction, diversion or control overflows – can unintentionally threaten downstream states, generating reciprocal insecurity (Posen 1993; Schweller, 1996). In water systems, such dilemmas are compounded by asymmetries in geography, hydropower potential and economic capacity. Upstream hegemony, exemplified by Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), Iran's Tropical Water Project (TWP) and China's Lancang-Mekong initiatives, often provokes downstream realist responses, as seen in Egypt's posture toward the Nile (Dinar 2002; Wolf et al. 2003; Cascão & Zeitoun 2010; Al-Muqdadi 2023). Hydraulic infrastructure thus serves both material and symbolic functions, operationalising hydrohegemony while shaping perceptions of threat and cooperation (Vörös 2023).

The foregoing discussion indicates that transboundary water security encompasses a continuum of material and non-material concerns, reflecting both realist and constructivist dimensions. Material security pertains to physical control over water and infrastructure, whereas non-material security involves perceptions, social imaginaries and discursive legitimisation of threats and rights (Brauch 2011;

1 Egypt's letters to the UN Security Council: S/2020/355, S/2020/566, S/2020/617, S/2021/354, S/2021/565, S/2021/607, S/2021/627, S/2022/134, S/2022/586, S/2022/587 and S/2023/664; Sudan's letter to the UN Security Council: S/2020/409, S/2020/623, S/2020/567, and S/2021/376.

Butler & Wolf 2019). By integrating security studies' relational and constructivist insights with hydro-concepts, this framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of transboundary water governance, highlighting both structural asymmetries and opportunities for cooperation. It posits the GERD case within a broader theoretical lens, showing that water security is neither purely material nor purely nor normative, but emerges from the interplay of power, discourse and shared ecological interdependence.

Transboundary water security (TWS) is framed here as an inherently relational, intersubjective and multi-scalar security system, rather than a purely hydrological or legal condition. TWS is understood here as embedded within a broader ecological network of governance, power relations and discursive practices. Security systems do not operate in isolation; rather, they constitute interdependent nodes within a complex security environment characterised by feedback loops, cascading effects and dialectical interactions among states, institutions and non-state actors. This dynamic gives rise to what Luís (1992: 39) conceptualises as a security complex – a meta-system within which water security is produced, contested and transformed.

Therefore, the politics of TWS is the result of the constellation of material, normative and discursive lines. It is material insofar as infrastructure, hydrology and allocation shape resource control; it is normative insofar as states invoke historic rights, sovereignty or collective responsibility; and it is discursive insofar as threats and opportunities are socially constructed, communicated and contested (Butler & Wolf 2020). Understanding TWS in this multi-dimensional and relational way is essential for situating the Nile Basin and other transboundary rivers within the broader security complex framework, linking the five security paradigms with the five hydroconcepts outlined in this paper.

Transboundary water security paradigms

Consistent with Tomé's definition of security systems as mechanisms for 'the protection and promotion of values and interests considered vital for the political survival and wellbeing of the community' (Tomé 2010: 36), this paper advances that security is neither static nor confined to national borders. Rather, it operates as an interdependent node within a broader ecological and governance network, in constant dialectical engagement with parallel systems and operational units through multidimensional proximate and cascading effects. Such relational dynamics constitute a security complex (Luís 1992: 39), where the security of one actor is inherently linked to the security of others.

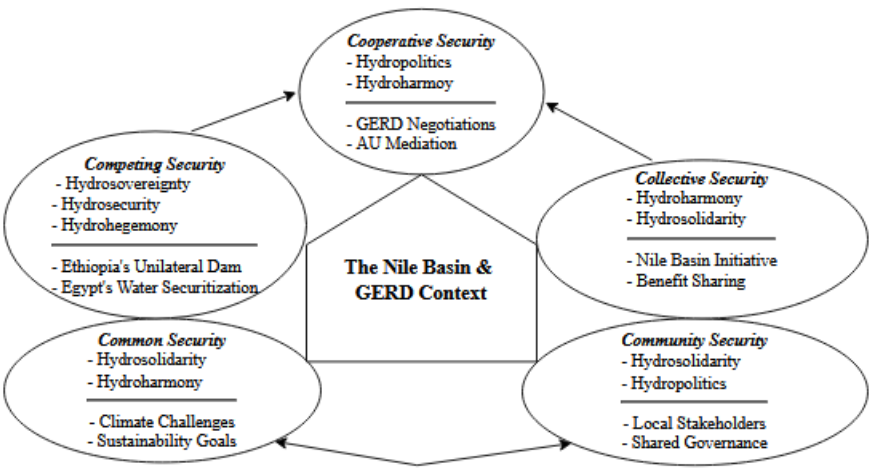
Scholarly consensus identifies five ideal-typical security paradigms emerging from such interdependence: competitive, common, cooperative, collective and community security (Luís 2010; Vayrynen 1999). These paradigms do not represent mutually exclusive categories but rather a continuum of security relations, rang-

ing from antagonistic rivalry to deep institutionalised integration. These security paradigms align with the five hydro-concepts – hydrosovereignty, hydrosecurity, hydrohegemony, hydropolitics and hydroharmony/hydrosolidarity – which collectively provide a multi-dimensional lens for analysing shared river governance (Teshome 2024).

Competitive security captures states' strategic prioritisation of national interests in an anarchic system, often producing zero-sum outcomes (Mearsheimer 2001; Tomé 2010: 37; Waltz 2001). Within transboundary water governance, this paradigm is operationalised through hydrosovereignty, hydrosecurity and hydrohegemony, in which states pursue unilateral control over river flows, infrastructure and hydropower to maximise their national advantage (Alam & Jeffrey 2009). This politicisation and securitisation of transboundary rivers produce what Magsig (2011: 329) calls 'discursive absolutes', which are conceived as non-negotiable and often reinforced by nationalistic narratives that can constrain cooperative possibilities.

The concept of hydrosovereignty illustrates the material-objective dimension of water security, whereby the state is understood as a container of security responsible for protecting its population (Hayat et al. 2022). Yet, in transboundary contexts, sovereignty-centric logics are insufficient. Threats such as climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics and transnational crime transcend borders and render unilateral strategies inadequate (Buzan 1991; Buzan & Hansen 2010). Consequently, security in shared river basins requires recognition of relational interdependence and multi-scalar vulnerabilities.

Figure 1: Water security paradigms and hydro-concepts framework



Source: Author

Common security emphasises shared survival, mutual wellbeing and interdependence, rooted in the principle that 'security must be reached with others, not against them' (Palme 1982). In transboundary water governance, hydrosolidarity and hydroharmony operationalise this paradigm through shared stewardship, equitable allocation and sustainability of water resources (Magsig 2020; Teshome 2024). Environmental crises such as climate change, floods and water pollution exemplify shared vulnerabilities that bind co-riparian states. By framing these challenges as common threats, upstream and downstream states are incentivised to cooperate, align development agendas and pursue collective environmental management strategies (Fig. 1). This paradigm demonstrates that security emerges relationally, where the wellbeing of each riparian state is contingent on the sustainability and stability of the basin.

Cooperative security extends beyond common security by incorporating institutionalised norms, procedural frameworks and negotiated arrangements, allowing rival or potentially rival states to balance power asymmetries and maximise joint benefits (Luís 1992: 38). In transboundary water contexts, cooperative security operationalises hydropolitics and hydroharmony through river commissions, joint planning and dispute resolution mechanisms. For example, in the Nile Basin, trilateral negotiations between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt reflect cooperative governance. Upstream hydropower generation is harmonised with downstream irrigation needs and seasonal variability. Cooperative security thus represents 'common water security plus', enabling riparian states to observe broader system-wide utilisation rather than narrow national interests.

Collective security emphasises the institutionalisation of shared responsibility and mutual protection, extending governance to include non-state actors such as NGOs, multinational corporations and community groups (Vayrynen 1999: 59). In transboundary water management, collective security is closely linked to benefit-sharing approaches, which prioritise equitable and optimised distribution of water-derived benefits rather than purely physical water allocation (Alam & Jeffrey 2009; Giordano & Wolf 2003; Sadoff & Grey 2002). In the Nile, Ethiopia's hydropower potential, Sudan's agricultural capacity and Egypt's economic leverage exemplify the tripartite interdependence often summarised as: 'Ethiopia provides power, Sudan grows food, and Egypt brings cash' (Verhoeven 2015: 245). Collective security frameworks facilitate coordination across this triad, promoting peaceful collaboration, technical sharing and mutual prosperity.

Community security represents the highest level of multilateral integration, characterised by deep institutionalism, shared identity and long-term relational commitment (Job 1994). In this paradigm, riparian states, local communities and extra-state actors perceive themselves as part of a hydrological community, prioritising systemic sustainability, adaptive governance and relational trust over short-term national gains. Operationalised through hydrosolidarity and

hydropolitics, community security emphasises ecological and systems of thinking, moving beyond anthropocentric and sovereign-centric approaches (Watson 2015).

Community security is also 'relational security' and emphasises the mutual co-constitution of interests, trust and predictability between actors (Williams 2008). In shared river systems, upstream and downstream states are entwined ecologically, economically and politically. As Williams (2008: 6) observes, true security does not arise from the ability to exercise power over others, but from cooperating to achieve security without depriving others of it. Security dilemmas are socially constructed and can be mitigated through identity transformation, trust-building and shared norms, rather than purely through material capabilities (Wendt 1992). Security cannot be reduced to either material control or normative agreement; it spans a continuum of objective, subjective and discursive dimensions (Brauch 2011; Butler & Wolf 2020).

The Nile experience: From hydrohegemony to hydrosecurity

The Nile River is shared among eleven riparian countries (Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan and Tanzania), the Blue Nile (estimated to contribute on average 49 BCM of 85% annually) is shared among Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan and South Sudan. At the same time, close to 70% of Ethiopia's water resources are in the Blue Nile sub-basin (Arsano 2007). The Nile Basin governance presents one of the most enduring and consequential cases of transboundary water security (TWS), characterised by deep historical asymmetries, contested legal regimes and evolving security imaginaries. For much of the twentieth century, Nile governance was structured around a narrow, state-centric and exclusionary framework rooted in colonial-era agreements. This institutional architecture entrenched a hydrohegemonic order that framed water security as synonymous with the preservation of downstream control, thereby embedding competitive security, hydrosovereignty and hydrohegemony as dominant organising principles.

Prior to the GERD, Nile Basin water governance was dominated by a competitive security paradigm, rooted in an asymmetric hydrohegemonic order. The absence of inclusive legal instruments and basin-wide institutions capable of ensuring equitable and reasonable utilisation left the Nile governed by colonial-era arrangements – most notably the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement and the 1959 Egypt-Sudan Agreement – which allocated volumetric water rights exclusively to downstream states. Egypt's enduring hydrohegemony – what Rossi terms 'endogenous hegemony' – operated not only through material control of downstream infrastructure, but also through legal, discursive and normative practices that naturalised historical water allocations as immutable rights (Rossi 2022). These arrangements were institutionalised and sustained not only through material power but also through discursive practices that normalised Egypt's claim to 'historic

rights'. Moreover, it unfolded within a basin marked by 'a history of hydro-egoism, exacerbated by imperial politics, colonial treaties, and broader disruptions across the Horn of Africa' (Rossi 2022: 247).

The absence of an inclusive legal and institutional framework capable of governing equitable and reasonable utilisation of Nile waters has long undermined basin-wide cooperation. Attempts to address this deficit since the 1980s – including the Undugu framework (1983), TECONILE (1992), the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) (1999) and ultimately the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) (2010; entered into force in October 2024) – represent incremental efforts to recalibrate Nile governance away from unilateralism toward shared management (Mekonnen 2012).

It was within this context that transboundary water security emerged as a contested politico-legal concept during the early late 1990s and the early 2000s Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) negotiations, later incorporated into the CFA on the recommendation of World Bank experts (Mekonnen 2010). The insertion of TWS into the CFA proved deeply divisive. Legal scholars variously described it as a 'cunning interpolation', a 'treacherous, non-legal concept' and an 'amorphous notion incapable of generating productive legal solutions' (Mekonnen 2013), while others viewed it as primarily political rather than legal (Salman 2013; Nyaoro 2014). Still others argued that TWS constitutes a legitimate legal entitlement encompassing both rights and duties of basin states (Woldetsadik 2017; Tekuya 2019).

The notion of TWS functioned as a discursive battleground between the Nile upstream and downstream states. Downstream states – particularly Egypt – appropriated water security to preserve the 1959 allocation regime, while upstream states – especially Ethiopia – mobilised the same concept to challenge entrenched inequities. For example, Egypt has historically been described as a 'gift of the Nile', in which the river is portrayed as the lifeblood of the nation (Hamada 2017). This discursive struggle became most visible in negotiations over CFA Article 14(b), where Egypt and Sudan sought to anchor water security in 'current uses and rights', whereas upstream states insisted on the principle of 'not causing significant harm', aligned with the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention.

Underlying this dispute were divergent perceptions of scarcity, entitlement and vulnerability. Egypt's expansive understanding of transboundary waters – including precipitation over Ethiopian highlands – led it to reject the basin-wide logic embedded in contemporary international water law (Woldetsadik 2017). Such positions reflected a hydrosovereign absolutism incompatible with evolving principles of equitable utilisation, and contributed to a climate of mistrust, exacerbated by paternalistic assumptions regarding upstream states' developmental capacities (II-P-10; II-P-12).

Furthermore, Egypt's hydrohegemony is continuously reproduced through repetitive practices that code and discipline the boundaries of identity and dif-

ference, shaping how upstream and downstream states perceive each other (Neumann 2009; Garrick & Han 2014). This narrative is institutionally enshrined: Article 44 of the Egyptian Constitution commits the state to protecting the Nile, upholding its historic rights, optimising its benefits and safeguard water quality (The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Art. 44). In this framing, 'Egypt is the Nile, and the Nile is Egypt', reflecting a civilisational and existential logic that underpins Egypt's historical hydrohegemony. Within this logic, any upstream deviation from the established order is discursively constructed as an existential threat, triggering securitising responses.

Conversely, upstream leaders articulate a cooperative and relational vision of TWS (reflected in the ratification of the CFA). For instance, Yoweri Museveni stated during his August 2025 visit to Egypt:

> Our goal should be prosperity for all, access to electricity for all, irrigation for all, and clean drinking water for all. By including these objectives in our framework, we can employ the most scientific and fair methods to achieve them (HICGI News Agency 2025).

Museveni's statement reflects a relational and collective approach to water security, consistent with the principles envisioned in the Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement, which sought to institutionalise equitable governance and benefit-sharing among Nile riparian states. However, the withdrawal of Egypt and Sudan from the agreement highlights the persistent tensions between unilateral securitising strategies and collective, relational governance.

This dynamic demonstrates water security divides and the relevance of relational water security challenge. Without mutual understanding, trust and recognition of interdependence, the appropriation of 'water security' by individual states risks exacerbating insecurity. One state's defensive or coercive actions provoke countermeasures by others, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust in which all riparian actors become increasingly insecure. Even where the idea of 'water security for all' is employed by the upstream states, it is political rhetoric and often not followed by confidence building measures (II-P-05; SI-P-21). Hence, the noble idea of TWS in a sense of shared, collective and relational enterprise, emphasising hydrosolidarity, hydroharmony and cooperative governance remains promissory.

GERD as rupture and catalyst: Reconfiguring Nile security

While early Ethiopian ambitions to develop the Blue Nile date back to Emperor Haile Selassie I (USBR 1964), the GERD represents the first material assertion of upstream infrastructural power capable of recalibrating basin dynamics (SI-P-24). Under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), now replaced by Prosperity Pary under Prime Minister Abiy, poverty was reframed as

Ethiopia's primary security threat, and state sponsored mega projects were believed to be a means to defeat poverty (Growth and Transformation Plan I 2010; Growth and Transformation Plan II 2016).

The GERD is 'the roller-compacted concrete gravity dam, the concrete gravity dam, the concrete faced rock fill saddle dam with gated spillway and other structures on the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia' (GERD Filling and Operation Draft Guideline 2020). The GERD is estimated to generate 5,115 MW of electricity. Domestically, the GERD became symbolically elevated as a 'Second Adwa', a project of collective resistance – this time against structural poverty rather than colonial domination (II-P-25; SI-P-21). Critics, however, questioned the project's developmental rationality, arguing that smaller irrigation-focused dams might have yielded broader livelihood benefits (II-P-13). This internal debate highlights tensions between state-centric development visions and broader human-ecological security considerations.

Moreover, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam marked a profound rupture in this long-standing hydro-political order. Following the diversion of the Nile River for the first time in history, during which the late prime minister was nicknamed '*Abayin yedefere*', ('the one who stood up to the Blue Nile'), Egypt viewed the move as a threat. It was articulated as a transformative national project aimed at electrification, industrialisation and regional integration. This shift was captured in the widely cited formulation *Abayin malmat, Abayin metekem le Ethiopia ye helewuna guday newu* – 'developing and utilising the Blue Nile is a matter of existence for Ethiopia' (II-P-01; SI-P-23). Here, water security was no longer framed exclusively in territorial or military terms, but as a developmental and human security imperative.

Undeniably, the GERD disrupted Egypt's hydro-hegemonic position and triggered a shift toward a competitive security paradigm. Egypt framed the dam as an existential threat, elevating the dispute to the UN Security Council (UNSC 2021). The GERD represents an upstream assertion of hydrosovereignty, whereas Egypt perceives existential threats to its water security. For example, Ethiopia rejected Egypt and Sudan's demand for entering into a binding agreement before filling and operating the GERD and demanded guaranteed releases during droughts. Rejecting these demands, Ethiopia completed filling the GERD without causing water shortages in the downstream, which in effect undermined the downstream securitisation of the GERD (II-P-10; II-P-12).

Thus, material concerns – volume, timing and distribution of water – intersect with discursive constructions of threat, framing development projects as counter-hegemonic or existential. This duality underscores that transboundary water security is both material and socially constructed, reflecting perceptions, narratives and hydro-power asymmetries (Brauch 2011; Butler & Wolf 2020). As long as water security is framed as a zero-sum entitlement rather than a shared

ecological condition, hydro-hegemonic competition will persist, regardless of institutional advances (Dinar 2002). The post-GERD landscape thus exposes the limits of legalism absent relational transformation.

Empirically, the filling of the GERD (from 2020 to 2025) produced no significant downstream water shortages, undermining apocalyptic securitisation narratives (II-P-10; II-P-12). As the GERD securitisation faltered, Ethiopia considered all those allegations to be inconsistent with good faith and equitable utilisation confirming their suspicion toward Egypt (II-P-04). Besides, Ethiopia's commitment to sharing water in times of hardship – grounded not in rigid legalism but in the principles of equitable and reasonable utilisation and no significant harm – is reflected in its letter to the UN Security Council (UNSC 2021). This stance aligns with community security, wherein states no longer conceive of security in zero-sum terms but recognise shared vulnerability and long-term interdependence (Sadoff and Grey 2002; Turton 2008).

CFA, GERD and DOP through the politics of water security

The negotiation, adoption and contestation of the CFA and the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DOP) illustrate how transboundary water governance in the Nile Basin is structured by overlapping security paradigms and competing hydro-concepts, rather than by a single, coherent model of water security. The CFA and DOP operate simultaneously as legal instruments, political compromises and security discourses, embedding multiple and often contradictory understandings of transboundary water security (Magsig 2020; Wouters et al. 2009).

Despite the CFA's formal grounding in the principles of equitable and reasonable utilisation and the obligation not to cause significant harm (Articles 4 and 5), the negotiation history reveals the persistent dominance of competitive security logic, particularly among downstream states. For Egypt and Sudan, 'water security' has historically been equated with the preservation of volumetric entitlements derived from colonial-era agreements – 55 BCM and 18.5 BCM respectively – reflecting a hydro-sovereign understanding of water as quasi-territorial property.

This interpretation reproduces hydrohegemony, whereby downstream states seek to maintain control not only over water flows but also over the legal meanings attached to security itself. The insistence on safeguarding 'current uses and rights' transform water security into a defensive instrument designed to protect the status quo, rather than a forward-looking framework for basin-wide adaptation. In this sense, water security becomes securitised as an existential concern, justifying resistance to institutional change and constraining the scope of cooperation (Salman 2011; Vuković 2019).

By explicitly linking water security to the principles of equitable and reasonable utilisation, both the CFA and the DOP introduce a common security logic

into Nile governance. The nine criteria enumerated in Article 4(2) of the CFA and Principle IV(a) of the DOP – ranging from hydrological and ecological factors to socio-economic needs, population dependence and climate variability – collectively frame water security as a multi-dimensional and shared condition rather than a zero-sum allocation problem.

This move reflects a shift in hydropolitics, away from narrow volumetric claims toward a broader systems-based understanding of risk and interdependence. Water security here is embedded in a web of hydrology, development trajectories, technological capacity and social vulnerability, aligning with Salman's (2013) notion that recognising interdependence can lead to inevitable cooperation. However, this reframing has also complicated negotiations by exposing fundamentally divergent assumptions about entitlement, contribution and vulnerability among riparian states.

The CFA's emphasis on cooperation, reflected in its invocation of the 'spirit of cooperation' and the proposed establishment of the Nile River Basin Commission, aligned with a cooperative security model. In this paradigm, security is pursued through agreed norms, procedures and institutions designed to manage disputes and facilitate joint decision-making (Alagappa 1998).

From a hydrosecurity perspective, the CFA represents an attempt to depoliticise and de-securitise water relations by embedding them within legal and technical frameworks. By tying water security to established principles of international water law, the CFA seeks to normalise cooperation and reduce the scope for unilateral action. Yet the cooperative promise of the CFA has been undermined by unresolved disagreements over the meaning of 'water security' itself, illustrating the fragility of cooperative security in the absence of shared interpretations and lack of confidence building measures (II-P-8).

The CFA's original vision as a 'mutually enticing opportunity' (Vukovic 2019; 2022) reflects a collective security logic grounded in shared responsibility and joint action. By recognising factors such as contribution to flows, availability of alternatives, and conservation costs, the agreement implicitly endorses principles of benefit-sharing rather than strict water allocation. This approach resonates with the concept of hydrosolidarity (Cosgrove 2003; Falkenmark 2002), which emphasises mutual dependence, ecological stewardship and shared risk management. Accordingly, the CFA strengthens the Nile Water Security Community (NWSC) for it reframes the basin not as a collection of sovereign units, but as an interconnected security system where actions in one part of the basin reverberate across others.

Finally, the CFA gestures – albeit imperfectly – toward a cooperative security model, in which Nile riparian states would internalise shared norms and perceive water security as a common good rather than a competitive asset. The envisioned Nile River Basin Commission symbolises this aspiration: a permanent institutional

forum for dialogue, adaptation and joint management. This corresponds to the concept of hydrosolidarity/hydroharmony, where long-term cooperation, ecological balance and mutual recognition replace securitised and adversarial relations.

Nile water security: Institutional transition challenges

The CFA's entry into force on 13 October 2024, ratified by Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan and Tanzania, and signed by Kenya, formalises principles that had already gained de facto relevance in the post-GERD context: equitable and reasonable utilisation, no significant harm, and cooperation as a security imperative. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed described the moment as 'the culmination of a long journey toward the equitable and reasonable utilization of the waters of the Nile', calling on non-signatory states to 'join the Nile family' in pursuit of development and regional integration (Ali 2024). Similarly, Ethiopia's Ministry of Water and Energy emphasised intergenerational stewardship and ecological sustainability as core rationales of the agreement (Addis Insights 2024).

Egypt and Sudan's rejection of the CFA, however, underscores the persistence of competitive security logics even as cooperative institutions expand. Egyptian officials have denounced the CFA as exclusionary and incompatible with the 1929 and 1959 agreements, reiterating that Egypt 'will not compromise even a meter of Nile water' (News Central 2024; Sewilam 2024). Joint statements issued under the Permanent Joint Technical Commission (PJTC) continue to emphasise prior notification and impact assessments while rejecting the CFA's authority (AhramOnline 2024).

The CFA's institutional core, the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC), is referenced over sixty times in the agreement, underscoring that the CFA's viability is structurally dependent on the Commission's establishment and operationalisation. However, the withdrawal of Egypt and Sudan from the CFA severely limits the realisation of this model (Tekuya 2024). Post-GERD, Egypt and Sudan's continued non-participation in the CFA is no longer merely a legal or diplomatic issue; it functions as a strategic response to altered power asymmetries. The GERD has weakened Egypt's long-standing hydro-hegemonic position by demonstrating that upstream development can proceed despite downstream opposition. Consequently, resisting the CFA – and by extension the NRBC – allows downstream states to preserve a governance vacuum in which unilateral leverage, securitisation and ad hoc diplomacy remain viable.

For example, the postponement of the NBI summit scheduled for mid-October 2024 in Uganda illustrates the fragility of basin institutions and the political resistance to supranational governance. Without Egypt's and Sudan's accession, the NRBC, even if established, would lack jurisdiction over the basin's most influential downstream actors, severely constraining its capacity to adjudicate disputes or enforce equitable utilisation principles (Tekuya 2024). This institutional deadlock

reflects the coexistence – and collision – of multiple security paradigms. While upstream states increasingly operate within a cooperative or collective security logic emphasising benefit-sharing and interdependence, downstream states continue to securitise water through competitive and hydro-sovereign frames. The result is a fragmented security complex in which legal norms, infrastructure realities and discursive practices pull in opposing directions.

An integrated water security regime – one capable of stabilising post-GERD relations – requires aligning infrastructure realities with institutional authority and normative commitment. This entails moving beyond securitisation toward hydrosolidarity, where water is understood not as sovereign property but as a shared system whose sustainability depends on collective stewardship. In this sense, the GERD does not undermine the CFA; rather, it renders the CFA indispensable.

The post-GERD phase dynamics and the entry into force of the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) together mark a structural reordering of Nile Basin hydropolitics. While analytically distinct, these developments are deeply interlinked: GERD represents a material and discursive rupture in long-standing hydro-hegemonic arrangements, whereas the CFA constitutes an attempt to translate that rupture into a legal-institutional order; they illuminate how transboundary water security (TWS) in the Nile Basin has shifted from competitive and hegemonic paradigms toward contested forms of common, cooperative and collective security – without yet consolidating into a community security regime.

Post-GERD dynamics reveal the limits of hydro-hegemonic control in an era of infrastructural sovereignty and shifting power asymmetries. Ethiopia's framing of GERD as both a developmental necessity and a sovereign right has redefined upstream agency within the basin. As articulated by Ethiopian officials and elites, GERD symbolises not merely energy production but a long-delayed correction of structural exclusion from Nile utilisation to common water security paradigm (II-P-01; II-P-04). Egypt's response, by contrast, has remained anchored in a competitive security logic, reframing GERD as an existential threat and advancing securitised claims in multilateral fora, including the UN Security Council (Egyptian State Information Service 2021; UNSC 2021).

Furthermore, drought discourse has been selectively mobilised. Ethiopian negotiators perceive downstream demands for guaranteed water releases during prolonged droughts as attempts to reframe the GERD as a de facto extension of the Aswan High Dam, thereby reinstating Egypt's hydro-hegemonic control under the guise of water security. This perception aligns with interview evidence suggesting that drought narratives are often deployed to protect historical entitlements rather than address basin-wide ecological vulnerability (II-P-02; II-P-08; II-P-12).

At the same time, Ethiopian officials emphasise that drought impacts are geographically uneven – originating primarily in upstream rainfall variability – yet require collective responses. For Ethiopia, 'Egypt's demand was simply an

attempt to subordinate GERD operations to the Aswan High Dam and perpetuate historical monopolies' (II-P-02; II-P-04; II-P-08). As one participant noted, 'if drought happens, it happens in Ethiopia, not in Egypt, for the latter is naturally rainless' (II-P-12). This framing situates drought within a common security paradigm, where climate change and hydrological uncertainty constitute shared threats demanding cooperative adaptation rather than securitised confrontation (II-P-07).

Transboundary water security community

An integrated water security regime, one capable of stabilising post-GERD relations, requires aligning infrastructure realities with institutional authority and normative commitment. This entails moving beyond securitisation toward hydrosolidarity, where water is understood not as sovereign property but as a shared system whose sustainability depends on collective stewardship.

A key outcome of transcendental and relational transboundary water security (TWS) is the potential emergence of a security community (Wæver 1998); a paradigm shift from the logic of anarchy to the logic of cooperation. In the Nile Basin, this entails moving beyond zero-sum, state-centric approaches – typified by downstream security anxieties over historical water entitlements – and embracing a constructivist framework of shared norms, practices and interdependence (Hopf 1998; Adler & Barnett 1998). The co-riparian states can, therefore, transition from securitisation discourse – where hydraulic development is framed as an existential threat – to TWS community, wherein cooperative management of the Nile fosters long-term trust, anchored in balanced reciprocity, and a collective sense of identity.

In the context of de-securitised transboundary water security understanding, the GERD, for instance, illustrates how infrastructure can simultaneously address hydrology and drainage/ecology (flow regulation, sediment management), water share (equitable allocation), development (hydropower generation and socio-economic growth), technology (advanced dam management) and socio-economic conditions (electrification) (II-P-04; Ayenalem et al. 2023; Keith et al. 2013). It also reinforces a rethinking of the GERD as an instrument that fosters energy transnationalism, enabling joint projects and reinforcing water security interdependence, co-riparian integration, and cooperation (Högselius 2018).

Simultaneously, the upstream states become empathetic towards downstream states' hydrological concerns and recognise the implication of territorial traps and evade from defining security solely in terms of national boundaries (Agnew 1994; Elhance 1998). Instead, water security interdependence positions the Nile as a shared resource, wherein droughts, climate change and demographic pressures are common vulnerabilities that demand collective actions (Aradau 2012; Paisley 2020; Tekuya 2020). As part and parcel of confidence building measures,

Ethiopia shall revisit the guideline for the GERD operation, hydrological data exchange and guarantee the safety of the dam (II-P-10; II-P-12).

In grounding transboundary water security community, not only the GERD but also the CFA plays an indispensable role. The implementation challenges of the CFA cannot be analytically separated from the post-GERD hydropolitical landscape. Rather than representing two distinct phases, the CFA and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) constitute mutually constitutive moments in the ongoing reconfiguration of Nile water security. Together, they reveal the tension between emerging cooperative and collective security logics and the persistence of competitive, hydro-sovereign and hydro-hegemonic practices.

Nonetheless, as a negotiated agreement, the CFA embodies a pluralist TWS community in which 'the use of force is not anticipated' (Deutsche 1961), and co-riparian sovereignty has been reconceived as cooperative rather than absolute (Magsig 2020). This approach directly addresses the upstream-downstream tension by reframing water security not as a zero-sum game but as a shared developmental and ecological enterprise (Wouters et al. 2009, 2011; Magsig 2015).

In this logic, hydrosolidarity eventually replaces hydrosovereignty with interdependence, promoting joint stewardship, equitable utilisation and collective resilience (Wouters 2000). In practice, it moves the Nile co-riparian states toward a hydrosecurity community, wherein watercourses are perceived as collective security concerns, and basin-wide vulnerabilities – such as droughts and sedimentation – become matters for cooperative management rather than securitised unilateral action (Elhance 1999).

In summary, the Nile Basin's evolving TWS community regime demonstrates that water security can serve as a bridge from conflict to cooperation. By embedding the five hydro-concepts within the broader security framework (competitive historic rights tensions), common (shared existential vulnerabilities), cooperative (joint projects, energy and irrigation), collective (regional management via NRBC) and community (shared norms, trust, and interdependence) (Wæver 1998; Hopf 1998; Adler & Barnett 1998), the basin states may advance a conceptual and practical paradigm of hydrosolidarity, where sovereignty is exercised collectively, risks are shared and water is managed as a common good for the long-term benefit of all riparian states (II-P-07; II-P-12).

Conclusion

The Nile experience demonstrates that transboundary water security cannot be reduced to infrastructure, law or hydrology alone. It is a relational security system, produced through power, discourse, institutions and ecological interdependence. The GERD has destabilised a historically entrenched hydro-hegemonic order while opening space, albeit contested, for a transition toward cooperative and community-oriented water security. Whether this transition materialises

depends less on engineering outcomes than on the willingness of riparian states to reconceptualise water not as sovereign property, but as a shared foundation for collective survival and regional stability.

This paper has indicated that the CFA, GERD and DOP do not represent a linear progression toward cooperation, but rather a contested arena in which multiple security paradigms and hydro-concepts coexist and compete. The Nile Basin is best understood as a hybrid water security complex, a key analytical insight is that water security itself is the object of struggle, whether it is framed as sovereign entitlement, shared risk, institutionalised cooperation, collective responsibility or ecological community, determines not only policy outcomes but also the trajectory of Nile Basin relations.

Taken together, post-GERD and post-CFA dynamics demonstrate that the Nile Basin currently occupies an intermediate security configuration. Competitive security and hydrohegemony persist, particularly in downstream narratives. Cooperative and collective security mechanisms have expanded through GERD coordination, drought-management discussions and CFA ratification. Elements of common security are evident in shared recognition of climate change, population growth and water variability as basin-wide threats. However, the conditions for community water security, characterised by deep trust, fused identities and fully institutionalised governance, remain unmet.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Data availability statement

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Annex I: List of Research Participants

Interviews	**Office**	**Position**	**Country**	**Code**
In-depth	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Diplomat	Ethiopia	II-P-01
In-depth	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Diplomat	Ethiopia	II-P-02
In-depth	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Diplomat	Ethiopia	II-P-03
In-depth	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Researcher	Ethiopia	II-P-04
In-depth	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Researcher	Ethiopia	II-P-05
In-depth	Ministry of Water & Energy	Director	Ethiopia	II-P-06
In-depth	Ministry of Water & Energy	Expert	Ethiopia	II-P-07
In-depth	Ministry of Water & Energy	Expert	Ethiopia	II-P-08
In-depth	Ministry of Water & Energy	Expert	Ethiopia	II-P-09
In-depth	GERD Project Office	Director	Ethiopia	II-P-10
In-depth	ENTRO	Expert	South Sudan	II-P-11
In-depth	Addis Ababa University	Academic	Ethiopia	II-P-12
In-depth	Addis Ababa University	Academic	Ethiopia	II-P-13
Semi-structured	ENTRO	Expert	Sudan	II-P-14
Semi-structured	GERD Project Office	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-21
Semi-structured	GERD Project Office	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-22
Semi-structured	GERD Project Office	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-23
Semi-structured	GERD Project Office	Manager	Ethiopia	SI-P-24
Semi-structured	GERD Project Office	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-25
Semi-structured	Institute for Water Education	Academic	Netherlands	SI-P-26
Semi-structured	EU Special Representative	Expert	Italy	SI-P-27
Semi-structured	Addis Ababa University	Academic	Ethiopia	SI-P-28
Semi-structured	Addis Ababa University	Academic	Ethiopia	SI-P-29
Semi-structured	Addis Ababa University	Academic	Ethiopia	SI-P-30
Semi-structured	Bahirdar University	Academic	Ethiopia	SI-P-31
Semi-structured	Bahirdar University	Academic	Ethiopia	SI-P-32
Semi-structured	Australian National University	Academic	Australia	SI-P-33
Semi-structured	Ministry of Justice	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-34
Semi-structured	Ministry of Justice	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-35
Semi-structured	Ministry of Water & Energy	Expert	Ethiopia	SI-P-36
Total				30

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Research article

Thematic section
Politics of Anniversaries in International Relations

Silenced Anniversaries, Stateless Memories: Rohingya Women's Oral Histories as Counter-Commemoration

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Abstract

Anniversaries are powerful instruments of nation-building, political legitimacy and collective memory. Yet for stateless peoples like the Rohingya – systematically stripped of citizenship in Myanmar and forcibly displaced into refugee camps in Bangladesh – commemorative recognition remains structurally foreclosed. This article argues that the absence of formal recognition surrounding Rohingya suffering constitutes what I term an 'invisible anniversary': a politically produced silence that renders violence ongoing, ungrievable and internationally manageable. Drawing on twenty-four in-depth oral history interviews conducted across three phases (January–May 2025) and six narrative case studies, the article demonstrates that these women's narratives function as counter-commemorative praxis – embodied acts of remembrance that resist temporal erasure and assert political claims to memory, justice and future-making. Theoretically, the article brings memory studies into dialogue with anticolonial feminist scholarship and International Relations, challenging state-centric approaches to commemoration by foregrounding stateless, gendered memory as a site of international political intervention. The analysis contributes to scholarship on memory politics, displacement and transnational justice by centring refugee

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women's oral histories not as supplementary testimony but as epistemologically generative counter-archives.

Keywords: *invisible anniversary, counter-commemoration, Rohingya, oral history, statelessness, gendered memory, anticolonial feminism, international relations*

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Introduction

Anniversaries are not merely temporal markers. They are political acts – moments through which states, institutions and communities declare which pasts matter, which suffering deserves mourning and which histories are entitled to recognition. In International Relations (IR), commemorative practices have been extensively examined as instruments of nation-building, diplomatic signalling and post-conflict reconciliation (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Mälksoo 2009; Subotić 2019). Yet these analyses almost universally presume the existence of a sovereign subject capable of authorising memory: a state that selects, ritualises and institutionalises the past. What happens, then, when the subjects of violence are stateless, excluded from national commemorative time, and denied political recognition altogether?

The Rohingya – a Muslim minority community whose documented presence in Arakan (present-day Rakhine State, Myanmar) spans centuries (Ibrahim 2018; Lee 2021) – reveal a profound and largely unexamined gap in the politics of anniversaries. Stripped of citizenship under Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law and subjected to multiple waves of state-sponsored persecution culminating in the military 'clearance operations' of August 2017, which the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (2018) characterised as carrying genocidal intent, more than one million Rohingya now live in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – the world's largest refugee settlement – unrecognised as refugees and registered instead as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals'. Despite widespread documentation of atrocities, ongoing proceedings at the International Court of Justice, and the largest single-country humanitarian operation in the world, Rohingya suffering remains uncommemorated within official national and international memory regimes. There is no recognised anniversary of their expulsion, no institutionalised ritual of mourning, no political closure marking an end to violence.

Drawing on twenty-four in-depth oral history interviews conducted across three phases and six narrative case studies with Rohingya refugee women in Cox's Bazar (January–May 2025), this article conceptualises this condition as an 'invisible anniversary': the systematic absence of commemorative recognition that does not merely reflect oversight but actively serves political interests – those of

the Myanmar state, of a humanitarian governance apparatus organised around emergency rather than accountability, and of an international order that struggles to extend recognition beyond sovereign subjects.

The article advances two interrelated arguments. First, the absence of commemoration is not merely symbolic but deeply political, shaping how violence is temporally organised and internationally governed. For Rohingya women, displacement is experienced not as a past event but as a continuous present – a condition of ongoingness produced by statelessness, encampment and the daily denial of rights. Second, Rohingya women's oral histories function as a form of counter-commemoration. Through embodied narratives of violence, displacement and survival, women produce alternative memory practices that contest erasure and articulate claims to justice, belonging and future-making beyond the state.

The article is structured as follows. The next (second) section develops the theoretical framework, situating the invisible anniversary within debates on memory politics, statelessness and anticolonial feminist oral history in IR. The third section details the anticolonial feminist methodology, including the three-phase fieldwork design, sampling, ethical protocols, the role of the female Rohingya interpreter-interlocutor, analytical approach and the researcher's positionality. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis as a continuous analytical narrative drawn from all twenty-four interviews and six case studies, moving across four interconnected dimensions: temporal refusal, embodied memory, suspended futurity and counter-commemorative narration. The fifth section draws together the transnational implications of these findings before concluding.

Memory politics, statelessness and anticolonial feminist oral history

This article is situated at the intersection of memory studies, International Relations and anticolonial feminist scholarship. Rather than treating anniversaries as neutral temporal markers, it approaches them as political practices through which authority, belonging and historical legitimacy are produced and, crucially, withheld. Three bodies of scholarship inform the theoretical framework developed here.

In memory studies, anniversaries have been theorised as key instruments through which political communities construct collective identity and stabilise narratives of the past. Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities highlights how commemorative rituals bind populations to shared histories, producing a sense of simultaneity and national belonging. Hobsbawm & Ranger's (1983) work on invented traditions reveals how such rituals are manufactured rather than organic, serving the interests of particular political formations. Maria Mälksoo's (2009) concept of mnemonic security extends this analysis into IR, showing how states manage memory to sustain ontological stability and project

historical legitimacy in international politics. Jelena Subotić (2019) examines how official memory can be instrumentalised in post-conflict settings to consolidate national narratives while suppressing inconvenient alternatives, revealing the deep entanglement of historical narrative with political power. Duncan Bell's (2003) account of mythscapes further illuminates how national memory operates through narrative coherence rather than historical accuracy, serving present political needs. Jenny Edkins's (2003) work on trauma and political memory, and Emma Hutchison's (2016) attention to affective communities in world politics, extend these insights to questions of how states respond – and fail to respond – to collective suffering.

These frameworks, however, share a fundamental limitation: they presume that memory circulates primarily through state institutions and that the subjects of commemoration are recognised members of national communities. As a result, experiences of violence that fall outside sovereign recognition – those of stateless refugees – are rendered structurally marginal or invisible. The invisible anniversary as theorised here is precisely this condition: the political production of absence, in which the non-commemoration of suffering is not accidental but functions to sustain existing power arrangements.

Statelessness is not only a legal condition but a temporal one. The denial of citizenship disrupts access to political futures and forecloses the possibility of historical closure. For stateless populations, violence is rarely framed as post-conflict, displacement is rarely understood as temporary, and time is experienced as suspended, repetitive and uncertain. This article conceptualises this condition as ongoingness – a temporal structure in which harm persists without recognition or resolution, destabilising anniversary politics by denying the capacity to designate historical beginnings and endings.

The Rohingya case makes this structural temporal exclusion unusually legible. The 1982 Burma Citizenship Law stripped the Rohingya of citizenship by requiring ancestral proof predating colonial Myanmar, legally erasing a community whose documented presence in Arakan stretches back centuries (Ibrahim 2018; Lee 2021). This legal erasure was not a single act but the codification of a longer project: Thawnghmung (2016) and Wade (2017) have traced how decades of Burman ethnic nationalist ideology constructed the Rohingya as threatening 'Bengali' interlopers rather than indigenous inhabitants of Arakan, mobilising the apparatus of the post-colonial state – army, police, judiciary, citizenship law – against them. Major military operations expelled Rohingya in 1978 and 1991–92 before the largest expulsion of August 2017, which saw villages systematically burned, men executed and women subjected to mass sexual violence, with over 700,000 Rohingya crossing into Bangladesh within months (UN FFM 2018; Human Rights Watch 2017). Today, more than one million Rohingya in Cox's Bazar are registered not as refugees – Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951

Refugee Convention – but as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals' (FDMN), a bureaucratic designation that further circumscribes their access to rights, formal employment, higher education and freedom of movement. For Rohingya women, the question 'when did the violence begin?' cannot be answered with 2017 alone. Their testimonies consistently situate recent events within a longer continuum of dispossession – one that stretches across generations and continues, in transformed forms, within the camps.

To analyse how stateless memory operates under conditions of ongoingness, the article draws on anticolonial feminist approaches to oral history. Feminist scholars have long argued that women's narratives – particularly those of refugee women – are excluded from official archives and treated as supplementary to 'authoritative' accounts of conflict (Sayigh 1994; Abdo 2014). Anticolonial feminism further critiques how colonial and postcolonial power structures shape whose voices are deemed credible, legible or politically relevant (Abdo 2014; Lugones 2007). In this framework, oral history is not a method of extracting testimony but a relational and political practice. Women's narratives are understood as epistemologically generative: they do not merely recount events but actively produce meaning about violence, survival and belonging. Rosemary Sayigh's (1994, 2007) foundational work with Palestinian refugee women, and Nahla Abdo's (2014) engagement with imprisoned Palestinian women, demonstrate how oral histories function as living archives – preserving collective memory where written records are absent or politically suppressed, and challenging masculinist, state-centric accounts of war that privilege strategic events over everyday lived harm.

Building on these insights, the article advances the concept of counter-commemoration to describe how marginalised subjects remember violence in the absence of official recognition. Counter-commemoration does not rely on sanctioned anniversaries or institutional rituals. It emerges instead through storytelling, testimony and collective narration that refuse erasure and insist on historical presence. For Rohingya women, oral history functions as a form of counter-commemorative praxis: by narrating violence as ongoing and structurally produced, women contest dominant memory regimes that fragment suffering into discrete events or depoliticised humanitarian crises. Crucially, this article does not romanticise oral history as inherently emancipatory. Counter-commemorative praxis emerges precisely because institutional recognition is absent. Women remember because no anniversary exists – not because oral history replaces the need for justice, acknowledgment or reparative practices. The concept names the political work that narration performs under conditions of statelessness; it does not celebrate it as sufficient.

Methodology: Anticolonial feminist oral history in the field

This article is grounded in anticolonial feminist oral history methodology, which I approach not merely as a research technique but as a counter-commemorative

praxis in itself. The choice of method is inseparable from the theoretical commitments outlined above: if Rohingya women's narratives are to be treated as epistemologically generative rather than supplementary, the research design must reflect that commitment at every level – from sampling and recruitment to the dynamics of the interview encounter and the ethics of translation.

Research design and phased fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, between January and May 2025, across three iterative phases totalling twenty-four oral history interviews and six additional narrative case studies – thirty participants in total. The phased design was deliberate: it enabled the interview instrument and approach to be refined between phases in response to emerging themes, participant comfort levels, and the emotional and ethical texture of prior encounters.

Phase 1 (January 2025) was a pilot phase involving six women across Camps 1W and 1E, designed to test the oral history guide, calibrate the emotional intensity of questions concerning sexual violence and family loss, and establish working relationships with Women-Friendly Space (WFS) staff and community networks. Phase 2 (February 2025) involved six additional women across Camps 3 and 8W, with a modified guide that deepened attention to temporal narration – how women situated their experiences in relation to both the longer history of persecution and their imagined futures. Phase 3 (March–May 2025) involved twelve women across Camps 4, 6, 8W, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19 and 20, deploying a matured instrument capable of sustaining extended, reflexive narrative conversations. The six case studies were collected separately at WFS sites in Camps 8W and 8E, using an open-ended, note-based format that allowed for life-history depth on particularly layered individual trajectories. All thirty participants are identified by pseudonym throughout. Participants ranged in age from nineteen to sixty years, came from multiple townships across Rakhine State (principally Buthidaung and Maungdaw), and included widows, married women, divorced women and single women across varied educational backgrounds, family structures and durations of displacement – from 2015 to as recently as 2024.

Sampling, recruitment and inclusion criteria

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, guided by an anticolonial feminist commitment to centring the diversity of lived experience among Rohingya refugee women rather than seeking statistical representativeness. Recruitment was conducted through established relationships with Women-Friendly Spaces, local NGO networks and informal community channels within the camps, in accordance with the ethical requirement to avoid recruitment pathways that could create coercion or compromise participant safety. Snowball referrals from

initial participants supplemented NGO-facilitated recruitment, consistent with established feminist oral history practice (Sayigh 1994; Gluck & Patai 1991).

Inclusion criteria were designed to ensure experiential diversity: current residence in designated camps (minimum six months); age eighteen to eighty; diverse marital status, education level, family composition and occupational background; and voluntary informed consent. Particular attention was given to ensuring participation of women who had survived gender-based violence, recognising both the centrality of this experience to the research questions and the ethical imperative to engage such participation with extraordinary care rather than to treat survivors as data sources.

The interpreter-interlocutor and the ethics of translation

A defining methodological dimension of this research was the sustained collaboration with a female Rohingya interpreter across all three phases of fieldwork. The interpreter was not a linguistic conduit: she was a cultural interlocutor, trust-builder and emotional co-presence whose role fundamentally shaped the interview encounter. Her presence enabled participants to speak with greater confidence – knowing their words would be carried not merely across languages but with fidelity to their cultural weight and emotional register. She also provided an anchor of safety that the researcher, as a non-Rohingya outsider, could not provide alone: a Rohingya woman among Rohingya women, whose own presence signalled that the encounter was not simply extractive.

The interpreter participated in pre-interview community sensitisation sessions and was trained on the research aims, ethical protocols and trauma-informed interviewing principles. Interviews were preceded, wherever possible, by informal visits to participants' homes or community spaces, allowing relationships to develop before formal recording began. Refreshments were provided and conversations were allowed to begin and end on participants' terms. Where participants showed signs of distress, interviews were paused or stopped. This was not a process of 'allowing women to tell their stories'; it was a sustained ethical and relational commitment to creating conditions in which narration was voluntary, supported and genuinely non-extractive – even as the researcher acknowledges that the asymmetries of the encounter can never be fully resolved.

Working with an interpreter also introduced irreducible methodological challenges. Subtle nuances of tone, metaphor, affect and embodied expression cannot fully survive translation. These limitations were addressed through collaborative transcription – with the researcher and interpreter reviewing recordings together and discussing questions of meaning, tone and cultural context – and through careful attention during interviews to non-verbal registers: trembling voices, pauses, tears, the gestures and silences that accompanied the most difficult testimonies. Wherever possible, these affective and embodied dimensions are docu-

mented alongside verbal content in the analysis below, following the feminist oral history insight that what is expressed through the body often carries more analytical weight than what is said in words (Allan 2018).

Ethical protocols

Research ethics clearance was granted by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (CUREB) in June 2024, under the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2). Permission to conduct research within the camps was additionally obtained from Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and the Camp-in-Charge (CiC) of each relevant camp, as required by Bangladesh government regulations for research involving the registered Rohingya population. This dual ethics approval process – spanning the Canadian institutional level and the Bangladesh governmental regulatory level – reflects the specific complexity of conducting ethical research with stateless populations in a host-country regulatory environment.

Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing prior to each interview, in Bangla and in the Rohingya dialect, with the consent form read aloud to accommodate varying literacy levels. For participants who could not or chose not to sign the form, oral consent was documented in the presence of an impartial witness, in keeping with REB-approved protocols for research with vulnerable populations. Participants were reminded at multiple points during longer interviews of their right to withdraw at any time, skip any question or stop the interview entirely without consequence. Compensation of BDT 500 per participant and refreshments were provided in recognition of participants' time.

The mental health risks inherent in this research were taken with the utmost seriousness. Many participants had survived sexual violence, witnessed the killing of family members, and experienced multiple displacements. Interviews were structured to begin with biographical and community questions before approaching experiences of violence, following trauma-informed sequencing. Participants were informed of available psychosocial support services – principally through Women-Friendly Spaces – at the outset of each interview, and referrals were facilitated where requested or where distress was evident. All transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms, with identifying geographic details masked where necessary.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded through manual thematic coding, a choice consistent with the epistemological commitments of anticolonial feminist oral history methodology, which privileges immersive, relational engagement with narrative material over mechanised or software-assisted approaches. All twenty-four interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed collab-

oratively between the researcher and the interpreter, with iterative checking to ensure accuracy of meaning across Rohingya, Bangla and English. Translation was understood throughout as an interpretive act rather than a neutral transfer, and the researcher and interpreter regularly discussed nuances of cultural meaning and affective register before finalising transcriptions. The six case studies, collected as detailed field notes rather than audio recordings, were written up immediately following each encounter. Initial codes were generated inductively from close reading of the full dataset and refined through successive cycles of reading across all twenty-four interviews and six case studies. Codes were subsequently organised into the analytical themes that structure Section 4 – temporal refusal, embodied memory, suspended futurity and counter-commemorative narration – and tested across the full dataset for consistency and divergence.

Positionality

As a Bangladeshi-born feminist researcher, I occupied a position simultaneously inside and outside the research context – a positionality that shaped both the possibilities and the limits of the encounter. My Bangladeshi identity and fluency in Bangla provided practical advantages: familiarity with the broader social and political context of Cox's Bazar, ease of communication with camp administration and NGO personnel, and a degree of cultural proximity that contributed to rapport. My decade of prior NGO fieldwork with vulnerable women's communities in Bangladesh – including prior engagement with Rohingya people in Bangladesh – offered field familiarity and relationship-building capacity that were practically indispensable. My doctoral training in sociology and anthropology at Carleton University, under the supervision of Professor Nahla Abdo, shaped my theoretical commitments and my understanding of what it means to conduct research that is ethically accountable rather than merely ethically compliant.

At the same time, my positionality carried limitations and obligations that I take seriously. As a non-Rohingya researcher, I do not share the experience of statelessness, genocide or encampment. My capacity to leave the camps, to hold Canadian university affiliation, and to publish in international journals reflects precisely the asymmetries of recognition and access that this article examines. These asymmetries cannot be resolved; they can only be acknowledged openly, reflected upon continuously and accounted for in analytical practice. I maintained a reflexive field diary throughout all three phases of fieldwork, documenting not only observations but ethical dilemmas, emotional responses and evolving analytical insights. This diary informed the analysis and serves as an audit trail of reflexive accountability.

Invisible anniversaries: Rohingya women's testimonies as counter-commemorative praxis

The empirical analysis that follows builds an analytical narrative from the full dataset of twenty-four interviews and six case studies. Rather than treating individual testimonies as illustrations of pre-established theoretical claims, it allows the data to accumulate – moving across four analytically interconnected dimensions – to demonstrate how the condition of the invisible anniversary is lived, embodied and contested by Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar. The women whose voices anchor this analysis are not representational samples; they are witnesses whose narrations constitute, in themselves, the counter-commemorative practice that this article theorises.

The most consistent feature across all twenty-four interviews is a temporal refusal: a systematic rejection of the event-based chronology that structures official accounts of the Rohingya crisis. International humanitarian and governmental narratives tend to treat August 2017 as the originary moment – a discrete crisis that can be marked, responded to and, in principle, resolved. Women's testimonies refuse this framing with remarkable consistency, across participants from very different camps, townships and generations. For Rahima, a fifty-one-year-old widow in Camp 1W who has lived in the camps for nearly eight years, the violence of 2017 was not a beginning: 'They took our nationality long before . . . and then everything followed.' She locates the roots of displacement not in a military operation but in the decades-long legal erasure that the 1982 Citizenship Law initiated, and in the everyday restriction of movement, education and religious practice that preceded mass expulsion. The clearance operation of 2017 is, in her account, not a crisis but an intensification – the most brutal episode in a pattern of persecution that has never formally ended.

This longitudinal framing is shared by participants across different arrival cohorts, underscoring that the invisible anniversary is not primarily about 2017 but about a structure of persecution that predates and outlasts any single date of international attention. Purnima, a sixty-year-old woman who arrived in 2015 – two years before the major 2017 influx – describes conditions in Myanmar that expose the inadequacy of a 2017 origin point: military battalions stationed inside Rohingya village schools for days at a time, requiring communities to feed and provision them on pain of violence, with children excluded from education entirely. 'The military lived in the schools, in every village's school . . . our children could not go to school.' Momota, a fifty-three-year-old camp volunteer who arrived in 2017, frames the escalation as beginning in 2015 with systematic livestock theft, arbitrary arrests and sexual harassment that intensified over two years before the August operations. And Papri, who arrived as recently as 2024 after renewed violence by both the Myanmar Junta and the Arakan Army, embodies the continuation of the crisis into the present: her testimony is a living refutation

of the assumption that 2017 marked any kind of closure. The Arakan Army – the Rakhine Buddhist militant force that now controls significant territory in Rakhine State – perpetrated the same patterns of sexual violence, house burning and mass displacement against which earlier participants fled, demonstrating what Thawnghmung (2016) and Wade (2017) analyse as the structural persistence of anti-Rohingya ethnic nationalism regardless of which actor controls the territory.

The administrative category under which Rohingya live in Bangladesh is itself a mechanism of the invisible anniversary. When Rahima observes that 'in Myanmar, they denied our identity as Rohingya. Here, we are called FDMN, and still we face many challenges', she articulates with precision how bureaucratic naming performs temporal erasure. The designation 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals' severs displacement from the political history of persecution, reframing a consequence of state-sponsored genocide as a logistical status. Without refugee recognition, and without citizenship on either side of the border, Rohingya women inhabit a permanent administrative present: neither past nor resolved, neither historicised nor politically legible. The invisible anniversary is thus not simply the absence of a commemorative date. It is the structural denial of historical continuity – the political organisation of violence into perpetual ungrievability.

Against this structure of erasure, women's bodies carry the history that institutions refuse to commemorate. What feminist oral historians call embodied memory (Allan 2018) – memory inscribed in the body rather than organised through linear chronology – is not a metaphor in this dataset. It is a physical and ongoing reality. Across the twenty-four interviews, all participants disclosed direct or proximate experiences of sexual violence perpetrated by Myanmar military personnel and Rakhine Mogh (now organising as the Arakan Army). The consistency and pattern of these accounts speak not to individual incidents but to the systematic, organised mass rape that the UN Fact-Finding Mission (2018) documented across Rakhine State and characterised as carrying genocidal intent. Reading these testimonies together – as the analysis requires – produces an account of sexual violence that no single institutional report has captured from the inside.

Mahjabeen, a forty-three-year-old woman from Buthidaung Township, describes what happened at 8 AM on a morning in 2017 at her home. Four military personnel and five Rakhine Mogh arrived at her compound. Her mother-in-law attempted to intervene when they took Mahjabeen; the military shot and killed her mother-in-law in front of her. Her husband ran from the hill above their house to help; he was beaten so severely that his mobility has been permanently impaired. Mahjabeen was raped by two soldiers for more than twenty minutes while her hands were bound. 'I almost died because I was not able to breathe', she states. 'I almost died from the heavy bleeding caused by the rape. I am still suffering greatly from it.' The ongoing pain she carries – the limitation on what her

body can carry and do, the chronic physical consequences of gang rape – is not background context. It is central evidence of the invisible anniversary's reality: a body that cannot forget what no official calendar marks.

Mollika, forty-five years old, from Tulatuli village in northern Maungdaw Township – one of the sites most extensively documented in Human Rights Watch (2017) and UN FFM (2018) reports on the 2017 massacres – narrates a scale of violence against which the language of crisis is wholly inadequate. Of her family of nineteen, seventeen were killed: her husband, her two young sons aged three and five, her parents, her parents-in-law, three brothers-in-law and four sisters-in-law with their children. She was raped by two military personnel in a paddy field, losing consciousness from the assault. She later discovered she had become pregnant from the rape; the pregnancy ended in miscarriage during medical treatment in Chattogram hospital. Eight years later, she says: 'When I cough, I feel pain in my abdomen even now. Because of their rape, I still have pain between my legs. I cannot even carry a water pot.' This statement names with biological precision the way that genocidal violence persists in the body long after the event, making the body itself a kind of living archive that refuses the narrative closure of 'post-conflict'. Her body is where the invisible anniversary is held.

Mohona, thirty-two years old and six months pregnant at the time of her assault, was taken by soldiers to a police station after they beat her and her husband at their home while searching for a named suspect. After hours of interrogation and deprivation of food and water, a soldier raped her at night, pressing his knee into her pregnant abdomen throughout the assault. She lost consciousness and woke not knowing where she was or how much time had passed. She describes the physical aftermath – the inability to walk or speak, the blood, the starvation of two days – in careful detail. But the analytical dimension of her testimony that the data demand attention to is what happened after: her husband, throughout their subsequent years in the camp, blamed her for the assault. 'When he beat me, he called me a bad girl, scolding me with the name of the violence. Sometimes he shamed me in front of others.' The state violence did not end with the assault. It was reproduced – by the husband, by the community – in ways that transferred shame from perpetrator to survivor, ultimately ending her marriage. This is how embodied memory becomes ongoing social harm: violence inscribed in the body produces social stigma that compounds the original injury.

This pattern of spousal rejection, social stigma and community exclusion following rape appears with striking regularity across the dataset. Bipasha, a nineteen-year-old woman who survived gang rape while being trafficked toward Malaysia, describes how her neighbours discuss her assault openly and how this community commentary has blocked marriage proposals: 'They see me as a "survivor of gang rape"; that is why they have reduced their communication with me, and even with my whole family.' Mohua was divorced by her husband because

she had been raped, then told she was a 'bad girl' for having been assaulted: 'He hates me because the military raped me in Myanmar.' Morjina notes that she knows of two women whose husbands divorced them specifically because they had survived rape. Fortify Rights (2018) has documented how the stigmatisation of rape survivors constitutes a secondary form of gender-based violence in Rohingya communities – one that extends the genocidal project of destroying community cohesion through the bodies of women into the domestic sphere and interpersonal relationships. The invisible anniversary operates not only at the level of international memory regimes but within the most intimate dimensions of survivors' lives.

The case studies from Women-Friendly Spaces in Camps 8W and 8E concentrate these dynamics in particularly layered individual trajectories. Yasmin arrived at Camp 8W five months prior to the case study encounter. Her husband had been killed, her home burned, and she had been raped by soldiers during the same operation. She arrived in Bangladesh having crossed through her brother-in-law's network, discovered she was pregnant from the assault, sought a medical abortion at five months (with severe complications), and spent months in a state of suicidal crisis before being referred to the WFS. She had no ration card – she was not officially registered in the camp – meaning she depended on her cousin's family for food while recovering from medical complications. Her case illustrates with painful concreteness how the biological consequences of genocidal rape continue to unfold long after the immediate violence, requiring a continuum of medical, psychosocial and material support that camp infrastructure cannot reliably provide. Salma's case documents a different but connected dimension of ongoing violence: a thirty-five-year-old woman who, after sending her disabled son to safety to protect him from armed group conscription, was gang-raped on multiple occasions by criminal networks operating within the camp. The structural vulnerability that statelessness produces – no legal status, no economic options, no protection mechanisms – created conditions in which violence against her was not merely possible but systematically predictable. These case studies are not exceptional; they are the concentrated expression of structural conditions that all thirty women in this study navigate.

The suspension of futurity is the third dimension through which the invisible anniversary is lived and contested. Across all twenty-four interviews, camp life is narrated as a condition of temporal stagnation – of time that does not move toward resolution or recovery, but simply accumulates. Rahima's description of daily life captures this with stark economy: 'There are no better days for us; every day is filled with hardship and uncertainty.' Salma, a thirty-two-year-old widowed mother of four who travels eight to nine kilometres daily to work in potato and chili fields outside the camp, describes the same reality from a position of relentless physical labour: 'We are surviving by enduring, as we have no other option.'

The verb 'enduring' recurs across testimonies – not adapting, not recovering, not building, but enduring. It names precisely the temporal condition of ongoingness: not a past that has been processed but a present that has simply continued.

Education emerges across the dataset as the most concentrated site where this suspension of futurity is felt. Women repeatedly connect the inadequacy of camp education to the long-term foreclosure of their children's possibilities. Rahima articulates the aspiration with painful clarity: 'Our children have access to learning centres, but the quality is very poor . . . I want education where they can have hope and dreams.' Mahjabeen, whose two daughters attend the camp Learning Centre, expresses a mother's hope with an awareness of its fragility:

> I have a dream that my daughters will be good lawyers in the future, and then they can both advocate and work for our people and our motherland, Arakan. I am trying to provide them with education, but I cannot provide it properly, as everything for us in the camp is limited. I do not know how I will make my dream come true.

The economic dimensions of this suspension are equally significant. Most participants subsist entirely on WFP rations, which are widely described as insufficient. Papia, a thirty-year-old mother of six whose fifteen-year-old son works as a tea-shop assistant in a nearby market to help support the family, describes the impossible arithmetic of camp survival: 'We are both always struggling to educate them, even if it means we do not eat good food.' Purnima, a sixty-year-old widow who sells vegetables door-to-door in her block to fund her son's private tutoring, describes going to relatives to beg for tuition money: 'I even went to Teknaf to beg.' The figure of a sixty-year-old woman begging across towns to keep her son in school carries within it the entire weight of what statelessness means: no employment rights, no formal economic participation, no institutional safety net beyond rations. These are not stories of passive victimhood. They are accounts of women who understand, with precision, that education is the mechanism through which their children might eventually be able to make claims on a future – and who are working, with whatever minimal resources they have, to keep that possibility alive.

The camp's physical environment compounds this temporal stagnation. The shelters – bamboo and tarpaulin structures – are overcrowded, fire-prone and vulnerable to landslides. Women describe camps in which one hundred families share two toilets; in which collecting water after dark is the only option because daytime collection is unsafe; in which kidnapping by armed groups is a daily fear for both children and adults. Madina, a twenty-nine-year-old WFS volunteer, describes the impossibility of allowing her children outside: 'Our shelter is at the top of the hill. If our children go outside, they may slip during the rainy season . . . there are many kidnappers roaming in the camp.' These conditions are nar-

rated not as exceptional crises but as the ordinary structure of camp life – which is precisely the point. Humanitarian temporality frames the camps as spaces of temporary protection awaiting future resolution. Women's narratives refuse this framing. They describe camps as permanently insecure environments in which 'emergency' has become the baseline condition of existence. This is ongoingness at its most material: violence that has been spatially relocated but not ended.

Against these conditions of temporal stagnation and embodied harm, the counter-commemorative dimensions of narration emerge with analytical clarity – the fourth dimension of this analysis. Women narrate not only to recount the past but to assert its political significance and to resist its erasure. Rahima's formulation, 'Our violence is not forgetting', is the most grammatically precise statement of counter-commemorative intent in the dataset. It is not 'we have not forgotten our violence' (retrospective recall), nor is it 'we will never forget' (future commitment). It is a present continuous construction: violence that is, in this moment, not-forgetting – actively persisting, refusing the closure that the invisible anniversary would impose. Memory here is not an archive consulted but a lived condition, and narrating it is one of the ways in which that condition is sustained, transmitted and made politically legible.

Many women frame their testimonies explicitly as obligations to future generations. Mahjabeen's hope that her daughters will become lawyers who can 'advocate and work for our people and our motherland, Arakan' positions the narrative of violence she shares with the researcher as a form of political transmission – a counter-archive being built for future use. Momota, who volunteers with a camp disaster management unit, articulates this forward orientation directly:

> I want to educate my children so that they can understand what is good and what is bad for them, and so they can survive easily after our return to our motherland – so they can raise their voices against the injustice.

The temporal structure of these statements is significant: the testimonies being given now are oriented toward a future in which Rohingya will have returned to Myanmar with their rights, and in which today's daughters and sons will be equipped to make claims on that future. This intergenerational dimension of counter-commemoration is its most politically significant feature: it positions oral testimony not as the end of a process of bearing witness but as the beginning of one.

The invocation of international legal instruments represents this counter-commemorative orientation at its most politically developed. Multiple women in the dataset referenced the ICJ proceedings explicitly and with precision. Rahima states: 'We complained to the ICJ. We will return to Myanmar after the cases are resolved. We will return with our rights.' This statement does several things

simultaneously. It situates her oral testimony within a legal framework in which narrating violence has formal juridical consequences and can accumulate into evidence. It refuses the framing of displacement as an indefinite humanitarian condition. And it insists on a future of return organised not around humanitarian mercy but around rights – citizenship, dignity, legal recognition. This is counter-commemoration in its most politically developed form: not merely remembering violence but directing that memory toward a specific, institutionally legible claim on justice. Within the camps, counter-commemoration also operates through the everyday infrastructures of community life and, in some cases, through direct institutional engagement. Madina, who used the legal channels available within the camp to obtain a divorce from an abusive husband – filing her complaint with the Camp-in-Charge and navigating the BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust) office – demonstrates how narration translates into legal action: her narration of abuse was not background to a legal process; it was the legal process. In this micro-example, oral testimony functioned as what this article theorises it to be: a political intervention, not merely a record.

Taken together across these four dimensions – the temporal refusal of event-based chronology, the embodied inscription of genocidal violence, the suspension of futurity in camp life, and the counter-commemorative orientation of narration itself – the twenty-four interviews and six case studies demonstrate that Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar are active political subjects performing commemorative labour that no institution performs on their behalf. Their oral histories do not seek inclusion within existing commemorative frameworks. They unsettle the foundations of anniversary politics by refusing closure, foregrounding ongoingness, and insisting on recognition as a matter of justice rather than ritual. The invisible anniversary names the structure they are contesting. Counter-commemoration names what they are doing about it.

Implications and conclusion: Towards a politics of stateless memory in International Relations

The analysis above carries implications that extend beyond the Rohingya case, demanding a reorientation of how International Relations conceptualises commemoration, memory and the politics of historical recognition. Three areas of implication deserve attention.

First, the case compels IR to take seriously the transnational dimensions of counter-commemorative practice. The oral histories analysed here do not remain within the camps. They circulate – through legal proceedings, humanitarian documentation, diaspora networks and global advocacy. The Gambia's 2019 case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, alleging violations of the Genocide Convention, represents one of the few institutional mechanisms through which Rohingya suffering has been formally named at an international

level. Rohingya women's awareness of and engagement with these proceedings – expressed consistently across the dataset, not as general sentiment but as specific knowledge of the proceedings and their significance – demonstrates that counter-commemorative narration is already transnational in orientation before it reaches any international forum. International law functions here not only as an accountability mechanism but as a transnational memory regime: one that records, names and may eventually adjudicate violence that the perpetrating state seeks to deny. Yet feminist and postcolonial scholars have rightly cautioned that such translation is never neutral: international courts can amplify marginalised voices while simultaneously narrowing complex experiences of violence into juridical categories that privilege certain forms of harm over others (Abdo 2014). The gap between what women narrated in interviews and what is cognisable within ICJ proceedings is a gap this article cannot close – but it must name.

Second, the case exposes the political temporality of humanitarian governance. International funding for Cox's Bazar is organised around annual donor cycles, crisis narratives and the logic of short-term emergency response rather than long-term historical responsibility. As WFP rations have been cut repeatedly in recent years due to funding shortfalls, women in the camps experience the material consequences of this humanitarian temporality directly in their bodies – in insufficient food, in children sent to work, in the impossible calculations of a sixty-year-old widow begging across towns to fund a tuition fee. This humanitarian temporality reinforces the invisible anniversary: violence is managed but not formally remembered; survival is provisionally ensured but political recognition is deferred. Women's narratives repeatedly contest this framing – by articulating displacement as ongoing and historically rooted, by connecting present suffering to past and continuing state violence that humanitarian governance obscures, and by demanding accountability rather than assistance. Rohingya women's counter-commemorative testimonies are, in this sense, a critique of the humanitarian order not from outside it but from within its administrative boundaries.

Third, and most broadly, the Rohingya case calls for a fundamental rethinking of anniversary politics in IR. The field's dominant frameworks presume a sovereign subject capable of authorising memory: a state that selects which pasts to mark, mourn or celebrate. Rohingya women's oral histories – produced by subjects who are recognised by no state, commemorated in no national calendar, and governed by an international system that manages rather than remembers their suffering – expose the profound exclusions embedded in this assumption. Diaspora communities, including the significant Rohingya diaspora in Canada, the United States and Europe, function as transnational memory carriers, linking localised experiences of violence to international norms, institutions and publics, and ensuring that the invisible anniversary does not simply disappear into humanitarian management. Counter-commemoration, as demonstrated across

the preceding analysis, is not a supplement to institutional memory-making. For stateless populations, it is its only available form. Recognising it as a legitimate and politically consequential mode of international memory practice requires IR to move beyond state-centred frameworks toward what might be called a politics of stateless memory – one that takes seriously the commemorative labour performed by those who fall outside the sovereign structures through which historical recognition is normally organised.

This article has argued that the absence of commemorative recognition for Rohingya suffering constitutes an invisible anniversary: a political condition through which violence is rendered ongoing, ungrievable and administratively manageable within international memory regimes. Drawing on twenty-four oral history interviews conducted across three phases and six case studies with Rohingya refugee women in Cox's Bazar – women who carry in their bodies, their testimonies and their everyday acts of narration the accumulated weight of genocide, statelessness, displacement and continued insecurity – the analysis has demonstrated how stateless, gendered memories disrupt state-centred temporalities that rely on closure, resolution and post-conflict narratives.

The concept of the invisible anniversary advances memory studies and International Relations in several ways. It names the political production of absence rather than treating non-commemoration as oversight. It centres statelessness as a temporal condition – not merely a legal one – that forecloses the very possibility of historical closure. And it repositions oral history not as a method for accessing subaltern voices but as a counter-commemorative praxis through which marginalised subjects perform the commemorative labour that institutions refuse to perform on their behalf.

For Rohingya women, speaking is not a supplement to justice – it is the practice of justice under conditions in which no other form is available. Rahima speaks because no anniversary exists. Mollika bears witness to the loss of seventeen family members because no institutional memory regime has yet named them. Mahjabeen articulates her dream of daughters who will become lawyers because she understands that the future of her community depends on its capacity to claim recognition – legally, politically, historically – in the present. These are not passive testimonies. They are political interventions: counter-anniversaries that recur relationally, through conversation, care and the transmission of memory across generations, insisting on historical presence in a global order that otherwise renders their suffering invisible.

Attending to such invisible anniversaries compels International Relations to rethink how memory, violence and belonging are produced and withheld beyond the boundaries of sovereignty and official time. It also compels those of us who conduct and publish research with stateless populations to reflect seriously on what it means to receive such testimonies – what obligations that

reception creates, and what our scholarly act of commemoration owes to the counter-commemorative labour of the women who made it possible. As Rahima reminded me during our interview: 'Our violence is not forgetting.' Ensuring that it is not forgotten in scholarly and political spheres is the minimum that counter-commemorative research can offer in return.

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Thematic section
Politics of Anniversaries in International Relations

The Internationalisation of Jina Mahsa Amini Anniversaries: Memory, Diaspora and Human Rights Politics (2023–2025)

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Abstract

Anniversaries occupy a pivotal place in the politics of memory, functioning as contested arenas where states, societies and diasporas negotiate identity, legitimacy and justice. Focusing on the Mahsa Amini anniversaries (2023–2025) and the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, this paper argues that commemorative practices have reconfigured domestic mnemonic contestation into a transnational human-rights narrative that recalibrates claims of state legitimacy in international arenas. The analysis integrates Politics of Memory, Mnemonic Security and Contested Memories with debates on human rights in International Relations to theorise how anniversaries travel across scales. Using qualitative thematic content analysis, the study traces mechanisms through which anniversaries operate as instruments of political communication, social mobilisation and reputational politics. It identifies patterned tensions between state-sanctioned narratives and alternative societal or diasporic memories, highlighting processes of framing, ritualised digital commemoration, securitisation and institutional uptake. By situating the Amini anniversaries within broader literatures on memory, security and human rights, the paper contributes a mechanism-focused account of how commemorations mediate the interplay of

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authority, resistance and normative claims in contentious political contexts, and clarifies the conditions under which mnemonic struggles become internationalised.

Keywords: *anniversaries, diaspora activism, Iran, Jina Mahsa Amini, memory politics, woman, life, freedom*

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Introduction

The death of Jina Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022 and the subsequent Woman, Life, Freedom uprising transformed a specific incident of state violence into one of the most visible protest cycles in contemporary Iran. The first, second and third anniversaries of her death, from 2023 to 2025, did not simply repeat the memory of the original event. They became recurring moments in which mourning, protest, state control, diaspora mobilisation and international human rights claims were reactivated. This article examines these anniversaries as temporal formations through which domestic struggles over memory are connected, contested and translated across transnational political arenas.

The case is significant because it is embedded in a longer history of protest and repression in Iran. Over the past decade, Iran has witnessed repeated waves of mobilisation, including the 2017–2018 protests, the 2019 fuel-price protests and the 2022–2023 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. These cycles have been shaped by socioeconomic grievances, political repression, gendered forms of state control, and recurrent struggles over public mourning and political visibility (Bayat 2017; Amnesty International 2023; Human Rights Watch 2023). In this context, anniversaries are not isolated commemorative dates. They are moments when past violence returns to the present as a contested political claim.

The article draws on memory studies, security studies, diaspora studies and human rights literature to analyse how anniversaries operate across scales. Anniversaries can function as sites of memory in which competing actors struggle over the meaning of the past (Nora 1989; Assmann 2011). They can also become objects of securitisation when states treat commemorative practices as threats to public order or political legitimacy (Mälksoo 2015). At the same time, memories do not travel automatically or without contestation. Diasporic actors, media networks, human rights organisations and international institutions may translate domestic claims into globally legible narratives, but these translations are selective, contested and shaped by political opportunity structures (Keck & Sikkink 1999; Ghorashi & Tavakoli 2006; Ghorashi & Boersma 2009; McAuliffe 2008).

This article therefore asks: *How do the anniversaries of Jina Mahsa Amini's death mediate the relationship between domestic memory contestation, diasporic meaning-*

making and transnational human rights politics? The argument is not that anniversaries automatically produce international pressure, nor that diaspora activism simply mirrors domestic activism. Rather, the article argues that anniversaries can create recurring opportunities for the reactivation, translation and institutional referencing of memory claims. In the Amini case, these opportunities were shaped through competitive framing, ritualised digital commemoration, securitisation and institutional uptake.

Empirically, the article traces the three anniversary cycles from 2023 to 2025 through a qualitative thematic content analysis of public documents, including state-affiliated media texts, diaspora and activist materials, international media reports and institutional documents from the European Union, United Nations bodies and human rights organisations. The analysis shows how the anniversaries became recurring focal points of reputational politics: not as direct causes of international mechanisms such as the UN Fact-Finding Mission, but as calendar moments through which existing human rights concerns, accountability claims and diplomatic assessments were renewed and made visible. The article contributes to debates on memory, diaspora activism and human rights by showing how commemorative time can structure the internationalisation of domestic political conflict.

Previous research and theoretical debates

The study of anniversaries as political events sits at the intersection of several research traditions: memory studies, the politics of commemoration, securitisation, diaspora activism and human rights politics. Rather than treating anniversaries as merely symbolic repetitions of past events, this article approaches them as recurring temporal moments in which political actors can reactivate, contest and translate memory claims across different arenas.

A first body of literature concerns collective memory and the political organisation of the past. Classical work on nationalism has shown that collective identities are not naturally given, but are reproduced through shared narratives, symbols, rituals and institutions. Anderson's account of the nation as an imagined community and Hobsbawm and Ranger's work on invented traditions remain important for understanding how collective belonging is reproduced through ritualised forms of memory (Anderson 2008; Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012). Memory studies further shows that collective memory is not a neutral reflection of the past, but a field of contestation in which actors struggle over legitimacy, responsibility, victimhood and political identity. Nora's concept of sites of memory is useful here because it shows how memory becomes institutionalised when the continuity of lived memory is disrupted (Nora 1989). Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory similarly helps explain how memories are stabilised through repeatable forms such as rituals, texts, images

and ceremonies (Assmann 2011). Recent work on transnational memory further clarifies how collective memories circulate beyond bounded national and cultural frameworks, making them available for reinterpretation across diasporic, media and institutional spaces (Erll 2025).

Anniversaries occupy a specific place within this politics of memory. They provide recurring moments when past events can be returned to the present and made politically visible. Recent work on protest memory and commemorative activism has emphasised that anniversaries do not simply preserve memory; they can also organise hope, critique, solidarity and renewed mobilisation (Rigney 2026). Hom's work on political timing and round numbers is also relevant because it shows that *when* political claims are made can be as important as *what* is claimed (Hom 2017). In the Iranian context, this temporal dimension is not new. Commemorative cycles have long played a role in political mobilisation, including the ceremonies of chehelom during the 1979 revolutionary period and later practices of mourning around political violence and martyrdom. The anniversaries of Amini's death should therefore be situated within a longer history of protest temporality and commemorative politics rather than treated as isolated events.

A second body of literature concerns the relationship between memory and security. In international relations and security studies, memory has increasingly been analysed not only as a cultural or domestic issue, but also as a matter of political order and legitimacy. Mälksoo's concept of mnemonical security shows how states may attempt to defend particular narratives of the past while delegitimising or criminalising competing memories (Mälksoo 2015). This is relevant to anniversaries because commemorative practices can be interpreted by authorities as threats to public order, symbolic authority or regime legitimacy. Work on critical security history similarly argues that history and memory are not simply background contexts for security politics, but active components of how threats, identities and political communities are narrated (Donnelly & Steele 2019). This literature helps explain why commemorative dates may become objects of surveillance, restriction or securitised framing.

A third body of literature concerns diaspora activism and transnational meaning-making. Earlier models of transnational advocacy, especially the boomerang model, show how domestic actors facing blocked political channels may seek external allies, who can then generate pressure on a target state through international networks (Keck & Sikkink 1999; Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999). However, this process should not be understood as automatic or linear. The relationship between domestic activism, diaspora mobilisation, media circulation and international pressure is selective, contested and shaped by political opportunity structures. Studies of the Iranian diaspora are particularly important in this regard because they show that diaspora communities are internally diverse rather than politically homogeneous. McAuliffe highlights internal diversity within

the Iranian diaspora, while Elahi and Karim emphasise the plurality of diasporic identities, histories and political positions (McAuliffe 2008; Elahi & Karim 2011). Khosravi similarly describes the Iranian diaspora as fragmented, suggesting that diasporic politics cannot be reduced to a single collective voice (Khosravi 2018).

Other studies show that Iranian diasporic activism is shaped by the interaction between transnational networks, local host-country contexts, media infrastructures and competing memories of homeland politics. Ghorashi and Tavakoli demonstrate the paradoxes of organising across borders, while Ghorashi and Boersma show how new media can enable both political action and humanitarian mobilisation among Iranians abroad (Ghorashi & Tavakoli 2006; Ghorashi & Boersma 2009). Work on diasporic demobilisation and feminist activism further demonstrates that transnational activism may decline, fragment or change form over time rather than simply intensify (Nasirpour, Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2022). These studies are important for the present article because they caution against treating diaspora actors as direct extensions of domestic society. Instead, diaspora actors may translate, amplify, reshape or contest domestic claims.

A fourth relevant literature concerns activist memory work and the cultural production of protest. Memory is not only transmitted through formal institutions or political statements; it is also produced through images, music, films, exhibitions, digital campaigns and commemorative performances. In the Iranian context, recent work on the Woman, Life, Freedom movement has shown how protest memory is produced through cultural and digital forms, including artistic narratives, social media practices and protest music (Mousavi 2024; Fadaee 2024; Rivetti & Saeidi 2023). Such work helps explain how the memory of Amini's death travelled beyond the original site of protest and became attached to broader claims about gender, bodily autonomy, state violence and accountability.

Taken together, these literatures provide the basis for the article's analytical approach. Memory studies explains why anniversaries become contested sites of meaning; security studies explains why states may seek to manage or securitise commemorative practices; diaspora studies shows that transnational mobilisation is internally diverse and politically contingent; and human rights literature explains how selected claims may be translated into internationally legible languages of accountability. The remaining gap is that these literatures are often discussed separately. Less attention has been paid to how anniversaries, as recurring temporal formations, mediate between domestic memory contestation, diasporic meaning-making and transnational human rights politics. This article addresses that gap by analysing the 2023–2025 anniversaries of Amini's death as recurring moments through which memory claims were reactivated, contested, translated and institutionally referenced across domestic, diasporic and international arenas.

Conceptual framework: Anniversary as a node of memory and global politics

This article conceptualises the anniversaries of Jina Mahsa Amini's death as temporal nodes of memory and global politics. An anniversary is not treated here as a simple calendrical return to the past, but as a recurring political occasion through which memory claims may be reactivated, contested, securitised, translated or institutionally referenced. The framework is therefore mechanism-oriented, but not deterministic. It does not assume that anniversaries automatically produce transnational mobilisation or international pressure. Rather, it examines the conditions under which anniversary cycles can connect domestic memory contestation, diasporic meaning-making and transnational human rights politics.

The starting point is the idea that time itself can become politically consequential. Hom's work on political timing suggests that when claims are made can shape their visibility, resonance and mobilisation potential (Hom 2017). Anniversaries are important because they create predictable occasions for renewed attention. They condense dispersed grievances around a recognisable date, enable coordination across different locations, and provide media and activist networks with a recurring temporal structure. This does not mean that anniversaries always generate political effects. Some commemorations may be silenced, fragmented, localised or contained. Their political significance depends on the interaction between memory work, state response, media visibility, diaspora capacity and institutional receptivity.

The framework operates through three conceptual layers: memory, security and norm translation. The first layer is the politics of memory. Collective memory is understood as a field of contestation in which actors struggle over what happened, who is responsible, who has the right to mourn and what political meaning should be attached to the past. In the case of Amini's anniversaries, state institutions and state-affiliated media may attempt to frame the event through narratives of stability, public order, foreign interference or official morality. By contrast, social, activist and diasporic actors may frame the same anniversary through narratives of injustice, state violence, gendered repression and demands for accountability. The anniversary thus becomes a recurring moment in which competing memory claims are made visible.

The second layer is securitisation and field control. Mälksoo's concept of mnemonical security is useful because it shows how states may seek to protect certain narratives of the past while delegitimising or criminalising alternative memories (Mälksoo 2015). In this sense, anniversary politics can become a security issue when commemorative practices are represented as threats to public order, national cohesion or regime legitimacy. This logic also resonates with securitisation theory, where political actors frame an issue as an existential threat in order to justify extraordinary measures (Wæver 1995). In the present framework, securitisa-

tion refers not only to direct repression, but also to broader attempts to control the field of commemoration through surveillance, discursive delegitimation, restrictions on gatherings, symbolic erasure and the management of public space.

The third layer is norm translation and internationalisation. Memory claims do not move into international politics by themselves. They require actors, infrastructures, frames and audiences. Transnational advocacy literature shows that, when domestic channels are blocked, activists may seek external allies and attempt to generate pressure through media, NGOs, international institutions and foreign governments (Keck & Sikkink 1999; Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999). However, this process is selective and contingent rather than automatic. Domestic claims may be amplified, reshaped, contested or disconnected from their original context as they circulate through diaspora networks and international arenas. When anniversary claims are translated into the language of human rights, they may generate reputational pressure, naming-and-shaming dynamics, agenda-setting and institutional referencing, even if they do not immediately produce policy change. At the level of norm dynamics, this process can also be understood through norm emergence and norm cascade, where visibility, persuasion and reputational pressure help claims move across institutional arenas (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998).

Within this framework, three linking mechanisms are central. The first is competitive framing. Anniversaries create moments in which competing actors struggle to define the meaning of death, responsibility, mourning and justice. State and state-affiliated actors may frame commemoration as disorder, manipulation or foreign interference. Activist and diasporic actors may frame it as evidence of state violence, gendered repression and unresolved accountability. This mechanism is competitive because meanings are not simply transmitted; they are selected, contested and reformulated for different audiences.

The second mechanism is ritualised digital commemoration. This mechanism combines ritualisation and digital dissemination as mutually constitutive processes. Anniversaries provide recurring ritual moments through which memory is reproduced and stabilised. In the digital age, these rituals are also mediated through online platforms, where images, hashtags, statements, videos and commemorative performances circulate across borders. Digital infrastructures do not simply transmit memory; they shape its temporality, form and reach. They can synchronise dispersed actors, produce a sense of simultaneity, and reinforce shared mnemonic frames across domestic and diasporic spaces (Assmann 2014; Hom 2017).

The third mechanism is securitisation and field control. Anniversary cycles may prompt state institutions to restrict gatherings, control public space, delegitimise commemorative narratives or reframe memory claims as security threats. Yet securitisation does not necessarily produce internationalisation. In some cases, it may silence or fragment commemoration. In other cases, especially when visible

repression intersects with active diaspora networks, media access and normatively legible human rights frames, securitisation may increase the transnational visibility of memory claims.

Diaspora actors occupy an intermediary but not unified position in this framework. They are not treated as a single collective actor or as a direct extension of domestic society. Rather, they consist of diverse networks with different political orientations, resources, host-country opportunities, media access and relationships to domestic activism. Their role may include translating memory claims into internationally legible narratives, linking commemorative claims to parliaments and human rights institutions, and coordinating anniversary actions across cities. At the same time, diaspora mobilisation can also be fragmented, selective or internally contested (Adamson 2005; Koinova 2013; McAuliffe 2008; Khosravi 2018).

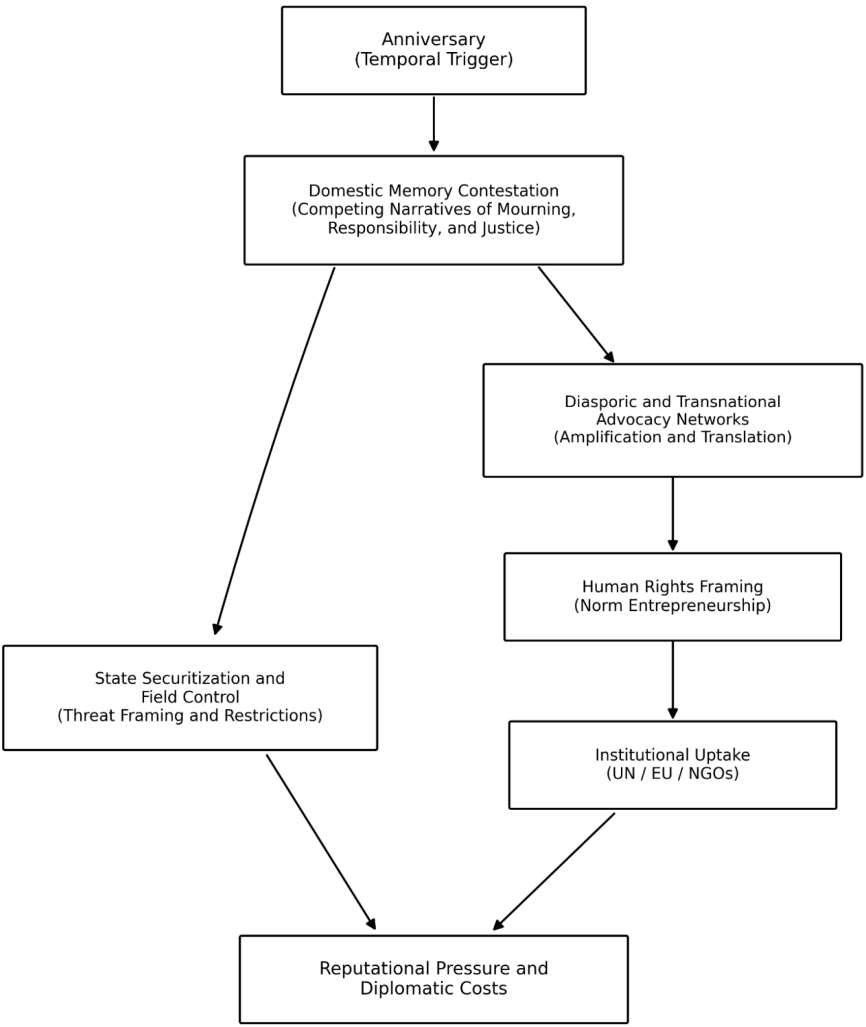
The framework therefore identifies several scope conditions. Anniversary politics is more likely to become transnationally visible when there are active diasporic or advocacy networks, access to media and digital platforms, relatively open political opportunity structures in host countries, and frames that can be translated into the language of human rights. Conversely, in the absence of these conditions, anniversaries may remain localised, suppressed or symbolically contained. Figure 1 presents this process as a set of analytical pathways rather than a fixed causal sequence. The anniversary functions as a temporal trigger that may reactivate memory contestation; state securitisation and diasporic mobilisation may then shape how, whether and to what extent these claims enter transnational human rights politics. The outcome is not automatic institutionalisation, but the possible accumulation of reputational pressure and renewed visibility around unresolved claims of accountability.

Research design and analytical strategy

This article adopts a mechanism-oriented qualitative research design to examine how the anniversaries of Jina Mahsa Amini's death became recurring temporal nodes in the politics of memory, securitisation, diaspora mobilisation and transnational human rights politics. The aim is not statistical representation, but the analytical tracing of processes through which anniversary cycles may reactivate memory claims, generate competing frames and produce reputational pressure in international arenas. This approach is consistent with qualitative case-study research in international relations, which focuses on tracing mechanisms and processual connections within historically specific cases (George & Bennett 2005; Beach 2020).

The empirical material consists of 58 publicly available documents collected between September 2023 and September 2025. The corpus is organised around three consecutive anniversary cycles: 2023, 2024 and 2025. The unit of analysis is therefore the anniversary cycle rather than Iranian protest politics in general.

Figure 1: Analytical framework of anniversary internationalization



Note: Arrows indicate possible analytical pathways, not a fixed or automatic causal sequence
Source: Author

This temporal design allows the article to compare how framing, securitisation, diaspora mobilisation and institutional referencing changed across repeated commemorative moments.

The documents were selected through purposive sampling. Materials were included when they directly referred to Jina Mahsa Amini, the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, anniversary commemorations, public mourning, state responses, diaspora mobilisation, human rights accountability, or institutional reactions

by international actors. Materials were excluded when they were only general reports on Iran, repeated identical information, lacked a clear connection to the anniversary cycles, or did not contribute to tracing the mechanisms identified in the conceptual framework. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that additional documents no longer generated substantially new themes regarding framing, securitisation, transnational mobilisation or institutional uptake.

The data are grouped into four categories: official international statements and parliamentary materials (n=18), United Nations and human rights documents (n=10), diaspora and activist mobilisation materials (n=12), and international media coverage (n=18). In addition, state narratives were traced through publicly available official statements, where accessible, and through state-affiliated media outlets, such as IRNA, Fars News Agency and Tasnim. The classification of Tasnim as a state-aligned media actor is also consistent with the European Union's 2023 designation of Tasnim among entities sanctioned over serious human rights violations in Iran (Council of the European Union 2023b). A distinction is made between direct governmental or institutional statements and mediated representations of state positions in state-affiliated media. This distinction is important because the latter are treated as representations of state-aligned framing rather than as formal policy statements.

The absence of direct fieldwork or interviews with domestic activists is a limitation of the study. Given the security risks and access constraints associated with protest politics in Iran, the article relies only on publicly available materials. Domestic activism is therefore analysed indirectly through its public traces in statements, commemorative practices, media reporting, human rights documentation and transnational advocacy materials. This choice reflects both ethical caution and the article's focus on public processes of narrative circulation and internationalisation.

The analytical method is qualitative thematic content analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's approach, the analysis involved familiarisation with the material, initial coding, theme development, review of themes across the three anniversary cycles, and interpretation in relation to the conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke 2006). The initial coding framework was deductively informed by the article's theoretical model and included themes such as competitive framing, threat framing, securitisation of memory, human rights language, reputational pressure, institutional referencing and diplomatic cost articulation. At the same time, the coding process remained open to emergent themes, particularly where the documents revealed unexpected shifts in narrative emphasis or institutional response.

The corpus includes both Persian- and English-language materials. Persian materials were read in the original language by the author and translated into

English for analytical and reporting purposes where necessary. In translating politically sensitive terms, attention was paid to preserving contextual meaning rather than producing literal equivalents. This was particularly important for terms related to threat framing, public order, morality, foreign interference, mourning and accountability. The combination of different source types enables triangulation across state-aligned narratives, diasporic mobilisation, media circulation and international institutional responses.

The internationalisation of Mahsa Amini anniversaries

This section analyses how the 2023–2025 anniversaries of Jina Mahsa Amini's death became recurring moments of memory contestation, diaspora mobilisation, securitisation and institutional referencing. The analysis is organised around three anniversary cycles. This structure follows the article's methodological choice to treat the anniversary cycle, rather than Iranian protest politics in general, as the unit of analysis. Across the three cycles, the empirical material shows a gradual movement from initial international attention in 2023, to more stable institutional referencing in 2024, and finally to the consolidation of Amini's memory as a recurring point of human rights discourse in 2025.

The analysis does not assume that anniversaries automatically produce international pressure. Rather, it examines how commemorative dates created recurring opportunities through which existing claims about state violence, gendered repression and accountability were renewed and made visible. Claims regarding securitisation, diaspora mobilisation and institutional uptake are therefore interpreted through publicly available documentary evidence, including state-affiliated media, international media, diaspora and activist materials, and official institutional documents.

The 2023 anniversary: Initial activation of internationalisation

The first anniversary of Amini's death in September 2023 marked the initial consolidation of the anniversary as a temporal node of political contestation. It was not simply a repetition of mourning, but the first major commemorative moment in which domestic memory conflict, diaspora mobilisation and international human rights discourse became simultaneously visible.

At the domestic level, state-affiliated and state-aligned media framed the anniversary through the language of public order, stability, hostile media and the failure of protest calls. Coverage by outlets such as IRNA and Fars News Agency presented the anniversary less as a legitimate moment of public mourning than as a politically sensitive event connected to unrest, opposition mobilisation or foreign interference (IRNA 2023; Fars News Agency 2023a,b). This framing indicates the emergence of what can be described as preventive securitisation: the anniversary was anticipated and governed as a potential moment of political reactivation.

International media reports around the same period documented heightened security presence, restrictions on gatherings, and attempts to prevent renewed mobilisation around Amini's grave in Saqqez and in major urban centres (Reuters 2023; Associated Press 2023; Al Jazeera 2023). These reports are not treated here as direct official statements of state intention. Rather, they help triangulate the broader pattern through which the anniversary was governed as a security-sensitive temporal event. From the perspective of securitisation theory, the anniversary became an object of anticipatory control. From the perspective of mnemonical security, the state response suggests an attempt to contain a competing memory that could challenge political legitimacy (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Mälksoo 2015).

At the transnational level, the 2023 anniversary showed a high degree of diaspora synchronisation. Reports and organisational materials documented commemorative gatherings and protest actions in several European and North American cities, including London, Berlin, Paris, Rome and Toronto (Associated Press 2023; El País 2023). These events demonstrate that the anniversary date itself provided a temporal infrastructure for dispersed actors. Rather than acting independently, diaspora groups and solidarity networks were able to organise mourning, protest and claims-making around a shared calendar moment.

This pattern corresponds to Hom's argument that timing is itself politically meaningful (Hom 2017). The first anniversary enabled transnational actors to act simultaneously across different locations, thereby transforming a domestic commemorative date into a globally visible moment of mobilisation. The dominant frames used in diaspora and advocacy discourse connected Amini's death to women's rights, bodily autonomy, state violence and fundamental freedoms (Amnesty International 2023; Associated Press 2023). In the language of transnational advocacy network theory, the anniversary activated both symbolic politics and information politics: activists and advocacy networks selected, circulated and translated the case into a language that was accessible to international publics and institutions (Keck and Sikkink 1999).

At the international institutional level, the 2023 anniversary coincided with renewed references to Amini's death and the wider human rights situation in Iran. European and international actors referred to the anniversary in relation to repression, women's rights, fundamental freedoms and accountability concerns (Council of the European Union 2023a; European Parliament 2023). The UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, although not created by the anniversary itself, formed part of the wider institutional background through which claims about the 2022 protests and their aftermath were documented and assessed (United Nations Human Rights Council 2024).

The 2023 cycle therefore shows the initial activation of internationalisation. The anniversary did not produce immediate policy change, nor did it directly

generate new international mechanisms. Its significance lies in the convergence of three processes: preventive securitisation within Iran, diaspora synchronisation across transnational spaces, and early normative uptake within international human rights discourse. The anniversary became a recurring reference point through which Amini's death moved from a domestic protest event into a wider field of reputational pressure.

The 2024 anniversary: Institutional deepening and stabilisation of reputational pressure

The second anniversary in 2024 indicates a more sustained and institutionally embedded phase. Whereas the 2023 anniversary marked the first major return of commemorative politics, the 2024 cycle shows that the anniversary had become a predictable political and institutional reference point. Three developments are particularly visible: the routinisation of domestic securitisation, the professionalisation of diaspora mobilisation, and the deeper incorporation of the case into international human rights mechanisms.

At the domestic level, the 2024 anniversary suggests a movement from reactive securitisation to pre-emptive management of commemorative time. Reports published before the anniversary referred to restrictions around the Amini family, concerns over access to the burial site in Saqqez, and a broader security sensitivity surrounding possible commemorative gatherings (RFE/RL 2024; Iran International 2024a). The importance of these reports lies not in proving a single unified state strategy, but in identifying an observable pattern: by 2024, the anniversary had become a calendar risk around which public space, family commemoration and protest potential were monitored and managed.

This confirms the framework's argument that anniversaries can become security-sensitive temporal nodes. The anniversary was not only remembered; it was anticipated, governed and contained. Yet the 2024 cycle also shows the limits of securitisation. Associated Press reporting before the second anniversary noted the persistence of women's everyday resistance to compulsory hijab in Iranian cities, despite expanded repressive measures and renewed efforts to enforce dress laws (Gambrell 2024). This suggests that anniversary politics did not operate only through spectacular street mobilisation. It also interacted with ongoing forms of everyday defiance that kept the memory of Woman, Life, Freedom socially present.

At the transnational level, the 2024 cycle demonstrated a more routinised form of diaspora mobilisation. Reports documented rallies and commemorative actions by Iranian diaspora communities and human rights advocates in European cities ahead of the second anniversary, with Woman, Life, Freedom remaining the central symbolic frame (Iran International 2024b). Compared with 2023, these actions appeared less episodic and more integrated into a recurring repertoire of anniversary mobilisation.

The framing of diaspora activism in 2024 also became more explicitly connected to accountability and impunity. Rather than presenting the anniversary only as a memorial for Amini, diaspora and advocacy narratives increasingly linked her death to broader patterns of repression, gender-based violence, compulsory veiling and the absence of legal accountability for abuses committed during and after the 2022–2023 protests. This shift illustrates the mechanism of norm translation: a specific death in custody was repeatedly reframed as part of a wider human rights problem. In this sense, the anniversary helped stabilise the connection between memory and accountability.

The clearest sign of institutional deepening in 2024 was the stronger connection between the anniversary and formal human rights mechanisms. In March 2024, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran reported to the Human Rights Council on serious violations connected to the 2022 protests, including patterns of repression and the use of force against protesters (United Nations Human Rights Council 2024). More directly, on 13 September 2024, immediately before the second anniversary, the Fact-Finding Mission issued an update on the situation of women and girls in relation to the September 2022 protests and the Woman, Life, Freedom movement (OHCHR 2024). This timing is analytically significant. It does not mean that the anniversary caused the Fact-Finding Mission or its mandate. Rather, it shows how the anniversary became a moment for renewing institutional attention to ongoing accountability concerns.

Other institutional sources confirm this pattern. The UK House of Commons Library's September 2024 analysis framed the second anniversary in relation to compulsory dress laws, the UN Fact-Finding Mission, protest deaths and the broader human rights situation in Iran (UK House of Commons Library 2024). The European Union also renewed its official position on 16 September 2024. The statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU honoured the memory of Amini and the Woman, Life, Freedom movement while linking the anniversary to women's rights, fundamental freedoms, repression, executions and the wider human rights situation in Iran (Council of the European Union 2024). The European Parliament also marked the second anniversary during the opening of its 16–19 September 2024 plenary session, where President Roberta Metsola stated that Parliament continued to stand with those fighting for equality, dignity and freedom in Iran (European Parliament 2024).

The 2024 cycle therefore shows a deepening of reputational pressure. The anniversary did not produce immediate behavioural change by the Iranian state. However, it became embedded in a more structured field of reports, institutional statements, parliamentary analysis and diplomatic messaging. A joint statement issued by several governments on the second anniversary similarly linked Amini's death to the continuing consequences of the 2022–2023 crackdown and the need for accountability (Joint Statement 2024). In terms of the spiral model of human

rights change, this phase corresponds not to compliance, but to the stabilisation of naming, documentation and reputational pressure (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999).

Overall, the 2024 anniversary demonstrates how commemorative repetition can transform an anniversary from a symbolic date into an institutional rhythm of human rights politics. Domestically, the date was treated as a predictable security-sensitive moment. Transnationally, diaspora mobilisation became more coordinated and accountability-oriented. Institutionally, the anniversary became linked to EU statements, UK parliamentary analysis, OHCHR updates and the work of the UN Fact-Finding Mission. The second cycle therefore marks a shift from initial internationalisation to institutional deepening.

The 2025 anniversary: Consolidation of internationalisation and global discursive presence

The third anniversary in 2025 shows the consolidation of Amini's anniversary as a recurring reference point in global human rights discourse. Unlike 2023, the significance of the 2025 cycle did not lie in the initial emergence of international attention. Unlike 2024, it did not primarily lie in the deepening of new institutional links. Rather, its importance lies in the routinised reactivation of already existing networks, narratives and accountability claims.

At the transnational level, the 2025 anniversary demonstrated the persistence of commemorative mobilisation across diaspora communities. Reports ahead of the anniversary documented calls for coordinated demonstrations in more than twenty cities worldwide, including major urban centres in Europe and North America (Iran International 2025a). Follow-up reporting during the anniversary period also described rallies by Iranian communities abroad under the continuing slogan of Woman, Life, Freedom (Iran International 2025e). These events suggest that by the third anniversary, diaspora mobilisation had become ritualised. The anniversary date itself provided a recurring calendar structure for protest, mourning and accountability claims.

This pattern strengthens the article's argument that anniversaries can function as infrastructures of synchronisation. The political significance of the anniversary was not limited to what was remembered, but also included the ability of dispersed actors to act at the same time across different spaces. Through repetition, the date enabled diaspora actors to reconnect local commemorative practices to a shared global frame. This process illustrates the mechanism of ritualised digital commemoration: memory was reproduced through gatherings, slogans, online circulation, images, statements and renewed campaign activity.

The 2025 anniversary also indicates that the Woman, Life, Freedom movement remained present in activist and human rights discourse even though the form of mobilisation had changed since the mass protests of 2022–2023. This continuity was also reflected in a joint statement by twenty-four Iranian labour, social and

support organisations, which framed the Woman, Life, Freedom movement as an unfinished struggle for political and social change (Iran International 2025c). Media reports around the third anniversary referred to continuing protest actions, statements and symbolic acts connected to Amini's death and the wider uprising (Iran International 2025f). These sources should not be read as comprehensive evidence of nationwide mobilisation. Rather, they show that the anniversary continued to function as a point of return for articulating claims of justice, bodily autonomy and accountability. In addition, families of victims and survivors used the anniversary to call for international action, linking memory and mourning to demands for accountability and pressure on the Iranian authorities (Iran International 2025b).

Human rights reporting reinforced this continuity. Human Rights Watch's third-anniversary assessment framed the anniversary through the persistence of impunity after the crackdown on the protests and highlighted the continuing risks faced by survivors, women and activists demanding justice (Human Rights Watch 2025). This framing shifts the anniversary from commemoration alone to responsibility. The central question becomes not only how Amini is remembered, but why meaningful accountability has not followed.

The institutional background in 2025 further strengthened this accountability frame. In April 2025, the UN Human Rights Council extended and expanded the mandate of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, allowing it to continue monitoring, investigating, collecting and preserving evidence of serious human rights violations in Iran (Amnesty International 2025). OHCHR materials in 2025 similarly connected the Woman, Life, Freedom protests to justice, accountability and evidence preservation (OHCHR 2025b). These mechanisms were not anniversary-specific, but they shaped the context in which the third anniversary was interpreted. The anniversary functioned as a calendar moment for renewing attention to an already institutionalised accountability process.

The 2025 anniversary was also marked by official diplomatic references. The United States Department of State issued a statement on the third anniversary of Mahsa Zhina Amini's death, linking her memory to broader criticism of repression, executions and the silencing of dissent in the Islamic Republic (U.S. Department of State 2025). Such statements demonstrate that by the third anniversary, Amini's name had become part of an established diplomatic vocabulary for discussing the human rights situation in Iran. Similar diplomatic referencing was visible in statements by Australia and New Zealand, which used the third anniversary to reaffirm support for Iranian women and to condemn continuing human rights violations in Iran (Iran International 2025d). European media and parliamentary commentary similarly framed the third anniversary as a moment for renewed support for Iranian civil society amid intensifying repression (Euronews 2025).

This does not mean that the anniversary determined foreign policy. Rather, it shows that the anniversary had become a recurring reference point within foreign policy discourse. Amini's case and the slogan Woman, Life, Freedom functioned as symbolic shorthand for broader concerns about state violence, gender repression and human rights violations. In this sense, the 2025 cycle reflects a shift from episodic attention to discursive consolidation.

Taken together, the 2025 evidence suggests that the internationalisation of Amini's anniversary had entered a phase of consolidation. Diaspora rallies reproduced the memory transnationally, human rights organisations framed the anniversary through impunity and survivor justice, and official diplomatic statements reinserted the case into global human rights discourse. In terms of the spiral model of human rights change, this wave does not indicate compliance or behavioural transformation by the Iranian state. Rather, it shows the persistence of reputational and normative pressure through repeated naming, documentation and institutional referencing (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999).

The third anniversary therefore demonstrates how commemorative repetition can transform an anniversary from a symbolic memorial into a durable discursive and institutional device. Each annual cycle reactivated the case, updated the evidence and renewed the demand for accountability. The anniversary became a rhythm of return through which unresolved memory claims continued to circulate across domestic, diasporic and international arenas.

Conclusion

This article asked how the anniversaries of Jina Mahsa Amini's death mediated the relationship between domestic memory contestation, diasporic meaning-making and transnational human rights politics. The analysis of the three anniversary cycles from 2023 to 2025 shows that the anniversary was not merely a commemorative occasion or a symbolic repetition of mourning. Rather, it became a recurring temporal mechanism through which memory claims were reactivated, contested, translated and periodically reinserted into international human rights discourse. The central finding is that anniversaries can create structured opportunities for political return: they allow unresolved claims of injustice, repression and accountability to reappear at predictable moments and to circulate across domestic, diasporic and institutional arenas.

The first contribution of the article is therefore to conceptualise anniversaries as temporal nodes in global politics. Time is not treated here as a neutral background against which political events unfold, but as an active dimension of political mobilisation and internationalisation. The anniversary date condensed dispersed grievances into a recognisable moment, enabled transnational coordination and provided media, advocacy and institutional actors with a recurring occasion for renewed attention. In this sense, internationalisation did not result

from a single shock or linear causal sequence. It emerged through repetition, accumulation and periodic reactivation across three anniversary cycles.

The second contribution concerns the politics of memory and securitisation. The empirical analysis suggests that state and state-affiliated responses frequently framed the anniversary as a security-sensitive moment rather than as a legitimate occasion of public mourning. This was visible in threat-oriented framing, preventive restrictions and attempts to manage commemorative space. Yet the effects of securitisation were not uniform. In some instances, efforts to contain commemoration limited public mobilisation inside Iran; in others, reported restrictions and security measures contributed to the transnational visibility of the anniversary. This finding complicates a simple understanding of securitisation as successful control. In a transnational media environment, the attempt to suppress or delegitimise memory may also provide advocacy networks with further evidence for claims about repression, state violence and the denial of the right to mourn.

The third contribution relates to diaspora activism and transnational meaning-making. The article has not treated the Iranian diaspora as a single or homogeneous actor. Rather, diaspora mobilisation appeared as a diverse and uneven field of actors, networks, media platforms and advocacy organisations operating across different host-country contexts. The anniversaries provided these actors with a shared temporal infrastructure for coordination, but the meaning of the anniversary was not simply transferred from inside Iran to the outside world. It was translated, reframed, amplified and sometimes simplified through the language of women's rights, bodily autonomy, state violence and human rights accountability. This process confirms that transnationalisation is selective and mediated, not automatic. Domestic memory claims become globally legible only when they are attached to available normative vocabularies, communicative infrastructures and political opportunity structures.

The fourth finding concerns institutional uptake and reputational pressure. The analysis does not claim that the anniversaries created international mechanisms such as the UN Fact-Finding Mission, nor that they directly transformed the behaviour of the Iranian state. Rather, the anniversaries functioned as recurring calendar moments through which existing concerns about repression, gender-based violence and accountability were renewed, cited and made visible. In 2023, the anniversary contributed to initial naming-and-shaming and symbolic international attention. In 2024, the anniversary became more closely connected to formal reports, parliamentary assessments, EU statements and UN-related accountability mechanisms. By 2025, Amini's name and the Woman, Life, Freedom slogan had become recurring reference points in diplomatic and human rights discourse. The shift, therefore, was not from protest to immediate policy change, but from episodic attention to a more stable pattern of reputational pressure. This

interpretation is consistent with later human rights scholarship, which emphasises that international pressure often produces uneven, partial and delayed effects rather than immediate compliance (Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 2013).

This pattern matters for international relations because it shows how memory disputes can enter global politics without necessarily becoming formal security crises or producing direct institutional change. Anniversaries can operate as devices of agenda renewal. They keep unresolved claims alive, give advocacy networks a repeated opportunity to update evidence and mobilise publics, and allow international actors to revisit a case within broader human rights assessments. The accumulation of reputational pressure is therefore temporal as well as normative. It depends on repetition, visibility and the ability of actors to connect memory to recognised categories such as accountability, impunity, gender repression and fundamental freedoms.

At the same time, the model developed in this article has clear scope conditions. Anniversaries do not always become internationalised. Some commemorations may remain local, be silenced or fail to attract transnational attention. The process identified in this article depends on several enabling conditions: active diaspora and advocacy networks, access to media and digital platforms, the ability to frame the issue in globally recognisable human rights terms, and a receptive international environment. Without these conditions, an anniversary may remain a domestic or symbolic event rather than becoming a recurring mechanism of transnational pressure. The case of Jina Mahsa Amini is therefore analytically significant not because it proves a universal model, but because it demonstrates how anniversary politics can operate when domestic memory contestation intersects with diaspora mobilisation and international human rights infrastructures.

The article also has limitations. It relies on publicly available documents and media materials rather than interviews or direct fieldwork with activists inside Iran. This choice was necessary given the security risks surrounding protest politics in Iran, but it also means that domestic activism is analysed through its public traces rather than through direct participant testimony. Future research could compare the Amini anniversaries with other Iranian commemorative traditions, such as chehelom practices during the 1979 revolution or the memory politics surrounding Khavaran, in order to clarify when anniversaries remain localised and when they become transnationally visible.

Overall, this article shows that anniversaries can become more than historical symbols. Under specific conditions, they function as temporal mechanisms through which memory, repression, diaspora activism and human rights politics intersect. The anniversaries of Jina Mahsa Amini's death did not automatically produce international pressure, but they repeatedly reopened the case, renewed claims of accountability and contributed to the accumulation of reputational

pressure on the Iranian state. From this perspective, commemorative time is not peripheral to global politics; it is one of the ways through which struggles over legitimacy, justice and political memory are sustained across borders.

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Thematic section
Politics of Anniversaries in International Relations

Haunted Independence: The Ghost of Ambazonia in Cameroon's National Memory

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Abstract

Each October 1st, Cameroon confronts a past it has never fully resolved. The date marks the 1961 entry of British Southern Cameroons into union with the Republic of Cameroun, yet it was never firmly institutionalised by the post-colonial state. Instead, October 1st remains an uneasy and largely avoided anniversary, displaced by the celebration of May 20th as 'Unitary Day'. This suppressed temporal marker was fractured decisively during the 2017 crisis escalation, when separatists reasserted October 1st – a date commemorated since the early 1990s – to proclaim the independence of 'Ambazonia'. Since then, October 1st has become a symbolic battleground where memory, authority and legitimacy collide. While the state continues to evade official commemoration, the date is now marked through militarisation, lockdowns and enforced silence in the Anglophone regions. Competing flags, counter-narratives and coercive practices reveal how control over political time has become central to the conflict. This article examines how October 1st evolved from an avoided anniversary into a counter-anniversary, demonstrating that anniversaries in conflict settings are not neutral commemorations but contested instruments of power. It argues that without historical reckoning and

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inclusive dialogue, Cameroon's unresolved mnemonic struggles will continue to destabilise its political future.

Keywords: *collective memory, Anglophone crisis, Ambazonia, national identity, postcolonial conflict, commemorative politics*

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Introduction

Anniversaries occupy a deceptively modest place in political life. Ostensibly marking the passage of time, they are often treated as ceremonial residues of past events rather than as active instruments of power (Secler 2025). Yet within international relations and domestic political orders alike, anniversaries function as political technologies through which authority is asserted, legitimacy is narrated, and collective identities are stabilised or contested (White 2019). By fixing particular interpretations of the past to specific dates, states seek to discipline historical meaning and organise political time in ways that naturalise existing power relations (McNeilly 2023). Conversely, challengers and dissident actors frequently mobilise anniversaries to disrupt these narratives, reclaim silenced histories or project alternative futures (Fitzsimmons 1998). In this sense, calendars are never neutral. They are sites of struggle where memory, sovereignty and political order intersect (Torbakov 2018).

While much scholarship has focused on celebrated anniversaries such as national independence days, revolutions or moments of triumph, less attention has been paid to anniversaries that are conspicuously avoided (Brownell 2021). Yet avoidance, no less than celebration, is a deeply political act. States may choose to suppress, displace or obscure certain dates precisely because they expose unresolved contradictions at the heart of the polity (Eglitis & Ardava 2011). Such avoided anniversaries linger as temporal absences, carrying unresolved meanings that refuse closure. It is in this analytical space that Cameroon's October 1st emerges as a particularly instructive case.

October 1st marks the 1961 entry of British Southern Cameroons into union with the *Republic of Cameroun* following a United Nations–supervised plebiscite (Ngoh 1979). Unlike many postcolonial founding dates, it was never firmly institutionalised as a national anniversary by the Cameroonian state. After the abolition of federalism in 1972 and the subsequent consolidation of a centralised unitary system, official commemorative attention shifted decisively to May 20th, celebrated as Unitary State Day (Konings 2011). October 1st was neither openly repudiated nor meaningfully commemorated; instead, it was left in a state of political suspension

– acknowledged as a historical fact, yet denied public ritual, symbolic affirmation or mnemonic investment. This deliberate avoidance transformed the date into an uneasy temporal remainder within Cameroon's national memory.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this suppression that has endowed October 1st with enduring symbolic power. This suppressed temporal marker was fractured decisively during the current crisis that escalated in 2017, when Anglophone separatists aggressively reasserted October 1st – a date that had already been actively commemorated and heavily contested since the return of multiparty politics in the early 1990s to proclaim the independence of 'Ambazonia' (International Crisis Group 2017a). Each year since, it has been marked not by state ceremonies, but by militarisation, enforced lockdowns, and an atmosphere of fear and defiance in towns such as Buea and Bamenda (Foute 2024). Competing flags, rival narratives and coercive practices converge around a date the state officially avoids yet cannot neutralise (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2025). While the term 'Ambazonia' gained widespread currency at the onset of the current crisis to denote the envisioned independent state of the former British Southern Cameroons, it is important to contextualise its usage. Not all Anglophone Cameroonian nationalists or political actors identify with the term, as it is increasingly avoided by individuals and groups who dissociate themselves from the violence associated with the ongoing armed conflict.

This transformation raises a compelling empirical and theoretical puzzle: how can a date the state refuses to commemorate become one of the most politically explosive moments in an ongoing conflict? Why does avoidance, rather than erasure, appear to intensify the mnemonic and political significance of an anniversary? Addressing this question requires moving beyond an understanding of commemorative politics centred solely on celebration and spectacle, and instead examining the productive effects of silencing, displacement and securitisation.

This article advances the argument that Cameroon's Anglophone crisis illustrates a broader dynamic in the politics of anniversaries: avoided anniversaries do not simply fade into irrelevance. On the contrary, when a state suppresses or displaces a foundational date without resolving the historical grievances attached to it, that date may return as a counter-anniversary (Giesen 2004). In such moments, challengers reclaim control over political time, transforming absence into accusation and silence into mobilisation. October 1st did not become politically potent despite its avoidance, but because of it. The state's refusal to publicly reckon with the ambiguities of the 1961 union created the conditions under which separatist actors could reframe the date as a symbol of betrayal, unfinished decolonisation and denied self-determination (Djounguep 2021).

By foregrounding this dynamic, the article contributes to the thematic section in two key ways. First, it expands the analytical scope of anniversary politics beyond celebratory rituals to include practices of avoidance and displacement

as central mechanisms of power. Second, it demonstrates how anniversaries can become securitised temporal sites, where competing actors deploy coercion to regulate memory, loyalty and political presence. In Cameroon, October 1st has become a moment when the struggle over historical meaning directly shapes security practices, domestic governance and international advocacy, blurring the boundary between memory politics and conflict dynamics (Agwanda & Asal 2021).

The article combines historical reconstruction with discourse and symbolic analysis. It traces the evolution of October 1st from decolonisation through post-federal state-building to contemporary separatist mobilisation, examining state narratives, commemorative practices, and their deliberate absences. It examines official state narratives embedded in civic education and presidential discourse surrounding May 20th, alongside separatist rhetoric deployed in public declarations and digital spaces to reframe October 1st. Through this approach, the article treats anniversaries not as background markers of conflict, but as active sites where political authority is asserted and contested.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates October 1st within the incomplete closure of British Southern Cameroons' decolonisation and the subsequent displacement of the date by the celebration of May 20th. It then examines the reappropriation of October 1st by Ambazonian separatists and the securitisation of commemoration in the context of the Anglophone crisis. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of avoided anniversaries for conflict persistence and political reconciliation, arguing that without historical reckoning and inclusive mnemonic dialogue, the ghosts embedded in political calendars are unlikely to remain silent.

October 1st as a contested temporal site

To understand why October 1st has become such a volatile political marker in contemporary Cameroon, it is necessary to approach it not simply as a date reclaimed by separatist mobilisation, but as a temporally fragile construct from its inception. Anniversaries do not acquire meaning automatically; they are produced through political processes that invest dates with shared narratives, symbols and expectations (Butkowski 2022). Where such processes are incomplete or contested, anniversaries may remain unstable, vulnerable to reinterpretation or subject to strategic avoidance. October 1st exemplifies this condition. Its present volatility is inseparable from the circumstances of its birth in the early 1960s when decolonisation unfolded under international supervision and Cold War constraint prioritising administrative resolution over political consensus (International Crisis Group 2017b). The fragility of October 1st as a commemorative anchor thus predates both the post-federal state and contemporary separatism. It is rooted in a decolonisation process that foreclosed genuine choice, deferred questions of political identity and produced a temporal marker without closure. This section

examines how that fragility emerged, focusing first on British Southern Cameroons and the limits of internationally managed decolonisation.

Decolonisation without closure: Producing a fragile date

The origins of October 1st as a commemorative date are inseparable from the ambiguities of Cameroon's decolonisation. British Southern Cameroons' transition from trusteeship to union with the *Republic of Cameroun* was managed under international oversight, prioritising administrative resolution over popular sovereignty (Percival 2008). The 1961 plebiscite addressed political status but left questions of identity and autonomy unresolved (Fanso 2017). As a result, October 1st initially marked a procedural transition rather than a consensual national founding. This section examines how such incompleteness produced a fragile date, open to reinterpretation and contestation in later decades.

British Southern Cameroons and the limits of internationally managed decolonisation

British Southern Cameroons occupied an anomalous position within Africa's late-colonial order. Administered by Britain under a League of Nations mandate and later a United Nations trusteeship, the territory was governed not as a distinct colony but as an appendage of neighbouring Nigeria (Nfobin & Minang 2014). This arrangement, justified as administratively expedient, had far-reaching political consequences. It denied British Southern Cameroons a clear trajectory toward sovereign statehood and embedded its future within international frameworks that prioritised territorial consolidation over political self-determination (Ngenge 2017). By the late 1950s, as decolonisation accelerated across Africa, the fate of British Southern Cameroons was increasingly shaped not by local aspirations alone, but by the strategic imperatives of the United Nations, Britain and regional actors navigating Cold War anxieties (Atabongwoung 2020).

Within this context, self-determination was tightly circumscribed. Rather than enabling a full spectrum of political options, the United Nations framed the future of British Southern Cameroons as a choice between integration with Nigeria or reunification with the already independent *Republic of Cameroun* (Ashukem 2022). Independence as a separate state was excluded from the ballot, despite sustained advocacy from segments of the local political elite. The rationale offered – that the territory was too small or economically unviable to stand alone – reflected a broader international tendency to equate stability with territorial aggregation (Nfobin & Minang 2014). Yet this logic reduced self-determination to a matter of administrative alignment rather than collective political will.

The 1961 plebiscite thus resolved a question of status without resolving a question of identity. Voters were asked to choose a future, but only within parameters set by external authorities (Percival 2008). The outcome in favour of reunification

with the *Republic of Cameroun* did not produce a shared national moment akin to independence celebrations elsewhere on the continent (Chiatoh 2019). Instead, it initiated a complex and asymmetric union whose terms were negotiated hastily and whose implications were imperfectly understood by the broader population. Thus, October 1st 1961, the date on which the union formally took effect, marked an administrative transition rather than a moment of sovereign birth (Kindong 2020).

This distinction is critical. Whereas independence days often function as temporal points of collective authorship, symbolising a people's emergence as political subjects, October 1st lacked this quality of consensual founding. It did not represent the achievement of independence, but the transfer of authority from one framework of external administration to another composite state (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). For Anglophone Cameroonians, the day signified neither the end of colonial subordination nor the unambiguous beginning of self-rule. Instead, it inaugurated a new political experiment whose contours were uncertain and whose durability depended on constitutional arrangements, most notably federalism that would later be dismantled (Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997).

As a result, October 1st entered Cameroon's political calendar already burdened with ambiguity. It was a date that required narrative work to stabilise its meaning, yet such work was unevenly undertaken and unevenly received. In the Francophone-dominated political centre, the union was framed as the completion of national reunification, retroactively incorporating British Southern Cameroons into a pre-existing nationalist story (Fonchingong 2013). However, describing this event as the completion of national sovereignty overlooks significant geopolitical exclusions. Most notably, the exclusion and integration of British Northern Cameroons into the Nigerian Federation was perceived as a profound loss by Yaoundé, prompting President Ahmadou Ahidjo to officially declare a day of national mourning (Mbah 2024). In subsequent years, various political actors also attempted to contest the permanent detachment and integration of Northern Cameroons, rendering the southern union only a partial realisation of a broader territorial ambition. In Anglophone regions, however, the date retained a more ambivalent resonance, tied to promises of autonomy, legal pluralism and political equality that would soon be contested (Nfobin 2017). The absence of a shared interpretive framework meant that October 1st never fully crystallised as a collectively owned anniversary.

This symbolic instability was compounded by the fact that the union's constitutional framework emerged through specific elite negotiations and representative channels rather than at a mass-deliberative popular moment. Although the union was preceded by a universal suffrage plebiscite and the participation of 25 Anglophone delegates led by John Ngu Foncha (including members of the Southern Cameroons House of Representatives and House of Chiefs) who negotiated its terms at the Foumban Conference on behalf of their constituencies, the result-

ing federal constitution lacked the broad ritualised affirmation characteristic of foundational political settlements (Achankeng 2015; Chofor 2013; Nfobin 2017). Consequently, October 1st did not generate the deep affective attachment necessary for enduring commemorative investment. It remained a date acknowledged in official records but thinly embedded in popular political consciousness.

Crucially, the absence of a universally shared moment of independence did not render October 1st meaningless; rather, it left the date vulnerable to competing interpretations. Lacking closure, the date remained open to reinterpretation, resignification and contestation. When federalism was abolished in 1972 and political power became increasingly centralised, the historical compromises associated with October 1st were neither publicly reaffirmed nor critically revisited (Nfobin 2017). Instead, they were allowed to recede into a muted past, unresolved and unritualised. This retreat did not extinguish memory; it suspended it. In this sense, October 1st exemplifies what might be termed a deferred anniversary, one whose political meaning is postponed rather than settled. Its original function as an administrative marker, rather than a sovereign founding, meant that it could not anchor a stable national narrative without sustained mnemonic labour (Begealawuh 2024). When such labour was withheld, the date did not disappear. It persisted as a latent temporal resource, capable of being reactivated under conditions of crisis.

The contemporary struggle over October 1st is therefore not an aberration imposed upon an otherwise settled past. It is the delayed eruption of contradictions embedded in the decolonisation process itself (Nfobin & Minang 2014). Internationally managed decolonisation resolved territorial status but left political identity incomplete. The plebiscite delivered a decision, but not closure. October 1st marked a beginning, but not a beginning owned equally by all. These unresolved tensions would later provide the symbolic raw material from which counter-narratives of betrayal, unfinished decolonisation and denied self-determination could be constructed (Achankeng 2018).

By tracing the origins of October 1st to the limits of internationally managed decolonisation, this section underscores a broader insight relevant to the politics of anniversaries: dates born of compromise, constraint or deferral may remain politically volatile long after their immediate context has faded. Where foundational moments are thinly legitimised and unevenly commemorated, anniversaries can become fault lines rather than anchors. In Cameroon, the fragility of October 1st was not a product of separatist invention, but a condition inherited from a decolonisation process that prioritised administrative resolution over collective authorship of the political future.

Avoided union: Mnemonic silencing and the rise of May 20th

The fragility of October 1st was compounded by state-led mnemonic practices after the 1972 referendum replaced federalism with a unitary republic (Fombad

2025). Whereas many postcolonial states institutionalise anniversaries to reinforce legitimacy, Cameroon pursued an alternative strategy: the selective avoidance of October 1st. In effect, the state progressively emptied the date of official recognition, neither commemorating the union with ceremonial ritual nor embedding it within civic consciousness (Nfobin & Minang 2021). This avoidance was neither neutral nor incidental; it was an intentional, strategic form of mnemonic governance, whereby the temporal politics of the state were used to suppress inconvenient or contested historical narratives (Vanguard Africa 2019). By choosing to displace, rather than celebrate, the Cameroonian government sought to manage national memory, foregrounding narratives of unity and centralisation while marginalising histories associated with Anglophone autonomy.

In place of October 1st, the state elevated May 20th, celebrated as Unitary State Day, as the symbolic anchor of the nation. This date marked the 1972 constitutional referendum that formally abolished the federal structure and consolidated authority in Yaoundé. Unlike October 1st, which remained ambiguous and contested, May 20th was readily amenable to state ritualisation: civic parades, flag displays, military ceremonies and school curricula all reinforced its position as the emblem of national cohesion (Nfobin & Minang 2021). Through the elevation of this substitute anniversary, the state enacted a temporal reorientation, shifting attention away from a date that might serve as a locus of Anglophone grievance to one that celebrated the consolidation of central power (Nfobin & Minang 2014). In doing so, the government transformed commemoration into an instrument of political integration, embedding the logic of unitary authority in public consciousness while erasing the constitutional compromises of 1961 from civic ritual.

Official state narratives actively construct this substitution through presidential speeches, educational curricula and civic media, which consistently frame the May 20th referendum as the definitive, unchallengeable birth of national unity. This narrative strategy relies on omission, designating October 1st as a historical aberration while saturating the public sphere with discourse that portrays unitary statehood as the sole guarantor of peace and stability. This calendrical substitution can be interpreted as a form of mnemonic governance through displacement. Whereas classical celebrations of national anniversaries aim to produce consensual memory and popular attachment, Cameroon's strategy relied on silencing a pre-existing commemorative moment and replacing it with a narrative conducive to state authority. By normalising May 20th and marginalising October 1st, the state sought to structure historical consciousness so that the past was experienced in alignment with centralised political objectives. Educational curricula, civic speeches and public holidays all participated in this project, repeatedly presenting the May 20th referendum as the definitive act of national unity while rendering October 1st politically awkward and historically muted (Nfobin 2019). In this way, avoidance became performative: silence and omission were themselves mechanisms of shaping collective memory.

The marginalisation of October 1st carried profound political and symbolic consequences. For Anglophone separatists, the displacement of the 1961 federal pact from official commemoration implied a denial of historical recognition (Nfobin & Minang 2014). The constitutional compromise that had granted Anglophone regions a measure of autonomy was effectively erased from the national mnemonic landscape, leaving the date of union unacknowledged in civic consciousness. Over time, this absence reinforced perceptions of systemic marginalisation, signalling that Anglophone experiences and political rights were peripheral to the dominant Francophone narrative of state-building (Nfobin 2019). By denying October 1st ceremonial or educational salience, the state inadvertently entrenched divisions it may have hoped to minimise, producing a latent reservoir of unacknowledged grievance that would later be mobilised by separatist actors (Nfobin & Minang 2021).

Importantly, avoidance did not equate to neutralisation. While October 1st was suppressed within official discourse, its memory persisted in private, local and Anglophone communal narratives. It became what could be termed a latent counter-memory, a temporal site of unresolved political tension capable of being reactivated under conditions of crisis (The Guardian 2025). In towns such as Buea and Bamenda, October 1st remained etched in the collective consciousness as a reminder of promised federal rights, legal pluralism and political equality – concepts that were systematically undermined by the abolition of federalism (Nogueira 2023). The state's refusal to commemorate the date publicly did not erase its meaning; it merely shifted the arena of contestation from official ritual to silenced memory, setting the stage for its later instrumentalisation as a symbol of resistance.

This dynamic highlights the productive power of avoidance in mnemonic politics. By failing to reconcile the historical ambiguities of 1961, the state rendered October 1st simultaneously invisible and potent. Its absence in public discourse created an opportunity for oppositional actors to claim the date for their own purposes, recasting it as a site of moral and political authority. When Anglophone separatists declared the independence of Ambazonia on October 1st 2017, they did not invent meaning ex nihilo; they capitalised on the symbolic vacancy left by decades of state avoidance and neglect (Fröhlich & Köpp 2019). The reactivation of October 1st as a counter-anniversary exemplifies how avoided dates can be more politically volatile than those firmly institutionalised, because the gap between official silence and lived memory produces a heightened potential for contestation.

Moreover, the Cameroonian case illustrates that mnemonic displacement operates across multiple dimensions: legal, educational, civic and symbolic. The state's suppression of October 1st was reinforced by constitutional centralisation, narratives emphasising national unity over regional autonomy, and curricular emphases on May 20th as the nation's defining moment (Nfobin 2019). In combina-

tion, these strategies constructed a temporal hierarchy in which certain dates were sanctioned, ritualised and celebrated, while others were excised or relegated to the margins of memory. Such hierarchical structuring of anniversaries demonstrates that power is not only exercised through coercion or policy, but also through the careful organisation of time itself.

In sum, the avoidance of October 1st and the concurrent elevation of May 20th illustrate the political work of silencing and displacement in the production of national memory. The strategy achieved short-term objectives: it allowed the state to celebrate a version of national unity consistent with centralisation, marginalising politically inconvenient narratives (Nfobin & Minang 2021). Yet it also sowed the seeds of future contestation. By leaving October 1st unresolved, the state created a latent counter-memory that could – and eventually would – be mobilised to challenge the official narrative, assert alternative histories and contest state authority (Nfobin & Minang 2014). This dynamic underscores the central argument of this article: anniversaries are not neutral markers of the past. They are instruments of power, whose significance is produced as much by omission and avoidance as by celebration and commemoration. October 1st in Cameroon demonstrates that suppressed anniversaries retain a persistent, latent force, capable of re-emerging as flashpoints of political contestation when the underlying historical contradictions remain unaddressed.

Counter-anniversaries and the securitisation of time

The re-emergence of October 1st as a politically charged date illustrates how avoided anniversaries can return as instruments of contestation. Ambazonian separatists have transformed the date into a counter-anniversary, challenging the state's monopoly over political time and historical narrative. In response, the Cameroonian government has tabooed commemoration, deploying coercive measures to control both memory and movement. This dual dynamic – reclamation by challengers and militarised suppression by the state – renders October 1st a site of intense temporal struggle. This section examines how anniversaries are simultaneously mobilised and policed, producing political effects that extend beyond ceremonial observance.

Ambazonia and the re-appropriation of October 1st

While the 2017 declaration of the independence of Ambazonia brought renewed global visibility to October 1st, it is historically inaccurate to view 2017 as the origin of its politicisation (Olomojobi 2023). Ever since the early 1990s, with the advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon, October 1st had already served as a rallying point for Anglophone movements. Early separatist mobilisations and commemorations of the date frequently provoked state crackdowns, resulting in prominent separatist figures such as Ayaba Cho Lucas, Melchisedek Kaavi and

Ebenezar Akwanga serving prison sentences during that decade in connection with October 1st activities (Nchinda 2015).

The declaration of Ambazonian independence was not merely symbolic; it constituted a counter-anniversary, directly challenging the state's control over political time and asserting an alternative narrative of sovereignty. Whereas the official calendar had rendered October 1st invisible, the declaration further transformed it into a moment of contested authority, demonstrating that suppressed anniversaries can return as instruments of political and mnemonic power (Nshom 2025a). The Ambazonian reappropriation illustrates how historical silences, left unresolved, create fertile terrain for insurgent claims to legitimacy (Loombe 2024).

Central to this reappropriation was a deliberate reframing of October 1st. No longer was the date a symbol of union or administrative transition; rather, it was recast as the commemoration of a betrayed or unfinished independence. Separatist rhetoric emphasised the perceived failure of the Cameroonian state to honour the promises embedded in the 1961 federal constitution, highlighting the erosion of autonomy, the marginalisation of Anglophone populations, and the suppression of distinct legal and political institutions (Shulika & Tella 2022). In this reframing, October 1st became a moral and historical claim: a temporal marker asserting that the Anglophone quest for self-determination remained unresolved. By inverting the official narrative, Ambazonian actors converted a suppressed anniversary into a site of moral legitimacy and historical rectitude.

The reclamation of October 1st was also materially and symbolically enacted through flags, ceremonies and diasporic activism (Shaw 2018). Across Anglophone regions, separatist banners, most notably the blue-and-white Ambazonian flag, were displayed in public spaces, asserting visual authority over urban landscapes traditionally dominated by the Cameroonian national flag (Essa 2017). Ceremonies, ranging from small-scale community gatherings to public demonstrations, ritualised the date as a foundational moment for the imagined state of Ambazonia. Online mobilisation played a complementary role: social media platforms amplified commemorations, circulated narratives of betrayal and resistance, and connected diasporic populations to local struggles, effectively transforming the anniversary into a transnational mnemonic project (Eyango 2018). Through these tools, the date was not only symbolically reclaimed but actively reproduced as a contested site of memory and identity, demonstrating the interplay between local, national and global dimensions of counter-memory.

This process of mnemonic reconstruction must be understood within broader debates on self-determination, symbolic sovereignty and the internationalisation of domestic conflict. By asserting control over October 1st, separatist actors enacted a form of temporal sovereignty, claiming the right to define political legitimacy in defiance of the state (MMI 2025). The date became a medium through which moral and political authority could be exercised, signalling to domestic and international

audiences alike that Anglophone grievances were not merely historical but ongoing and unresolved (Orock 2021). Diasporic advocacy and media engagement further extended this claim beyond Cameroon's borders, situating October 1st as a focal point in campaigns for international recognition, humanitarian support and normative legitimacy. In doing so, the counter-anniversary illustrates how disputes over commemorative time are not confined to domestic politics but are intimately linked to the internationalisation of local struggles.

The struggle over October 1st operates across multiple temporal and spatial scales. Domestically, it shapes civic life in Anglophone cities, where local populations navigate lockdowns, security enforcement and symbolic displays of resistance (International Committee of the Red Cross 2025). Diasporically, the anniversary functions as a connective tissue, linking communities across Europe, North America and Africa to a shared historical grievance and political vision (Nshom 2025b). Internationally, it frames debates over self-determination, minority rights and humanitarian intervention, drawing attention to the Anglophone crisis as more than an internal administrative matter (Ketzmerick 2023). In each arena, the date serves as a lever for legitimacy, a site where moral, symbolic and political claims converge. Control over October 1st is thus not merely ceremonial; it is constitutive of the broader struggle over political authority, historical memory and territorial sovereignty.

Importantly, the Ambazonian reappropriation demonstrates that suppressed anniversaries retain an enduring latent power. Whereas the Cameroonian state had hoped to neutralise October 1st through avoidance and substitution with May 20th, the counter-anniversary reveals the limits of such strategies. By withholding ritual, recognition or narrative reinforcement, the state inadvertently created a temporal vacuum that could be occupied by dissenting actors. In this sense, October 1st exemplifies what memory scholars describe as the productive potential of absence and suppression: a date avoided by the state can, paradoxically, emerge as a focal point of resistance precisely because it has been neglected, unresolved and politically charged.

In sum, the 2017 declaration of Ambazonia independence illustrates how counter-anniversaries operate as instruments of political and mnemonic power, challenging official narratives, asserting alternative claims to sovereignty, and connecting local struggles to broader international debates (Akua 2025). By reclaiming October 1st, separatist actors transformed a date of silence into a contested arena of legitimacy, demonstrating that anniversaries are not merely ceremonial markers but active sites of political struggle (Vinson & Zeleza 2025). The Ambazonian case highlights the ways in which avoided anniversaries, once reactivated, can shape domestic governance, diasporic identity and international advocacy, underscoring the profound implications of temporal politics in conflict settings.

Securitising memory: Lockdowns, coercion and the criminalisation of commemoration

Since the declaration of Ambazonian independence in 2017, October 1st has not merely been a contested date; it has become one of the most militarised anniversaries in Cameroon's political calendar (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2025). It is, however, worth noting that October 1st had already become a heavily militarised anniversary well before the 2017 crisis. Early actions by groups like the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), including localised uprisings and anniversary protests in the North West Region during the 1990s, demonstrated that the state's security apparatus had long treated the date as a subversive threat (Nchinda 2015). While the contemporary crisis has exponentially intensified this trend, the securitisation of October 1st is rooted in decades of prior state crackdowns against commemorative defiance.

This securitisation of time is multidimensional: it involves the deployment of armed forces, legal restrictions, public silences and symbolic coercion, and it reveals how anniversaries in conflict zones operate as instruments of political authority rather than neutral markers of history (Beseng, Crawford & Annan 2023). The Cameroonian case demonstrates that absence, silence and enforced immobility are not signs of apathy, but deliberate effects of contested memory, designed to shape political behaviour and define allegiances.

Cameroon has systematically militarised October 1st to prevent any public assertion of Ambazonian sovereignty. Security forces are deployed in Anglophone towns, saturating streets, monitoring public spaces and conducting checkpoints that restrict movement. Communication blackouts, particularly the temporary suspension of internet and social media services, aim to prevent the dissemination of separatist narratives and mobilisation calls (Al Jazeera 2017). Public gatherings are frequently banned, while arrests and detentions target activists, journalists and ordinary citizens suspected of commemorating October 1st.

Notable among these interventions is the case of the 'Nera 10', ten Ambazonian separatist leaders arrested in Nigeria and extradited to Cameroon (Amnesty International 2018). While their arrests frequently coincide with heightened tensions around October 1st anniversaries, framing them as being detained merely for commemorative observance is factually incorrect. They faced severe charges related to acts of terrorism, incitement to violence and the killing of civilians. Similar serious criminal charges explain why diaspora activists such as Cho Ayaba and Melchisedek Kaavi have faced legal proceedings in Norway and Belgium, respectively (Human Rights Watch 2026; Ndi 2026). Consequently, these high-profile legal cases extend far beyond the immediate context of commemorative activities, highlighting how state prosecution targets structural leadership under the broader umbrella of counter-terrorism and public security.

As previously mentioned, the arrest of Julius Ayuk Tabe and other Ambazonian leaders (Nera 10) in Nigeria, and their subsequent trial and imprisonment in Cameroon, have amplified the stakes of the anniversary (BBC 2018). These leaders, who serve as symbolic anchors of the independence movement, are central to Ambazonian mnemonic strategies (Human Rights Watch 2019). Their incarceration underscores the risks associated with asserting alternative claims to historical and political legitimacy, while simultaneously galvanising the diaspora and local populations around October 1st as a sacred temporal site of resistance. In effect, the state's punitive actions against leadership and grassroots actors alike highlight the intimate connection between anniversary observance, political authority and the enforcement of national unity through coercion.

Separatist actors exercise symbolic coercion to enforce participation in commemorations. The establishment of ghost towns, in which streets are emptied and businesses shuttered under threat of arson or intimidation, transforms civic space into a controlled arena of mnemonic performance (Africanews 2025). Flags, posters and street demonstrations serve as both markers of territorial claim and mechanisms of social discipline, ensuring that participation, or at least visible compliance, is observable (DW 2023). In combination with the state's coercive measures, these practices create a highly securitised environment in which the anniversary itself is inseparable from surveillance, enforcement and risk.

The political effects of these securitising practices are profound. By regulating anniversaries through coercion rather than consensus, memory becomes entangled with trauma (Heath-Kelly & Shanaah 2025). Citizens are forced to navigate fear, symbolic obligation and political loyalty simultaneously. Silence, absence and immobility, whether imposed by the state or enforced by separatist mandates, function as visible indicators of contested authority, producing an environment in which commemoration is experienced as an act of risk rather than celebration (Verovšek 2016). In this context, October 1st illustrates how the governance of memory through coercion transforms what might otherwise be a moment of collective reflection into a flashpoint of anxiety and political tension.

The securitisation of October 1st also demonstrates the feedback loops inherent in contested commemorations. State interventions, such as the arrests of the 'NERA 10', while intended to neutralise dissent, reinforce the symbolic potency of the anniversary. Each act of repression underscores the unresolved nature of the 1961 union and validates separatist claims of marginalisation and historical betrayal. Conversely, the enforcement of ghost towns and symbolic rituals by separatists provokes further state intervention, creating an ongoing cycle of coercion, counter-memory and resistance. The anniversary thus becomes both a cause and a consequence of conflict, illustrating how temporal politics and memory are deeply entangled with security practices.

Ultimately, the Cameroonian case illustrates a paradox central to the politics of avoided anniversaries: the suppression of memory through coercion preserves and amplifies its potency. October 1st remains a flashpoint because it is feared, contested and politically charged. By governing anniversaries through force, the state and separatist actors convert memory into both a tool of domination and a source of enduring resistance, transforming commemoration into an arena where historical grievance, political authority and social control intersect.

Conclusion

October 1st in Cameroon illustrates that anniversaries are far more than symbolic markers of history; they function as temporal fault lines, where unresolved pasts repeatedly destabilise the present. From its ambiguous origins in the 1961 union, through its suppression in favour of May 20th, to its reclamation by Ambazonian separatists, the date has continuously generated contestation, coercion and political mobilisation. The securitisation of commemoration manifested in militarised lockdowns, arrests of the NERA 10, and their subsequent imprisonment sanctioned by the Yaoundé Military court demonstrates that memory is inseparable from authority and control. At the same time, the counter-anniversary practices of separatists reveal that suppressed histories are not neutralised by avoidance; they endure as latent claims, capable of reactivation, resistance and symbolic sovereignty. In this regard, anniversaries emerge not merely as instruments of commemoration but as potent conflict multipliers, shaping domestic, diasporic and international arenas of political contestation.

The broader implications for international relations and postcolonial governance are significant. Cameroon's Anglophone crisis underscores that institutional or security-focused reforms alone cannot resolve conflicts rooted in contested memory. Durable peace requires engagement with competing historical imaginaries through inclusive mnemonic dialogue and historical reckoning, rather than enforced forgetting or temporal erasure. Avoided or contested anniversaries reveal that the past persists in shaping political loyalties, collective identities and security dynamics. Recognising anniversaries as active sites of memory and power highlights the necessity of addressing temporal politics alongside conventional political, legal and security measures, demonstrating that reconciliation depends as much on shared narratives of the past as on the architecture of the present.

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