

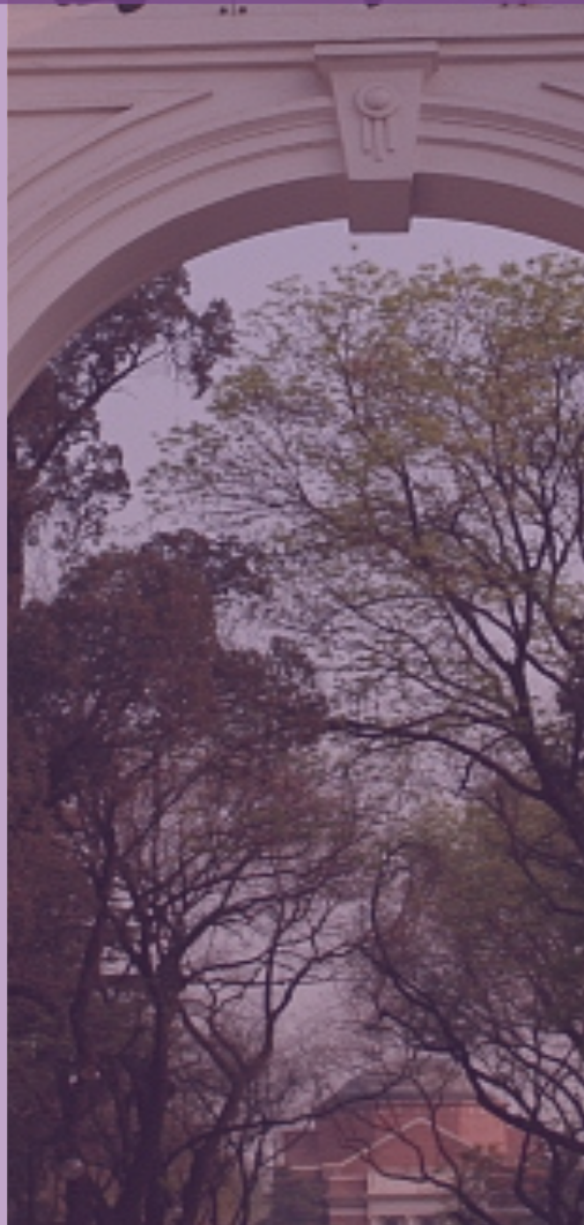
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Table of Contents

PREFACE	4
ANGLO-AMERICAN UNITY AMID DIFFERENCES	5
<i>BRITISH INTERESTS IN THE SAN FRANCISCO PEACE TREATY</i> LILAH CONNELL Bibliography	22
PUBLIC RHETORIC AND IDEOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE	24
<i>GDR PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA, 1986-1989</i> LUCIE MARONNA Bibliography	40
RECONFIGURING SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION.....	43
<i>CHINA-LAC INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION</i> MURILO RANGEL Bibliography	67
NAGORNO-KARABAKH AND THE POWER OF LEADERSHIP.....	70
<i>THE IDENTITY OF THE NATIONAL LEADER IN SHAPING THE DEFENSE OF NATIONAL INTEREST</i> OLEG GRUNDA Bibliography	94

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Preface

Since 2017, Tsinghua International Relations Review has strived to provide students with opportunities to better understand the editing and publishing process in academia. Our journal stands out for its emphasis on a student-led environment, a position that allows us to interact with unique and upcoming perspectives in the field of international relations.

Such a stance, however, comes with its challenges. As Editor-in-Chief, for the past year I have overseen the process of the journal's creation and have worked to continue the vision of those who founded this project. This was only possible due to the hard work of every person who pledged to continue to support TIRR. The members of TIRR this year worked hard to balance their academics and work life with the tasks of the journal. I commend each and every one of our editors and contributors for their efforts in this regard.

For two years, I introduced myself as a student studying in China. Passing the baton to the next Editor-in-Chief is also the final step in me shedding this identity and stepping into a new position as someone working in China. I am grateful for how this opportunity with TIRR has helped prepare me for this shift. Not only has serving in this position allowed me to better understand the ever-shifting dynamics of our world today, it has also brought to light my own personal strengths and weakness. I hope those who continue to work with TIRR after me also have enlightening experiences, and that the vision of TIRR continues to thrive at Tsinghua University. This journal contains a wealth of potential, and I am excited to see how it will blossom in the years to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan St. Denis".

Susan St. Denis
Editor-in-Chief



Anglo-American Unity Amid Differences British Interests in the San Francisco Peace Treaty

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Abstract: In light of US-UK strategic differences and shifting power dynamics in the aftermath of World War II, this research aims to evaluate the extent to which an emphasis on maintaining Anglo-American unity constrained the United Kingdom's interests in its negotiations of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Through an archival survey, this research explores the strategic assessments shaping the UK's treaty interests to understand its motivations on contested issues and to examine whether the prioritization of Anglo-American unity explains unfavorable UK treaty outcomes. This analysis also yields important insight on the UK's view of its position in the new postwar international order, particularly vis-à-vis an economically recovering, democratizing, and US-security backed Japan. Finally, it sheds light on British expectations and reservations about Japan's political and economic transformation post-occupation and its potential to serve as a Western-aligned influential leader in Asia. This historical research also contributes to the broader study of alliance politics in the field of international relations.

Keywords: *Alliance politics, San Francisco Peace Treaty, United Kingdom foreign policy, Postwar Japan, Post-World War II international order*

Introduction

As the unequivocal leader of the Allied Occupation and security guarantor of postwar Japan, the United States played the primary role in drafting and negotiating the San Francisco Peace Treaty between Japan and the Allied Powers that restored Japan's sovereignty in 1952. However, as a key US ally the United Kingdom also played a substantial role in the negotiations, holding extensive internal debates and exchanges with the United States and Japan during the treaty's drafting and in the eight-month period following its signing before its ratification.

Despite the United States and United Kingdom's shared concerns regarding the spread of communism in Asia as the Cold War began to take shape and mutual recognition of the need to swiftly conclude the Allied Occupation, different strategic interests and concerns emerged when negotiating the peace treaty. In the aftermath of World War II, the US and UK were experiencing opposite power trajectories amid the decline of British imperial power and economic difficulties. In addition, the two allies possessed different economic relationships with Japan, with the UK viewing Japan as an economic competitor, and their distinct war experiences generated unique historical memories, sensitivities, and public sentiments.¹ As a result, three main areas of Anglo-American disagreement and negotiation emerged, including Japanese rearmament, economic sovereignty, and Japan's recognition of competing Chinese governments.

In light of these strategic differences and shifting power dynamics, this research aims to evaluate the extent to which an emphasis on maintaining Anglo-American unity constrained the United Kingdom's interests in its negotiations of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. While the UK accepted its "junior status" in the treaty negotiations, some scholars have minimized British participation in the San Francisco peace process as "largely a bureaucratic exercise where ministers did not intend to press the Truman administration too hard."² While weakened after

¹ Given their postwar economic insecurity and pre-war Anglo-Japanese trade union tension, British officials viewed the revival of Japanese economic competition as a central concern in the peace negotiations. In an October 1951 internal telegram, Sir Esler Denning noted that "our own difficulties with Japan were likely to be in the economic field." In the same telegram, Denning observed that the US "by and large, were not concerned about Japanese competition." Instead, US negotiators prioritized "politico-strategic relations with Japan and neglecting their economic dimensions." Hugh Cortazzi notes it was not until later that the Americans "realized their mistake" in underestimating the threat of Japanese competition to American firms. See Hugh Cortazzi, "Britain and Japan, 1951: San Francisco and Tokyo," in *The British Commonwealth and the Allied Occupation of Japan, 1945–1952: Personal Encounters and Government Assessments*, ed. Ian Nish (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2013), 270.

² Roger Buckley, "Hong Kong and San Francisco: Anglo-American Debate on East Asia and the Japanese Peace Settlements," in *The British Commonwealth and the Allied Occupation of Japan, 1945–1952: Personal Encounters and Government Assessments*, ed. Ian Nish (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2013), 249.

World War II and relegated to a supervisory role in the occupation, this passive characterization of British diplomacy is an oversimplification of its foreign policy in East Asia that portrays it as centered around preserving a strong Anglo-American alliance.

In reality, the UK had already demonstrated its willingness to deviate from and push back on US foreign policy in East Asia with its recognition of the PRC over the ROC in January 1950 and its objections to the US assertive posture in the Korean War.³ Furthermore, British historical documents reveal their belief that they had considerable influence with the US. In November 1950 at a conference held at the British Embassy in Tokyo, then British Under Secretary of State in the Foreign Office Sir Esler Denning “stressed that the United Kingdom had at present great influence with the United States,” particularly given their influence over other Commonwealth states.⁴ His optimism regarding US openness to British opinions and advice reflected his view that the US “had recently come to realize that the U.K. was in fact their only reliable ally.”⁵

Even after the treaty had been finalized, the UK retained its belief that it had played an integral role in shaping the outcome and even advocated for greater recognition of the British contribution.⁶ An August 1951 telegram to Washington from the office of UK Secretary of State Herbert Morrison stated while the UK would not “advertise the influence we have exerted behind the scenes” it would be beneficial for both Anglo-American cooperation and US relations with other governments to “avoid letting the draft Treaty appear as a purely single-handed American achievement.”⁷ Therefore, the predominant portrayal of the UK as an unassertive, sidelined player does not align with its own views of its role in the peace process.

To better understand the influence of the Anglo-American alliance on British treaty interests and negotiations, renewed historical research that sufficiently recognizes the UK’s independent foreign policy objectives and the complexities of its sometimes-conflicting interests in the region is needed. As such, this research will lead to a reevaluation of the emphasis the UK placed on maintaining Anglo-American unity through an assessment of the internal considerations

³ Buckley, “Hong Kong and San Francisco,” 248.

⁴ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” Government Papers, FO 262/2066, p. 26, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, 1950, accessed via Archives Direct, http://cn.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FO_262_2066.

⁵ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 33.

⁶ Peter Lowe, “Britain’s Labour Government and the Japanese Peace,” in *The British Commonwealth and the Allied Occupation of Japan, 1945–1952: Personal Encounters and Government Assessments*, ed. Ian Nish (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2013), 246.

⁷ Lowe, “Britain’s Labour Government,” 246.

shaping its own strategic objectives and ultimately its capacity and will to either accommodate or reject certain US interests in the Japan peace process.

Methodology

This research adopts a historical approach through an archival survey of three sets of documents. First, documents from the British Foreign Office files for Japan, including memos and telegrams between high-level British officials and minutes from a meeting at the British Embassy in Tokyo, are analyzed to study the UK's strategic interests and the internal debates, judgments, and justifications regarding acceptable terms for Japanese rearmament, economic sovereignty, and the recognition of competing Chinese governments. Second, transcripts from debates within the UK House of Commons provide the views of members of parliament, which reflect more local interests, and demonstrate how the UK Secretary of State justified the treaty provisions to the government. Finally, for greater insight into the details of the negotiations and to identify the US perspective and where Anglo-American preferences diverged, this research will also rely on archival documents that detail exchanges between British and American diplomats found through the US Office of the Historian.

While treaty negotiations began as early as 1947, they stalled several times. For the sake of continuity, the analysis will focus on the negotiations occurring between 1950 and 1952 after the outbreak of the Korean War and the appointment of John Foster Dulles as the chief US negotiator. Prior to this, there had been some American internal debate regarding the urgency for a multilateral peace treaty and end of the occupation. However, after the victory of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Chinese civil war and outbreak of the Korean War, there was a renewed urgency for a peace settlement and a stronger Anglo-American consensus in favor of a swift conclusion of a broad treaty. This is an important foundation for this research into Anglo-American strategic differences regarding the treaty's specific provisions.

Postwar Power Trajectories & the Anglo-American Alliance

The conclusion of WWII saw the emergence of a bipolar international system featuring the United States and Soviet Union as great powers.⁸ Facing a domestic economic crisis and the

⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

decline of its imperial power, the British government sought to preserve its great power status amid its reconstruction.⁹ In addition to debt challenges, the UK was grappling with food and coal shortages, Soviet expansionism, instability in Greece and Palestine, and its withdrawal from India.¹⁰ This new international structure and US-UK power dynamic contributed to a complex relationship with the US characterized by both a deep economic and military dependence as well as competition for export markets in the Middle East and tension over British imperial interests in Southeast Asia in the face of US anti-colonialism.¹¹ Given these power shifts, the UK's postwar foreign policy was marked by uncertainty of its new role and influence in the world.

The British Labor Government's decision to strengthen the Anglo-American alliance reflected its goal of maintaining its great power status. The UK believed the US's economic influence made it "the only power that could provide Britain with the support to maintain its world position."¹² Therefore, the alliance was deepened largely out of necessity for the UK due to its economic weakness and insecurity rather than out of complete alignment and shared interests with the US. As the Cold War increasingly began to take shape, growing threat perceptions of the Soviet Union and mutual desire to form an anti-communist bloc further strengthened the alliance and facilitated the increasing alignment of US and UK worldviews.¹³ By 1947, it was acknowledged that while an independent British foreign policy was desirable, "in the light of British weaknesses and Soviet threats 'too great independence of the United States would be a dangerous luxury.'"¹⁴ Therefore, the alliance remained asymmetrical and characterized by the power imbalance and continuous British efforts to retain US support.

⁹ This ultimately underpinned the British decision to align itself with the United States during the Cold War as they believed they could harness American "superior power" to Britain's benefit (57). The Labour Government made a concerted effort to forge the US-UK "special relationship" despite disagreement over British imperialism and distrust of US economic power by positioning itself as a "key anticommunist ally" and reframing its colonial relationships as development partnerships (60). See Peter Weiler, "British Labour and the Cold War: The Foreign Policy of the Labour Governments, 1945–1951," *Journal of British Studies* 26, no. 1 (1987): 54–82.

¹⁰ These acute challenges in the immediate postwar period both reflected and intensified the strain on the British economy, while also signaling the UK's declining global influence as it became increasingly overextended. These events prompted the Anglo-American Loan Agreement in December 1945 to provide American credit for UK reconstruction. However, the loan was quickly exhausted while the UK continued to face balance of payments pressures. See Anthony Adamthwaite, "Britain and the World, 1945–49: The View from the Foreign Office," *International Affairs* 61, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 227.

¹¹ Alexandru Dumitru Aioanei, "Redefining British Policy at the Beginning of the Cold War: South-East Europe in London's Foreign Policy Strategies," *CES Working Papers*, Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași 13, no. 2 (July 2021): 213–29.

¹² Weiler, "British Labour," 57.

¹³ Weiler, "British Labour," 60.

¹⁴ Adamthwaite, "Britain and the World," 227.

While the UK was empowered by its belief that it remained the “principal partner and ally on whom the United States of America can rely,” the Foreign Office also recognized the risk of abandonment if the US perception of this reliability were to change.¹⁵ Thus UK foreign policy entering into the Japan peace process was characterized by efforts to “show enough strength of national will and retain enough initiative to maintain her position as a leading world power, and, as such, influence United States policy.”¹⁶ As this statement suggests, this required a delicate balance of remaining firmly united with the US while pursuing its own interests and demonstrating its strength with the aim of preserving its bilateral influence. This framework certainly applied to the British approach to the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

This new power and alliance structure is key for understanding British interest and capacity to shape postwar Japan. Given this insight on the Anglo-American alliance, it is clear its preservation carried valid strategic importance for the UK. However, the new postwar order also highlights the distinct positions of the US and the UK which created an array of strategic differences vis-à-vis post-occupation Japan and a British motivation to preserve both its global influence and bargaining leverage within the alliance.

The Allied Occupation and Aims for Post-Occupation Japan

The Allied Occupation of Japan beginning in September 1945 was a US-led effort under General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. While the UK, Soviet Union, and PRC possessed advisory roles through the Allied Council, they had little contribution to the occupation.¹⁷ The US had the dominant military presence, provided the most economic aid, and MacArthur possessed final decision-making authority.¹⁸ The main features of the occupation included the demilitarization of Japan and an array of social, political, and economic reforms to democratize Japan. This included the adoption of a new US-crafted national constitution in 1947 which revoked Japan’s right to wage war.¹⁹

¹⁵ Adamthwaite, “Britain and the World,” 229.

¹⁶ Adamthwaite, “Britain and the World,” 230.

¹⁷ Christopher James Baxter, *Britain and the Origins of the Cold War in East Asia, 1944–1949* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “Occupation and Reconstruction of Japan, 1945–52,” *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/japan-reconstruction> (accessed June 13, 2025).

¹⁹ The Constitution of Japan, promulgated November 3, 1946, effective May 3, 1947, chap. II, art. 9 (“Renunciation of War”), English translation, Government of Japan Cabinet Secretariat, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government/the_constitution_of_japan.html (accessed December 14, 2025).

While the UK opposed the unilateral US control over Japan due to the implications on its domestic economy, Southeast Asian colonies, and “imperial prestige” in Asia, it had a limited ability to influence US occupation policy, and to an extent welcomed the reprieve from administrative and military burdens in Japan.²⁰ To preserve coordination with the US and advocate for British interests, the UK established its own liaison mission to Japan in 1946, although given their general alignment with US policies that same year the UK withdrew its under-utilized troops from Japan.²¹ However, there remained British frustration with the US unilateral approach to the occupation. The UK was not only skeptical of MacArthur’s reports on the progress of democratization of Japan by 1947, but also sensed US internal divisions were impeding the formation of a long-term Japan strategy and hampering effective communication to the Allies.²² These occupation era dynamics contributed to early delays in peace treaty talks amid disagreement on how urgent and punitive a treaty should be.

The US-UK alliance was additionally initially strained by their different mindsets regarding Japan’s strategic value as an asset against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. While the US policy towards Japan was increasingly shaped by their Cold War mindset with the primary aim of establishing Japan as an anti-communist base in East Asia and insulating it from Soviet influence, the British were slower to adopt such a framework despite shared concerns about the spread of communism.²³ This led to disagreement over the extent to which Japan should be economically supported versus punished.

The UK’s policy priorities were influenced by its domestic economic concerns as well as its aim to protect its imperial interests in Southeast Asia and a sensitivity to public opinion and POW war experiences. In this sense, the UK’s approach to Japan has been described as “backward looking” in contrast to the US “forward looking” approach.²⁴ While the allies’ broad interests in a democratic, Western-aligned, and economically stable Japan were not incompatible, their unique relations with Japan and postwar strategic circumstances produced different concerns and interests on specific treaty provisions.

²⁰ Baxter, *Britain and the Origins*, 183.

²¹ Baxter, *Britain and the Origins*, 186; 188.

²² Baxter, *Britain and the Origins*, 189.

²³ Baxter, *Britain and the Origins*, 194-202.

²⁴ Lowe, “Britain’s Labour Government,” 246.

While the US had significant bargaining leverage over the UK given its dominance in the occupation and economic power, it nonetheless required UK support of the treaty and thus remained willing to engage and negotiate. UK treaty support was not only critical in winning the support of other Commonwealth nations, but also crucial in earning the treaty international legitimacy as the product of multilateral agreement rather than unilateral US action. The US also sought to maintain Western unity to support a united front against communism. Thus, the allies approached the negotiation table with broad shared interests, important strategic differences, a recognition of US primacy, and unique yet mutual incentives to preserve Anglo-American unity.

Japanese Rearmament

Despite the allied initiative to demilitarize Japan during the occupation, the US position shifted as Cold War concerns heightened. By 1951 the US was heavily in favor of Japanese rearmament to reduce the burden on the US military and increase Japan's role in promoting regional security against the communist threat. In President Truman's early instructions to John Foster Dulles outlining the general terms upon which the US was willing to conclude a peace treaty it is stated that while the US will commit "substantial armed force" for the defense of Japan it also "desires that Japan should increasingly acquire the ability to defend itself."²⁵ A memorandum prepared by the Dulles mission in February 1951 detailing broad US treaty aims further states: "There would be no restrictions on Japan's right to rearm."²⁶

The UK advocated for a more cautious approach to post-treaty security that favored the limited, gradual rearmament of Japan featuring indirect restrictions and oversight mechanisms. While recognizing that a total rearmament ban was undesirable, infeasible, and dangerous to impose on a sovereign nation, the UK was considerably more concerned with the potential for the resurgence of Japanese militarism due to their war experiences and skepticism of Japanese democratization.²⁷ Given these complex and conflicting British concerns and interests, their

²⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Vol. VI, Pt. I, doc. 470 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d470> (accessed June 14, 2025).

²⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Vol. VI, Pt. I, doc. 496 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d496> (accessed June 14, 2025).

²⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Vol. VI, Pt. I, doc. 525 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d525> (accessed June 14, 2025).

primary aim was to ensure that rearmament was not explicitly authorized or banned in the treaty.²⁸ This rather flexible British position created significant middle ground for compromise. The question here thus becomes was this flexible British position formed out of the necessity to remain US-aligned despite concerns of Japanese aggression? Historical evidence shows that UK interest in a limited rearmament was primarily shaped by practical considerations that led them to independently conclude rearmament was both necessary and beneficial for Japan and desirable for the allies.²⁹

In a telegram sent to the British Mission in Japan in November 1950, British Under Secretary of State Sir Esler Dening sought answers to a series of questions intended to inform the UK response to Washington's treaty proposals circulated in October 1950, including the topic of rearmament. While it was acknowledged that the US favored rearmament, the responses demonstrate the British interest in a limited rearmament was grounded in an assessment of historical precedents, resources, enforceability, concern for Japanese sovereignty and national dignity, and Cold War politics. References to the Treaty of Versailles and Washington Treaty of 1922 emphasized the infeasibility of enforcing a ban on rearmament and its potential to create adverse effects on nationalism and militarism.³⁰ Additionally, there is evidence of a Cold War mentality that caused British officials to warn against punitive restrictions that could be viewed as "intolerable injustices or improper treatment at the hands of the Western Powers tantamount to an affront to the National dignity," thus risking giving Japan "cause to join forces with the U.S.S.R."³¹

Despite concerns of lingering political instability in Japan given the early, untested nature of its democracy and the belief that rising authoritarianism and nationalism were inevitable in post-occupation Japan, British assessments of the economic implications of rearmament also reinforced its position that a limited rearmament was desirable. The UK considered rapid Japanese rearmament impossible without significant financial aid given their lack of necessary raw materials. They reasoned that "certain items of equipment could not even be manufactured in

²⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Near East, South Asia, and Africa*, Vol. VI, doc. 713 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d713> (accessed June 14, 2025).

²⁹ "Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty," *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 15.

³⁰ "Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty," *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 15; 18.

³¹ "Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty," *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 15.

Japan for five to ten years.”³² For this reason, it would be possible to control the scope and pace of rearmament “not by specific restrictions but by long-range and discreet controls on Japanese imports of strategic raw materials.” They also weighed the benefits of Japan’s rearmament in which its allocation of resources towards either its own armament industry or an international force would “alleviate the fierceness of Japanese competition.”³³ These calculations led to the British conclusion that it was “desirable that the Japanese be allowed to create a small armament industry for which they should be compelled to pay as far as possible.”³⁴

The debate within the UK House of Commons in July 1951 following the publication of the draft treaty reinforced these diplomatic observations while expressing resentment to what some interpreted as an overly US-favorable outcome. Some parliament members agreed with the necessity of defensive rearmament to prevent Japan from itself becoming a victim of aggression as well as its limited capacity to “re-arm to the extent of becoming a potential aggressor” in light of its lost territory and scarce resources.³⁵ However, others perceived and resented that Anglo-American unity was being prioritized at the expense of British interests and with neglect of consideration of its wartime experiences and sensitivities.

One parliament member felt that the UK needed to do more to restrain the US and feared a re-armed Japan would “be much more subservient to America than we are, and we may find that our influence with America will diminish,” while another reflected on the atrocities committed against “Lancashire’s proudest sons” when Singapore fell to the Japanese and called into question “whether our American friends realize how deep these feelings really are.”³⁶ He concludes that the treaty contents “cater largely for the American view of Japan of the future, a view which I consider to be purely artificial.”³⁷ While the views of these parliament members do not reflect the official UK position, this contrast highlights that the British position, while formed based on valid strategic considerations, to some extent ignored public opinion that clashed with Anglo-American unity.

³² “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 13.

³³ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 18.

³⁴ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 31.

³⁵ United Kingdom, *Commons Debates (Hansard)*, vol. 500, col. 468-586, “Foreign Affairs,” July 25, 1951, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1951/jul/25/foreign-affairs> (accessed June 14, 2025).

³⁶ United Kingdom, *Commons Debates*, July 25, 1951, col. 552.

³⁷ United Kingdom, *Commons Debates*, July 25, 1951, col. 552.

Ultimately, the final peace treaty did not explicitly authorize or ban rearmament, and simply guaranteed Japan's "inherent right of individual or collective self-defense" and freedom to "voluntarily enter into collective security arrangements."³⁸ The strategic ambiguity of the treaty therefore allowed for the separate bilateral US-Japan Security Treaty, signed the same day as the main treaty, to enable later rearmament. While the UK hoped for greater indirect restrictions on rearmament, they were satisfied to defer all main aspects of rearmament and security to the bilateral treaty because it guaranteed US oversight of a gradual rearmament instead of complete Japanese military independence and did not compel the UK into a collective security arrangement that would have strained its limited resources. It was also a British diplomatic victory that the bilateral treaty remained separate from the main treaty as the UK wanted to avoid the impression that the treaty had been imposed upon Japan rather than freely entered.³⁹ In this area, Anglo-American unity did not significantly constrain British interests as UK positions were formed based on independent strategic assessments and strategic ambiguity was leveraged to fulfill both the US and UK's primary interests.

Economic Sovereignty

While the US opposed imposing any economic restrictions on Japan to allow its economy to rebuild and reduce dependence on US aid, the UK was fearful of a revival of Japanese economic competition and sought to include commercial restrictions on Japan. UK interests included prohibiting Japanese aircraft manufacturing, restrictions on its shipbuilding capacity, and the formation of a strong trade union movement to prevent the reemergence of cheap Japanese labor.⁴⁰ Unlike rearmament, the economic sovereignty of Japan was an area where US and UK interests appeared to have no overlap and less room for compromise.

British archival documents reveal the Foreign Office was optimistic about the economic "viability" and recovery of Japan in the near-term, particularly given its supplier role in the

³⁸ *Treaty of Peace with Japan* (San Francisco, September 8, 1951), United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 136, No. 1832, art. 5(c), <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume-136/volume-136-I-1832-English.pdf> (accessed June 14, 2025).

³⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Vol. VI, Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), doc. 493, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d493> (accessed June 14, 2025).

⁴⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Near East, South Asia, and Africa*, Vol. VII, Part II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), doc. 124, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v07p2/d124> (accessed June 14, 2025).

Korean war and as a potential profitable player within US initiatives for the development of Southeast Asia and postwar rehabilitation of Korea.⁴¹ The economic viability of Japan was of interest to the UK because its economic collapse could “divert American aid away from Western Europe and destabilize Britain’s imperial position in Southeast Asia.”⁴² They also viewed the economic stability of Japan as closely tied to its long-term political stability. Once again there is evidence that the UK did in fact have a Cold War mentality influencing its positions on post-occupation Japan as their concern with its political stability was rooted in the fear that “increasing instability and erratic swings from Left to Right culminating in the victory of Communism.”⁴³ Similar to the US, they saw Japan’s potential as a leader in a non-Communist Asia with “an important role to play in the development of the backward countries of Asia.”⁴⁴

At the same time, Japan’s recovery also posed an economic challenge to the UK, which recognized that Japan would inevitably “capture some UK markets.”⁴⁵ There was also wariness that a rapid economic recovery would fuel nationalism and militarism. These conflicting economic and political interests were repeatedly acknowledged by British diplomats who recognized that if Japan were to be economically viable and “pay her own way” in the future, there could not be any restrictions on its industrial development.⁴⁶ Sir E. Dening summarized these conflicting interests in a November 1950 telegram, stating: “Politically it is in our interest that Japan should pay her way, but economically it is in our interest to ensure that the adverse effect of Japanese competition upon our own economy is minimized.”⁴⁷ These insights reveal that while the UK desired to limit Japanese economic competition, they also had important political incentives that were incompatible with their economic priorities, but in alignment with US goals.

The British debate on Japan’s economic sovereignty did take into consideration US

⁴¹ Baxter, *Britain and the Origins*, 193.

⁴² Baxter, *Britain and the Origins*, 191.

⁴³ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 14.

⁴⁴ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 17.

⁴⁵ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 6.

⁴⁶ The British did, however, also justify permitting Japan to industrialize by reasoning that due to its lack of raw materials, which was described as “Japan’s Achilles’ heel,” they could “by a check on the supply of such materials...best exercise a long-range control on Japanese commercial competition.” See “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 5.

⁴⁷ “Anglo-American Policy of the Japanese Peace Treaty,” *Government Papers*, FO 262/2066, 4.

interests. It was deemed unrealistic to expect any economic restrictions as they lacked American support or sympathy. The UK also wanted to demonstrate to the US their commitment to aiding Japan's economic recovery, thereby reinforcing their image as a reliable and strong US ally. In an aide-memoire from the British Embassy to the US Department of State, the UK frames the purpose of the treaty as to establish "a peace-loving Japan with a settled government and viable economy."⁴⁸ Further, in justifying the lack of economic restrictions in the 1951 draft treaty at a House of Commons debate, Secretary Morrison is careful to acknowledge the "anxieties of Lancashire and the fears held there of a revival of Japanese competition," but concludes not only that for "practical purposes" it is "useless" to try to write commercial restrictions into the treaty but also makes a subtle appeal to Anglo-American unity.

He emphasizes that Japan has been a significant financial liability on the US, citing that its occupation-era food and raw materials imports have cost the US government "over 2,000 million dollars."⁴⁹ Further, he frames the decision to forgo economic restrictions within the Anglo-American agreement that a treaty should be nonrestrictive to enable Japan to overcome its present poverty. In doing so, Morrison acknowledges a UK concession was made while also minimizing it by dismissing commercial restrictions as unrealistic and contradictory to shared US and UK long-term interests.

This historical analysis thus serves to outline the multilayered economic and political considerations the UK was weighing regarding Japan's economic sovereignty. In this case, the UK lacked the necessary US support to achieve its desired treaty outcome, and thus no economic restrictions were included. While Anglo-American unity constrained British efforts to push for its economic interests, its self-conflicting interests and limited capacity to demand and justify restrictions arguably exerted a greater influence on the British willingness to forgo economic restrictions in the treaty in favor of its own political interests.

Recognition of Competing Chinese Governments

The issue of which Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party's People's

⁴⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Volume VI, Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), doc. 524, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d524> (accessed June 14, 2025).

⁴⁹ United Kingdom, *Commons Debates*, July 25, 1951, col. 484.

Republic of China or the Nationalist government's Republic of China, Japan should recognize—and how/when it should be determined—arguably created the greatest Anglo-American strain. The UK's recognition of the PRC in 1950 became a source of tension with the US, who continued to recognize the Nationalist government as the sole legitimate government of China despite its loss in the civil war. To preserve Japan's strategic autonomy, UK leaders advocated for Japan to make an independent decision on which government it would recognize, but to withhold this decision until after the complete ratification of the peace treaty. The US, however, was eager to secure Japanese support for the ROC to cement its anti-communist position and viewed it as a necessary basis for the treaty's ratification in Congress.

These conflicting positions were openly communicated between Dulles and Morrison on September 9, 1951 following the treaty's signing but before its ratification by either government. In a memo of conversation, Dulles writes:

Mr. Morrison said that he hoped that nothing would be done to crystallize the Japanese position toward China until after the Treaty of Peace came into force. He said that otherwise he might have difficulty about ratification. I said to Mr. Morrison that if nothing was done we, too, might have difficulty about ratification. I told him that, of course, we had not made any secret arrangements or understandings of any kind with the Japanese, as had been rumored.⁵⁰

These UK suspicions and the need for continuous clarification and reassurance persisted despite the earlier June 1951 Morrison-Dulles agreement that “Japan's future attitude towards China must necessarily be for determination by Japan itself in the exercise of the sovereign and independent status contemplated by the treaty.”⁵¹ This indicates the unresolved nature of the China issue and repeated early US and UK attempts to remain a united front.

The British position on the China question was justified by emphasizing their interest in preventing the delay of treaty ratification due to discord among the Allied Powers who were split

⁵⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Vol. VI, Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), doc. 738, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d738> (accessed June 15, 2025).

⁵¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific*, Vol. VI, Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), doc. 597, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d597> (accessed June 15, 2025).

in their own positions between the two Chinese governments.⁵² Their recognition of the divisive nature of the issue informed their cautious approach to the issue. UK officials demonstrated careful attempts not to undermine US interests, and rather than advocating for Japan's recognition of the PRC instead focused their position on the importance of restoring genuine Japanese sovereignty.⁵³

In 1951, Morrison even stated that a de facto arrangement between Japan and the ROC would be acceptable, but that Japan's recognition of the ROC as the sole legitimate Chinese government, particularly before the treaty's entry into force "would seriously embarrass his Government and expose it to the charge of having been deceived by the United States." This demonstrates that while the UK retained a firm position and red lines on the China issue, they were nonetheless highly flexible and considerate in their diplomacy in a concerted effort to prioritize Anglo-American unity. Ultimately, the US largely reneged on its earlier statements and pursuit of an Anglo-American united front. In a highly criticized political maneuver, in December 1951 John Foster Dulles secured a written letter from Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida reassuring him that Japan would not recognize the PRC and intended to sign a treaty with the ROC.⁵⁴ On April 28, 1952, the same day the San Francisco Peace Treaty went into effect, the ROC-Japan Peace Treaty was signed, representing an undeniable American strategic victory.

According to British documents, in November 1951 Morrison rejected US proposals for Japan to initiate ROC peace negotiations "in any form" prior to the treaty's entry into force.⁵⁵ As a result, the British felt betrayed when they learned of the Yoshida letter on January 16, 1952, arguing the US did not keep them adequately informed despite having "ample opportunity" during the UK Prime Minister and Secretary of State's January 1952 visit to Washington.⁵⁶ During this visit, Dulles had made reference to the letter and stated US actions were "the absolute minimum

⁵² United Kingdom, *Commons Debates*, July 25, 1951, col. 479.

⁵³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Western Europe and Canada*, Vol. VI, Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), doc. 351, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v06p1/d351> (accessed June 15, 2025).

⁵⁴ Shigeru Yoshida, "Yoshida Letter on Peace with the Republic of China," Washington, December 24, 1951, in *Modern International Relations: Basic Documents*, vol. 1, 288–90; reprinted in *The World and Japan Database* (National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies; University of Tokyo, Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia), <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JPCH/19511224.O1E.html> (accessed June 15, 2025).

⁵⁵ "Anglo-American Differences over Japan. Code FJ File 1026," Government Papers, FO 371/99402, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, 1952, http://cn.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FO_371_99402 (accessed June 15, 2025).

⁵⁶ "Anglo-American Differences over Japan," *Government Papers*, FO 371/99402, 20.

necessary” to ensure the treaty’s US Senate ratification “and at the same time retain the spirit and in fact the letter of the Morrison-Dulles agreement.”⁵⁷ However, UK documents contend the letter’s contents were not disclosed in this meeting, thus provoking British “distress” when they learned the letter committed the Japanese government “to sign, as soon as possible,” a bilateral peace treaty with the ROC.⁵⁸ They were further made aware that the US had also failed to inform Yoshida of the British objections.⁵⁹ This discreet US action led to the British view that “the Americans themselves violated the understanding by persuading the Japanese to recognise Nationalist China, without telling us plainly what they were up to.”⁶⁰

On the China question, Anglo-American unity significantly constrained British interests as the UK recognized the divisive nature of the topic and tread carefully in its interactions with Japan regarding China, despite hints that Yoshida’s view of the PRC closely aligned with the UK’s.⁶¹ At the same time, despite earlier open communication on the issue, the secretive nature by which this outcome was reached does not constitute voluntary British concessions to maintain Anglo-American unity but instead highlights the US-dominated nature of the peace process and its ability and willingness to sideline UK interests when deemed necessary for ratification.

Conclusion

As with many alliances, the postwar US-UK alliance was underpinned by an array of shared interests and values. Given its postwar vulnerabilities and US strength amid looming Cold War threats, maintaining a strong Anglo-American alliance was a valid and strategic British interest. However, the UK’s efforts to remain a great power with an imperial presence while recovering economically and preserving US-alignment at times created conflicting interests in East Asia. An analysis of historical documents of internal British deliberations and negotiation exchanges with US counterparts reveals the UK was primarily motivated by independent foreign policy preferences but was not unconstrained by the US-UK alliance.

⁵⁷ *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 351.

⁵⁸ “Anglo-American Differences over Japan,” *Government Papers*, FO 371/99402, 20.

⁵⁹ “Anglo-American Differences over Japan,” *Government Papers*, FO 371/99402, 21.

⁶⁰ “Anglo-American Differences over Japan,” *Government Papers*, FO 371/99402, 22.

⁶¹ Valdo Ferretti, “In the Shadow of the San Francisco Settlement: Yoshida Shigeru’s Perception of Communist China and Anglo-Japanese Relations,” *Japan Forum* 15, no. 3 (2003): 425–34.

Depending on the extent to which a US-UK compromise was possible, Anglo-American unity exerted different degrees of influence over British negotiation efforts. Where strategic ambiguity was able to be leveraged to satisfy both US and UK primary interests or in areas where the UK had conflicting economic and political interests, Anglo-American unity did not significantly constrain British interests. In these areas, namely rearmament and economic sovereignty, British deliberations reflect realistic strategic assessments of various factors including historical precedents, resources, enforceability, concern for Japanese sovereignty and national dignity, and Cold War politics rather than the importance of maintaining alignment with the US.

However, UK concessions in the economic realm also demonstrate how declining British power and domestic weakness constrained its bargaining power. Where US and UK interests were antithetical and compromise ultimately not possible as on the China issue, British interests were sidelined not due to their own voluntary concessions in the name of Anglo-American unity, but rather due to the US-dominant nature of the peace process.

Topic	US Interest	UK Interest	Treaty Outcome	UK Interest Achieved?
Rearmament	Unrestricted rearmament	Limited, gradual rearmament	No rearmament authorization or ban	Yes
Economic Sovereignty	No economic restrictions	Economic restrictions	No economic restrictions	No
China Recognition	ROC recognition prior to ratification	Japan independent decision after ratification	Confirmation of ROC recognition prior to ratification	No

Table 1: Summary of San Francisco Peace Treaty Interests & Outcomes

Overall, this research reveals the US and UK shared many Cold War concerns that drove them to agreement on the rearmament of Japan and the importance of its unfettered economic development. However, the UK was plagued by additional concerns including a less optimistic view of Japan's democratization progress, a sensitivity to the resurgence of Japanese militarism, and the vulnerabilities of its domestic economy. This historical research contributes to the understanding of alliance politics between rising and declining powers by demonstrating how at

times the UK was motivated by a desire to demonstrate its reliability as a strong US ally. Within this asymmetrical power dynamic, the weaker ally navigates a balancing act in which they are incentivized to pursue agreeable positions while simultaneously motivated to advocate their independent interests and remain firm in negotiations to prevent the appearance of weakness.

For the UK in the Japanese peace treaty negotiations, this meant at times prioritizing long-term political interests over short-term economic interests and the pursuit of strategically ambiguous resolutions. While the UK did not achieve all its interests, British participation in the Japanese peace process demonstrates an active pursuit of its distinct foreign policy interests, including US alignment, that was constrained primarily by the complexity of the challenges it faced in East Asia as it came to inhabit its new secondary power status amid domestic reconstruction efforts and the intensifying Cold War.

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Public Rhetoric and Ideological Divergence

GDR Perceptions of China, 1986-1989

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how the German Democratic Republic (GDR) viewed its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and evaluated China's political and economic reforms from 1986 to 1989. Using archival documents from the Bundesarchiv and the Wilson Center Digital Archive, the paper examines diplomatic exchanges, symbolic gestures, and internal evaluations. Although the GDR publicly supported China's reforms, internal evaluations criticized them as inconsistent with Marxism-Leninism. The paper argues that the GDR employed rhetoric of ideological alignment to justify cooperation with China, revealing a tension between pragmatic diplomacy and ideological rigidity during the late Cold War era.

Keywords: *German Democratic Republic, People's Republic of China, socialist diplomacy, ideological alignment, Cold War, archival analysis*

Introduction

The final years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as presented in this paper from 1986 to 1989 were marked by ideological crises across the socialist world. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic reforms sharply diverged from East Germany's rigid adherence to Soviet-style socialism during this period.¹ At the same time with Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985 and his initiation of Perestroika and Glasnost and the SED's tendency to keep important matters from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) leadership, the Soviet-East German frictions intensified.² The period of 1986 to 1989 is also seen as pivotal as 1986 marked a turning point in the GDR's foreign policy with Honecker's first visit to the PRC balancing pressure from Moscow with a need to expand to new markets.³

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how the GDR perceived its relationship with the PRC, and how it assessed the PRC's political and economic reforms, during the pivotal period of 1986–1989. This study tests two hypotheses:

H 1: The GDR's public embrace of China was purely strategic, reflecting neither ideological approval nor private trust.

H 2: The GDR even with the opposition of the Soviet Union approached China as they aligned with their party legitimacy.

To answer these questions the paper analyses primary and secondary sources from the Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive) and the Wilson Center Digital Archive categorizing the evidence the three sections: Symbolic acts and public image (press articles, toasts, speeches from Honecker's 1986 China visit), Diplomatic exchanges (state visits, official talks and economic cooperations), internal assessments (Reports and other internal documents).

¹ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 11.

² Hannes Adomeit, "Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev: An Analysis Based on New Archival Evidence, Memoirs, and Interviews," *Slavic Review* 58, no. 1 (1998): 235–297; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 115.

³ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 217; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 10.

The findings reveal that despite publicly supporting China's reforms, internal party assessments criticized the PRC's reform for not adhering to Marxism-Leninism. The paper argues that the SED framed its cooperation with China with strategic ideological rhetoric focused on alignment to legitimize the partnership. Even as it distanced itself from the PRC's reforms in internal documents. This paper further contributes to the broader field of ideological divergence within the socialist bloc during the end of the Cold War and how socialist satellite states of the USSR like the GDR navigated ideology and reforms during the end of the Cold War.

Early Amicable Relations

The relationship of both states starts with their timewise close creation. Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing on October 1, 1949 and only 6 days later, the constitution of the German Democratic Republic was adopted in East Germany, giving way to the creation of the GDR.⁴ Following this the Relationships between the GDR and the PRC were strongly dependent on their relationship with the USSR as the GDR was a satellite state under close watch of the leadership in Moscow.⁵

In the 1950s, Sino-GDR relations were characterised by deepening economic and technical cooperation, and a shared ideological view.⁶ Both countries faced economic boycotts by the West and were therefore largely isolated.⁷ Consequently, they focused their search for new partners on the socialist world. In the year of its foundation, the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations with all socialist states in Eastern Europe, including the GDR.⁸

For the GDR China presented an economic and political opportunity as China emerged as the second major power in the socialist world.⁹ East Germany provided assistance as it supplied

⁴ Kai Vogelsang, *Geschichte Chinas* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012), 536; Hermann Weber, *Die DDR 1945–1990* (Oldenburg: Oldenburg, 2012), 28.

⁵ Yuenian Chen, "Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC" (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 49; Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 340.

⁶ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 4.

⁷ Joachim Krüger, "Die Volksrepublik China in der außenpolitischen Strategie der DDR (1949–1989)," in *Deutschland und China: Beiträge des Zweiten Internationalen Symposiums zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen, Berlin 1991*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Heng-yü Kuo (Berlin: [publisher], 1994), 67.

⁸ Martina Wobst, *BChSt 43 – Die Kulturbeziehungen zwischen der DDR und der VR China 1949–1990* (Berlin: [publisher], 2005), 45.

⁹ Martina Wobst, *BChSt 43 – Die Kulturbeziehungen zwischen der DDR und der VR China 1949–1990* (Berlin: [publisher], 2005), 45.

equipment and assisted China's economic and trade interests in Western Europe through the China Export GmbH. As already mentioned both states were largely diplomatically isolated giving them a shared experience.¹⁰ The growing relationship was further strengthened by PRC officials particularly those educated in the USSR and GDR having a positive attitude towards socialism and cooperation with socialist countries.¹¹ In conclusion the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) established a close alliance predicated on a shared ideology, mutual isolation, and practical economic cooperation before the Sino-Soviet split.

The Impact of the Sino-Soviet Split Shift On Late 70s Rapprochement

Later on in the late 1950s to 1960 ideological disagreements caused the Sino-Soviet split. This impacted the relationships within the socialist bloc. As a satellite state the GDR had to side with Moscow and turn China into an "ideological enemy."¹² The obligation to follow Moscow's anti-China directives is evident in the negative reporting on China by East German newspapers as well as by Moscow actively restraining the GDR from engaging with China.¹³ However some East German officials expressed sympathy for the Chinese position and complained about the GDR's obedience to Moscow, though this had little impact on the country's official policies.¹⁴

Initially the PRC tried to leverage the GDR in their dispute with the USSR but China's attitude became increasingly influenced by its deteriorating relationships with Moscow.¹⁵ Especially from 1963 onwards relationships worsened with confrontational exchanges and insults. East Germany accused China of collaborating with the West, especially regarding the PRC

¹⁰ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 18.

¹¹ Herbert Weiz, "Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 10.

¹² Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 4, 21; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 46.

¹³ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 21; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 46, 48.

¹⁴ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 28.

¹⁵ Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 223, 334.

supporting West Germany.¹⁶ All in all, this caused Beijing and Berlin to experience a shutdown or “ice age” in their diplomatic relationships in the 60s which continued throughout much of the 70s but also started an internal debate about the constraints on GDR’s option due to Moscow’s influence.¹⁷

In the late 1970s and 80s the relations between the PRC and East Germany relations began to improve with the rise of Deng Xiaoping and friction between Moscow and Berlin.¹⁸ In the PRC Deng’s pragmatism, opening-up policy and engagement with Eastern Europe to learn from reform experiences and economic know-how lead to a reassessment of its relationship with the GDR.¹⁹ At the same time East Germany shifted its foreign policies towards a more independent stance from Moscow due to differing views on the war in Afghanistan and cutbacks in oil-deliveries. Its dependence on the Soviet economy also led the GDR to seek new markets as it became increasingly reliant on inter-German cooperation.²⁰ In conclusion, Sino–East German relations underwent a shift from ideological hostility to cautious rapprochement, due to a changing leadership and strategic interests.

Shared Goals and Conflicting Ideology

Initially the two countries shared a common interest in opposing Western imperialism as well as a shared ideological view as they both attempted to develop their new socialist state systems.²¹ The USSR being the major socialist power was seen as a guide for both countries and a place to seek recognition and legitimacy as well as the “right” interpretation of socialism.²²

¹⁶ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 98, 122.

¹⁷ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 93; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 434.

¹⁸ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic’s Relations with the People’s Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 24.

¹⁹ Yuenian Chen, “Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC” (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 24.

²⁰ Yuenian Chen, “Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC” (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 61; Joachim Krüger, *Zu Gast in Peking: Die DDR und die VR China in den 80er Jahren* (Potsdam: Universität Potsdam, 2006), 39.

²¹ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 24; Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 109.

²² Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 17, 30; Barna Tólas, *Economic Reforms and Political Attempts in China, 1979–1989* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991), 16, 28.

However, this trend did not continue in the 50s. Ulbricht and Mao reaffirmed their mutual rejection of the new Soviet course in 1956, marking the beginning of a period of “like-mindedness” and shared fundamental interests. They both believed that the Soviets did not provide insufficient support in their struggle against 'imperialist' control of their territories.²³

This period of “like-mindedness” ended quickly. As the Soviet and Chinese views on socialism diverged, the GDR was forced to take an anti-China position. East Berlin accused China of following the “wrong” form of socialism and switching from Marxism-Leninism to “Maoism” supporting a personality cult, which clashed with the GDR’s ideological views.²⁴ Ulbricht especially advocated for the Soviet Union's interpretation of socialism as the “correct” form that the GDR must follow.²⁵

China’s “Reform and Opening up” brought up ideological changes for example the shift from a centralized planned economy to one that integrated market mechanisms starting the idea of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”²⁶ This also created an interest for China to learn from other socialist economies such as the GDR which was at that time economically successful.²⁷ Despite the economic reforms, China maintained its stance and held the shared view with the GDR that the leadership and authority of the communist party must never be questioned. As both parties prioritised the authority of the Communist Party, this resulted in a growing suspicion of

²³ Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 109, 205; Joachim Krüger, “Die Volksrepublik China in der außenpolitischen Strategie der DDR (1949–1989),” in *Deutschland und China: Beiträge des Zweiten Internationalen Symposiums zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen, Berlin 1991*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Heng-yü Kuo (Berlin: [publisher], 1994), 53; Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 219–235; Werner Meißner, ed., *Die DDR und China 1945–1990: Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung* (Munich: De Gruyter Akademie Forschung, 1995), 90.

²⁴ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 27; James G. Hershberg, David Wolff, Péter Vámos, and Sergey Radchenko, *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press, 2011), 8.

²⁵ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 29.

²⁶ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 81; Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 16, 22; Barna Tólas, *Economic Reforms and Political Attempts in China, 1979–1989* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991), 88.

²⁷ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 36.

Moscow's liberalising reforms and a convergence of ideological views.²⁸ But while the GDR continued to legitimize itself through its loyalty to soviet-style socialism and political stability, China was also able to justify the communist party's legitimacy through economic development.²⁹

Shared Perspective on Gorbachev's Reforms

Following Moscow's proposed reforms in 1985, Honecker proclaimed that the GDR would pursue "Socialism in the colour of the GDR" and refused to adopt the reforms.³⁰ East Berlin rejected the reforms as it viewed them as a threat to the regime and the party's legitimacy.³¹ Honecker believed that the GDR had undergone sufficient reform since 1971 and that further reforms were unnecessary. The country's focus was on trade reforms and relied on West German loans to stabilize its economy. The leadership in Berlin sought to maintain the political status quo and promote "ideological stability."³²

Overall, although the countries paths diverged during the Sino-Soviet Split, both found common ideological ground in the late 80s through a shared commitment to maintaining the party's absolute authority and resisting Moscow's efforts to liberalise politics. Further they both endorsed for their own version of socialism, distinct from Gorbachev's, showing a comparable ideological conservatism. The following table compares the divergence by the GDR and China

²⁸ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 19, 160, 227; Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 19.

²⁹ Yuenian Chen, "Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC" (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 363; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 189; Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 47; Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7.

³⁰ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 191; Andreas Malycha and Peter Jochen Winters, *Die SED: Geschichte einer deutschen Partei* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009), 300.

³¹ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 218; Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 210.

³² Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 253, 259; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 63, 128, 143; Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about a Meeting of Comrade Erich Honecker with Comrade Song Jian, 20 May 1986," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262, 3.

during 1986-1989.³³

Table 1 A comparison of the socialist approaches of China and East Germany in the 1980s.

Aspect	China	East Germany
Economic Reforms	Reorientated its economy through market reforms and “Opening Up”	Minimized reforms, prioritizing foreign trade (e.g. with China and West Germany) without changing the system.
Ideology	Adapted Marxism to fit the Chinese situation “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, while opposing liberal reforms under Gorbachev and supporting Germany reunification.	Maintained the Soviet ideal, opposed liberal reforms under Gorbachev and rejected reunification with West Germany.
Party Legitimacy Narrative	Based on economic development	Based on loyalty to Soviet-style socialism and political stability

Symbolic Acts and Public Image

This section analyses the symbolic acts and public image of the East German leadership by looking at press articles, toasts, speeches from Honecker’s 1986 China visit on China’s reforms. Looking at the GDR’s public rhetoric we can clearly see a pattern of avoiding references to China’s “opening up” and market-reforms. The rhetoric is strategically focused on anti-imperialist solidarity and the shared “socialist brotherhood.”³⁴

³³ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021); Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic’s Relations with the People’s Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014); Joachim Krüger, “Die Volksrepublik China in der außenpolitischen Strategie der DDR (1949–1989),” in *Deutschland und China: Beiträge des Zweiten Internationalen Symposiums zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen, Berlin 1991*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Heng-yü Kuo (Berlin: [publisher], 1994), 43–58; Joachim Krüger, *Zu Gast in Peking: Die DDR und die VR China in den 80er Jahren* (Potsdam: Universität Potsdam, 2006); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Andreas Malycha and Peter Jochen Winters, *Die SED: Geschichte einer deutschen Partei* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009); Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Barna Tólas, *Economic Reforms and Political Attempts in China, 1979–1989* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991).

³⁴ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986); “Press Articles on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,”

During his visit Honecker highlighted ideas on “the exchange of experiences on socialist construction” and cooperation while the Chinese side expressed interest in “promoting the development of relations with other brother parties in the European socialist states.”³⁵ Honecker mentioned in an interview to Chinese media the “traditionally friendly relationships” emphasising the common “fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war,” often using terms such as “dear comrades and friends” when addressing Chinese officials.³⁶

Honecker also talks about Shanghai being a fight against the imperial struggle bringing up the topic of anti-imperialism multiple times.³⁷ While an official report discusses the topic of “Policy of economic reform and opening up to the outside world,” Honecker himself makes more general statements such as “far-reaching plans for developing the national economy, raising living standards, creating a life under socialism.”³⁸ All in all the GDR’s rhetoric emphasized common ideology such as “socialist construction” and anti-imperialism with Honecker especially avoiding the topic of economic reforms.³⁹

Examining the documents there is no evidence of the GDR presenting China as a model of “stable socialism” in order to implicitly contrast with soviet reforms. Furthermore, during his visit to China Honecker expressed his agreement with Gorbachev’s views as set out in his speech in Vladivostok and “familiarised the Chinese discussion partners with the GDR’s position on the Soviet-American meeting in Reykjavik.”⁴⁰ The same report also states “China’s adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong’s ideas as one of the four fundamental principles of its

Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Toast during the Dinner in Honour of the Chinese Delegation,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1987.

³⁵ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

³⁶ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Toast during the Dinner in Honour of the Chinese Delegation,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1987.

³⁷ “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1ff.

³⁸ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 8; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4.

³⁹ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

⁴⁰ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 5.

politics,” but frames it as a Chinese self-description not explicitly talking about China as more adherent to socialist principles than the USSR.⁴¹

Further Honecker brings up the “traditionally friendly relationships” and the common “fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war,” highlighting ideological and historical alignment. Honecker frames the PRC’s economic achievements as “far-reaching plans for developing the national economy,” noting that the achievements contribute to “strengthening of socialism.”⁴² This demonstrates the reinforcement of a shared ideological narrative.

The GDR further framed its own economic policy changes as “the more effective internal combination of the advantages of socialism with the achievements of the scientific and technological revolution.”⁴³ This shows that the GDR sees its own advancements as leveraging technological development in a socialist system rather than reform implicitly criticising the soviet approach of Perestroika.⁴⁴ Overall the documents do not show explicit criticism of Gorbachev’s reforms, nor do they frame China as a model of “stable socialism” in contrast to the USSR. However the papers do show a tendency to emphasize ideological alignment like the “fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war” while avoiding mentionings of Chinese reforms.⁴⁵

East Germany’s Diplomatic Exchanges

This section analyzes East Germany’s diplomatic exchanges, and the normalization of the relationships by looking at state visits, official talks and economic cooperations.

While the documents do not demonstrate a lack of ideological alignment, they do emphasize pragmatic cooperation within a shared ideological framework as evidenced by the focus on

⁴¹ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 8.

⁴² “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4–5; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 6.

⁴³ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 3ff.

⁴⁴ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic’s Relations with the People’s Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 115; Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

⁴⁵ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

“exchange on the basic orientations of the domestic, economic and foreign policies of both parties and states, and [...] of experiences on socialist construction,” and in the “Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987” where the idea of a “common foundation concerning the build-up of socialism” is mentioned as well as “further expansion of scientific-technological cooperation.”⁴⁶

In his conversations with both Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang, Honecker frequently emphasizes the “long tradition” of relations and cooperations between the parties.⁴⁷ Other issues, such as visa exemptions, were pragmatic, but were framed as contributing to socialism as well as the signing of the “agreement about the long-term development of economic and scientific-technological cooperation” which was seen as in “the interest of economic progress and the solidification of friendly relations and peace.”⁴⁸ All this created rhetoric of ideological alignment.

The conversation with Margot Honecker (the Minister of National Education) was focused on ideological dimensions talking about the “friendly coexistence of all socialist states in general” and a wish to better the relationships with the USSR, with China focusing on “three respects”:⁴⁹

1. “The PRC fully respects the internal and external policies of these states;
2. The PRC fully respects the special relations of these states with the USSR, which have been established and developed over the past decades;
3. The PRC fully respects the ideas and plans of these states regarding the development of their relations with the PRC.”⁵⁰

Hu further mentioned that “Progress has been made in economic relations [...], but there has been no significant progress in political relations” with the USSR emphasizing the want to

⁴⁶ “Report on the Visit of the Chinese Delegation to the GDR,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2437, *Relations with China*, Bd. 2 (1987–1989), 1987, 1; Herbert Weiz, “Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 4.

⁴⁷ “Conversation between Erich Honecker and Deng Xiaoping,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4, 6; “Conversation between Erich Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4.

⁴⁸ “Report on the Visit of the Chinese Delegation to the GDR,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2437, *Relations with China*, Bd. 2 (1987–1989), 1987, 2; Herbert Weiz, “Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 2–3.

⁴⁹ “Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

⁵⁰ “Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 2.

engage with the USSR. To this Margot Honecker references the GDR's "independent foreign policy" trying to strengthen "the position of socialism" all in all showing an underlined focus on ideological rapprochement and strong motivation for pragmatic cooperation.⁵¹

Interest in sharing experience and technical cooperation can also be seen in other conversations. Herbert Weiz's conversation with Song Jian, the latter emphasizes that it would be "worthwhile for the PR China to study the experiences of the GDR" while Weiz showed an interest for the GDR on rural development.⁵² Other conversations such as the ones between Honecker and Deng, between Günter Mittag and Li Peng and the report on the Song Jian's visit show agreements on technological cooperation, discussions about trade aimed at strengthening the socialist economy while emphasizing the "common foundation concerning the build-up of socialism."⁵³

Looking at the above-mentioned conversation Hu Yaobang highlighted "three respects" also counter the argument that China was being used to distance itself from the Soviet Union as it explicitly focuses on cooperation between all states in the socialist bloc.⁵⁴ The documents do not explicitly show that the GDR used its ties to China to demonstrate its ideological independence from the USSR. They often reference a commitment to cooperating with the entire socialist bloc and including positive notes about the USSR. Furthermore, the documents show that the expanding relationship was motivated by a mixture of ideological alignment and pragmatic cooperation.

China's Diplomatic Exchanges

This section analyzes China's domestic developments, China's political reforms and their implications for GDR foreign policy by looking at reports from the Foreign Ministry and other internal documents. The internal reports studied clearly express concern and criticism by the

⁵¹ "Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 7.

⁵² Herbert Weiz, "Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 5.

⁵³ Herbert Weiz, "Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 4; "Conversation between Erich Honecker and Deng Xiaoping," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; "Conversation between Günter Mittag and Li Peng," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about a Meeting of Comrade Erich Honecker with Comrade Song Jian, 20 May 1986," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1986).

⁵⁴ "Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 2.

Foreign Ministry and Stasi (Ministry of State Security of the GDR) towards China's. Firstly, when analysing the documents, it becomes evident that the GDR questioned Chinese socialism, labelling China as an "ideological revisionist."

A report by the Stasi the Ministry describes how China sees itself in an "initial stage of socialism" but focuses on terms associated with market reforms, such as "foreign property in the form of joint ventures" showing criticism while maintaining a more conservative view of socialism.⁵⁵ The same document also implies a deviation from socialist principles by concerns about ideological foundations and "education of party members only[...] [being] developed modestly."⁵⁶ Another document from 1989 also expresses similar concerns that "methods of political-educational activities are met increasingly with rejection in factories and institutions" suggesting a failure to educate on socialist values in the population, all in all criticising China's economic reforms in different ways.⁵⁷

Some documents also express distrust and criticism of Deng's policies. A report 1987 by the Stasi acknowledges economic growth but suggest "spontaneous factors" such as "relatively high rates of inflation" to be the reason and questions the "proportional development of the economy" concluding that the "Chinese economic organism is still subject to heavy swings and changes," indicating a lack of trust in the long-term development of the economy.⁵⁸ The report from 1989 mentions Western experts' views on how "the situation in the People's Republic of China is still complicated" and that "a successful mastery especially of the economic problems are said to have decreased," clearly criticising.⁵⁹ Other documents by the Stasi also show a worry about social unrest in China.

The report from 1987 is warning that the "discontent within the population is growing" and in 1989 the report highlights how "one has not succeeded in eliminating the tensions in the relationship between Army and the population" showing concern of potential instability by the

⁵⁵ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3, 6.

⁵⁶ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 6.

⁵⁷ Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1-2 (1989), 3.

⁵⁸ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3.

⁵⁹ Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1-2 (1989), 2.

GDR.⁶⁰ Reports from 1987 also express distrust in the competence of leadership, noting Minister of State Security Jia Chunwang to be “a young and inexperienced man,” “lacking the collective recognition needed for such a position.”⁶¹ While the report from 1987 criticises China’s economic development it also acknowledges that “Cooperation was expanded both comprehensively and in intensity.”⁶²

A different report by a Chinese intelligence source mentions that the GDR “acted very courageously” and was the first demonstratively displaying friendship towards China.⁶³ All in all some of the documents make contradicting statements acknowledging the increase of relationships but criticizing Deng’s policies and others. In a report on the developments of the relations between China and the GDR “the Chinese side” expresses “confidence in the firm and stable course of the party and government of the GDR” giving reciprocal recognition and reinforcing legitimacy for the GDR through its engagement.⁶⁴ Even though China’s self-views as in the “initial stage of socialism” reports by the Stasi still highlight China’s commitment to the “four fundamental principles,” focusing on its commitment to socialism and the leadership of the communist party, to legitimize cooperation by viewing China as part of the socialist bloc.⁶⁵ The same report also finds a connection between the PRC and the GDR in the primary concern for “political stability” and to “develop the leading role of the party.”⁶⁶ Maintaining a leading role as the communist party

⁶⁰ Ministry for State Security (GDR), “Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1–2 (1989), 4; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3.

⁶¹ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2.

⁶² Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 6.

⁶³ Opinions from a Member of an Intelligence Service of the PR China Operating in the GDR under Journalistic Cover 1987, p.2)

⁶⁴ Foreign Ministry (GDR), “Entwicklung der Beziehungen zu China und Korea,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2345, *Foreign Policy Information from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to Erich Honecker* (1988), 2; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2.

⁶⁵ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 6.

⁶⁶ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3, 6.

is central to the GDR's legitimacy narrative, therefore these reports highlight a perceived alignment with the PRC.⁶⁷

The reports do not explicitly compare the perceived instability in the USSR with China but there is a clear indication for tensions which may have elevated China as the more stable and reliable partner. Especially the Chinese intelligence source in the GDR in 1987 notes about tensions between the USSR and the GDR saying, "Some official personalities" of the GDR would "openly oppose the Soviet Union," which contrasts the portrayal of the Chinese leadership which seemed to overall positive despite challenges.⁶⁸

All in all, documents seem to implicitly compare China as a success with "increased activities vis-a-vis its socialist partners" to the USSR's slowing development.⁶⁹ Overall, the reports highlight aspects that support the GDR's rhetoric on stability and party leadership showing a common ground in party legitimacy narrative to validate the GDR's engagement with China, while also implicitly comparing the PRC and the USSR. The documents highlight ideological concerns, observations of economic instability and potential social unrest. The analysis highlights the stark difference between the public portrayal of the relationships and the negative internal assessments of China's developments. However there appears to be a desire to legitimize the cooperation with China by implicitly comparing it to the USSR and aligning with the narrative on party legitimacy.

Conclusion

The final years of the GDR must be seen against the backdrop of the changing socialist bloc with reforms in most countries.⁷⁰ This paper examined how the German Democratic Republic (GDR) perceived its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC), and how

⁶⁷ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 208.

⁶⁸ "Opinions from a Member of an Intelligence Service of the PR China Operating in the GDR under Journalistic Cover," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2.

⁶⁹ Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1–2 (1989), 4.

⁷⁰ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 258; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 19.

it assessed China's political and economic reforms, during this period of change" In the first part of the analysis, the documents do not show explicit criticism of Gorbachev's reforms, nor do they frame China as a model of "stable socialism" in contrast to the USSR. Instead, they emphasize ideological alignment through shared rhetoric such as the "fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war," while avoiding direct references to Chinese reforms.⁷¹ This supports Hypothesis 1, suggesting that the GDR's public discourse prioritized common ideological values, but it does not support Hypothesis 2, as there is no evidence that this alignment was used to implicitly critique Soviet policies.

In the second part of the analysis, neither Hypothesis 1 nor Hypothesis 2 is supported. The development of Sino-GDR relations cannot be explained by a shift away from ideology toward pragmatism, but instead reflects an interaction between ideological alignment and pragmatic considerations. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the GDR leveraged its relationship with China to signal ideological autonomy from the Soviet Union.

The third part of the analysis proves both hypothesis 1 and 2. Overall, the documents mention ideological concerns, observations of economic instability and potential social unrest. The analysis highlights the stark difference between the public portrayal of the relationships and the negative internal assessments of China's developments, yet there seems to be a want to legitimize the cooperation with China through a comparison with the USSR and an alignment on party legitimacy narrative.

The GDR from the analysis seemed to have understood its relationship with China as deepening but there is no evidence supporting that it saw its strengthening connections to the PRC as a form of ideological independence for the USSR. Rather it tried to walk a thin path between needed pragmatic cooperation trying to create a legitimacy for the relationship by emphasising "socialist brotherhood" and a common "fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war."⁷² There can also be no evidence found criticising Gorbachev's reforms to find an alignment with China. From the analysis it can be said that the GDR viewed China's political and economic reforms positive in public statements often in a combination with "strengthening of socialism," but internally seeing China's economic success as a combination of "spontaneous factors," while

⁷¹ "Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

⁷² "Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

also criticising Minister of State Security Jia Chunwang to be “a [...] inexperienced man.”⁷³ All together it should be noted that the research would benefit from more documents during the years 1988 and 1989 with most documents in the analysis being in 1986 and 1987. The analysis also mainly relied on public records which leaves private conversation between SED members remaining undiscussed. Here the paper could benefit from interviews with ex-SED members or ambassadors of the GDR in China.

Although this paper has limitations it contributes to the broader field of how socialist states navigated ideology and reforms during the end of the cold war. Especially the GDR’s deepening relationship with China disprove the common narratives on monolithic structure of the socialist bloc whose policies were entirely dictated by Moscow. This paper analysis shows that the GDR’s sought to deepen its relations with China while framing the partnership as ideologically aligned, despite policy differences. The GDR publicly supported Chinese reforms but was criticized internally. This contradiction highlights how the SED used ideological rhetoric to justify cooperation, emphasising shared narratives of party legitimacy to legitimise engagement with a reformist communist state.

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⁷³ “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 5–6; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3; “Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 2.

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Reconfiguring South-South Cooperation

China-LAC Infrastructure and the Political Economy of Transnational Cooperation

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Abstract: This paper analyzes China–Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) cooperation as a form of South–South political economy centered on infrastructure finance and multilateral development. It argues that China’s expanding engagement—particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative—has contributed to the reconfiguration of regional logistics, credit access, and project financing by embedding LAC countries within alternative financial and institutional networks in the Global South. Drawing on Robert Cox’s critical framework, the article conceptualizes China–LAC cooperation as a challenge to hegemonic development structures, emphasizing multilateralism among emerging economies rather than dependence on Northern-led financial regimes. Through foreign direct investment and institutional arrangements, China promotes “win-win” partnerships that secure commercial advantages while addressing infrastructural and logistical constraints, especially in commodity- and resource-oriented sectors. The findings highlight how infrastructure finance functions as both an economic and structural instrument in contemporary South–South cooperation.

Keywords: *China, Latin American and Caribbean Countries, Belt and Road Initiative, Multilateralism, Global South*

Introduction

Over the last decades, China has been developing a range of investments and large-scale projects that are integrated in a multilateral perspective of alignment with strategic countries around the world, where Latin America and the Caribbean are a significant part of this transnational cooperation. Throughout the historical influence of developed countries and traditional institutions in the region, Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries approached Chinese investments and the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity to not only receive financing for large infrastructure projects, but also expand their credit availability and transfers. Based on the ‘win-win’ conception related to mutual benefits, China's strategy consists of maximizing the international logistics of LAC countries through focused lines of credit, loans, and direct investments to consolidate an infrastructure capable of dealing with the Chinese demand for commerce.

The use of multilateral financial institutions and international banks is fundamental to establishing deeper economic relations and stable economic growth in different segments of LAC countries, mainly because LAC countries historically have had more difficulties accessing international financing institutions. This aspect emphasizes the Coxian and Leninist perspectives on the use of cooperation among emerging countries to develop ways to circumvent traditional Western institutions and prioritize national development. As Brazil, Chile, and Peru are China's top trading partners in the region, China is focusing on operating construction, power, and other renewable projects in strategic countries and routes for improving regional and international distribution.

However, the reduction of the world's economic growth is a current challenge for China and LAC countries due to a period marked by high inflation rates, uncertainty regarding energy prices, significant debt, and high real interest rates.¹ This is the reason why Chinese investments have great importance in the region, because LAC countries are also using this opportunity to avoid stagnation, while they are fomenting the development of the national infrastructure to be more competitive in the world market. Moreover, the uncertainty of the economic development of Europe and the distancing of the United States in policies for multilateral institutions is a scenario where emerging economies can stand out as new investment spots. The mutual benefit

¹ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: A Critical Juncture amid Policy Shifts* (Washington, DC: IMF, April 2025).

in the relations between LAC countries and China is a movement for cooperation between South Global countries, but it is also a strategic alignment to minimize the dependency of LAC countries on traditional Western institutions and developed countries.

Methodology

Based on the approach of Robert Cox to the essential aspect of creating multilateral relations where emerging economies could be counter-hegemonic forces, there is an understanding that the transformations of the world order are a process of cooperation, although it is fundamental to distinguish the differences between hegemonic and non-hegemonic structures. Drawing on Gramscian theory, neo-Marxist scholar Robert Cox analyzes how emerging economies can utilize international cooperation with institutions to expand their own development. Moreover, Lenin's perspectives define how investments in national production can be used as a mechanism to evolve subsidiary industry, while moving away from purely agrarian development.

Given the relations between China and Latin American countries in recent years, both authors' views are applied to analyze the process of mutual development that emerging countries can contribute to through strategic coalitions. Information available in publications by official institutions, such as the World Bank Group, was used to prepare the data used in the tables and figures to ensure greater data reliability. Although it is not known to the general public, the table referring to international trade was developed with information from Trade Map, which is an initiative made by the International Trade Centre UNCTAD/WTO (ITC) that is related to the World Trade Organization.

China's Development-Oriented Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean

Based on the various strategic factors that China has for establishing international partnerships, "including the target country's political stance towards China, its geopolitical influence, and the potential for economic cooperation between the two sides, China develops and identifies mutual interests between the parties to consolidate economic and commercial

rapprochements.² However, for China, bilateral relationships are inefficient for deeper interstate relations, and China's objective is to consolidate a more three-dimensional vision strategy in connection with the world.³ Latin America, as it is not an exception within the international context for China, has become a focus, given its economic potential and the gradual growth in Latin American (LatAm) trade in commodity production.

The development of Chinese partnerships with LAC is defined within a series of progressive factors for greater diplomatic, geopolitical, and economic integration of mutual cooperation. The alignment of global strategic interests of partner states establishes a deeper cooperation between China and LAC countries, based on a process of South-South cooperation.⁴ According to the policy paper released by China's State Council in 2008, "China will, on the basis of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, give positive consideration to concluding free trade agreements with LAC countries or regional integration organizations."⁵ In line with Vadell, the policy paper established similarities with institutional frameworks that evoke deeper cooperation between countries from a region as developed by China with Africa in other institutional experiences, which is related to the increasing South-South cooperation.⁶

According to Cox, the institutionalization of power relations can become both a battleground of opposing tendencies and a way to represent the interests of different agents for a universalization of policies.⁷ In other words, the strong United States (US) presence in Latin America over the last decades has created not only limitations to national development in LAC countries but also generated the effects of new South-South perspectives to be used as an alternative, which China has been taking advantage of it for organizing multilateral relations with this region.

In 2015, Premier Li Keqiang announced the new "3 x 3" cooperation model between China and LAC countries at the China-Brazil Business Summit, as a new strategy to explore areas related

² Xinyu Zhang, "Strategic Enhancement and Differential Governance: China's Partnership Diplomacy in Latin America," *Relaciones Internacionales* 97, no. 2 (2024): 64.

³ Jie Guo, "The Political Economy of China-Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm," *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 117.

⁴ Xinyu Zhang, "Strategic Enhancement and Differential Governance: China's Partnership Diplomacy in Latin America," *Relaciones Internacionales* 97, no. 2 (2024): 64.

⁵ Xinhua, "China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean," *China Daily*, November 6, 2008.

⁶ Javier Alberto Vadell, "El Foro China-CELAC y el Nuevo Regionalismo para un Mundo Multipolar," *Carta Internacional* 13, no. 1 (2018): 20.

⁷ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 219.

to domestic demand through the improvement of logistics, power, and information pathways.⁸ The other 3 aspects are related to positive integration with enterprises, society, and governments, which are important to promote a healthy market economy based on cooperation. Conforming to this new model, China would integrate into LAC countries to boost free markets with “joint investment, public-private partnerships (PPP) or joint franchising” on cooperative projects, established in the expansion of financing channels (funds, loans, and insurance) to focus on bilateral projects.⁹

Conforming to Cox, “the internationalization of the state is associated with the expansion of international production”, and “international production expands through direct investment[...]¹⁰ Following this analysis into the development and internationalization of LAC countries with China, the expansion of international production is part of this relation because, through a transnational scale, national and industrial cooperative structures are expanded to economic stability and national development. Part of these processes are also based on direct investments, where a coalition of peripheral countries can use institutions or cooperative projects to use new investments to promote development. Although Cox (2007, 117) identifies that non-hegemonic states have a difficulty of creating interstate coalitions against the current international system, this strategy between LAC countries and China is not only an alternative to delimiting closer relations between emerging countries that shape resistant partnerships from multilateral trade, but also accompany Cox’s idea about economic development through international production.

In January 2018, at the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum, China formally invited by Wang Yi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the LAC countries to be part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) based on a reasoning that:

Latin American and Caribbean countries are part of the natural extension of the Maritime Silk Route and are indispensable participants in international cooperation of the Belt and Road initiative. In fact, the "Pacific Maritime Silk Road" has reached Latin America as

⁸ State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Premier Proposes ‘3×3’ Model for China–Latin America Cooperation,” May 20, 2015.

⁹ State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Premier Proposes ‘3×3’ Model for China–Latin America Cooperation,” May 20, 2015.

¹⁰ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 233.

early as 400 years ago.[...] Through this meeting, China has once again clearly showed its willingness to align development strategies with CELAC countries under the Belt and Road framework, promoting coordination, inter-connectivity of infrastructures, facilitation of trade, cooperation on financial matters and mutual understanding in order to promote and expand cooperation between the parties. Both China and CELAC countries agreed that the establishment of the Belt and Road initiative will inject new vitality and open up new prospects for the all-round cooperation between China and CELAC countries and are willing to realize the optimization, upgrading, innovation and development of China-CELAC cooperation which is wider, better structured, more dynamic and of better quality in promoting the Belt and Road initiative.¹¹

Although there are different Chinese infrastructure projects and companies implementing a varied network of sectors in LAC countries, such as Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, they are not exclusively related to the expansion of the BRI because, given the Chinese offering of US\$35 billion to finance projects in Latin America — through the creation of a China-Latin America and Caribbean Cooperation Fund — at the beginning of the CELAC-CHINA.¹²

Each country has unique characteristics, which are part of their natural resources and geographical location, that can be used to develop an integration between Chinese and national interests, based on partnerships and/or collaborative infrastructure projects. At the same time, it is not mandatory to be linked with the Chinese government's formal extension of the BRI.¹³ The rise of infrastructure construction as the fastest-growing segment of cooperation has been a key driver in China-Latin America trade, which totaled US\$307 billion in 2018 and consolidated China's position as the region's second-largest trading partner.¹⁴

¹¹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Antigua and Barbuda, "Work Together to Create a Better Tomorrow for China-CELAC Relations," January 31, 2018.

¹² Camila Moreno, *O Brasil Made in China: Para Pensar as Reconfigurações do Capitalismo Contemporâneo* (São Paulo: Fundação Rosa Luxemburgo, 2015), 28–29.

¹³ Jie Guo, "The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm," *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 124.

¹⁴ Belt and Road Portal, "Latin America Eyes Opportunities in Belt and Road Initiative," July 24, 2017, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/20712.html>; Edimar da Rocha Pinto, *Impactos da Iniciativa Chinesa Cinturão e Rota no Brasil: Estará o País Preparado para as Oportunidades e Desafios da Nova Rota da Seda?* (São Paulo: Editora Dialética, 2021), 272.

The movement to create intra and cross-regional infrastructure projects, which are assembled to BRI initiatives, are encouraged by China in LAC countries, due to their potential to develop further connections between the countries. For example, there is the Panama–Chiriqui Railway, the Panama Colon Container Port, the Montero–Bulo Bulo Railway in Bolivia, a Brazil–Peru Bioceanic Railway, a Central Bioceanic Railway (that would start in Bolivia and connect that country with Brazil and Peru), an Argentina–Chile international tunnel and the trans-Pacific fiber optic cable in Chile.¹⁵

Despite these being projects of interest to China for a more dynamic and structured continental logistics development, China is advancing a vision that extends beyond bilateral trade. These initiatives represent a strategic effort to reshape the physical and economic architecture of LatAm countries, fostering deeper regional integration while simultaneously reorienting its global connectivity. Projects like the Brazil-Peru Bioceanic Railway or the trans-Pacific fiber optic cable were designed to create new logistical corridors, reduce dependency on traditional Atlantic routes, and bind the continent more directly to Asian markets. In this sense, it is analyzed that these projects demonstrate a more in-depth perspective in the regional and international context because infrastructure push demonstrates a dual-layer strategy: at a regional level, it positions China as an indispensable partner in South American development and integration, while at the international level, it systematically expands China's network, enhancing its influence within global supply chains and challenging established geopolitical and economic frameworks.

LatAm integration favors better continental proximity, reducing barriers related to the structural and economic weaknesses of each country in the region. Nevertheless, the BRI is not limited to a China-only perspective due to the promotion and support of the inherent multilateralism of the project. These projects empower countries to benefit from the internationalized character of the BRI because they are positioning their countries not only for commercial purposes, but also for developing the connection of the LAC countries with themselves, China, and the world.

Comparing the graphs in Image 1, even though the US is still the largest trade partner in the region, it shows that China is increasing its exportation in transporting products to LAC countries, where the US is having a reduction in this sector over the last years. It is clear that the

¹⁵ J. Gonzalez Jauregui, "Latin American Countries in the BRI: Challenges and Potential Implications for Economic Development," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 10, no. 3 (2021): 353.

trade market between the US and Mexico is perhaps the anchor that supports most of the US export numbers to LAC countries. In 2024, Mexico accounted for more than 60% of total US exports to LAC countries, while Mexico just represented 33% of total Chinese exports. Although there is a current increase in Chinese investments to Mexico, both graphs illustrate a different Chinese approach from the US. This is because China is developing a more dynamic environment for international logistics distribution in the region through investments and the implementation of new technologies, with the export of products from the transport sector being essential for improving LAC international trade.

As another example, since 2021 the annual growth rate of the value of certain exports (auto components from China to Mexico) has increased at 14 % per year, because, through the growing Chinese interest in exporting automotive components to North America, the Mexican trade relationship with the Asian giant arises from the Chinese intention to circumvent US protectionist restrictions.¹⁶ As a result, China's FDI flow into Mexico increased from US\$38 million in 2011 to US\$386 million in 2021.¹⁷ This is because China is using the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which provides tariff-free access for goods made with enough North American content through Mexico, to have an entry point into the US with the lowest terms.¹⁸

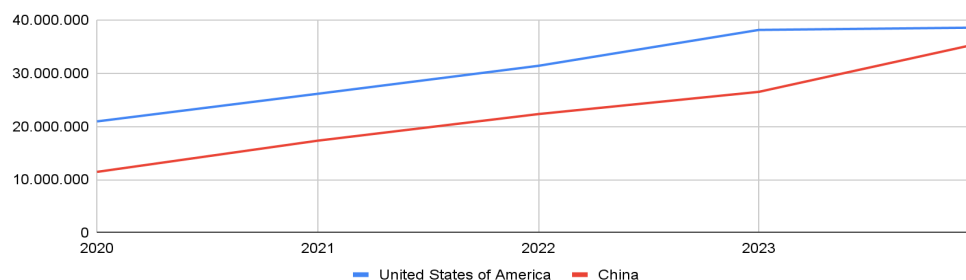
¹⁶ Mia Nulimaimaiti and Ralph Jennings, "China Has Made Mexico a Premier Investment Destination. Is It a US Detour, or Something More?," *South China Morning Post*, February 3, 2024.

¹⁷ Marc Jütten, *China's Increasing Presence in Latin America: Implications for the European Union* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2025), 7.

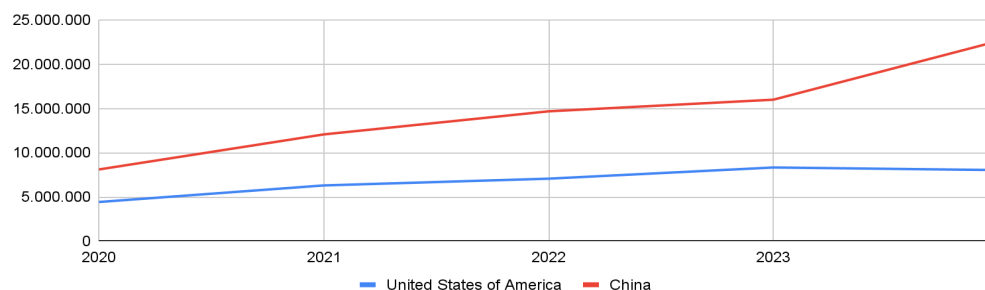
¹⁸ Karin Johnston, *China, Latin America, and the United States: Geopolitical Impacts and New Challenges* (Washington, DC: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung USA, 2025), 6.

Image 1: Difference in exports of transport products from China and the USA to LAC countries (2020-2024)

Exports of transporting products from China and the USA to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2020 and 2024 (Unit: US Dollar thousand)



Exports of transporting products from China and the USA to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (except Mexico) between 2020 and 2024 (Unit: US Dollar thousand)



***Transport products: Ships, boats and floating structures; vehicles other than railway or tramway rolling stock, and parts and accessories thereof; railway or tramway locomotives, rolling stock and parts thereof; railway or tramway track fixtures and fittings and parts thereof; mechanical (including electromechanical) traffic signalling equipment of all kinds.**

Source: Author's estimates based on Trade Map 2025.

As emphasized by José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) by the Secretary-General of the United Nations,

“...the region is immersed in a trap of low growth capacity, from which it must urgently escape. [...] Given the importance of China in economic relations with the region, and its expected future growth, there is no doubt that relations between both sides, both on matters

of trade, infrastructure construction, FDI flows and financing, as well as technological cooperation, can make an important contribution to achieving these goals.”¹⁹

Based on a favorable environment for infrastructure development, mainly in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, PPP projects are the most common to Chinese companies investing in LAC countries. This is because a few countries in the region have favorable legal environments to develop this mode of cooperation.²⁰

Table 1: Chinese loans to selected countries of Latin America (2005-2019)

Country	Number of loans	Amount in US\$ billions
Venezuela	16	60.0
Brazil	14	31.0
Ecuador	24	18.2
Argentina	13	17.0
Bolivia	9	3.2
Jamaica	11	2.1
Mexico	1	1.0

¹⁹ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), “Relations with China Are Important for Latin America and the Caribbean to Move Towards More Productive, Inclusive and Sustainable Development,” August 7, 2024.

²⁰ Jie Guo, “The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm,” *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 130.

Source: Abrão, R. A. F. 2023.

Since 2005, two Chinese development banks — the CDB and the China Export-Import Bank (EximBank) — were responsible for loaning over US\$ 141 billion to LAC countries, more than the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the Latin American Development Bank combined (Johnston 2025, 6). As shown in Table 1, although Venezuela and Brazil have more than twice the amount of loans of the other countries, the availability of the number of loans is an important factor. The evidence suggests that Ecuador's number of loans is based on economic proximity, interstate reliability, and, mainly, a partnership process that prioritizes the national development of Chinese partners through lines of credit. In addition to China having a strategic interest in Bolivia due to its proximity to the Panama Canal, given the cross-regional infrastructure projects related to Panama, Bolivia has projects such as the Montero–Bulo Bulo Railway and the Brazil–Peru Bioceanic Railway.

Furthermore, this strategy has a direct relation to the historically damaging background that LAC countries suffered in the 20th century, where the central financing international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, created disadvantageous economic environments for these countries based on US interests.²¹ According to Cox, “the internationalization of the state is not, of course, limited to advanced capitalist core countries.”²² In this sense, the introduction of Chinese and other multilateral banks to support loans and investments to LAC countries is not only a mechanism to avoid the influence of developed countries and traditional institutions in the region, but it is also a movement to facilitate credit availability and transfers, in addition to ensuring the completion of financed internationalized projects.

Even though Cox analyses that institutions are born from hegemonic states, the BRI structure is based on a transnational project of cooperation that develops a greater connection among, mainly, emerging economies, which have less access to beneficial policies due to the current international system.²³ According to the author, “it would not be difficult to make a

²¹ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981).

²² Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 232.

²³ Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations,” in *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, ed. Stephen Gill (Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, 2007), 119–120.

catalogue of recent cases in peripheral countries where institutions of the world economy, usually as a condition for debt renewal, have dictated policies which could only be sustained by a coalition of conservative forces.”²⁴ So, this “new injection of vitality,” as said by the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, in LAC-China relations is the consequence of the lack of international cooperation initiatives that integrate LAC countries with other Western countries over the last decades, which creates a vision of the BRI as an opportunity to minimize hierarchies between developed and emerging countries.²⁵

China’s Development Footprint in LAC Countries

Although China has invested in different projects in Latin America, Chinese companies are still developing a small proportion of construction projects with contract values of over US\$100 million under engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) arrangements. Based on the Chinese track record of success and their expertise, Chinese construction companies are more interested in investing in large infrastructure projects in LAC countries.²⁶ However, it is analyzed that, at the same time that there is a Chinese interest in building its own niche in LatAm construction markets, LAC countries have infrastructure deficits that minimize their self-development in these projects due to their low national expertise.²⁷

Chinese financing of domestic infrastructure development projects for members of the BRI is deeply based on the win-win conception, with a certain national autonomy for these projects to create a collaborative environment according to their own interests. For example, China built the Sinclair hydroelectric plant in Ecuador to meet the demand of one-third of the population, helped revitalize the Belgrano freight railway in Argentina, and completed the Belo Monte 1 and Belo Monte 2 projects to build transmission lines in Brazil.²⁸ China is focusing on a transnational connection that interconnects different areas of the region to maximize the international logistics with the Asian giant and other countries, but, firstly, it is fundamental to

²⁴ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 232.

²⁵ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Antigua and Barbuda, “Work Together to Create a Better Tomorrow for China-CELAC Relations,” January 31, 2018.

²⁶ Jie Guo, “The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm,” *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 126.

²⁷ Jie Guo, “The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm,” *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 126.

²⁸ Edimar da Rocha Pinto, *Impactos da Iniciativa Chinesa Cinturão e Rota no Brasil: Estará o País Preparado para as Oportunidades e Desafios da Nova Rota da Seda?* (São Paulo: Editora Dialética, 2021), 272.

establish an infrastructure capable of supporting this demand through investments.

Over the last decade, foreign direct investment (FDI) and financing in LatAm countries increased significantly due to Chinese source expansion. In fact, 44 out of 100 large-scale companies from emerging countries that have been investing in Latin America are Chinese, and most of them are state-owned enterprises (SOEs).²⁹ Between 2004 and 2019 the FDI flows from China were focused on Brazil (35.9%), Argentina (16%), Venezuela (15%), and Peru (14.7%).³⁰

Despite China's loans through policy banks to LatAm countries received quiet recognition in international academic and business circles, throughout the last decade China has been integrating its presence in Latin America through multilateral financial institutions and international banks.³¹ After the Chinese inclusion in the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2009, it became easier for major Chinese financial institutions to develop financial services. From 2005 to 2020, the China Development Bank (CDB) and EximBank were responsible for financing projects that totaled almost US\$140 billion in loans (Sousa et al. 2023). In this period, the Bank of Communications (BoComm), China Construction Bank (CCB), the Bank of China (BOC), the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), the Agricultural Bank of China (ABC), and China Construction Bank (CCB) also consolidated their presence in acquiring Latin-American banks or opening branches in LAC countries.³²

However, based on the European Parliamentary Research Service, Chinese FDI is still well below if it is compared to US or EU flows, getting estimated in total US\$187.5 billion, while the EU is leading with US\$765 (€741) billion in 2022.³³ The document emphasizes that, even though there was a drop of the average investment levels per year from US\$14.2 billion between 2010 and 2019 to an average of US\$7.7 billion from 2020 to 2021 and US\$6.4 billion in 2022, China its having a current focus on its FDI to “new infrastructure” projects.

Since China-Brazil relations are growing in different segments, China has strategically

²⁹ J. Gonzalez Jauregui, “Latin American Countries in the BRI: Challenges and Potential Implications for Economic Development,” *Asian Education and Development Studies* 10, no. 3 (2021): 350.

³⁰ Ana Lucia Abeliasky and Inmaculada Martínez-Zarzoso, “The Relationship between the Chinese ‘Going Out’ Strategy and International Trade,” *Economics* 13, no. 1 (2019): 546.

³¹ A. T. L. M. de Sousa, Georgina R. Schutte, Rafael A. F. Abrão, and Vitor L. Ribeiro, “China in Latin America: To BRI or Not to BRI,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Globalization with Chinese Characteristics*, ed. P. A. B. Duarte, F. J. B. S. Leandro, and E. M. Galán (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

³² Jie Guo, “The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm,” *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023).

³³ Marc Jütten, *China’s Increasing Presence in Latin America: Implications for the European Union* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2025), 6.

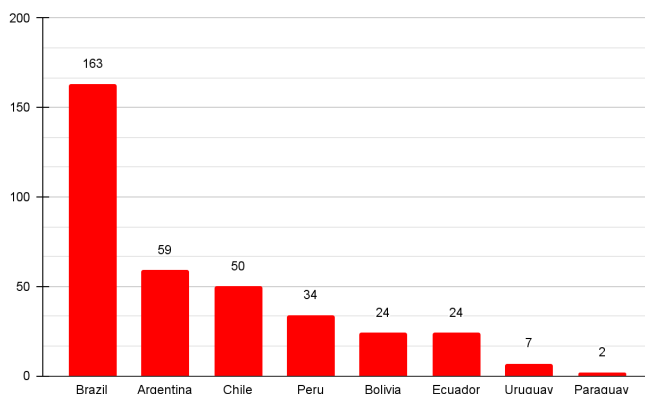
developed important agreements to benefit more than one LAC country at the same time. In 2024, the APEC summit in Peru and the G20 summit in Brazil represented progress in the China-Peru trade agreement (Free Trade Agreement) through the inauguration of the port of Chancay, which has a direct positive impact on Brazilian trade. As a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic China-Brazil relations, the Brazilian government declared that this cooperation will be used to support projects of national development: New Industry Brazil (Nova Indústria Brasil/NIB), the Growth Acceleration Program (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento /PAC), the South American Integration Routes Program (Programa Rotas da Integração Sul-Americana), the Ecological Transformation Plan (Plano de Transformação Ecológica), and the BRI (Iniciativa Cinturão e Rota).³⁴

Image 2, elaborated by the Millennium Nucleus of China's Impact on Latin America (ICLAC), shows that Brazil stands out for being the major destination in LatAm to receive Chinese FDI Projects, with 163 projects that represent US\$66.3 billion. Based on the countries analyzed by the ICLAC, Brazil has almost 45% of all Chinese investment and construction, and nearly 41% of the total since 2003.³⁵ Due to the fact that Brazil, Chile, and Peru are China's top trading partners, mainly focused on commodities and foodstuffs, China is concentrating on operating construction, power, and other renewable energy projects to develop a structure in Brazil and other LAC countries and, consequently, improving regional and international distribution. In Brazil, China owns and operates 10% of the total energy generation capacity of the country, while 57% of Chilean electricity distribution is owned by Chinese companies.³⁶

³⁴ BRASIL, "Press Statement by President Lula during the State Visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping," Brasília, November 20, 2024.

³⁵ Francisco Urdinez and Margaret Myers, *Trends in Chinese FDI in South America: Findings from the Regional Repository of Chinese Investments in Latin America* (ICLAC, 2025).

³⁶ Francisco Urdinez and Margaret Myers, *Trends in Chinese FDI in South America: Findings from the Regional Repository of Chinese Investments in Latin America* (ICLAC, 2025); Karin Johnston, *China, Latin America, and the United States: Geopolitical Impacts and New Challenges* (Washington, DC: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung USA, 2025).

Image 2: Number of Chinese FDI Projects by Repository Country, 2004-2024

Source: Urdinez F., & Myers, M. 2025.

While Brazil has been the major recipient of China's agricultural sector investment since 2003, Brazilian agricultural exports are gradually gaining prominence in China because, due to the US trade frictions with China, this sector is getting a significant increase in recent years.³⁷ In 2018, during President Trump's first presidency (2017-2021), Brazil's exports of soybeans to China went up from 37.8% to 44%, and the US exports decreased by 49.2% (Guo, 2023). Following the same effect in the second Trump's presidency, the US tariffs against China caused a greater search for Brazilian soybeans by the Chinese, creating a situation where Brazil is almost at the limit of its soybean export capacity to China because 73% of the total Brazilian soybean exports were already exported to China in 2024.³⁸

Due to Sino-Brazilian exports getting more intense gradually, in 2025 Brazil began operating a direct connection between Brazilian and Chinese ports, creating a faster and dynamic maritime exporting between the Port of Gaolan, in the city of Zhuhai, and the Brazilian ports of Santana (AP) and Salvador (BA).³⁹ The Chinese incentive to the development of LatAm ports is related to the decentralization of commercial axes in the international context, such as the new

³⁷ Margaret Myers, Ángel Melguizo, and Yexin Wang, *New Infrastructure: Emerging Trends in Chinese FDI in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2024); Jie Guo, "The Political Economy of China-Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm," *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 113-38.

³⁸ Paloma Custódio, "Brasil já está no limite da capacidade de exportação de soja para China, diz Aprosoja," *Agro Estadão*, April 11, 2025.

³⁹ BRASIL. "Nova Rota Marítima Direta entre China e Brasil." Brasília: Ministério de Portos e Aeroportos, April 17, 2025.

port of Chancay in Peru, which has 60% of the project done by China and has direct connection to Shanghai.⁴⁰ Reducing the time and cost of the exports of raw materials from LAC countries to Asia is the main objective that China has been investing in these ports, even though China's investment in Peru is less diverse than in Brazil because there is a focus on Peruvian mining, agricultural, and manufacturing.⁴¹

As demonstrated in a report made by the Green Finance & Development Center from Fudan University, LatAm countries that are members of the New Silk Road received a 92% increase in direct investment in 2023 in comparison to 2022, with 20.5% of all foreign investment directed to the initiative with 149 countries.⁴² In agreement with Lenin, the exportation of capital needs to be used as a tool to foment development to the region or country, averting stagnation through expansion of the economy.⁴³ In a Leninist perspective, these direct investments in LatAm countries are fundamental to be used by these countries as a platform to establish long-term development in the region, using the capital to deliberately expand and diversify the productive economy. In this sense, as elaborated by Zhang, it is observed that Sino-Latin American relationships were and should become deeper again, given China develops its institutional relationships in a way that they are long-term.⁴⁴

In a Coxian perspective, multilateralism is both defined by institutional/regulatory order and through interactions for the transformation of the existing order, where the Third World⁴⁵ could be a counter-hegemonic force that creates alternative understandings for the transformation of the current world order.⁴⁶ Cox's view is that it is fundamental to distinguish the differences

⁴⁰ Peruvian Army Center for Strategic Studies, "Belt and Road Initiative in Peru: Impact, Opportunities and Challenges," January 25, 2022; Matheus Gouvea, "O novo porto chinês no Peru que pode ser porta do Brasil para Pacífico e preocupa EUA," *BBC News Brasil*, December 19, 2024.

⁴¹ Margaret Myers, Ángel Melguizo, and Yexin Wang, *New Infrastructure: Emerging Trends in Chinese FDI in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2024); Jie Guo, "The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm," *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 113–38.

⁴² Christoph Wang, *China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023* (Green Finance & Development Center, 2024).

⁴³ Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

⁴⁴ Xinyu Zhang, "Strategic Enhancement and Differential Governance: China's Partnership Diplomacy in Latin America," *Relaciones Internacionales* 97, no. 2 (2024): 54-75.

⁴⁵ The author used this term to refer to emerging countries, but the article will not include this term in the rest of the text due to a reductionist and hierarchical meaning that it is referring to a group of economies.

⁴⁶ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 150; Robert W. Cox, "Multilateralism and World Order," *Review of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 163.

between hegemonic and non-hegemonic structures because institutions are structures made by collective ideas and material power, which in turn influence the development of more ideas, material capabilities, and, sometimes, opposing tendencies.⁴⁷

Based on this aspect, BRI's, BRI-related or non-BRI projects are part of a process of multilateral development on an economic and diplomatic basis. Even though the BRI is not classified as an institution, the project is developed within the idea of expanding a greater global communication network between China and the world, with Latin America being fundamental to this process as it directly influences the development of more effective intercontinental integration, and consequently, reduces disadvantages that come from the international system.

Historical Instances of Rhetorical Entrapment

In accord with the World Economic Outlook, which is made by the IMF, there is a global tendency where economic growth and international trade will have challenges to deal with growing in short and medium-term, mainly because there are economic consequences from the post-pandemic period where it brought high inflation rates, uncertainty regarding energy prices, significant debt, and high real interest rates.⁴⁸ Thus, it creates an economic environment where investments and availability of credit will not only be more difficult but also develops greater care in project financing, given the expectation of risk reduction.

The interest of China and Chinese companies in investing in LAC countries remains, but, due to the global effect, there is a recent decrease in some respects related to economic partnership between the LAC region and China. For example, CDB and Eximbank, China's top development finance institutions, reduced their availability of loans, providing only US\$2.9 billion in loans to LAC countries between 2019 and 2022, even though CDB issued alone approximately US\$35 billion to the region in 2010.⁴⁹ This is why some LAC countries, such as Peru and Costa Rica, had special agreements with China to develop their manufacturing of goods of high added value through Chinese investments, avoiding a primary exporting country aspect and conferring

⁴⁷ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 219.

⁴⁸ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: A Critical Juncture amid Policy Shifts* (Washington, DC: IMF, April 2025).

⁴⁹ Margaret Myers, Ángel Melguizo, and Yexin Wang, *New Infrastructure: Emerging Trends in Chinese FDI in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2024), 5.

alternative solutions to economic and trade market independence.⁵⁰

Under Leninist terms, this type of strategy, developed by Peru and Costa Rica, creates ways to desprimarize national production through investments is a process to minimize the predominance of financial capital over all other forms of capital in LAC countries, because these countries are directly developing their subsidiary industry — which is still dependent on foreign capital — and detaching from a full national agrarian development.⁵¹ According to Cox, social forces, forms of state, and world orders are directly related to, creating a cause and effect environment that “changes in the organization of production generate new social forces which, in turn, bring about changes in the structure of states; and the generalization of changes in the structure alters the problematic of world order.”⁵²

This analysis is shown in the cooperation between LAC countries and China because there is a development of new structures over the region due to industrial evolution to produce more complex manufacture of goods. Based on Hobson and Lenin, Cox identified that international production is related to direct investment, however, the essential feature of direct investments need to be used to possess knowledge instead of money, because it is fundamental to invest in the capacity of production of new technologies.⁵³

Although Chinese investments have been more and more important in LAC countries, the post-pandemic investment environment in Latin America was affected due to inflation and complex fiscal scenarios in LatAm economies which are still recovering from the debt pressure in some LAC countries and the less accessible credit in international markets.⁵⁴ Based on the Green Finance & Development Center of 2024, Chinese investments in LatAm BRI countries suffered imports drops, which indicated the lowest Chinese engagement in approximately 10 years and also small growth in construction engagement.⁵⁵ According to the report, while FDI to Asian developing countries and LAC countries had a decline of 7% and 9% — respectively —,

⁵⁰ Peruvian Army Center for Strategic Studies, “Belt and Road Initiative in Peru: Impact, Opportunities and Challenges,” January 25, 2022.

⁵¹ Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

⁵² Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 220-221.

⁵³ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 233.

⁵⁴ Margaret Myers, Ángel Melguizo, and Yexin Wang, *New Infrastructure: Emerging Trends in Chinese FDI in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2024), 5.

⁵⁵ Christoph Wang, *China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2024* (Green Finance & Development Center, 2025).

FDI into Africa increased by 86%.

Moreover, given the Chinese government's economic growth objectives, the Chinese FDI has changed to be focused on strategic priorities and specific industrial sectors that can bring more economic benefits for LAC countries. While China has interest in the energy, mining, and agriculture sectors in LAC countries, the "new infrastructure" are defined by investments in telecommunications, artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, renewable energy, cloud computing, and 5G, which are expected to rebound Chinese FDI to LAC countries due to the rising of 58% in these sectors in the region in 2022 (US\$3.7 billion) and it has more than 60% of the total number of FDI deals announced by Chinese companies in the same year.⁵⁶ Conforming to China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), the Chinese objective is to "promote integrated connectivity that comprises land, sea, air, and cyber links, build a connectivity framework featuring "six corridors, six routes, and multiple countries and ports."⁵⁷

Throughout the development of trade and investments, China's 14th Five-Year Plan established that the BRI will be expanded by different mechanisms based on improving "the risk resistance and security support system of the BRI and enhancing legal service support to effectively prevent and defuse various risks." This aspect is related to the "multilateral economic governance mechanism" that China has been encouraging to maintain stability among major markets (global industry, supply chain, and global financial markets), given the necessity of promoting economic governance principles in emerging sectors.⁵⁸ In this sense, Chinese businesses in LAC countries are boosting the contracting market through greater industrial cooperation in exports of construction services, machinery, engineering supplies, and technology.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Karin Johnston, *China, Latin America, and the United States: Geopolitical Impacts and New Challenges* (Washington, DC: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung USA, 2025); Margaret Myers, Ángel Melguizo, and Yexin Wang, *New Infrastructure: Emerging Trends in Chinese FDI in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2024).

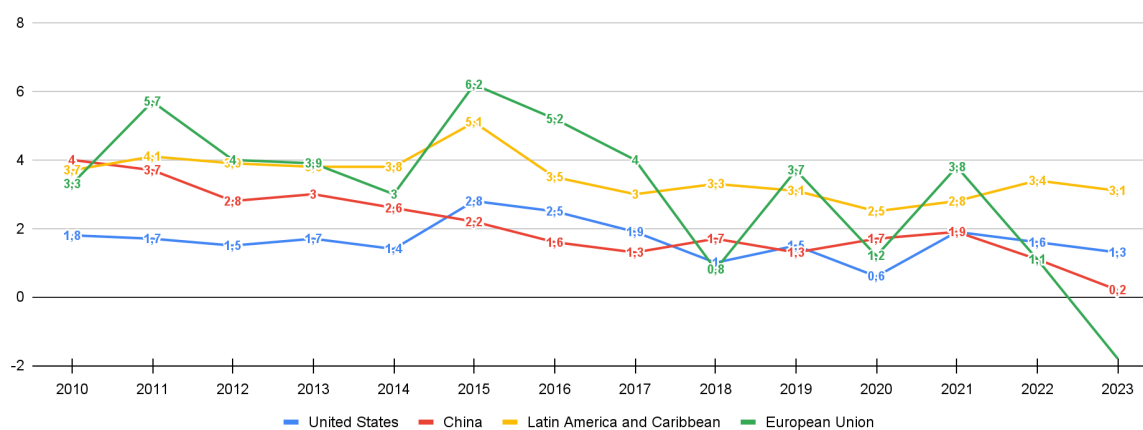
⁵⁷ The People's Government of Fujian Province, "Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People's Republic of China," August 9, 2021.

⁵⁸ The People's Government of Fujian Province, "Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People's Republic of China," August 9, 2021.

⁵⁹ Jie Guo, "The Political Economy of China–Latin America Relations: The Making of a Post-Boom Paradigm," *China International Strategy Review* 5 (2023): 126.

Graph 1 illustrates that the net inflows of FDI in LAC countries are not only superior to US, Chinese, or European net inflows, but there has been stability over the last few years.⁶⁰ This is because LAC countries are establishing strategies to control the “rising macro-financial risks” through expansion of the space of fiscal policy, increasing monetary policy tools, and strengthening macro-prudential supervision.⁶¹ Even though the world tendency to reduce FDI develops some challenges to national growth, it can be inferred that LAC countries have been also using their FDI to build a more stable economic environment and, as a consequence, the net inflows of FDI are still high if compared to other countries.

Graph 1: Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$) - China, United States, Latin America & Caribbean, European Union



Source: Author’s estimates based on World Bank Group 2025.

Nevertheless, although Brazil is the biggest economy among other LAC countries and one of the countries with closer bilateral cooperation with China, Brazil is not engaging the BRI. In addition to the US geopolitical influence in the region, Sino-Brazilian relations are already deep due to Brazil’s economic and regional importance to China, which creates more access for Brazil to receive exceptional benefits through the BRI projects and investments. The official Brazilian partnership in the initiative is not only a strategic position of economic independence, but it is

⁶⁰ The beginning of the Ukrainian War seems to be an important factor that drastically affected the European net inflows of FDI.

⁶¹ Fei Wang and Yang Lyu, “The New Round of Economic Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean and Its Prospects,” *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* (现代国际关系) 34, no. 3 (2024): 79–95.

also a demonstration of how concrete China can bring more economic benefits to Brazil than expected if it enjoys the initiative.⁶²

As analyzed by Cox, Brazil is a key country to support new power configurations if considering more industrialized emerging economies.⁶³ Even though Mearsheimer did not mention LAC countries or African countries to establish his hypothesis, the author believed that the US needed to create a coalition between Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, India, and Russia to slow down the Chinese economy.⁶⁴ However, 2 (Vietnam and Russia) of the 5 countries are official members of the BRI, 2 (India and Russia) of the countries mentioned are in BRICS, and the 2 others (Japan and South Korea) are negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China.⁶⁵ It illustrates that the Chinese partnerships through developing multilateral arrangements are part of a process that works within a plural and global perspective within different contexts, being essential for China to have significant relationships with strategic countries, even if unofficially.

The current conservative international economic environment for China is a challenge and an opportunity at the same time. Despite Chinese international financing, loans, and investments suffering a decrease in LAC countries, China does not need to surpass or equal past numbers, but it does need to bring more opportunities for economic growth than other countries seeking to approach the current LAC market. Thus, the European Parliamentary Research Service considered that “Europe's economic power in Latin America is perceived as much lower than that of China or the US.”⁶⁶ Due to the integrated process of cooperation of LAC countries to combat economic stagnation, China seems to be a greater response for reactivating development by Global South alignment.⁶⁷ This understanding is under Coxian terms because the world order can be changed by a coalition of states and social forces that is defined as a ‘counter-hegemonic force’,

⁶² Rafael Almeida Ferreira Abrão and M. P. Amineh, “Brazilian Perception of the China-Led Belt and Road Initiative,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 33, no. 150 (2024): 987–1005.

⁶³ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 237.

⁶⁴ Harry Kreisler, “Through the Realist Lens: Conversation with John Mearsheimer,” *Conversations with History*, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, video, 58:28, April 8, 2002.

⁶⁵ The People’s Government of Fujian Province, “Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People’s Republic of China,” August 9, 2021.

⁶⁶ Marc Jütten, *China’s Increasing Presence in Latin America: Implications for the European Union* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2025), 8.

⁶⁷ Fei Wang and Yang Lyu, “The New Round of Economic Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean and Its Prospects,” *Contemporary International Relations* 34, no. 3 (2024): 79–95.

which is developed through multilateral relations.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The development of multilateral relations between LAC countries and China has evolved over the years through different investment processes, credit availability, and multi/bilateral partnerships between partner countries. Chinese investments in LAC countries are more connected and integrated into regional and continental projects, assigning positions of relevance and benefits. China is present through a variety of new national development projects for infrastructure improvements, providing an opportunity for LAC countries not only to boost their international trade but also to invest in industrial projects. However, although China is not the largest partner of LAC countries, the US presence in the region is centralized by the Mexican market because Mexico represents more than 60% of total US exports to LAC countries, being the country a commercial anchor in numbers for the US.

Figure 1 illustrates this aspect in exports of transport products to LAC countries due to Chinese diversification of exports to LAC countries if Mexico is removed from the analyses. It is observed that China, as one of the main economic partners of most LAC countries, is able to benefit indirectly from the trade agreements that LAC countries have, given the Chinese presence in several productive and logistical sectors in the region. Even though, at the first Trump's presidency, Trump declared in 2020 that "the USMCA is the fairest, most balanced, and beneficial trade agreement we have ever signed into law," there is a current movement of Washington to review the agreement in 2026.⁶⁹ This context emphasizes not only the US interests to create more beneficial agreements, but also the concern to prevent China from using its trade advantages to circumvent the US protectionist restrictions, given that the USMCA is an automobile agreement.⁷⁰

This is because the Chinese strategy is to invest and support the development of a more dynamic logistics distribution in the region, with the export of products from the transport sector being essential for improving Latin American and Caribbean international trade. By financing

⁶⁸ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981).

⁶⁹ National Archives, "Remarks by President Trump at a USMCA Celebration with American Workers," *The White House*, January 30, 2020; White House, "America First Trade Policy," January 20, 2025.

⁷⁰ Mia Nulimaimaiti and Ralph Jennings, "China Has Made Mexico a Premier Investment Destination. Is It a US Detour, or Something More?," *South China Morning Post*, February 3, 2024; Karin Johnston, *China, Latin America, and the United States: Geopolitical Impacts and New Challenges* (Washington, DC: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung USA, 2025), 6.

more modern infrastructure for LAC countries through FDI and other investment mechanisms, China is developing a win-win cooperation by providing LAC countries with the opportunity to carry out national development projects, although most Chinese investments are still earmarked for greater Latin American exports of raw materials.

In a period marked by international economic instability influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and political and economic uncertainty in the US after Trump's second presidency, the availability of commodities in international trade becomes not only a necessity but a fundamental political and economic point. Brazil, in addition to being the largest economy among LAC countries, becomes essential in the development of Chinese projects related to the BRI, even though Brazil is not an official member, as it means that Brazil is essential in the consolidation of Chinese strategies that also include other LAC countries adhering to China's plans.

As a consequence, Graph 1 highlighted the net inflows of FDI in LAC countries in comparison to other economies, mainly because the region has been more and more important to the international commodities market, given the international demand for supplies. China positions itself in a more plural way within the region, diversifying investments in strategic countries in Latin America through multilateral financial institutions and international banks, establishing in the BRI points of interest that are mutual between the LAC economies and China. According to Grabel, the dismantling process of multilateral institutions by foreign policies of European states and the US is resulting in a power vacuum in the leadership of international multilateralism due to the US support for the constant global economic instability.⁷¹ The Asian giant not only provides considerable amounts of loans to more developed LAC countries or those with deeper relations but also extends its influence through multilateral arrangements to smaller economies that have key strategic points in Latin America.

Based on Ocampo and Ortega, the last two decades have seen an increase in long-term committed venture capital for innovation projects, and national development banks and multilateral development banks are essential in this transformation.⁷² The institutionalization process permeates a particular stabilizing and perpetuating order, with state institutions and

⁷¹ Ilene Grabel, "Continuity, Discontinuity and Incoherence in the Bretton Woods Order: A Hirschmanian Reading," *Development and Change* 50, no. 1 (2019): 66–67.

⁷² José Antonio Ocampo and Victor Ortega, "The Global Development Banks' Architecture," *Review of Political Economy* 34, no. 2 (2022): 241–42.

arrangements as a reflection of the prevailing power of the member states.⁷³ In this sense, China's presence in LAC countries is the effect of how multilateral cooperation between emerging countries can define new opportunities and structures for self and multi-development, which is a process of stabilizing economic order among emerging countries' economies. As reaffirmed by China's 14th Five-Year Plan, the plan for "maintaining the multilateral trade system" is a coalition of different international arrangements and multilateral financial institutions for economic growth, so LAC countries are fundamental for this international cooperation.

⁷³ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 291.

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Nagorno-Karabakh and the Power of Leadership

The Identity of the National Leader in Shaping the Defense of National Interest

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Abstract: This study examines the role of leadership in shaping Armenia's national trajectory through an analysis of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's rise to power and the subsequent loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. It argues that the 2018 Velvet Revolution, while framed as a democratic breakthrough, produced a leadership style that weakened Armenia's strategic position and accelerated national vulnerability. Drawing on realist concepts of balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging, as well as constructivist insights into identity and historical memory, the article explores how Pashinyan's foreign policy decisions disrupted Armenia's security architecture and eroded its sovereignty. The case demonstrates how small states operating in high-risk environments are especially sensitive to leadership miscalculation, particularly when domestic legitimacy, geopolitical alignment, and national identity are mismanaged. Ultimately, the study contends that Armenia's defeat was not merely the result of external pressure, but of internal strategic failure rooted in personal leadership dynamics and policy incoherence.

Keywords: *Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, Leadership, Hedging, alignment strategy*

Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh region holds immense historical and cultural significance for Armenians, as it is a symbol of its identity. However, under the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia has witnessed a profound shift that culminated in the loss of this pivotal region that was an integral part of the collective memory. This chronicle explores the role of Pashinyan's personality and decisions in shaping Armenia's national interests, focusing on how a leader's actions can alter the course of history, often to the detriment of the nation he is meant to protect. While the "Velvet" revolution promised democratic reform, it ultimately gave rise to a leader whose choices undermined Armenian sovereignty. By examining Pashinyan's rise to power, his governance and the implications for Armenia's identity, this case aims to demonstrate how the dynamics of leadership, rather than ushering in positive change, can actually exacerbate national vulnerabilities. Drawing on theories of international relations such as balancing, bandwagoning, constructivism and hedging, this case study highlights the interplay between national leadership and identity, and how a leader's missteps can irreparably affect the security and future of a nation.

Armenia's Velvet Revolution

Nationalist sentiments have always occupied an important place in Armenian society. Their origins go back to the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These ideas have influenced the formation of a collective identity and ideology, in relation to both themselves and the world around them.¹ As an example, in Armenia, a common belief becomes more popular, saying that Lenin and Stalin are responsible for the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Alexandropol, which ended the Armenian-Turkish war. Although the defeat in the war was the result of the actions of the "Dashnaktsutyun" (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), over time the blame was shifted to Soviet Russia. However, without the intervention of the Soviet Union, modern Armenia, in its present borders, might not have existed. Nevertheless, Armenia's independent path of development began in 1991 with its own successive leaders.

¹ Melikyan, Aren, Jeyhun Veliyev, Katie Sartania, and Saadat Abdullazade. "The Rise of New Nationalism in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s." *The Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation*. March 4, 2018. <https://caucasusedition.net/the-rise-of-new-nationalism-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-in-the-late-1980s-and-early-1990s/>.

April 2018 in Armenia was marked by the start of the “My Step Alliance” protest movement directed at the capital. The mass demonstrations followed a classic scenario of people’s mobilization, blocking of transport hubs and public facilities, intensification of rallies and growth of protest sentiments. The main causes of public discontent were the country’s industrial degradation, high unemployment, lack of social security, mass labor migration and excessive concentration of the population in the capital, where half of the country’s population lived.

Nikol Pashinyan, leading the protests, emerged as a central figure of the opposition challenging the government. Being formerly a member of Levon Ter-Petrosian’s pro-Western party and editor of an opposition newspaper, criticizing corruption and low levels of trust in law enforcement and the judiciary, Pashinyan was arrested and convicted for his participation in the 2008 protests. He was granted amnesty in 2011 and returned to political activity, drastically gaining popularity ever since.

During the 2018 protests, Pashinyan actively used the image of a victim, appearing in public with a bandaged hand, which evoked associations with Karabakh war-hero Monte Melkonyan. This strategy resonated with nationalist circles and reinforced the perception of Pashinyan as a fighter against an internal enemy: the ruling elite, whom he accused of betraying the national interest. The symbolic image of Pashinyan with a beard, in a camouflaged shirt with a bandaged hand became recognizable among the protesters (Figure 1). He actively appealed to public discontent, which was rooted in the belief that members of the parliament did not represent the views of the people. As a result, he called for the blockade of strategically important facilities, including the airport and initiated negotiations with the authorities. Yet, despite initial statements of readiness for dialogue, the ultimate goal remained the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan.^{2 3}

Serzh Sargsyan, Armenia’s third president, and a politician with a Karabakh background, was closely associated with the region, as was his predecessor Robert Kocharian. Born in Karabakh’s capital, Stepanakery, both politicians paid close

² Sirekanyan, Tigran. “We Are Ready for Negotiations – Nikol Pashinyan Gives Speech at Republican Square.” *Armenpress*. April 25, 2018. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/931464>.

³ Krikorian, Onnik James. “Pashinyan’s Moment of Reckoning.” *Yorktown Institute*. August 13, 2025. <https://yorktowninstitute.org/pashinyans-moment-of-reckoning/>.

attention to the Karabakh issue, which remained central to Armenian domestic politics. However, Sargsyan's domestic policies focused more on consolidating personal power, including the establishment of a bipartisan system. Despite its close partnership with Russia, Armenia also tried to establish contacts with NATO and Turkey, which provoked mixed reactions in society.

Pashinyan's popularity was not a direct consequence of Sargsyan's unpopularity, but he was able to capitalize on the wave of public discontent. With the help of the "My Step" March he succeeded to mobilize the critical mass of frustration that had accumulated over a decade, which was rooted in Armenia's oligarchic political system, endemic corruption and stagnant economic prospects.⁴ The end of Sargsyan's second presidential term in 2018 was accompanied by a constitutional reform that transformed Armenia into a parliamentary republic. Shortly after, Sargsyan ended up reelected as head of government, sparking public outrage. Sargsyan's narrative of explanation was based around the idea that the new 2018 term is his first term, not third, and turning the country into a parliamentary republic gave birth to a new "collective" leadership of a country.⁵ Under pressure from the protests however, he was compelled to resign. The scale of the pressure forced Sargsyan's parliamentary supporters to back Pashinyan's candidacy in order to reduce the intensity of the protests.

Nikol Pashinyan positioned himself as a leader free of ideological frameworks, emphasizing no geopolitical orientation and independence from Russia, the EU or the US, prioritizing the national and state interests of Armenia above all else.⁶ This course was perceived as challenging, given the importance of maintaining balance in foreign policy. On the Karabakh issue, Pashinyan initially favored a continuation of Petrosian's policy (a former Armenian head of state whose party Pashinyan used to be a member of), who aimed to achieve a compromise where the Armenian side would

⁴ Paul, Amanda. "Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution': Time is Pashinyan's Worst Enemy." European Policy Center. May 30, 2018. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Armenias-Velvet-Revolution-Time-is-Pashinyans-worst-enemy-1e7abc/>.

⁵ National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. "Serzh Sargsyan Elected RA Prime Minister at RA National Assembly Special Sitting." April 17, 2018. http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=10227&lang=eng.

⁶ Nikoghosyan, Hovhannes, and Vahram Ter-Matevosyan. "Post-Revolution and War, Armenia Must Find a Geopolitical Balance." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. March 9, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/03/post-revolution-and-war-armenia-must-find-a-geopolitical-balance?lang=en>.

consent to formally depart Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan, meanwhile the counterpart would concede to provide Karabakh a status higher than the nominal autonomy.⁷ Nevertheless, by 2022 despite his narrative becoming more rigid after the election, his position had changed and unilaterally recognized Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, a major blow to Armenian policy in recent decades.

The War in Nagorno-Karabakh

The Karabakh conflict has a profound impact on Armenian national consciousness and plays a key role in shaping the country's political identity. The origins of the territorial disputes date back to 387 AD, when the Armenian kingdom was divided between Byzantium and Persia. As a result, Nagorno-Karabakh came under Persian control and became a center of resistance to the occupation forces. In the following centuries, the region repeatedly became an area of struggle against Mongol and Turkic invasions. The establishment of the Karabakh Khanate by the Ottomans in 1747 increased the pressure on the local Armenian population, which led to a mass exodus of native Armenians. However, during the period of the Russian Empire, the process of the return of Armenians to the region began.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the conflict resumed, but was temporarily resolved by 1936, when Armenia and Azerbaijan became part of the USSR. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union again exacerbated tensions in the region. In 1988, against the background of the weakening of the central power of the USSR, a mass movement to join Armenia began in the autonomous district of Karabakh. The referendum on independence from Azerbaijan confirmed the desire of the majority of the population for reunification with Armenia, having over 99% voting in favor.⁸ This period became the beginning of a new stage of the Karabakh conflict.

In 1992-1994, Azerbaijan attempted to regain control over the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). Because of the First Karabakh War, Armenian forces took control of several districts of Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, some territories remained under Baku's control. This victory strengthened the position of Yerevan,

⁷ Libaridian, Gerard. "That Elusive 'Right Formula' at the 'Right Moment': A Historical Analysis of the Official Peace Process". Accord 17. Translated from Russian. https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Accord17_p34_right_formula.pdf.

⁸ U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Report on the Armenian Referendum on Independence*. October 1, 1991. <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Report-on-the-Armenian-Referendum-on-Independence.pdf>.

which actively supported the region economically and militarily. It was only through the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group that a cessation of hostilities was achieved. Despite the truce, intermittent armed clashes continued. An important milestone was the escalation of the conflict in 2016, known as the “April War”, when Azerbaijan used drones for the first time in its conduct of a military warfare.⁹ The fighting lasted four days and was mediated by the OSCE and Russia.

After receiving the legitimacy, Nikol Pashinyan repeatedly declared that the disputed territory cannot be other than Armenia. Despite initially favoring a constructive conflict resolution approach, Pashinyan gradually embraced irredentist rhetoric, a shift reportedly made to appease and win over nationalist elements within Armenia.¹⁰ This change culminated in August 2019 with the potent declaration, “Artsakh is Armenia, and that’s it,” an outright call for unification between Armenia and Karabakh.¹¹ Nevertheless, in 2020, during the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan regained control over significant territories around Nagorno-Karabakh and part of the region itself. By agreement of the two parties, Russian peacekeepers were stationed in the region, although their presence was not officially mandated, meaning they had no right to use military weapons other than for the purposes of self-protection. Armenia’s vulnerability in 2020 forced Yerevan to accept the peacekeepers’ terms, which strengthened Azerbaijan’s regional position. The ceasefire agreement signed in 2020 was seen by many as Armenia’s capitulation.¹²

In October 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev unexpectedly signed a statement in Prague recognizing Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity based on the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration.¹³ The

⁹ Hecht, Eado. “Drones in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Analyzing the Data.” *Military Strategy Magazine* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 31–37. <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/drones-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-war-analyzing-the-data/>.

¹⁰ Huseynov, Rusif, and Gulkhanim Mammadova. “The Evolution of Armenian Discourse on Karabakh.” *Topchubashov Center*. May 29, 2023. <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3515/the-evolution-of-armenian-discourse-on-karabakh>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Losh, Jack, and Andrew Roth. “Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal Brokered by Moscow Prompts Anger in Armenia.” *The Guardian*, November 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/10/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-pm-signs-deal-to-end-war-with-azerbaijan-and-russia>.

¹³ Huseynov, Vasif. “In Prague, Armenia and Azerbaijan Make a Critical Move Toward Peace.” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19, no. 153 (October 17, 2022). <https://jamestown.org/program/in-prague-armenia-and-azerbaijan-make-a-critical-move-toward-peace/>.

Alma-Ata Declaration implies the recognition of the territories of the CIS countries within the borders they had during the USSR. The statement stressed that they recognized the sovereignty of Azerbaijan within the framework of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, part of which included the Karabakh region. This step factually confirmed Nagorno-Karabakh's belonging to Azerbaijan. Later in October 2023 in Granada, Spain, a declaration was made stating a confirmation of Azerbaijani territory to be 86,600 km², reaffirming the Nagorno-Karabakh being included within Azerbaijan's sovereign territory.¹⁴ The statement was concluded under the auspices of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, European Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron. On September 19 2023, Azerbaijan regained full control over Nagorno-Karabakh, ending the longest conflict in the post-Soviet space.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing the international system through the lens of realism highlights its anarchic nature, where national security is at the center of any state's agenda. In a self-organizing system, small states, such as Armenia, are at a disadvantage, especially when faced with stronger and potentially threatening neighbors, as in the case of Azerbaijan. Realism offers two basic approaches to responding to such threats. These approaches include "balancing" and a "bandwagoning" strategy. Balancing can entail enhancing a state's internal military capabilities or forming alliances with external powers, thus mitigating threats and bolstering its autonomy. On the other hand, bandwagoning refers to submitting to a dominant or threatening power, which may reduce the risk of conflict.

However, it often comes at the cost of compromising the state's interests or autonomy. Both strategies carry risks as balancing can lead to an inefficient redistribution of domestic resources and the risk of involvement in conflict, while accession risks a loss of sovereignty and dependence on a stronger partner.¹⁵ Both balancing and bandwagoning involve a clear choice of aligning with one power over

¹⁴ European Council. "Statement by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, President Michel of the European Council, President Macron of France and Chancellor Scholz of Germany." October 5, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/05/statement-by-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-of-armenia-president-michel-of-the-european-council-president-macron-of-france-and-chancellor-scholz-of-germany/>

¹⁵ Wang, T. Y., and Alexander C. Tan. "Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging: Taiwan's Strategic Choices in the Era of a Rising China." *Political Science* 73, no. 1 (2021), p.2.

another; committing straightforward actions either to counter a threat through balancing or maximize gains through bandwagoning and fully committing to the chosen power's side.¹⁶

It can also be argued that the balancing and bandwagoning are not applicable to the case of Armenia and instead, the state, being in a complex geopolitical situation, demonstrates a pattern of behavior known as hedging. Hedging is defined as a “hybrid strategy” that combines elements of balancing and bandwagoning to counter a threat while simultaneously engaging with it.¹⁷ It is best understood as “insurance-seeking behavior” adopted under situations of high stakes and high uncertainty.¹⁸ By refusing to take sides or be locked into a rigid alignment, a hedging state cultivates a fallback position. In the case of Armenia, this could be evident in the desire to maintain relations with both Russia and Western bloc, thus diversifying its political and economic ties. Other than the two blocs, Armenia can try to maintain policies of appeasement and resistance towards Azerbaijan.

It is important to note that hedging is particularly characteristic of small states, which often prefer to describe their policies as “neutral,” “non-aligned,” or “equidistant” to avoid unwanted pushback from competing big powers.¹⁹ This policy preference was reflected in the initial rhetoric of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan following his election, who similarly articulated a position of non-alignment. Hedging seeks to cultivate strong relationships with both competing powers, possibly resulting in pro-Western and pro-Russian factions, in order to mitigate various risks in uncertain circumstances and preserve flexibility by keeping all options available. However, the Pashinyan government period has shown so far a lack of concrete steps to implement a hedging strategy, leaving Armenia vulnerable to growing challenges and uncertainty.

Constructivism as a theory of international relations also provides important tools for analyzing Armenian foreign policy. Unlike realism, constructivism emphasizes the role of identity, perception and historical memory in shaping foreign

¹⁶ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective.” *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (2021), p.302.

¹⁷ Wang, T. Y., and Alexander C. Tan. “Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging: Taiwan’s Strategic Choices in the Era of a Rising China.” p.3.

¹⁸ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective.” p.300.

¹⁹ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective.” p.301.

policy decisions. For Armenia, issues of identity and self-determination play a key role in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the Armenian scope or framework, constructivism has a separate significance in analyzing the state that gained its independence and identity after the collapse of the USSR, which correlates with the idea of “Me/Us” and “the Others”. One of the main concepts is the collective understanding of what is “Us” and what is “the Others” at the micro level (within the state) and at the macro level (on the international arena at the state level). Thus, the social nature of each is different, making it possible to understand the internal motivations behind the behavior of large or small powers.

Unlike structuralists, who try to explain why systems of international relations are transforming, constructivists try to explain the internal processes of these changes, which are mostly created by ideas and narratives promoted by national leaders. In relation to Armenia, this lies in the narrative and explanation of what Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia and the collective Western countries are for Armenians. Armenia’s foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by a “foreign policy identity” rooted in collective memory, where the historical narrative of Turkey and Azerbaijan as “foes” often limits diplomatic flexibility, while the perception of Russia as a security guarantor and the West as a civilizational aspiration creates a constant duality between security dependence and value-based integration.²⁰ Thus, the changes in Yerevan’s policy after 2018 reflect not only external challenges but also the country’s internal transformation regarding statehood and memory, which emphasizes the importance of analyzing identity and social constructs in international relations.²¹

Western Reaction and the Limits of Support

The reaction from the West to Pashinyan’s expectations is ambivalent. Armenia has traditionally been seen as an important partner, due to the strong Armenian lobby in France, the US and Turkey. By 2023, the European Parliament’s Committee of Foreign Relations published reports on the “Common Security and Defense Policy”, as well as a report on the implementation of “Common Foreign and

²⁰ Terzyan, Aram. "The Evolution of Armenia’s Foreign Policy Identity: The Conception of Identity Driven Paths. Friends and Foes in Armenian Foreign Policy Discourse." In *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, Universal, 2016, 145–183.

²¹ Zolyan, Mikayel. “National Identity Rethink Confronts Armenians With Hard Truths.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. December 10, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/11/armenia-new-national-identity?lang=en>.

Security Policy”.²² These reports condemned Azerbaijan’s aggressive actions and systematic military campaign against Nagorno-Karabakh. The European Parliament proposed to impose sanctions on the Azerbaijani authorities responsible for repeated ceasefire violations by stopping the gas imports, as well as to suspend the “Memorandum of Understanding” with Baku.²³ The call to criticize Turkey for supplying arms to Azerbaijan is also present.²⁴ Against the backdrop of continued violence by Baku and a humanitarian crisis in the form of refugee flows, Brussels formed a consensus on the need to support Yerevan.

In 2024, the European Parliament called for the withdrawal of all Azerbaijani troops from Armenia’s sovereign territory, underlining Europe’s desire for increased diplomatic pressure.²⁵ This all came alongside the calls to reduce the European dependence on Azerbaijani gas, which Baku also buys from Moscow. In parallel, EU diplomatic chief Josep Borrell condemned the escalation of tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh and called on Azerbaijan to stop military action.²⁶ Officials in Yerevan received similar assistance from the head of the EU delegation to Armenia, Vasilis Maragos, who declared that “in the interests of peace for all citizens of the South Caucasus, the European Union continues to monitor the situation in the region and to finance Armenia to support democracy.”²⁷

Nevertheless, despite statements of support, in practice, the interests of the European Union are still largely determined by energy factors. Azerbaijan remains a

²² European Parliament. *Report on the Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy*. A9-0403/2023. December 6, 2023. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0403_EN.html, European Parliament. *Report on the Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy*. A9-0389/2023. December 4, 2023. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0389_EN.html.

²³ European Parliament. “MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan.” October 24, 2024. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24740/meps-denounce-violations-of-human-rights-and-international-law-by-azerbaijan>.

²⁴ European Parliament. “Nagorno-Karabakh: MEPs Demand Review of EU Relations with Azerbaijan.” October 5, 2023. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06132/nagorno-karabakh-meps-demand-review-of-eu-relations-with-azerbaijan>.

²⁵ European Parliament. “MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan.”

²⁶ European Union External Action Service. “Nagorno Karabakh: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell in the EP Plenary.” October 3, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nagorno-karabakh-speech-high-representativevice-president-borrell-ep-plenary_en

²⁷ Armenia News - NEWS.am. “Head of EU Delegation to RA: We Will Unlock the Full Potential of Armenia-EU Relations.” October 12, 2024. <https://news.am/eng/news/847010.html>.

key gas supplier to the EU, as emphasized by the extension of the “Strategic Energy Partnership Roadmap with the EU” by Azerbaijani Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov for an additional five years in 2023.²⁸ The document, signed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and the head of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, demonstrated that real steps to impose sanctions or refuse gas imports are overshadowed by the need to ensure the energy security of EU countries. As a result, the European ambivalence is manifested in its support for two contradictory principles: the right of nations to “self-determination”, enshrined in the EU-Armenia Action Plan and “the territorial integrity” of states, enshrined in the EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan.²⁹³⁰ As a result, Brussels’ policy has appeared to be blending moral imperatives with pragmatic economic interests.

Realizing the limitations of Russian support, Nikol Pashinyan diversified on cooperation with the United States. In September 2023, he publicly acknowledged Armenia’s strategic mistake of overdependence on Moscow in the security sphere.³¹ The statement was accompanied by practical steps to distance Armenia from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), including the withdrawal of the country’s permanent representative to the organization.³² Joint US-Armenian military exercises at the same time became a symbol of growing engagement with the West, even though at this time, the demand for the resignation of Pashinyan was taking place in Yerevan.³³³⁴ Nevertheless, seemingly Washington did not fulfill Yerevan’s hopes. In 2023 at the UN General Assembly, the American President Joe Biden stressed the

²⁸ The Turan News Agency. “Azerbaijan-EU to Update Strategic Energy Partnership Roadmap.” December 4, 2023. <https://turan.az/en/politics/azerbaijan-eu-to-update-strategic-energy-partnership-roadmap>.

²⁹ European Union External Action Service. *EU/Armenia Action Plan*. 2006. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/armenia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf.

³⁰ European Union External Action Service. *EU/Azerbaijan Action Plan*. 2016. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/au-az_action_plan_azerbaijan.pdf.

³¹ Osborn, Andrew. “Armenian PM Says Depending Solely on Russia for Security was ‘Strategic Mistake’.” *Reuters*, September 3, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenian-pm-says-depending-solely-russia-security-was-strategic-mistake-2023-09-03/>.

³² TASS Agency. “Armenia Recalls Its Envoy to CSTO, Appoints Him Ambassador to the Netherlands.” September 5, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1670235>.

³³ Al Jazeera. “US Completes Joint Military Exercise in Armenia.” September 20, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/us-completes-joint-military-exercise-in-armenia>.

³⁴ Light, Felix. “Armenian Protesters Demand Pashinyan Ouster.” *Reuters*, September 21, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/several-hundred-protesters-gather-armenian-capital-after-karabakh-surrender-2023-09-20/>.

importance of defending the principles of the UN Charter, on the same day Azerbaijan launched a new attack on Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁵ In contrast to the statements on readiness to protect small states from aggressors, the US continued to ignore the aggravation of the situation, prioritizing energy agreements with Baku. With the lack of the decisive steps to prevent the crisis, the US government contributed to the consolidation of Azerbaijan's position, which was made possible by its longstanding alliance with Turkey. The US has not only ignored Azerbaijani attempts to control the Armenian people but has also consistently supported its coercive diplomacy and avoided holding it accountable for the blockade.³⁶

With the Biden administration coming to the end of its term, the Armenian National Committee of America criticized the results of the passive policies of the US and the EU. In their statement it was noted that the Biden administration “failed to take meaningful steps to hold Azerbaijan accountable”, and criticised “the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) failure to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the over 120,000 Armenian refugees”.³⁷ Pashinyan’s mistake was to overestimate the Western willingness to come to Armenia’s help despite transparent signals of support for Azerbaijan. The refusal in 2023 to participate in CSTO exercises against the backdrop of Azerbaijani military equipment moving towards the conflict zone the same year was a clear indication that Yerevan overlooked the need to assess the threat in time and mobilize the necessary resources to defend itself.

Although this doesn’t argue for Azerbaijan’s intention at the time to start a war, Azerbaijan showed that it was determined and aimed at political-military blackmail to force Armenia to sign “the transfer of the Karabakh” agreement. While the West limited itself to condemning Baku’s actions, Pashinyan by continuing to distance himself from Russia, found himself in a position where Armenia was left virtually

³⁵ The White House. “Remarks by President Biden Before the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly | New York, NY.” September 19, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/19/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-78th-session-of-the-United-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>.

³⁶ Galitsky, Alex, and Gev Iskajyan. “The U.S. Keeps Failing Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Time*, September 20, 2023. <https://time.com/6316001/us-failures-nagorno-karabakh/>.

³⁷ Armenian National Committee of America. “ANCA Gives Biden-Harris Administration Failing Grade on Artsakh Policy.” July 30, 2024. <https://anca.org/press-release/anca-gives-biden-harris-administration-failing-grade-on-artsakh-policy/>.

without any external security guarantees. This policy, in spite of its inherent shortcomings, is rarely criticized inside Armenia, as Pashinyan prefers to place responsibility on Moscow. Nonetheless, an objective analysis of the situation shows the need for a diversified approach and a more balanced foreign policy capable of taking into account the interests of both the West and Russia. Meanwhile, whatever claims may be voiced about the double standards of certain actors involved in the Armenian-Azerbaijani agenda, the most important question remains: what has the Armenian leadership done on its side to protect its people from the hostility?

Pashinyan's Policy Failures and Strategic Missteps

The initial events in Armenia could be described as a classic example of a color revolution. Such processes in international practice often end with negative consequences for the state. Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan each experienced deep political polarization or even armed conflict and unrest in the aftermath of these changes. In the course of revolutions, political figures whose level of competence is questionable come to power and countries rarely see any drastic improvement. They are elected due to the minority's social pressure and prove incapable of effectively governing the country. As a result, Nikol Pashinyan initiated a social split and polarization, putting different segments of the population against each other.³⁸ This scenario has been evident in similar events on the post-Soviet space in Georgia (2003), Kyrgyzstan (2004), with the failed uprisings in Belarus (2006, 2020) and Kazakhstan (2022).

In the wake of the protests, Pashinyan positioned himself as a fierce nationalist, as the process of national identity construction began to change the society after Armenia's independence in 1991. Once in power, however, he failed to garner significant support from the opposition. Although he was perceived as a symbol of change and hope for a better future during the period of political instability, this credibility was not subsequently realized. Pashinyan's rise to approval cannot be attributed directly to the crisis of confidence in the previous leadership under Sargsyan. He managed to mobilize public discontent against the previous government, but he failed to accumulate and reaffirm the same masses to support his own political narrative.

³⁸ Arsenyan, Magda. "Political Polarization and Hate Speech in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution." *Caucasus Watch*. April 21, 2020. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/political-polarization-and-hate-speech-in-armenia-after-the-velvet-revolution.html>.

In the mass consciousness, political leaders continued to be associated with the previous regimes, which limited Pashinyan's ability to consolidate his position.

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 negated many of the democratic initiatives implemented by Yerevan since Pashinyan came to power. Internal political instability, Pashinyan's conflict with the army representatives and the lack of political competition have only worsened in comparison to the previous years of Sargsyan's rule. Consequently, Pashinyan's leadership began to mirror his predecessors, marked by populism and power centralization. The question of a repeated change of power became less urgent, despite the social unrest. The early parliamentary elections in 2021 were realized as Pashinyan's government was at question for the failed policy. However, a low turnout of 49% demonstrated the high level of social apathy and fatigue in society, which hindered the realization of conducting a political change again.³⁹

During the first years of his rule, Pashinyan failed to build effective mechanisms to respond to key national security challenges. It could be argued that Armenia's security policy should have focused on modernizing the military while rekindling alliances with Russia and other strategic partners. Russia has played and continues to play a critical role in maintaining Armenian defense capability, as the armed forces of the two countries are integrated under bilateral agreements. The Russian military base on Armenian soil, as well as regular joint exercises within the CSTO, served as a guarantee of a minimum level of combat capability for Armenian troops. However, interaction with the Russian side has gradually decreased in intensity.⁴⁰ As a result "balancing" doesn't describe Armenia's behavior, as internal military capabilities weren't mobilized to the fullest, nor have the alliances with the foreign actors, including receiving clear support from the West, been achieved, but in contrary disintegrated.⁴¹

In domestic policy, the need to ensure national sovereignty remained a key challenge. The years of Pashinyan's rule saw an increase in the assistance of foreign-

³⁹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems. "Armenia." Election Guide. <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/12/>.

⁴⁰ Anahit Shirinyan, "Armenia's Foreign Policy Balancing in an Age of Uncertainty," Chatham House, March 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Armenia3.pdf>.

⁴¹ Haberman, Joe, and Paul Cormarie. "The U.S. Can't Guarantee Armenia's Security, Despite Azerbaijan's Threats, but It Can Help." RAND Corporation. March 14, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/03/the-us-cant-guarantee-armenias-security-despite-azerbajans.html>.

funded NGOs and funded Civil Society Organization projects.⁴² These structures are crucial in areas like human rights, free speech, education and democratic development. Grants provided by the United States Agency for International Development and the European Union, were actively invested in projects aimed at strengthening civil society, fighting corruption and supporting the rule of law.⁴³ Unlike the US, Georgia or Russia, Armenia doesn't have strict legislative measures to regulate the activities of foreign-funded NGOs.

The introduction of such restrictions seems unlikely, as this could negatively affect the freedom of their activities and lead to a deterioration of relations with the West. Nevertheless, one of the largest international donors to NGOs in Armenia, the USAID, has provided significant amounts of funding. In 2021 alone, the US allocated over \$70 million to projects focused on strengthening civil society, human rights, and judicial reform.⁴⁴ This support greatly contributes to the organization's efforts aimed at weakening Armenia's integration into the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

This assistance has had little effect on speeding up the national economy. Armenia's economic weakness, which increased because of the conflict in 2020, was only a continuation of a long-term trend. After the collapse of the USSR, the national economy was never modernized. Destructive changes led to the dismantling of the Soviet industrial infrastructure, the degradation of scientific institutions and a decline in the quality of education. The accumulation of these processes caused structural problems, including low productivity, chronic unemployment and rising poverty rates.⁴⁵

The example of Armenia reflects the general difficulties of most post-Soviet countries, which have failed to develop an independent development trajectory. One of

⁴² Isanians, Verej. "After USAID: Armenian Civil Society at a Crossroads." *Caucasus Watch*. August 14, 2025. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/after-usaid-armenian-civil-society-at-a-crossroads.html>., Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "USAID Doubles Aid Package to Armenia to \$250 Million." *OC Media*. September 6, 2024. <https://oc-media.org/usaid-doubles-aid-package-to-armenia-to-250-million/>., European Union External Action. *EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Armenia 2021-2027*. Updated June 2025. Accessed December 12, 2025.

⁴³ Alioghlu, Elchin. "NGOs and Power: New Battleground in South Caucasus." *Trend News Agency*, October 18, 2024. <https://en.trend.az/scaucasus/georgia/3958648.html>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cheterian, Vicken. "Is the Republic of Armenia a Viable State?" *CivilNet*, June 23, 2023. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/742721/is-the-republic-of-armenia-a-viable-state/>.

the reasons for this state may be psychological dependence on the dominant state (Russia, its predecessors and others) and long existence in the status of a subsidized region.⁴⁶ This creates a tendency to attribute successes to internal efforts and failures to external actors. The dynamic is visible in the rhetoric of Pashinyan, who attributed the loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh to insufficient support from Russia and the CSTO.⁴⁷

Other than the question of ensuring national security for its domestic policy, the Karabakh conflict remained to be a key challenge. The events of 2020 were a turning point and it is argued the war could have been avoided. Had the conflict been prevented, it would have avoided the signing of an agreement perceived as capitulation.⁴⁸ According to information that emerged later, Pashinyan was given the opportunity to stop the war in 2020 twice.⁴⁹ Both times, the Prime Minister rejected the General Staff's recommendation for a ceasefire, as he was concerned that accepting it would lead the public to perceive him as a "traitor".

This episode demonstrates significant shortcomings in Pashinyan's leadership. Governing a country with unresolved international conflicts requires from the head of state a high degree of responsibility and willingness to compromise in the interests of the nation. On the contrary, as events have shown, the Prime Minister was focused on holding on to power, ignoring calls from the opposition and former leaders of Armenia and Karabakh to reconsider his decisions. By 2016, it became evident that drones would play a crucial role in future conflicts, as was demonstrated by Azerbaijan's military actions. In response to this emerging threat, Armenia was compelled to invest in drone countermeasures and other defense systems. Despite the existence of agreements with

⁴⁶ Giragosian, Richard. "Paradox of Power: Russia, Armenia, and Europe after the Velvet Revolution." European Council on Foreign Relations. August 7, 2019. https://ecfr.eu/publication/russia_armenia_and_europe_after_the_velvet_revolution/.

⁴⁷ ArmenPress. "Pashinyan Accuses Russia of Failing Peacekeeping Mission, Warns of Int'l Legal Order Crisis, Ukraine Cause-and-Effect." September 2, 2023. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1118667>., Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "Pashinyan: Armenia Has 'Frozen' Its Participation in the CSTO." OC Media. February 24, 2024. <https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-armenia-has-frozen-its-participation-in-the-csto/>

⁴⁸ Losh, Jack, and Andrew Roth. "Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal Brokered by Moscow Prompts Anger in Armenia."

⁴⁹ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at the Commission Investigating the Circumstances of the 44-Day War." June 20, 2023. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/06/20/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.

Russia to supply arms, the agreement was revised after Pashinyan came to power, preferring the purchase of aircrafts.⁵⁰

The lack of effective counter-drone warfare capabilities in 2020 significantly reduced the combat capability of the Armenian army. While previously Armenia was technologically advanced, Azerbaijan's asymmetric investments in weapons outnumbered Armenia in terms of drones and significantly modernized its armed forces.⁵¹ The distribution of blame between previous governments and the government of Pashinyan may remain open. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there were opportunities to prepare, and Pashinyan's failure to act in 2020 once again raises questions about his leadership capacity and emphasizes the influence of the personal factor on key state decisions. One may argue for his efforts to counterbalance Azerbaijan by buying the military equipment, however personal character of relying on his own knowledge and estimations has led to poor preparation in the sphere he previously had no expertise in.

As of 2024, Nikol Pashinyan has also expressed dissatisfaction with the country's state emblem, which embodies his desire to rethink and "create" a new republic.⁵² Under the rhetoric of slogans about democratization, fighting corruption and eliminating clans, treaties such as the Treaty of Alexandropol are being symbolically revised. The principle of restarting the political process through a border resolution serves as a tool to realize the idea of a neutral 'Real Armenia' and seeking partnership with Azerbaijan for the sake of the protectorate and access to economic benefits that can be gained with the help of Turkey and, indirectly, access to European markets.⁵³ At

⁵⁰ Stepanian, Ruzanna. "Yerevan Confirms Purchase of Russian Fighter Jets." *Azatutyun*, February 4, 2019. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29750802.html>, The Eurasian Times. "Armenia Acquired Russia's Su-30 Fighter Jets Without Missiles Prior to War with Azerbaijan.", March 21, 2021. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/armenia-purchased-russias-su-30-fighter-jets-without-missiles-in-2020-pm-pashinyan/>.

⁵¹ Shaikh, Shaan, and Wes Rumbaugh. *The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. December 8, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>, Wezeman, Pieter D., Alexandra Kuimova, and Jordan Smith. "Arms Transfers to Conflict Zones: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). April 30, 2021. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh>.

⁵² Sassounian, Harut. "PM Pashinyan Disparages Armenia's Coat of Arms and National Anthem." *The Armenian Weekly*, June 20, 2023. <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/06/20/pm-pashinyan-disparages-armenias-coat-of-arms-and-national-anthem/>.

⁵³ Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "Armenia Removes Ararat from Border Crossing Stamp." *OC Media*. September 15, 2025. <https://oc-media.org/armenia-removes-ararat-from-border-crossing-stamp/>.

the same time, the course of abandoning the CSTO is often criticized as lacking a clear strategic foundation. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been more balanced and consistent. Although the desire to distance itself from Russia is evident, Azerbaijani leaders (being a ruling dynasty) have always stressed the importance of maintaining friendly relations and pragmatic dialogue. The formation of Azerbaijani identity within the framework of building a nation was largely constructed around the Karabakh conflict, which helped to rally society around a common goal. Unlike Baku, Pashinyan failed to consider the potential of the Karabakh issue as an instrument of national consolidation and unification. Armenia's tactical scope of analysis provided Azerbaijan with an opportunity to legitimize its territorial claims using arguments of historical affiliation and national unity by institutionalizing the "Western Azerbaijan" narrative and promoting a cult of victory through the element of "Iron Fist" and the idea of the "Victorious Nation".^{54 55}

Russia's Role and Armenia's Misplaced Expectations

Since 2018, calls to abandon the strategic partnership with Russia have started to spread in Armenian society. In parallel, calls for ending integration with Armenia appeared in the Russian expert environment. Nevertheless, even amidst this rising sentiment of disengagement, Russia and the EAEU continued to serve as Armenia's paramount economic partners. Agricultural products formed the basis of Armenian exports and Russia was the guarantor of Armenia's energy security, including the operation of the country's only nuclear power plant. However, despite the benefits of trade, economic and defense cooperation, the anti-Russian orientation of the new government undermined the existing security balance, which primarily harmed Armenia itself.⁵⁶

As noted earlier, the activities of Western-funded NGOs in Armenia contribute to the formation of specific narratives that explain Russian inactivity on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. These narratives make it possible to identify several main areas of

⁵⁴ Regional Centre for Strategic Policy (RCSP). "Azerbaijan's Territorial Claims Against Armenia: The Institutionalization of Narratives." April 30, 2025. <https://rcsp.am/en/entry/7213/azerbajians-territorial-claims-against-armenia-the-institutionalization-of-narratives/>.

⁵⁵ Samadov, Bahruz. "In the Beginning Was the Violence." *New Eastern Europe*. August 9, 2023. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/08/09/in-the-beginning-was-the-violence/>.

⁵⁶ Keghart. "Pashinyan is Reducing Russian Influence in Armenia." September 23, 2024. <https://keghart.org/davidian-pashinyan-russia/>.

interpretation of Russian-Armenian relations. First, much of the criticism focuses on the CSTO activities and the lack of official statements condemning Azerbaijan's actions. The Armenian authorities claim the CSTO is obliged to protect Armenian territorial integrity after the incursions of Azerbaijani troops. As a consequence, Armenia boycotted CSTO activities. Moreover, arguments were made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister himself against the Russian peacekeeping contingent, which, according to the Armenian side, should have resisted Azerbaijani offensives.⁵⁷ Lastly, despite official statements by the Russian government confirming allied relations with Armenia, the public discourse in Russia expresses a lack of understanding of Yerevan's anti-Russian rhetoric. This mood is employed by pro-Western NGOs, constructing an image of Russia as an unreliable partner and contributing to the spread of its negative perception.

Armenia with Pashinyan at its head has exposed an inherent inconsistency in its approach in demands for CSTO to support its territorial integrity, despite the fact that Yerevan has never officially recognised Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenian territory. Pashinyan, speaking at an extraordinary session of parliament in 2023, recalled the 1996 OSCE summit in Lisbon, which he said was a turning point. According to him, the international community stated that the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh should be decided within the framework of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.⁵⁸ Two key conclusions follow from this: first, the CSTO had no legal grounds to intervene, as there was no attack on recognised Armenian territory. Second, Pashinyan's position reflects an attempt to place responsibility on both Russia and the international community, which emphasizes the inconsistency of his rhetoric.

Criticism of Russia also concerns its peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, but Armenian representatives have often misinterpreted the scope of Russian peacekeepers' responsibilities, failing to distinguish between a peacekeeping

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. "Comment of the Spokesperson of MFA of Armenia Regarding the Statement of the Official Representative of the MFA of Russia." August 31, 2023. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2023/08/31/spox_comment/12172., "Armenia: Russia's Peacekeepers Failed Mission in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Al Jazeera*, December 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/22/armenia-russias-peacekeepers-failed-mission-in-nagorno-karabakh>.

⁵⁸ Arka News Agency. "The Prime Minister Explained Why Armenia Did Not Recognize Artsakh." April 21, 2023. https://arka.am/news/politics/premer_obyasnil_pochemu_armeniya_ne_priznala_artsakh/.

contingent and armed force. Under international law, the mandate of Russian peacekeepers is limited to monitoring the ceasefire and their role is to maintain peace by ensuring the protection of the civilian population, not engaging in hostilities by taking anyone's side. During the second Karabakh war, the intervention of Russian peacekeepers was the decisive factor in ending the hostilities and facilitated agreements aimed at stabilizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Attempts to accuse of allowing 'ethnic cleansing' in the region were used as means to blame and discredit Russia's role in the region.⁵⁹ However, available objective data indicates that there have been no massacres or significant destruction of civilian infrastructure in Karabakh.⁶⁰ Data from international organizations also doesn't contain any evidence of mass crimes against civilians, which casts doubt on the credibility of such accusations.

Armenia's growing rapprochement with the West, coupled with Pashinyan's actions, significantly strained relations with Moscow, reducing the likelihood of close cooperation. Russia avoided engaging militarily, as such involvement would risk human casualties and stretch its resources, due to being wary of escalating tensions with Azerbaijan and Turkey, whose partnership it sought to preserve.⁶¹ Furthermore, with Armenian leadership failing to take constructive steps, Russia saw no commitment to Armenia's security, especially with the leader's inconsistent stance, marked by accusations against Russia and other post-Soviet states, worsening the situation further. Yerevan's desire to distance itself from traditional allies and pivot towards the West was perceived by Russia as detrimental to Armenia's own national interests, particularly given its own internal and external challenges.⁶²

The idea of distinguishing new "friends," "allies," "enemies," "rivals," or "competitors" in Armenian political discourse as part of constructivism theory, has taken them to a different path, which didn't meet the original requirements of their

⁵⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Excerpts from the Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, January 12, 2024. Statements by Armenian Politicians." January 12, 2024. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1925275/#Q2

⁶⁰ Shahverdyan, Lilit. "Russia Rejects Criticism of Peacekeepers in Karabakh." *Eurasianet*, January 15, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/russia-rejects-criticism-of-peacekeepers-in-karabakh>.

⁶¹ Broers, Laurence. "Russia Concedes Karabakh for Stake in New Regional Order." Chatham House, October 9, 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/russia-concedes-karabakh-stake-new-regional-order>.

⁶² TASS. "Russian Foreign Ministry: Yerevan Orients Itself Toward the West Often to the Detriment of Its Own Interests." July 1, 2025. Translated from Russian. <https://tass.ru/politika/24400321>.

identity. In the context of the Karabakh issue, Russian and Armenian interests and identification never contradicted each other, while Europe originally had nothing to offer Armenia. As a result, the shift in Russia's foreign policy in response to Armenian new self-recognition left Armenia's national interests vulnerable, illustrating the importance of Russian influence in maintaining stability in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region traditionally stabilized by Russian presence.

From Velvet to Void

It can be argued that the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia was part of a broader geopolitical context aimed at changing the balance of power in the region. In that geopolitical context, Israel was lobbying for the US to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran by presenting materials allegedly indicating Tehran's possession or development of nuclear weapons. In this context, the change of power in Armenia could be an element of the US strategy to isolate Iran. Under the previous leadership, led by Serzh Sargsyan, Yerevan and Tehran achieved an unprecedented level of cooperation. Of particular importance was the agreement to build Meghri hydroelectric power plants, which was expected to become the largest energy project in the South Caucasus.⁶³ These initiatives strengthened bilateral ties through infrastructure and economic projects. Although direct US intervention in the Armenian events remains only a hypothesis, Armenia's subsequent foreign policy reorientation indicates the significant influence of new actors. Pashinyan, who presented himself as an independent reformer seeking to build a new version of Armenia, has proven unable to implement the major projects initiated by his predecessor and ended up forming a new ideology of 'Real Armenia'. At the same time, Azerbaijan, pursuing a pragmatic development strategy, completed the construction of the Aras Dam hydroelectric power plant back in 1970.

The establishment of external governance, in which the country's interests are sidelined in favor of global strategic goals, often accompanies "velvet" or "color" revolutions, be that the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia or the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan. Armenia has traditionally linked its interests with Russia, especially in

⁶³ Avanesov, Alexandr. "Minister: Armenia Expects a Significant Breakthrough in the Construction of the Meghri Hydroelectric Power Station on the Border with Iran." *ArmlInfo News Agency*, August 29, 2018. https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=35653&lang=3.

the context of the Karabakh conflict. The Karabakh issue was the foundation that kept Yerevan and Moscow allied. In the absence of this conflict, the ties between the two countries would inevitably weaken.

Armenia's leadership, led by Nikol Pashinyan, played a key role in the voluntary transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Since 2020, when the outcome of the Second Karabakh War was a profound shock for Armenian society, the authorities have not taken any tangible steps to strengthen defense capabilities or advance diplomatic initiatives. Nor did Yerevan seek cultural or administrative autonomy for the region within Azerbaijan, indicating the inability of the Armenian leadership to use diplomatic tools in their own interests. Nikol Pashinyan's policy has demonstrated passivity. The leadership, marked by distancing Armenia from the Eastern bloc and from Iran, as well as conducting joint military exercises with the US, signaled a shift not only towards external powers but also a movement that undermined national sovereignty. The failure to take responsibility for strategic decisions, particularly in the wake of military defeats, has diminished Armenia's influence on the international stage, leaving it with little to offer in negotiations. From the onset of his tenure, Pashinyan misled the public regarding Karabakh future, by abandoning Armenia's multivector policy, neglected the nation's historical legacy and lacked a coherent vision for the identity.

Yerevan did have the opportunity to strengthen its position by mobilizing and organizing the defense of the region, however Nikol Pashinyan publicly renounced Karabakh in Prague and Granada. As a result, Stepanakert was left to negotiate without Armenian mediation.⁶⁴ In 2024, Pashinyan claimed that the leadership in Stepanakert was pro-Russian, making Armenia not able to provide them with support or asylum.⁶⁵

Historically, Armenian society has been accustomed to relying on external assistance. Throughout its independence, Armenia has received financial, military and diplomatic support from Russia or the Armenian diaspora abroad. Nonetheless, instead of using this support to strengthen its statehood, Yerevan has often only maneuvered in search of maximum benefit, which has become a peculiar political tradition. The

⁶⁴ Berikyan, Mane. "Pashinyan: Armenia Cannot Protect Karabakh's Population." *CivilNet*, July 26, 2023. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/745607/pashinyan-armenia-cannot-protect-karabakhs-population/>.

⁶⁵ Avetisyan, Ani. "Pashinyan Puts Kibosh on Karabakh Government-in-Exile." *Eurasianet*, April 3, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-puts-kibosh-on-karabakh-government-in-exile>.

dependence on one country for security has led to strategic miscalculations. As relations with Russia deteriorated after 2020, Armenia was unable to adapt and take responsibility for its own destiny. Western countries contributed to Yerevan's perception of Russia as an unreliable partner, which affected its actions within the CSTO framework and its decision to conduct joint military exercises with the US. As a result, Azerbaijan strengthened its geopolitical standing in the region and Armenia remained isolated, losing one of its few allies. Pashinyan, despite his leading post, did not recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia, which in the end predetermined the outcome of the conflict in Baku's favor.

The reasons for the ongoing changes in Armenia's policy could also be explained by the shift in the foreign policy vector, oriented towards rapprochement with the West, which manifested in the rejection of traditional allies and territorial interests. One of the most notable steps in this direction was the ratification in 2023 of the International Criminal Court Rome Statute. Officially, this decision was presented as a measure aimed at improving the country's security, as emphasised by Pashinyan.⁶⁶ However, the explanation is unconvincing, as the signing of such an international treaty, especially in the context of 'allied' relations with Russia, can't be considered as a practical measure to strengthen security.⁶⁷

The International Criminal Court, by its nature, is not a body capable of exerting a direct influence on the state's defense capacity or capability, nor preventing threats to its sovereignty. This indicated the political rather than strategic nature of the step, which can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture aimed at distancing itself from Russia or the CIS, as, with the exception of Tajikistan, no CIS country has ratified the Statute. The role of the national leader and interpersonal relations in the development of the countries that gained independence in the early 90s is particularly indicative of the post-Soviet space. Thus, a pattern can be traced, where temporary leaders came to power, seeking personal or political gain at the expense of citizens and to the detriment of the state.

In geopolitical terms, Armenia found itself in a position where significant

⁶⁶ ArmenPress. "Armenian Prime Minister Explains Reasons for Joining Rome Statute." February 12, 2024. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1130069>.

⁶⁷ TASS. "Armenia's Accession to ICC Rome Statute 'Political Blindness' — Opposition." March 29, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1595639>.

concessions were made to Azerbaijan and Turkey without clear gains for Armenia. Yerevan's foreign policy in recent years has led to a gradual loss of positions, which was in line with the interests of Baku. Nikol Pashinyan is shaping Armenia's new reality, marked by a weakened army, loss of national identity and unclear political direction. Unlike Azerbaijan, which has long strengthened its allied ties with Turkey, Armenia has deliberately weakened its relations with Russia. Its landlocked position, weak economy and reduced military capabilities have led to its marginalization in regional politics. If during the years of Serzh Sargsyan's rule the country was balancing on the brink of instability, the ascension of a leader lacking foreign policy expertise, as a result of the 2018 revolutionary processes, exacerbated the crisis. Following his election, parts of the population have been misguided in their understanding of national identity. As a candidate with no university degree and supported by local NGOs, Pashinyan was viewed as a conduit for foreign interests rather than the Armenian ones. This political transition can be seen as a strategic mistake that significantly limited Armenia's potential in the international arena and deprived it of real mechanisms for the defense of national interests.

Figure 1.



Monte Melkonyan on the left and Nikol Pashinyan on the right.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Starikov, Nikolai. "Armeniiia – zametki na poliakh" [Armenia – Notes in the Margins]. *Blog Nikolaja Starikova* [Nikolai Starikov's Blog]. May 17, 2018. <https://nstarikov.ru/armeniya-zametki-na-polyah-93405>.

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