Georgetown Security Studies Review

Volume 12 | Issue 1
July 2024

An official publication of the Center for
Security Studies at Georgetown University's
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service

Georgetown Security Studies Review
Volume 12 | Issue 1
July 2024

An official publication of the Center for Security Studies at
Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service

https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org

GEORGETOWN SECURITY STUDIES REVIEW

Published by the Center for Security Studies
at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service

The Georgetown Security Studies Review is the official academic journal of Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. Founded in 2012, the GSSR has also served as the official publication of the Center for Security Studies and publishes regular columns in its online Forum and occasional special edition reports.

Access the Georgetown Security Studies Review online at
https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org
Contact the Editor in Chief at gssr@georgetown.edu

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Role of Conventional Counterforce in NATO Strategy: Historical Precedents and Present Opportunities

Davis Ellison

Multiple NATO states have acquired long-range, highly precise conventional missiles and have discussed using these to target Russia's nuclear weapons, risking possible nuclear escalation. How has conventional counterforce strategy shaped NATO's history, and would such a strategy be viable today? This paper addresses these questions by first reviewing the literature on conventional counterforce, thereby exploring various models that explain why states pursue such capabilities. It argues that, due to the complexities of alliance politics and the role of nuclear weapons within them, there is mounting pressure for non-nuclear-armed states to acquire conventional capabilities to credibly and independently threaten a nuclear-armed competitor's secure second-strike capability. The paper then applies this explanation to two case studies: 1) NATO's Cold War counterforce strategies vis-à-vis the Soviet Union; and 2) current NATO counterforce strategies in the context of deteriorating NATO-Russia relations and the global arms control regime. The paper finds that non-nuclear NATO states are acquiring conventional counterforce capabilities to target Russia's nuclear arsenal without sufficient attention being paid to escalation risks or broader strategic opportunities to bolster arms control.

Introduction

Conventional counterforce, or the targeting of an opponent's nuclear arsenal with conventional weapons, has been a consistent feature of post-Cold War strategic stability. Technological developments in long-range precision strikes seemingly assured defense planners and policymakers that newer nuclear-armed adversaries could be preventively disarmed without risking a nuclear response. This was particularly evident in the cases of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Accordingly, American military planners envisioned the concept of Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) as a means to further underpin their global hegemony in military affairs.

Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), however, have perceived these systems as a threat to the survivability of their nuclear arsenals. Though many systems procured or developed by states (e.g., the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile-Extended Range or Perseus missiles) do not have publicly acknowledged counterforce roles, their ability to assume such roles at any point in a crisis or conflict is sufficiently worrisome to planners in Moscow and Beijing. These developments, coupled with the U.S. abandonment of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, have heightened concerns that American strategy is not predicated on stability but rather on predominance. Coupled with Russian actions to undermine the global arms control regime, including undermining and ultimately ending the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, these developments fed off one another to erode stability. Conventional systems have, therefore, played a catalyzing role in Russian military thought for decades and have frequently been cited as concerns in the writings of Russian military experts.[1]

This modern challenge has its roots in the history of the Cold War. Counterforce was an important element of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) flexible response strategy—although these counterforce capabilities were originally nuclear rather than conventional. Nuclear

forces with pre-assigned counterforce targets were under the direct operational control of both Supreme Allied Commanders Europe and Atlantic (SACEUR and SACLANT).[2] This included Polaris submarines, bombers from the United States and United Kingdom, and ground-launched cruise missiles like the Pershing-I and -II systems. The earliest defense plans envisaged NATO bombers attacking Soviet and Warsaw Pact airfields hosting atomic bomber forces at the outset of the war and remained a consistent feature of NATO strategy during the eras of massive retaliation and flexible response.

Conventional counterforce is a relatively new concept for NATO, with increasing relevance, as non-nuclear NATO allies have either acquired or developed capabilities that could be assigned a counterforce role against Russia.[3] Evidence suggests, though, that some level of collective alliance planning on conventional counterforce has been included in planning for at least two decades as a part of NATO's theater missile defense mission.[4] What remains to be seen is how the evolution of this conventional missile technology is being considered within the alliance's nuclear thinking, if at all.

Therefore, to understand today's security landscape, it is imperative to answer the following questions: What was the role of conventional counterforce strategies in NATO's history, and would such a strategy be viable today? This paper begins by summarizing the literature on counterforce that emerged during the Cold War and its evolution into conventional counterforce as the East-West competition ended and new proliferation threats emerged. It continues with an overview of both nuclear and conventional counterforce in NATO strategy before considering what conventional counterforce means for a contemporary collective alliance strategy. It will then conclude with recommendations NATO could consider for better coordinating the planning and consultation regarding these capabilities.

The Conventional Counterforce Literature

The last decade has seen a marked increase in scholarly interest in conventional counterforce strategies and capabilities.[5] Particular attention has been paid to the perceptions of these weapons in Moscow and Beijing and how the deployment and use of such capabilities could risk nuclear escalation.[6] Understandably, this research focus has intensified following the continued deterioration of relations between the United States and the PRC, as well as between NATO and Russia. The conventional missile challenges each of these respective dyads presents to the survivability of secure nuclear second-strike capabilities is significant and bears further attention.

What constitutes a conventional counterforce weapon is commonly understood as a missile system with a sufficient warhead, payload, kinetic energy, and accuracy that it can reliably target nuclear assets such as hardened missile silos, mobile launchers, and command and control facilities.[7] Range has also often played a factor, particularly when it comes to potential exchanges between powers such as the United States, Russia, and the PRC,[8] but range alone does not necessarily imply a counterforce role as in-theater air forces can be stationed close to borders and carry out the same mission. Other capabilities, such as cyber-attacks and anti-satellite missiles, play a counterforce role by targeting enablers like command and control systems and surveillance satellites, though these are less commonly used.[9] The present paper borrows from Oslo Nuclear Project doctoral fellow Fabian Hoffmann's description of conventional counterforce weapons as a

function of warhead, payload, kinetic energy, and accuracy.[10] This informs the references to specific systems used in later sections.

The origins of contemporary conventional counterforce discussions stem from the proliferation challenges of the post-Cold War era rather than the more recent great power competition. Scholars and policymakers gave attention to the role of conventional capabilities in eliminating threats from 'rogue state' weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.[11] The challenge of the period was to counter smaller nuclear arsenals that could be deployed on smaller, more concealable mobile launchers, such as North Korea's capabilities after 2006.[12] These programs became the impetus behind the quixotic U.S. pursuit of CPGS, a system of highly accurate missiles and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms such as advanced satellites that could speed up the engagement chain (find, fix, track, target, engage, assess) to destroy a missile before it could be fired.[13] As of today, no such 'silver bullet' system has been successfully developed.

Two criticisms of the CPGS approach (not necessarily mutually exclusive) emerged. The first was that such systems risked creating overconfidence in their effectiveness, and therefore, policymakers could begin to see these systems as a panacea possible of eliminating all missile threats.[14] The second criticism was that these systems risked nuclear escalation through the targeting of an adversary's nuclear second-strike system and, therefore, could support a damage limitation (i.e., 'war winning') nuclear strategy.[15]

Outside of the United States, allies and partners both in NATO and around the world have contributed to conventional counterforce thinking. Given the continuous uncertainty regarding the reliability of U.S. security guarantees, some states have turned to conventional counterforce as a way to assuage fears of abandonment or to entrap allies into their defense (or both).[16] Poland, Finland, and South Korea are all U.S. allies with mutual defense agreements that have pursued such weapons.[17] These three states have also explicitly developed them alongside discussions of a deterrence-by-punishment strategy that would target an adversary's (Russia and North Korea, respectively) nuclear systems. In these specific cases, criticism has arisen regarding the maturity of thought informing these systems, particularly in regard to the full appreciation of nuclear escalation dynamics.[18] Interestingly, NATO states like Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Spain, and soon the Netherlands also possess such capabilities but have invited far less commentary from Russian analysts. Bilateral political relations clearly play a role in Moscow's perceptions, with Poland and Finland being perceived as more threatening than Turkey or Greece, though common reference to "NATO" may, by extension, include the above states' capabilities. Additionally, states like Germany openly note that their capabilities are for suppression of air defense rather than counterforce.

Counterforce in NATO Strategy

NATO's Cold War Nuclear Strategies

Counterforce has been incorporated into NATO's strategy since its inception. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) plans from 1951 referred to the use of 'new weapons' against Soviet atomic airfields within Eastern European satellite states. Notably, in this period, these weapons were under the peacetime operational control (OPCON) of SACEUR, with some evidence claiming that SACEUR

even had release authority in the event of war.[19] U.S. systems such as Polaris submarines would be routinely under the direct OPCON of SACEUR or SACLANT throughout the Cold War.[20]

Internally, NATO's strategy related to nuclear weapons was unambiguous about their counterforce role. The 1954 NATO policy on force structure, titled MC 48, was explicit:

> "The only presently feasible way of stopping an enemy from delivering atomic weapons against selected targets in Europe is to destroy his means of delivery at source…This will require early atomic counter-attack against the enemy's delivery system."[21]

Counterforce would maintain its central place in NATO planning throughout the Cold War and appear throughout the alliance's major strategy documents. Additionally, the counterforce formed the basis of NATO policies, such as the Dual-Track Decision, which pushed the Soviet Union to reduce its missile presence in Europe, culminating in the INF Treaty.[22]

The key challenge within NATO, however, was that the political-military relationships in the alliance's collective decision-making prevented confidence in assured counterforce retaliation. Archival evidence from the 1962-1966 FALLEX series of high-level exercises indicates that in free-play, decisions were frequently blocked or slowed by both civilian and military leaders when it came to nuclear use against targets inside Warsaw Pact states.[23] This challenge was also seen in HILEX 12 and WINTEX 89, where West Germany and the U.S. respectively blocked nuclear use on their territory and against the Soviet Union.[24]

While NATO had counterforce thinking at the core of its strategy for decades, there was persistent uncertainty about whether or not the alliance structures would be able to actually accommodate a counterforce strategy in practice.[25] Indeed, this challenge was well known to NATO's adversaries, with the East German Military Intelligence Service tracking the nuclear decision-making process during every NATO exercise between at least 1962 and 1989.[26] The speed of decision-making and the surety of response vital to a strategy centered on counterforce was undermined by a challenging civil-military relationship within NATO structures.

Additionally, there was dysfunction and confusion surrounding nuclear command and control arrangements in the United States, the primary supplier of nuclear capabilities to NATO *in extremis*. While it is perhaps counterintuitive to many assumptions regarding these arrangements, newly released archival and biographical evidence from the Cold War period shows that U.S. Strategic Air Command and Joint Chiefs of Staff actively obfuscated information surrounding nuclear command arrangements. In particular, the role of pre-delegated launch authorities "lurked beneath the surface of civil-military relations in the 1960s."[27] As nuclear strategist Frank Miller put it, throughout the Cold War, there existed a "dangerous disconnect between presidential assumptions and actual [military] plans" for nuclear weapons use.[28]

There is little archival or primary source evidence pointing to any *conventional* counterforce thinking in NATO strategy during the Cold War. Some level of this targeting was assumed, particularly by air forces and the dual-use nature of airfields. Given the level of destructiveness of assumed nuclear conflicts and the presumed early use of such weapons, it is understandable that such an approach did not receive as much attention from planners

at the time. As the competition between East and West ended, however, the threat environment changed significantly, and allies became increasingly concerned by other proliferation threats around the world.

Post-Cold War Proliferation Threats to the Return of Russia

Conventional counterforce grew in NATO thinking as part of the post-Cold War era response to nuclear weapons and ballistic missile proliferation. Since 2001, counterforce has been considered within the context of theater-ballistic missile defense, most likely with the threat of Iranian ballistic missiles in mind. For example, Exercise Clean Hunter 2001 practiced protecting "NATO forces from TBM (theatre ballistic missile) attack through CCF (conventional counterforce) operations against threat coalition(s) to ensure that threat TBM infrastructure and support systems could be destroyed prior to TBM launch."[29] Additionally, then Assistant Secretary-General for Defense Investment Robert Bell spoke to the role of conventional strikes on ballistic missile threats in a conference forum in Brussels.[30] Importantly, from the early 2000s to today, allies have insisted that NATO's ballistic missile defense posture is not directed against Russia.[31]

Challenges in policy and strategy arose once NATO began reorienting itself back to Europe in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Conventional counterforce in a missile defense role is a different effort when applied against a sophisticated nuclear-armed adversary. As already highlighted, conventional counterforce is intimately tied to nuclear escalation dynamics regardless of user intent. Post-2014 investments in conventional counterforce by the United States and other NATO allies continue to be perceived as destabilizing and threatening in Moscow.[32] This is due to uncertainties both about the warheads that such a missile could carry and the targets for such weapons. These uncertainties together could create a "use it or lose it" fear amongst Russian planners if they perceive that nuclear capabilities could be lost in a crisis.

As NATO allies reoriented their forces towards operations within Europe against Russian forces, long-range precision strike missiles became an important priority for several allies. Both Poland and Finland (before the latter joined NATO) had been pursuing conventional counterforce 'triads' of air-, sea-, and ground-launched missiles with the aims of building and maintaining an independent deterrent capability against Russia.[33] Poland would later reduce the importance of an independent deterrent as it sought to build closer ties with the United States.[34] Several other allies have reinforced their long-range strike capabilities in both national and multinational formats, including the UK, France, Germany, Norway, and the Netherlands.[35] A summary of specific capabilities that have been domestically developed, are under development, or are being procured can be found in Table 1 in the appendix.

There is also evidence of long-range precision strikes in NATO's contemporary collective military thinking. Both Allied Air[36] and Maritime[37] Commands have identified 'deep precision strike' as part of their missions, while national documents have shown evidence of a "NATO Maritime Strike Long Range (NMS-LR)" capability under development.[38] National capabilities under NATO OPCON serving a counterforce mission certainly have precedent, as shown above, and would be a symbol of a shared recognition of the importance of conventional long-range precision strike into the alliance's

conventional deterrence and defense posture.

There are serious risks that come with increased national conventional counterforce capabilities and collectively held assets. Independent national conventional counterforce systems risk exacerbating fears of entrapment by other allies. Washington, in particular, is highly sensitive to the idea that allied action could cause it to be drawn into a conflict that risks nuclear escalation.[39] This has been seen in practice with U.S. officials stressing that they do not support nor enable Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory in the ongoing war.[40] Collectively held assets risk the same entrapment challenges due to allied and staff command and control differences on nuclear use and targeting. NATO's campaigns over Kosovo and Libya have been derided as effective wars by committees, as staff in capitals and in NATO headquarters considered every target collectively.[41] While there is perhaps some optimism that a Russian attack against NATO allies may lead to more efficient decision-making, the alliance's Cold War precedents and recent operational experience warn against too much hopefulness.

The final point to stress is that these systems cause serious concern in Moscow and have for decades.[42] Some, ranging from current CIA Director William Burns to arms control advocates like James Acton and analysts at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, have argued that U.S. investments into CPGS were part of the spark that caused the collapse of arms control in Europe.[43] While this should not be overdetermined, aggressive deployments or the actual use of conventional counterforce against Russian nuclear targets naturally invites possible nuclear retaliation. They are, in effect, first-strike weapons that several allies have openly described as deterrence-by-punishment measures. Capabilities that can target hardened command and control centers, missile silos, and road-mobile launch systems will be perceived as threatening regardless of stated intent. This reality, however, is largely brushed aside either for political convenience or bureaucratic easing.

Conclusions

Together, multi-nationally and nationally, NATO allies have taken large steps in developing and modernizing conventional counterforce capabilities to threaten Russia's secure second-strike. Holding Russia's nuclear capabilities at greater risk is an important element of balancing deterrence activities between NATO allies, and it arguably gives Europeans a larger say in the security architecture of the continent. This does come with an increased risk of escalation should conflict with Russia begin to spiral, and European states must ensure that these capabilities are not pursued as an end unto themselves but as part of a coherent strategy.

The explicit or implicit counterforce role for long-range precision strike capabilities demands the inclusion of its considerations not only in conventional deterrence and defense planning but also within NATO's collective deterrence and defense work, particularly on nuclear affairs. For example, NATO's joint discussions on dual-capable aircraft could prove a useful model, wherein tactics and roles for these aircraft are discussed collectively by nuclear planners. The risks of nuclear escalation caused by conventional counterforce planning are real, particularly as Russia continues to integrate lower-yield nuclear capabilities into its warfighting doctrine.[44]

Finally, these capabilities and their implicit counterforce role open the possibility of integrating this development into a wider strategy that aims to push Russia back to the

arms control negotiating table. Similar to the Double-Track Decision of 1979 that led to the INF Treaty, these counterforce measures could push Moscow to talk as it begins to perceive itself as losing a theatre-range missile advantage in Europe. While inherently risky, this approach would manipulate risk to ensure that arms development is not an end unto itself and could be supportive of a broader strategic stability agenda.[45]

About the Author: *Davis Ellison is a PhD Candidate at King's College London and a strategic analyst at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. His dissertation research focuses on the internal dynamics of NATO political and military structures both during and after the Cold War, using this lens as an explanatory variable for important NATO shifts over time. He has written widely on civil-military relations, arms control, and national security policymaking.*

Appendix

Table 1. Select Non-U.S. NATO States' Conventional Counterforce Capabilities[46, 47]

State	System	Warhead (kilograms)	Range (kilometers)
UK	Future Cruise/Anti-Ship Weapon (FC/ASW) aka SPEAR 5 or Perseus	N/A	500+
France	Future Cruise/Anti-Ship Weapon (FC/ASW) aka SPEAR 5 or Perseus	N/A	500+
Germany	JASSM-ER	450	1,000
Netherlands	JASSM-ER	450	1,000
Norway	Joint Strike Missile	120	275+
Poland	Tomahawk Block V	450	1,600
Finland	JASSM-ER	450	1,000
Italy	Future Cruise/Anti-Ship Weapon (FC/ASW)	N/A	500+
Turkey	*Cenk*	N/A	1,000+

[1] Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds. "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts." *Center for Naval Analysis*, April 2020, https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/04/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf; Tong Zhao. "Conventional Counterforce Strike: An Option for Damage Limitation in Conflicts with Nuclear-Armed Adversaries?" *Science & Global Security* 19, no. 3 (2011): 195–222, https://doi.org/10.1080/08929882.2011.616146; Dmitry Stefanovich. "Proliferation and Threats of Reconnaissance-Strike Systems: A Russian Perspective." *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1–3 (2020): 97–107.

[2] "Summary Record of a Restricted Meeting of the Council Held on Monday, 30 June 1969, at 9.30 am - Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT)." *NATO Archives* (June 30, 1969); "Report by the J-5 to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on NATO-US Targeting." *The National Security Archive* (April 26, 1961); Beatrice Heuser. "Victory in a Nuclear War? A Comparison of NATO and WTO War Aims and Strategies." *Contemporary European History* 7, no. 3 (November 1998): 311–27; Desmond J. Ball. "The Counterforce Potential of American SLBM Systems." *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 14 (1977): 23–40; Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart, and Jeffrey D. McCausland. *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2012).

[3] Joshua H. Pollack, Cristina Varriale, and Tom Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making." *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1–3 (2020): 21–37.

[4] Robert G. Bell, "Remarks - NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defence Investment." Conference co-hosted by the Institute for Defense Analysis and the Forum du Futur, Brussels, April 2003, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_20508.htm?selectedLocale=en; David F. Taylor. "NC3A Simulation Support for NATO Exercise Clean Hunter 2001." *The Hague: NATO Consultation, Command and Control Agency* (June 2002).

[5] Paul van Hooft and Davis Ellison. "Good Fear, Bad Fear: How European Defence Investments Could Be Leveraged to Restart Arms Control Negotiations with Russia." *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, April 2023, https://hcss.nl/report/good-fear-bad-fear-how-european-defence-investments-could-be-leveraged-to-restart-arms-control-negotiations-with-russia/; Paul van Hooft, Davis Ellison, and Tim Sweijs. "Pathways to Disaster: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation." *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, May 2023, https://hcss.nl/report/pathways-to-disaster-russias-war-against-ukraine-and-the-risks-of-inadvertent-nuclear-escalation/; Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula." *International Security* 45, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 7–39, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00399; Pollack, Varriale, and Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making."; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence." *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 9–49; Alexey Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin, and Petr Topychkanov, "Entanglement as a New Security Threat: A Russian Perspective," in *Entanglement: Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks, Edited by James Acton* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017); Acton, *Silver Bullet? Asking the Right Questions about Conventional Prompt Global Strike*; Zhao, "Conventional Counterforce Strike"; Anatoly Anin, "Prompt Global Strike Weapons and Strategic Instability," *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security* 17, no. 2 (2011): 15–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/19934270.2011.578452.

[6] Pollack, Varriale, and Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making."; Bowers and Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas."; van Hooft, Ellison, and Sweijs. "Pathways to Disaster: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation."

[7] Fabian Hoffmann. "Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons and Strategic Stability - Promoting Trust through Technical Understanding," *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, November 2021, https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/programmes/Programme%20TNP%20-%20P5/2021/202103.pdf.

[8] Bruce M. Sugden, "Nuclear Operations and Counter-Homeland Conventional Warfare: Navigating Between Nuclear Restraint and Escalation Risk," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 60–89; Amy F. Woolf. "Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues," *Congressional Research Service*, July 2021, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/R41464.pdf.

[9] James M. Acton, "Cyber Warfare & Inadvertent Escalation." *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (2020): 133–49; James M. Acton. "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War." *International Security* 43, no. 1 (August 1, 2018): 56–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320.

[10] Hoffmann, "Strategic Non-Nuclear Weapons and Strategic Stability - Promoting Trust through Technical Understanding." 7.

[11] James J. Wirtz, "Counter Proliferation, Conventional Counterforce, and Nuclear War." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 5–24; Bell. "Remarks - NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defence Investment"; James A. Russell. "WMD Proliferation and Conventional Counterforce: The Case of Iraq." *Strategic Insights* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, July 3, 2002), https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA527149.pdf.
[12] Vipin Narang and Ankit Panda, "North Korea: Risks of Escalation," *Survival* 62, no. 1 (2020).
[13] Acton, *Silver Bullet? Asking the Right Questions about Conventional Prompt Global Strike*.
[14] James M. Acton et al, *Entanglement: Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017); Pollack, Varriale, and Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making."; Bowers and Hiim. "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas."
[15] Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108562225; Bowers and Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas"; Acton et al, *Entanglement: Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks*; Narang and Panda, "North Korea"; van Hooft, Ellison, and Sweijs, "Pathways to Disaster: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation"; James M. Acton. "Why Warhead Ambiguity Could Lead to Escalation - Is It a Nuke?: Pre-Launch Ambiguity and Inadvertent Escalation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Acton_NukeorNot_final.pdf; Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation : Conventional War and Nuclear Risks*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Anin, "Prompt Global Strike Weapons and Strategic Instability"; Stefanovich, "Proliferation and Threats of Reconnaissance-Strike Systems: A Russian Perspective."
[16] Pollack, Varriale, and Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making"; Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022).
[17] Lukasz Kulesa, "Operationalizing the 'Polish Fangs': Poland and Long-Range Precision Strike," *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1–3 (2020): 49–60; Charly Salonius-Pasternak. "Friends with (Some) Benefits: How Non-Allied Sweden and Finland View Long-Range Conventional Precision Strike," *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1–3 (2020): 61–79; Bowers and Hiim. "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas."
[18] Pollack, Varriale, and Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making"; Bowers and Hiim. "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas."
[19] Matthew Connelly, *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals about America's Top Secrets* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2023), 152–53; "SHAPE History, 1952-1953: The Command Structure Takes SHAPE" (NATO SHAPE Historical Office, 1959).
[20] "Summary Record of a Restricted Meeting of the Council Held on Monday, 30 June 1969, at 9:30 am - Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT)"; Ball, "The Counterforce Potential of American SLBM Systems," 24; Nichols, Stuart, and McCausland, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*.
[21] Heuser, "Victory in a Nuclear War? A Comparison of NATO and WTO War Aims and Strategies," 316.
[22] van Hooft and Ellison, "Good Fear, Bad Fear: How European Defence Investments Could Be Leveraged to Restart Arms Control Negotiations with Russia."
[23] "SGM-0355-63 A Report by the Military Committee to the North Atlantic Council on NATO Fall Exercise 1962" (NATO Archives, August 12, 1963); "LOSTAN 68/62 Standing Group Report on FALLEX 64" (NATO Archives, January 28, 1966); "LOM 4/67 Memorandum for the Director of the International Planning Staff on FALLEX 66" (NATO Archives, January 6, 1967).
[24] Paul B. Stares, *Command Performance: The Neglected Dimension of European Security* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 105–6; John R. Galvin, *Fighting the Cold War: A Soldier's Memoir* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 376–77.
[25] Jeffrey H. Michaels. "'No Annihilation without Representation': NATO Nuclear Use Decision-Making during the Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2074405.
[26] Heinz Marzluff. "Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv: Bestand DVW 1: Ministerium Für Nationale Verteidigung, Verwaltung Aufklärung" (Das Bundesarchiv, 2004), 179–93, https://phpisn.ethz.ch/kms2.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/PHP/21413/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/d7391f3e-e1f0-418d-b571-6e99e4c3c425/de/6_Findbuch_Aufklaerung.pdf.
[27] Connelly, *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals about America's Top Secrets*, 153.
[28] Franklin C. Miller, "Establishing the Ground Rules for Civilian Oversight," in *Managing Nuclear Operations in the 21st Century, Edited by Charles Glaser, Austin Long, and Brian Radzinsky* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 66.
[29] Taylor, "NC3A Simulation Support for NATO Exercise Clean Hunter 2001."

[30] Bell, "Remarks - NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defence Investment."
[31] David S. Yost. *NATO's Balancing Act* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), 102–3; "Ballistic Missile Defence," *NATO*, November 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49635.htm.
[32] Anin, "Prompt Global Strike Weapons and Strategic Instability"; Arbatov, Dvorkin, and Topychkanov, "Entanglement as a New Security Threat: A Russian Perspective"; Kristin Ven Bruusgaard. "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 3–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070; Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky. "From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (February 23, 2018): 33–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1347872; van Hooft, Ellison, and Sweijs, "Pathways to Disaster: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation."
[33] Kulesa, "Operationalizing the 'Polish Fangs': Poland and Long-Range Precision Strike"; Salonius-Pasternak, "Friends with (Some) Benefits: How Non-Allied Sweden and Finland View Long-Range Conventional Precision Strike."
[34] Kulesa, "Operationalizing the 'Polish Fangs': Poland and Long-Range Precision Strike."
[35] "UK-France Joint Leaders' Declaration," *UK Government*, March 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration; Inder Singh Bisht. "MBDA Unveils Long-Range, Ground-Launched Cruise Missile," *The Defense Post*, June 2022, https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/06/28/mbda-unveils-cruise-missile/; "Norway Orders Additional Naval Strike Missiles (NSM)," *Naval News*, December 2022, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/12/norway-orders-additional-naval-strike-missiles-nsm/; "3.2 Artikel 2: Maritiem Materieel," Ministerie van Financiën, 2023, https://www.rijksfinancien.nl/memorie-van-toelichting/2023/OWB/K/onderdeel/1467295.
[36] "Allies Work out an Integrated Air Defense System Takedown with Bombers and Fighters," *NATO Allied Air Command*, September 2022, https://ac.nato.int/archive/2022/allies-work-out-an-integrated-air-defense-system-takedown-with-bombers-and-fighters.aspx.
[37] "NATO's Maritime Activities," *NATO*, January 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_70759.html.
[38] "3.2 Artikel 2: Maritiem Materieel."
[39] Pollack, Varriale, and Plant, "The Changing Role of Allied Conventional Precision-Strike Capabilities in Nuclear Decision Making."
[40] "Blinken Says US Neither Encourages nor Enables Ukraine to Strike inside Russia," *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/blinken-says-us-neither-encourages-nor-enables-ukraine-strike-inside-russia-2022-12-06/ (accessed May 29, 2023).
[41] Ivo Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2001); Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/wesley-k-clark/waging-modern-war/9781586481391/?lens=publicaffairs; Rob Weighill and Florence Gaub, *The Cauldron: NATO's Campaign in Libya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[42] Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority"; Anin, "Prompt Global Strike Weapons and Strategic Instability"; Arbatov, Dvorkin, and Topychkanov, "Entanglement as a New Security Threat: A Russian Perspective"; van Hooft, Ellison, and Sweijs, "Pathways to Disaster: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation."
[43] Acton, *Silver Bullet? Asking the Right Questions about Conventional Prompt Global Strike*; William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2020); Evan Braden Montgomery and Toshi Yoshihara. "Speeding Toward Instability: Hypersonic Weapons and the Risk of Nuclear Use," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2023, https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8350_(Speeding_Toward_Instability_Report)_FINAL_web.pdf
[44] Anonymous, "Slouching Towards a Nuclear Gomorrah," *Survival* 65, no. 6 (2023): 139.
[45] Paul van Hooft and Davis Ellison. "Good Fear, Bad Fear: How European Defence Investments Could Be Leveraged to Restart Arms Control Negotiations with Russia," The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, April 2023, https://hcss.nl/report/good-fear-bad-fear-how-european-defence-investments-could-be-leveraged-to-restart-arms-control-negotiations-with-russia/.
[46] Camille Grand, "Missiles, Deterrence and Arms Control: Options for a New Era in Europe," (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 2023), pg. 12.
[47] "Chapter Four: Europe," *Military Balance 2023* 123, no. 1 (2023): 50-149.

The Rise of Iran's Cyber Capabilities and the Threat to U.S. Critical Infrastructure

Gabrielle Christello

The United States and its allies' reliance on critical infrastructure to provide necessary functions for their ways of life, to protect their nations, and to maintain strong economies has caught Tehran's attention. This study examines Iranian cyber-attacks against its neighbors to provide insight into the growing potential for success in future attacks on the United States. This paper examines the evolution of Iran's cyber threats and its cyber structure within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. The energy and water/wastewater sector case studies highlight vulnerabilities in U.S. critical infrastructure and underscore that small and local utility companies face growing threats from various Iranian state and non-state cyber adversaries. This study stresses the urgent need for Washington to evaluate Tehran's motivations, opportunities, and capabilities in cyber warfare. Furthermore, it urges enhanced collaboration among stakeholders to fortify critical infrastructure defenses and establish robust cybersecurity standards. It is only a matter of time before Iran launches new cyber phases, including cyber-enabled economic warfare operations and the targeting of vulnerable U.S. and allied computer networks, especially those associated with critical infrastructure.

Introduction

Decades of mounting U.S.-Iran tensions have led to Iran possessing severely limited military capabilities due to the absence of strong state allies, shortage of conventional arms, and lack of nuclear weapons. To improve its ability to challenge and deter the United States, Iran has turned to cyber-enabled espionage, disruptive/destructive infrastructure attacks, and cyber warfare as cost-effective strategies to inflict significant harm. Iran's tactics using disruptive cyber attacks have become much bolder in the past few years. In response, the United States needs to shore up better cyber defenses as quickly as possible.

Since the 2010 Stuxnet attack – an allegedly joint U.S.-Israeli cyber intelligence operation that deployed the Stuxnet malware against Iran's nuclear program from 2009 to 2010 – Iran has built up multiple units in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) that focus on offensive and defensive cyber operations.[1] Further, a 2023 U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security hearing warned that Iran had a "peculiar sense of symmetry" in responding to cyber-attacks.[2] If Israel, the United States, or its allies were to decide to strike Iran's networks, Iran could quickly counterstrike by matching the offensive tactics, techniques, and procedures of its adversaries.[3] For example, after a retaliatory U.S. military strike in January 2020 that killed IRGC Quds Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani, a former head of the Department of Energy's Cyber Security Incident Response Team assessed that Iran would be more inclined to target vulnerable U.S. and allied forces' critical infrastructures due to their potentially catastrophic consequences.[4]

Not only is Iran able to counter-strike its most formidable allies, but since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas War, Iran's cyber strategy and tactics have aligned with its military goals. This alignment suggests Tehran has set common objectives for its

domestic stability, territorial integrity, and foreign policy. At the beginning of October 2023, Iran increased its influence operations (IOs) against Israel and leveraged pre-existing access to networks to launch attacks/unleash campaigns.[5] By mid-to-late October, the IRGC launched cyber attacks in tandem with kinetic attacks on international commercial shipping vessels by Iran-backed Houthis.[6] In the span of a year, Iran has demonstrated it can mount four primary cyber-attack tactics: espionage operations, IOs, disruptive/destructive attacks, and mixed attacks (combining some or all the different attacks).[7] This study examines Iran's cyber attacks against Iran's neighbors to provide insight into the potential success rate of future attacks in the United States.

In addition to cyber attacks, Iran has also used cyber-enabled economic warfare (CEEW) as a quick, low-stakes option in response to various political and economic conflicts. The term CEEW was first introduced in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy to capture adversaries' use of technology to "weaken our business and our economy."[8] Tehran has been eyeing the United States and its allies' reliance on largely privately owned critical infrastructure to service citizens, protect their nations, and maintain strong economies. Most recently, in November 2023, cyber threat intelligence firms, such as Microsoft's Threat Analysis Center and Mandiant Intelligence, have revealed attempts by the IRCG to launch cyber-attack on U.S. water facilities, confirming growing concern that Iran may be preparing to launch cyber-attacks to disrupt or destroy vulnerable U.S. or allied critical infrastructure networks.[9] Thus, this study examines two case studies that highlight vulnerabilities in the U.S. energy and water/wastewater sectors and underscores the growing threats small and local utility companies face from Iranian state and non-state cyber adversaries. Additionally, this paper argues that Iran's increasing geopolitical confrontation with Israel and Saudi Arabia suggests Iran may leverage CEEW operations against Western countries as its offensive cyber capabilities improve.

Ultimately, this study forecasts that it is only a matter of time before Iran launches new phases of cyber operations, including CEEW operations and the targeting of vulnerable U.S. and allied computer networks, especially those associated with critical water and energy sectors. Unfortunately, the United States is woefully under-prepared.

Evolution of the Iranian Cyber Threat

Iran has a history of cyber retaliation against the United States. In 2010, cybersecurity researchers discovered a computer worm known as Stuxnet had infiltrated computers controlling nuclear centrifuges in Iran.[10] Allegedly a joint effort between the United States and Israel, the code targeted supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems connected to specific models of programmable logic controllers (PLCs) used for industrial machinery such as uranium enrichment centrifuges.[11] Thus, once the worm took control of the PLCs, it damaged the centrifuges by varying the speed at which they spun, interfering with Iran's nuclear program.[12] As a result, Iran's nuclear program was set back by at least two years due to Stuxnet rendering 2,000 centrifuges inoperable.[13] Following the discovery of the Stuxnet worm, the United States experienced an increase in the severity and duration of Iran-affiliated cyber-attacks.[14]

Iran began to expand significantly its offensive and defensive cyber capabilities following the Stuxnet attack. According to a 2012 testimony by Representative Patrick Meehan before the U.S. House of

Representatives, Tehran started to invest USD 1 billion in new cyber warfare technology in 2011.[15] Offensive and defensive cyber forces since then have resided within the government and military, while other entities like the Mabna Institute in Iran, composed of contractors and university affiliates, have operated more independently.[16] Iran's trajectory since 2010 shows how a medium-sized adversary, crippled by sanctions, willingly allocated limited resources to quickly become a cyber power.[17]

Today, Iranian organizations playing lead roles in cyber operations are either components of the IRGC or belong to varying components of Iran's elected government, such as the MOIS.[18] Subordinates of the former often adhere to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's orders and interests rather than other government officials.[19] On the other hand, Esmaeli Khatib leads MOIS, coordinating its intelligence mission with the priorities of the elected government.[20] The IRGC and MOIS have been reported to lead independent and cooperative operations against perceived Iranian national security threats. Reports by the United States Institute of Peace assess that the IRGC almost exclusively oversees Iran's offensive cyber activities.[21] The MOIS also conducts cyber espionage and ransomware attacks on Middle Eastern, European, and North American nations to support Iran's political goals.[22] These overlapping operations have complicated U.S. kinetic and cyber attribution by Iranian threat actors to specific organizations within the IRGC or MOIS. Throughout the 2010s, the United States had to aggregate multiple technical, organizational, and personal behavioral data sets for more precise attribution.[23]

Beyond government-directed cyber operations, scholars suggest the IRGC and MOIS have collaborated with different Iranian threat actor groups and proxies.[24] However, Tehran has instead characterized the individuals working in collaboration with Iran's cyber operations as "threat actors," "state-sponsored," or "state-aligned," as a deflection to the direct relationship between the attackers and Tehran.[25] The relationships between the two ranged from passive support to complete control, with some instances of Tehran orchestrating operations to meet its needs.

To further illustrate the extent of this collaboration, it is critical to understand the specific Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) actors that have been linked to Iran. The various "Kitten" APTs, which an April 2020 report by Insikt Group attributed to Iran, highlight the complexity of the Iranian threat actor network.[26] *Flying Kitten* gathered intelligence on foreign governments and corporations; *Magic Kitten* targeted domestic dissidents; *Domestic Kitten* targeted dissidents in Iran, the United States, and the United Kingdom; *Charming Kitten* used social networking platforms to reach various targets; *Cutting Kitten* produced website penetration tools; *Nemesis Kitten* conducted malicious network operations and ransomware campaigns; and *Imperial Kitten* targeted Israeli critical infrastructure.

In recent years, Iran's cyber strategy has become more emboldened, characterized by an increasingly provocative target selection and expanded geopolitical scope. In response to IRGC-inspired attacks against U.S. forces in Northern Iraq and personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, President Donald Trump authorized a U.S. military strike on January 3, 2020, that killed Soleimani.[27] Afterward, the United States issued repeated warnings against potential cyber-attacks from Iran. As anticipated, Iranian hackers of all skill levels accelerated social media disinformation operations,

website defacements, phishing attempts, and network probing.[28] Researchers from RAND assessed that given the scale of the cyber-attacks, Iran may no longer be reluctant to target U.S. and allied forces with wiper attacks, similar to Stuxnet, or look for points of entry into critical infrastructure.[29]

Iran's cyber warfare capabilities have not only grown more sophisticated but also more audacious, as evidenced by their increasing willingness to target a broader range of geopolitical entities. Since Hamas launched attacks on Israel in October 2023, Tehran-aligned actors have initiated a series of cyber-attacks. Their likely intent has been to support Hamas's cause and weaken Israel, its political allies, and business partners. Cyber attacks and IOs are likely to increase as the war continues.[30] Moreover, as of mid-November 2023, Iranian actors had expanded their geographic scope to attack Albania and Bahrain; the U.S. cyber-threat intelligence firm CrowdStrike believed that starting smaller and using cyber operations on regional adversaries could be a testing ground for attacks against future U.S. targets.[31]

Iran's Cyber-Attack Methods

Iran has conducted cyber operations to promote its national objectives, the most crucial being the stability and longevity of the Islamic Republic. To achieve such goals, Iran has focused on four primary methods: espionage campaigns, IOs, disruptive/destructive attacks, and mixed attacks (combining some or all methods).[32]

Espionage Campaigns and Influence Operations

So far, Iran has more often used IOs and espionage campaigns compared to disruptive/destructive attacks because the former offer a less time-consuming and resource-intensive way to gain maximum exposure to support Tehran's agenda.[33] Moreover, these methods may serve as a stepping stone to more aggressive operations.[34] Additionally, Microsoft found that cyber-enabled IOs went from one operation every month in 2021 to 11 in October 2023 alone.[35] As the number of IOs rose in the early days of the Israel-Hamas war, researchers observed that these campaigns shifted towards developing targets of interest for destructive cyber-attacks, such as data deletion, distributed denial of service, and ransomware.[36]

Disruptive/Destructive Attacks

Disruptive/destructive attacks have significantly disrupted the economy and potentially damaged the critical infrastructure of Iran's neighbors and the United States (e.g., Saudi Aramco in 2012 and denial-of-service attacks on U.S. banks from 2011 to 2013).[37] In December 2023, the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) released an advisory on Iran targeting critical infrastructure, such as transportation, water and wastewater systems, healthcare, and energy pipelines.[38] These attacks were disruptive rather than destructive, probably because Iran's threat actors lacked Industrial Control System (ICS) specific capabilities. However, the attacks demonstrated that Iran has standard tools to conduct attacks against infrastructure targets and wields a simple, opportunistic approach to information gathering.[39] The targets of these attacks are typically poorly defended small and local utility companies with limited resources to harden their assets.[40] The targeted systems have often not patched severe vulnerabilities listed in Microsoft Exchange.[41] A 2021 CPO Magazine report found that exploited critical infrastructure systems had known vulnerabilities dating back three years.[42] Luckily, as of late 2023, analysis suggests that Iran still lacked the ability to mount

sophisticated cyber-attacks (such as Stuxnet, the 2021 Colonial Pipeline attack, or Russian actions on Ukraine's power grid in 2015 and 2022).

Mixed Attacks

As highlighted by the Israel-Hamas war example, Iran has employed a combination of methods for cyber-enabled kinetic attacks on the United States and its allies. Disruptive/destructive cyber operations targeting electricity, water, and fuel infrastructure have reinforced Iran's geopolitical objectives by incorporating retaliatory messaging to intimidate Israel's citizens and international supporters and threaten the families of Israel Defense Forces soldiers.[43] Cyber espionage efforts such as phishing campaigns have gathered data and delivered malware to assist with disruptive or destructive cyber operations.[44] Likewise, the number of cyber-attack groups active in Israel rose from nine during the first week of the war to 14 during the second week.[45] Iran is unlikely to expend limited resources on destructive attacks but will maintain the capability to employ them later.[46]

Case Studies: Most Impacted Critical Infrastructure Sectors

Iran's simple, opportunistic cyber intrusions since 2020 have left threat intelligence firms wondering whether Iran has been simply collecting intelligence and gathering information on conflicts and preparing to launch cyber-attacks to disrupt or destroy vulnerable U.S. or allied networks.[47] So far, the November 2023 water sector cyber attack reigns as Iran's most successful cyber-attack against the United States. The following case studies hint at Iran's broader strategic agenda and capabilities to attack U.S. critical infrastructure. Furthermore, the case studies underscore the increasing threats small and local utility companies face from various Iranian state and non-state cyber adversaries.

Energy Sector

After identifying the Stuxnet worm, Iran re-engineered it to use in retaliation against the United States and its allies. The IRGC-affiliated cyberwarfare group called *Refined Kitten* leveraged Stuxnet to develop the Shamoon malware for multiple operations against Saudi Aramco, a Saudi Arabian state-owned petroleum and natural gas company, in 2012, 2018, and 2020.[48] In 2012, the malware wiped around 30,000 computers and halted operations of the company's main internal computer networks for 11 days.[49] This attack was Iran's first publicized destructive cyber operation.[50]

No significant attacks attributed to Iran have happened yet on U.S. energy companies. Although not attributed to Iran, the 2021 Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack exemplifies the impact cyber attacks can have on the U.S. energy sector. Colonial Pipeline controls nearly half of the gasoline, jet fuel, and diesel flowing along the East Coast. This attack caused the utility company to halt operations for five days, skyrocketing gasoline prices.[51] Iran can likely learn from the tactics, techniques, and procedures of this attack to wield a smaller, lower-level opportunistic one of their own. In 2023, Microsoft published a threat assessment on another IRGC-affiliated cyber warfare group, *Charming Kitten,* and its ability to target critical infrastructure, including energy companies.[52] The group's capabilities at that time had multiple attack chains and various tools to compromise infrastructures. *Charming Kitten*'s methodology involved using publicly disclosed code to gain initial access and persist in targeted networks without detection, conducting low-volume phishing

campaigns, and—in some cases—evading detection with customized tools.[53] This modus operandi and tradecraft are consistent with other IRGC-affiliated cyber actors.

Water and Wastewater Systems

From 2018 to 2022, Iran initiated a series of cyber-attacks targeting Israeli water facilities. One attack in 2020 hit small agricultural water facilities near Galilee and infrastructure in central Israel but failed to disrupt Israel's drinking water.[54] The attacks likely aimed to trigger a fail-safe, shutting down water pumps. Notably, in other attacks earlier that year, media reports claimed Iran may have intended to override networks to increase chlorine levels in water flowing to residential areas.[55] Had these efforts been successful, hundreds of people would have been at risk of getting sick, establishing a concerning new precedent for future cyber-attacks. It cannot conclusively be determined if the series of attacks on Israel's water systems served as a testing ground for Iran's future cyber-attacks.

Still, these attacks do hint at a broader strategic agenda for Iran. On November 25, 2023, the U.S. government attributed the cyber-attacks on the Municipal Water Authority of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, and nearly ten other small utilities nationwide to IRGC-affiliated cyber actor *Cyber Av3ngers*.[56] By using simple default passwords, attackers likely compromised the Internet-connected industrial control devices made by Israeli company Unitronics to display the message "Down with Israel."[57] The breach also resulted in a shutdown of the utility's automated water pump system, forcing the equipment to operate manually.[58] CISA concluded that none of the attacks affected operations or access to safe drinking water.[59] However, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's section chief of national security cyber operations warned that the access *Cyber Av3ngers* achieved could lead to deeper network access and cause "more profound cyber-physical effects" going forward.[60]

United States Policy, Legislation, and Recommendations

Since 2012, Tehran has demonstrated its intent to attack the United States and allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia through cyber means. In a hearing on the "Iranian Cyber Threat to the U.S. Homeland" in 2012, the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence stated that Washington must prevent Iran from becoming a more capable cyber power.[61] Yet, in 2018, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) emphasized that Washington still had not done enough to understand the Iranian cyber threat, strengthen U.S.-allied defense capabilities, and impose costs on Tehran for its malicious cyber activities.[62] In September 2023, the Department of Defense's Cyber Strategy stated that Iran "had not yet demonstrated the ability to conduct significant or sustained malicious cyber activity against the United States."[63] Likewise, in November 2023, the news outlet Politico released statements that multiple U.S. federal agencies "stressed that they ha[d] yet to see any intelligence suggesting that Iran is planning an imminent attack on U.S. critical infrastructure."[64] Weeks after this article was published, Iran launched its most successful cyber-attack against the United States by targeting the Municipal Water Authority in Pennsylvania. The 2012 House of Representatives hearing addressed the foreseen Iranian cyber threat; 12 years later, the United States remains unprepared to identify, deflect, and outright stop foreseen attacks.

The United States cannot underestimate Iran. As researchers from FDD recommend, the United States must assess Tehran's

motivation, opportunity, and capabilities to understand the evolving Iranian cyber threat.[65] A key concern is that Tehran's IOs often lead to destructive operations; these methods are a form of CEEW that weakens strategic relationships between the United States and its allies.[66]

Critical infrastructure is vital to U.S. citizen's livelihoods and the nation's economy. However, companies listed under the 16 critical infrastructure sectors have been slow to harden their assets; they place the blame on their complex web of interconnected devices to run operational systems. Given the high stakes, each sector's resilience requires enhanced collaboration among utility providers, industry-led associations, information-sharing bodies, and U.S. government agencies. Increased communication and awareness will help create best practices, guidance, and standards that raise baseline cybersecurity.[67]

Beyond hardening defenses at home, Washington must send prompt, clear signals to Iran that malicious cyberattacks are unacceptable. Indeed, in February 2024, the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control imposed sanctions on six officials of the IRGC-CEC in response to the targeting of critical infrastructure in the United States and other countries.[68] While this action was a necessary step, the attacks on the water facilities happened in November 2023. Responses to cyber-attacks need to be fast; in this case, three months was simply too long.[69]

Outlook and Conclusion

Iran's cyber threat posture will likely slowly but persistently grow in depth and complexity over the next 12 to 24 months. This anticipated growth is rooted in ongoing geopolitical tensions between Iran and its adversaries, notably Western nations and Israel. The persistence of the Israel-Hamas War only adds fuel to this fire, providing Iran with further motivation to enhance its offensive cyber capabilities.

The IRGC and MOIS's use of cyber personas will likely continue to provide cover for Iran's IOs and espionage campaigns to gather intelligence and prepare for disruptive attacks. The lack of direct connections between the IRGC's *Cyber Av3ngers* and its other cyber threat actors shows an ability to compartmentalize operational techniques, tools, and covers. Moreover, the diversity of cyber actors highlights the value Iran places in leveraging proxies and pro-regime groups for its geopolitical ends.

Iran's focus on targeting critical infrastructure sectors, evidenced by the recent advancements in attacks on the water/wastewater sector, signals a dangerous escalation in its cyber offensive. The attack on the Municipal Water Authority of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, ten miles from Beaver Valley Nuclear Power Station, significantly magnifies the threat to the United States. It also highlights foundational vulnerabilities within U.S. critical infrastructure and raises alarming questions about the potential ripple effects on other sectors.

Iran appears to have the necessary cyber capabilities to support its agenda. This study stresses the urgent need for Washington to evaluate Tehran's motivations, opportunities, and capabilities in cyber warfare. Furthermore, it urges enhanced collaboration among stakeholders to fortify critical infrastructure defenses and establish robust cybersecurity standards. If Washington does not quickly address the advancing threat of Iran's cyber capabilities, the United States can only hope that the fear

of an overwhelming U.S. response will deter Tehran from escalating the severity of its attacks on critical infrastructure.

About the Author: *Gabrielle Christello is a graduate student at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service, pursuing a Master of Arts in Security Studies with a focus on Technology and Security. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Intelligence Studies and a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity from Mercyhurst University. In Fall 2023, she interned as a Cyber and Technology Innovation Intern for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Previously, she was a Cyber Specialist at Federal Resources Corporation, consulting small to medium-sized businesses on data breaches and risk assessments. In 2021, she interned at Pfizer, monitoring threats and researching anti-pharma organizations.*

[1] Kim Zetter. "An Unprecedented Look at Stuxnet, the World's First Digital Weapon," *Wired*, November 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/11/countdown-to-zero-day-stuxnet/.
[2] *An Examination of the Iranian Regime's Threats to Homeland Security*, 118th Cong. (2023) (statement of Thomas S. Warrick, Atlantic Council Senior Fellow and Director), https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-10-18-HRG-Testimony.pdf.
[3] Maggie Miller. "U.S. Officials Hold their Breath for Iranian Cyberattacks," *Politico*, November 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/11/01/us-officials-iranian-cyberattacks-00124847.
[4] Andy Greenberg. "How Iran's Hackers Might Strike Back After Soleimani's Assassination," *Wired*, January 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/iran-soleimani-cyberattack-hackers/
[5] Clint Watts. "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel from chaotic start," Microsoft On the Issues, *Microsoft*, February 2024, https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/02/06/iran-accelerates-cyber-ops-against-israel/.
[6] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[7] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[8] Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 21, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf
[9] Ofir Rozmann, Chen Evgi, and Jonathan Leathery. "When Cats Fly: Suspected Iranian Threat Actor UNC1549 Targets Israeli and Middle East Aerospace and Defense Sectors," *Google Cloud*, February 2024, https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/suspected-iranian-unc1549-targets-israel-middle-east; Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[10] Kim Zetter, "An Unprecedented Look at Stuxnet, the World's First Digital Weapon."
[11] Paul W. Parfomak, *Pipeline Cybersecurity: Federal Policy*, CRS Report No. R42660 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42660.
[12] Josh Fruhlinger. "Stuxnet Explained: The First Known Cyberweapon," *CSO Online*, August 2022, https://www.csoonline.com/article/562691/stuxnet-explained-the-first-known-cyberweapon.html.
[13] Fruhlinger, "Stuxnet Explained."
[14] Fruhlinger, "Stuxnet Explained."
[15] *Iranian Cyber Threat to the U.S. Homeland*, 112th Cong. (2012) (statement of Patrick Meehan, U.S. Representative), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg77381/html/CHRG-112hhrg77381.htm.
[16] Catherine A. Theohary, *Iranian Offensive Cyber Attack Capabilities*, (CRS Report No. IF11406 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/IF11406.pdf; "Iranian intel cyber suite of malware uses open source tools," *U.S. Cyber Command*, January 2022, https://www.cybercom.mil/Media/News/Article/2897570/iranian-intel-cyber-suite-of-malware-uses-open-source-tools/.
[17] James Andrew Lewis. "Iran and Cyber Power," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-cyber-power.
[18] Lewis, "Iran and Cyber Power."
[19] Sanam Vakil. "Might the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Use the Iranian Protests to Supplant the Ruling Clerical Establishment?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2023/01/might-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-use-the-iranian-protests-to-supplant-the-ruling-clerical-establishment?lang=en&center=middle-east.
[20] Insikt Group. "Despite Infighting and Volatility, Iran Maintains Aggressive Cyber Operations Structure," *Recorded Future*, April 2020, https://www.recordedfuture.com/blog/iran-cyber-operations-structure.
[21] Connor Bradbury. "Profiles: Iran's Intelligence Agencies," *The Iran Primer*, April 2023, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/apr/05/profiles-iran%E2%80%99s-intelligence-agencies.
[22] Cyber National Mission Force Public Affairs, "Iranian intel cyber suite"; Theohary, *Iranian Offensive Cyber Attack Capabilities*; Lewis. "Iran and Cyber Power."
[23] Insikt Group. "Despite Infighting and Volatility."
[24] Collin Anderson and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran's Cyber Threat: Introduction - Iran's Cyber Threat: Espionage, Sabotage, and Revenge* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), 6-8, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Iran_Cyber_Final_Full_v2.pdf.
[25] Anderson and Sadjadpour, *Iran's Cyber Threat*.
[26] Insikt Group, "Despite Infighting and Volatility."
[27] Annie Fixler, "The Cyber Threat from Iran after the Death of Soleimani," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 2 (February 2020): 20-29, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/cyber-threat-iran-death-soleimani/.
[28] Fixler, "The Cyber Threat from Iran after the Death of Soleimani."

[29] Greenberg, "How Iran's Hackers Might Strike Back."
[30] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[31] Annie Fixler. "The Dangers of Iran's Cyber Ambitions," *FDD*, October 2022, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/10/28/the-dangers-of-irans-cyber-ambitions/.
[32] Insikt Group, "Despite Infighting and Volatility."
[33] AJ Vicens. "Microsoft says Iranian hackers combine influence ops with hacking for maximum impact," *Cyberscoop*, May 2023, https://cyberscoop.com/iranian-information-operations-hacking-microsoft-report/.
[34] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[35] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[36] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[37] Theohary, *Iranian Offensive Cyber Attack Capabilities*.
[38] "IRGC-Affiliated Cyber Actors Exploit PLCs in Multiple Sectors, Including U.S. Water and Wastewater Systems Facilities," *Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency*, December 2023, https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa23-335a.
[39] Fixler, "The Dangers of Iran's Cyber Ambitions."
[40] Orion Hindawi. "Small Utilities Must Master Cybersecurity," *Forbes*, October 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/tanium/2022/10/03/small-utilities-must-master-cybersecurity/.
[41] Fixler, "The Dangers of Iran's Cyber Ambitions."
[42] Alicia Hope. "US, UK, and Australia Agencies Issue Joint Cybersecurity Advisory on Iranian APT Groups Targeting Critical Infrastructure," *CPO Magazine*, November 2021, https://www.cpomagazine.com/cyber-security/us-uk-and-australian-agencies-issue-joint-cybersecurity-advisory-on-iranian-apt-groups-targeting-critical-infrastructure/.
[43] Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[44] Sandra Joyce and Shane Huntley. "Tool of First Resort: Israel-Hamas War in Cyber," *Google*, February 2024, https://blog.google/technology/safety-security/tool-of-first-resort-israel-hamas-war-in-cyber/
[45] Joyce and Huntley, "Tool of First Resort."
[46] Fixler, "The Dangers of Iran's Cyber Ambitions."
[47] Rozmann, Evgi, and Leathery, "When Cats Fly;" Watts, "Iran accelerates cyber ops against Israel."
[48] Christopher Bosse. "Stuxnet and Beyond: The Origins of SCADA and Vulnerabilities to Critical Infrastructure," *Homeland Security Today*, December 2020, https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/stuxnet-and-beyond-the-origins-of-scada-and-vulnerabilities-to-critical-infrastructure/.
[49] "Saudi Oil Producer's Computers Restored After Virus Attack," *New York Times*, August 26, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/technology/saudi-oil-producers-computers-restored-after-cyber-attack.html.
[50] "Saudi Oil Producer's Computers Resorted After Virtus Attack."
[51] Kimberly Wood. "Cybersecurity Policy Responses to the Colonial Pipeline Ransomware Attack," *Georgetown Environmental Law Review*, March 2023, https://www.law.georgetown.edu/environmental-law-review/blog/cybersecurity-policy-responses-to-the-colonial-pipeline-ransomware-attack/.
[52] "Nation-state threat actor Mint Sandstorm refines tradecraft to attack high-value targets," *Microsoft*, April 2023, https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/blog/2023/04/18/nation-state-threat-actor-mint-sandstorm-refines-tradecraft-to-attack-high-value-targets/.
[53] "Nation-state threat actor Mint Sandstorm refines tradecraft to attack high-value targets."
[54] Toi Staff. "Cyber attacks again hit Israel's water system, shutting agricultural pumps," *Times of Israel*, July 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/cyber-attacks-again-hit-israels-water-system-shutting-agricultural-pumps/.
[55] Staff, "Cyber attacks again hit Israel's water system."
[56] Christian Vazquez and AJ Vicens. "Pennsylvania water facility Hit by Iran-linked Hackers," *Cyberscoop*, November 2023, https://cyberscoop.com/pennsylvania-water-facility-hack-iran/.
[57] Vazquez and Vicens, "Pennsylvania water facility Hit by Iran-linked Hackers."
[58] Jonathan Greig. "Pennsylvania water authority hit with cyberattack allegedly tied to pro-Iran group," *The Record*, November 2023, https://therecord.media/water-authority-pennsylvania-cyberattack-pro-iran-group.
[59] "IRGC-Affiliated Cyber Actors Exploit PLCs in Multiple Sectors."
[60] Zachary Berman. "Iranian Hackers Compromise American Water Utilities," *FDD*, December 2023, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/12/06/iranian-hackers-compromise-american-water-utilities/.
[61] *Iranian Cyber Threat to the U.S. Homeland*.
[62] Fixler, "The Dangers of Iran's Cyber Ambitions."
[63] "DOD Releases 2023 Cyber Strategy Summary," *U.S. Department of Defense*, September 2023, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3523199/dod-releases-2023-cyber-strategy-summary/.

[64] Miller, "U.S. Officials Hold their Breath for Iranian Cyberattacks."
[65] Samantha Ravich and Annie Fixler. "The Attack on America's Future," *FDD*, October 28, 2022, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/10/28/the-attack-on-americas-future-cyber-enabled-economic-warfare/.
[66] Ravich and Fixler, "The Attach on America's Future."
[67] Sophia Fox-Sowell. "Where's the federal legislation for state water utility cybersecurity?", *Statescoop*, February 2024, https://statescoop.com/state-water-utility-cybersecurity-federal-legislation/.
[68] Greig, "US Sanctions Iranian Military Hackers."
[69] Fox-Sowell, "Where's the federal legislation for state water utility cybersecurity?"

Constructive Competition: A Strategic Framework for U.S. Engagement and Policy Alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative

Frank Hoffman and Ian Jones

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while commonly depicted in American policy literature as China's strategic ploy for global dominance, warrants a reevaluation away from the U.S. security perspective that transcends the conventional adversarial narrative. This paper posits that the prevailing discourse, which frames the BRI as a geopolitical maneuver with an outsized focus on its long-term adverse effects, is counterproductive to formulating effective U.S. responses. Instead, this paper advocates for an analysis grounded in the tangible benefits realized by recipient countries, such as infrastructure development and economic upliftment, which hold more significance for local stakeholders than the abstract notion of "debt trap" diplomacy. By examining the BRI's developmental outcomes over the past decade, this study juxtaposes the initiative's achievements against its initial 2013 objectives, offering a balanced appraisal of its impact on regional prosperity. The findings underscore the United States' need to identify and prioritize areas where the BRI's success stories can be constructively engaged with or strategically countered. The paper closes with policy recommendations that enable the United States to advance its regional security interests by fostering alternative pathways for development and cooperation in Asia, thereby reframing the BRI narrative within a context of constructive competition.

Introduction

Introduced by President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping in 2013, shortly after assuming leadership, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands as Xi's principal foreign and economic policy agenda. The BRI is an ambitious endeavor initially designed to link China with Central Asia, but it swiftly evolved to encompass South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe through a land-based "Silk Road Economic Belt." Simultaneously, the sea-based "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" was conceived to forge connections between China and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

In a September 2013 address at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, Xi underscored China's millennia-long history of engagement, advocating for regional economic development strategies, enhanced road connectivity, and transportation networks spanning East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia to bolster and facilitate trade. This vision laid the groundwork for the Silk Road Economic Belt.[1] Subsequently, in October 2013, during a speech before the Indonesian Parliament, Xi articulated plans for the Maritime Silk Road, calling for strengthened maritime cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, expanded collaboration on security matters and regional stability, and heightened "friendly exchanges."[2] The goal of the BRI, China asserts, is to foster win-win cooperation that promotes connectivity, development, and mutually advantageous partnerships between Beijing and its BRI partners.[3]

Broadly speaking, the BRI represents a foundational economic development strategy aimed at enhancing trade and investment while cultivating ties between China and other emerging economies globally. Xi's expansive vision has spurred

substantial investments in traditional infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, power plants, and telecommunication networks, alongside ventures in non-traditional infrastructure such as information technologies and e-commerce platforms. Since its establishment in 2013, the BRI's scope has consistently broadened, shaping Asia's economic and diplomatic landscapes over the past decade. According to the Green Finance and Development Center of China's Fudan University, the number of countries that have joined the BRI by signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) ranges between 146 and 151 countries – some nations have not publicly confirmed their MOU signings or have even denied them. Additionally, certain countries may have allowed their MOUs to lapse after the initial five-year duration. Consequently, there is some uncertainty regarding the precise count of BRI member nations. [4] Out of the approximately 150 member countries, this paper focuses on South, Southeast, and Central Asian countries, which have been the most involved with BRI over time.[5]

The BRI is often depicted as a geostrategic instrument of the PRC within U.S. security policy circles, with a common narrative framing the initiative as "debt trap diplomacy." This paper contends that such portrayals may overshadow the BRI's developmental successes, which are of primary concern to its beneficiaries.[6] While the BRI's limitations and adverse effects on participating nations are widely recognized and frequently discussed, this analysis focuses on quantifying the benefits BRI participating nations accrue. To the United States, the BRI might represent a debt snare or a vector for Chinese soft power influence; however, to local stakeholders, it may signify tangible progress—be it a new road replacing an impassable path or the introduction of electricity to a previously unlit area.

To effectively propose alternative development programs, the United States must understand the BRI's influence on Asian development, not to replicate it but to address the gaps it leaves. Existing Western responses, such as the Blue Dot Network, while a valuable multilateral initiative, primarily focus on certifying or backstopping projects, which differ from the BRI as they do not provide funding or oversee construction projects, and its decision-making process involves a consortium of primarily Western nations.[7] In contrast, the U.S. solution we envision is tailored to regional needs and backed by stakeholders within the communities it aims to serve. This paper's examination of the BRI shifts away from the dominant adversarial perspective, instead highlighting the BRI's economic and developmental value. The aim is to fill the current gap in security studies literature, which lacks an impartial, macro-level economic and developmental evaluation of the BRI. Through this analysis, the study assesses the BRI's role in enhancing regional prosperity and identifies avenues for the United States to compete with the BRI by formulating precise strategic countermeasures focused on the project's beneficial outcomes.

The paper concludes with policy recommendations that enable the United States to advance its regional security and soft power interests by promoting alternative avenues for development and cooperation in Asia. The recommendations take into account the tangible benefits perceived by regional stakeholders, thereby redefining the BRI narrative towards a paradigm of competition. Ultimately, this work seeks to answer the question: After a decade of the BRI, how have its contributions to infrastructure and economic development

positively influenced the landscape of Asia, and what implications does this hold for U.S. policy and competition in the region?

The BRI's Stated Goals

The BRI lacks central governing authority and has yet to be officially institutionalized into a national plan or strategy. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has outlined an objective to "promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; encouraging the countries along the Belt and Road to achieve economic policy coordination and carry out broader and more in-depth regional cooperation of higher standards; and jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all."[8] This objective was articulated in a paper jointly released by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, and National Development and Reform Commission titled "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road." Critical to our examination of the BRI, the paper introduced five cooperation priorities, later referred to as the "five linkages": (1) policy coordination, (2) facilities connectivity, (3) unimpeded trade, (4) financial integration, and (5) people-to-people bonds.[9]

First, in the "Vision and Actions" paper, the PRC defines *policy coordination* as intergovernmental cooperation facilitated by a "multi-level macro policy exchange and communication mechanism."[10] This coordination entails BRI countries aligning their economic development strategies, devising plans for regional cooperation, negotiating cooperation-related issues, and providing support for the implementation of large-scale projects.

Second, *facilities connectivity*, as outlined in the same document, emphasizes the construction and enhancement of an infrastructure network that links all subregions of Asia and connects Asia with Europe and Africa. This aspect entails the construction of transportation, communication, and energy infrastructure, encompassing the majority of BRI's large-scale projects.

Third, *unimpeded trade*, as its name implies, aims to eliminate trade and investment barriers and improve trade facilitation among BRI countries. This goal involves cooperation across various fields and emerging industries, as well as the establishment of industrial parks and economic cooperation initiatives.[11]

Fourth, *financial integration* seeks to establish a mutual credit information system and promote the internationalization of currencies, although the precise wording of this objective may require further refinement.

Finally, *people-to-people bonds* is a somewhat abstract metric defined by China as enhancing "the spirit of friendly cooperation" through extensive cultural and academic exchanges, personnel exchanges and cooperation, media collaboration, youth and women exchanges, and volunteer services.

The "five linkages" goals implicitly aim to foster deep regional integration centered around China, providing an "alternative development path" to the current U.S.-led international order.[12] Additionally, the BRI serves additional PRC goals beyond the stated linkages, including expanding the global reach of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and exporting China's surplus production capacity, but we do not factor them into our assessment. It also aims to accelerate the internationalization of the

renminbi (RMB), uphold regional stability, and enhance China's energy security.[13] Critics of the BRI have alleged that China employs predatory practices to acquire assets, while others have accused China of utilizing debt-trap diplomacy and "predatory economics" to render countries susceptible to Chinese influence. However, the PRC contends that the BRI serves as a critical rising tide to lift areas within middle China and Central Asia out of poverty.[14] While we acknowledge the dueling narratives and framings surrounding the intent of the BRI, explorations of these ambitions have been widely covered in countless works, and relitigating them herein would not significantly advance the literature surrounding the BRI. Rather, this work will primarily focus on analyzing the quantifiable successes, failures, and impact that a decade of the BRI has had upon Asia through the lens of the "five linkages."

Assessing the Belt and Road's Impact

While the five linkages offer some insight into China's initial objectives for the BRI, the practical details remain scarce. At present, no macro-level framework exists for assessing the overall impact of the BRI. The five linkages expressed by the Chinese government provide vague policy objectives but do not provide concrete steps, metrics, or goals that the Chinese government wishes to achieve.

Western analysis of the BRI tends to focus on the geopolitical implications of the entire BRI or the impact of individual projects within the BRI instead of holistically examining the BRI's successes and failures. To address this gap in analysis, we have selected several indicators for each linkage, as outlined in Table 1 in the appendix. Although not exhaustive, each indicator has been chosen to evaluate whether China has broadly achieved its specified goals for each of the five linkages.

Importantly, the metrics selected for this analysis are based on readily observable indicators and data. Whenever possible, data was sourced from international bodies and non-governmental organizations recognized by both China and many of the BRI's most vocal critics, such as the United States and India. It is important to note that some of the stated goals of the BRI, such as *policy coordination* and p*eople-to-people bonds*, inherently lend themselves to qualitative rather than quantitative assessment. While a degree of subjectivity is inevitable when evaluating qualitative data, this work endeavors to maintain its mission of objective evaluation by clearly delineating the introduction of subjective assessment and explaining the rationale behind its inclusion.

Having established a comprehensive framework for assessing the initiative's successes and failures along specific and objective evaluation metrics and contextual considerations of the BRI, the forthcoming section will examine each linkage and provide a delineation of the project's accomplishments before moving on to an impact analysis drawing upon both quantitative indicators and qualitative assessments.

Policy Coordination

The aim of policy coordination, as outlined by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), is to "seek common ground and establish communication mechanisms among governments."[15] The NDRC highlights what they perceive as successes in policy coordination, including various unspecified MOUs with BRI countries, mutual visa exemptions or visa-on-arrival systems, and the implementation of various unspecified

BRI mechanisms and institutions by BRI countries and international organizations.[16] Given the somewhat nebulous definition of policy coordination, we attempted to disaggregate this linkage into quantitative and qualitative components: "basis for cooperation" measured the number of high-level exchanges and MOUs signed between China and other BRI countries, while "cooperation achievements" examined whether these exchanges and MOUs resulted in tangible cooperative policies.

"Visions and Actions" specifically highlights MOUs as the designated mechanism for enrolling states into the BRI, symbolizing a mutual willingness and political interest from both parties to engage in BRI cooperation without necessitating a guarantee of economic collaboration.[17] According to estimates from Fudan University's Green Finance and Development Center, as of December 2023, 151 countries have signed MOUs to join the BRI.[18] The peak year for MOU signings was 2016, with 63 countries signing MOUs with China. China's BRI Portal reports that China has entered into over 200 cooperation documents related to the BRI with 152 countries and 32 international organizations, although the specific nature of these "cooperation documents' remains unclear. Notably, China has signed MOUs with six countries in Southeast Asia, six countries in South Asia, six countries in Central Asia, and 24 countries in East Asia.[19] In addition to MOUs, China has also revamped existing cooperation mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Plus China, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation, and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) to bolster communication among BRI countries and attract further participation in the initiative.[20]

China has expanded the scope of its policy coordination efforts through engagement with international organizations. Notably, 193 UN member nations agreed to incorporate the Belt and Road Initiative into a resolution passed at the 71st UN General Assembly in November 2017.[21] Additionally, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2344 in March 2017, which called for strengthening "the process of regional economic cooperation" via the BRI.[22] China further deepened its cooperation by signing a MOU with the World Health Organization in January 2017 to enhance health cooperation. Subsequently, in August of the same year, China hosted a forum attended by senior health officials from 30 countries and representatives from international health organizations. This forum adopted a communique outlining efforts to strengthen health cooperation under the BRI.[23] Moreover, China played a facilitating role in concluding negotiations within the World Trade Organization (WTO) on the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement, aimed at promoting a unified investment management system to encourage BRI investment.[24] High-level exchanges have also intensified since the inception of the BRI in 2013. However, while the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017 boasted 30 heads of state or government in attendance for high-level meetings and 37 heads of state or government at the second Belt and Road Forum in 2019, there was a drop to 23 for the third Belt and Road Forum in 2023.[25]

Research supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China revealed that as of 2021, there were 1,143 instances of "political relations" between China and BRI countries, as sourced from China's Ministry

of Foreign Affairs.[26] This research further indicated that the BRI has led to a significant enhancement in China's bilateral political relations and that BRI mechanisms have incentivized member countries to foster a conducive political environment through economic cooperation.[27]

In terms of the effectiveness of policy coordination, China has attributed the signing of ancillary agreements under the BRI to being a direct result of the BRI's foundational MOUs. Examples of subsequent agreements can be seen in accords made under the auspices of the Silk Road Maritime Association involving "more than 300 well-known Chinese and international shipping companies, port enterprises, and think tanks." Additionally, there are agreements on industrial capacity cooperation with over 40 countries, currency swap agreements with 20 countries, science and technology cooperation agreements with more than 80 countries, and the establishment of numerous industrial parks.[28] China has further entered into e-commerce cooperation with 30 countries and signed MOUs with 18 countries on closer digital economy investments. These agreements accompany MOUs with 17 additional countries in constructing the Digital Silk Road.[29] As part of the Digital Silk Road infrastructure agreement, China supplies 11.4% of undersea cables as of 2019 and is expected to reach 20% between 2025 and 2030.[30] E-commerce has also increased by 92.7% year on year in the first quarter of 2022, according to officials at China's Ministry of Commerce.[31] China has further claimed successful coordination with flagship Asian projects such as Kazakhstan's Bright Road economic policy, Turkmenistan's Silk Road revival strategy, Mongolia's Steppe Road plan, Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum initiative, the Philippines' Build Better More program, and Vietnam's Two Corridors and One Economic Circle plan.[32] Notably, policy coordination efforts have significantly increased air connectivity with BRI countries, with the Civil Aviation Administration of China proposing a "proactive, flexible aviation strategy."[33] Between 2015 and 2017, direct-air routes connected provincial regions in China to 43 BRI countries, a figure that rose to 98 countries by the end of 2022 and further increased to 104 countries by 2023, accounting for 60% of China's total international flights.[34] The BRI concept of "policy coordination has also occurred in the financial sector – 13 Chinese-funded banks have established offices in 50 BRI partner countries.[35] Policy coordination has likewise led to concrete successes in institutional guarantees of cross-border investment and financing channels and the establishment of the Silk Road Fund and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.[36]

China has also leveraged MOUs to assert leadership by introducing technical standards associated with the BRI. Notably, China has expanded its participation in technical committees and subcommittees within the International Organization of Standardization from 465 in 2005 to 668 in 2021.[37] China frequently incorporates terms in BRI MOUs, calling for the mutual recognition of standards and integrating technical standards into specific BRI projects. However, the actual impact of the standardization language within the MOUs remains a subject of debate.[38] Additionally, China has reported signing 107 standardization documents with 65 countries as of June 2023, underscoring its efforts to shape international technical standards in alignment with the BRI objectives.[39] While China has not had major success in shaping international standards, there are potential spillover effects that could position China to have greater success in the future, such as

the diffusion and implementation of Chinese standards via on-the-ground BRI projects.

Facilities Connectivity

Facilities connectivity within the BRI endeavors to finance infrastructure projects to link China with BRI countries via land, air, and sea routes. Beyond transportation infrastructure, facilities connectivity also targets the development of communication and energy infrastructure while striving to enhance international customs clearance processes for goods transported by land and sea. Our indicators for assessing facilities connectivity primarily focus on transportation and energy infrastructure. Specifically, we examine the number of completed projects, the expansion of transportation connectivity, and the augmentation of energy transmission capacity between China and BRI countries. These metrics provide insights into the tangible progress and impact of facilities' connectivity initiatives within the BRI framework.

In evaluating BRI's transportation infrastructure, our focus primarily centers on projects that construct airports, bridges, highways, roads, ports, and railways that connect China to other BRI countries. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a British think tank, monitored 298 BRI projects in Southeast Asia (SEA), South Asia, Central Asia, and the South Pacific between 2013 and 2021. SEA accounted for the majority of these projects, with 131 in total, while South Asia, Central Asia, and the South Pacific received 91, 43, and 33 projects, respectively.[40]

A closer examination of SEA projects between 2013 and 2016 reveals a predominant emphasis on transportation and energy infrastructure, before diversifying. Of the 131 SEA projects, 42 were specifically dedicated to transportation infrastructure, reaching a peak in 2015.[41] China's primary objective in SEA BRI transportation infrastructure is to reduce reliance on maritime routes by expanding regional rail networks. As of 2018, six of the top ten largest BRI projects in SEA were railway-related, including the Kuala Lumpur–Kota Bharu Rail, Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima High-Speed Railway, and the Preah Vihear–Kaoh Kong Railway.[42] Despite China's considerable success in expanding rail networks, much of China's imports and exports still depend on maritime shipping. However, trade between China and SEA has more than doubled in the decade since the launch of the BRI. The World Bank Group estimates that the aggregate impact of BRI transportation infrastructure projects in SEA will reduce shipping time by an estimated 3-5% and increase total exports from BRI countries by an estimated 3.8 percent.[43] Of the 91 South Asian projects, transportation infrastructure constituted 34 of them. Pakistan received 52 projects, the largest number of BRI projects, while Nepal received 19.[44] The rest of the countries in the region received a cumulative 20.

Transportation infrastructure projects in South Asia have geographic, security, and political challenges. BRI projects in South Asia peaked in 2017 before slowing due to worsening economies in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Maldives.[45] Additionally, the harsh geography of South Asia, particularly within Pakistan's Himalayan interior, creates economic disincentives to construct railways in these countries, as the cost of transporting via this infrastructure would exceed the cost of maritime shipping. The Trans-Himalayan railway project in Nepal has been on hold since 2014 due, in combination, to a lack of bureaucratic capacity and technical expertise, delays in conducting a feasibility study, and disagreements over funding mechanisms.[46] Infrastructure projects in Pakistan further suffer from terrorist attacks

on the Chinese personnel working on them. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) includes "insecure" regions of Pakistan, and extremists have targeted Chinese nationals. These attacks include incidents in 2017, in which the Islamic State claimed it had killed two Chinese nationals, and in 2018 when gunmen fired on Chinese nationals working in Karachi.[47] Annual trends show a steady rise in terrorism-related deaths, incidents, and suicide attacks in Pakistan. Although not all of these attacks directly target Chinese nationals or Chinese interests, they do represent increasing instability in the region.[48]

Of the 43 Central Asian projects, eight were related to transportation infrastructure. Initial BRI investments into Central Asia focused almost exclusively on energy infrastructure until 2017, when BRI investment diversified to include roads and highways. Chinese infrastructure building in Central Asia has increased rail traffic between Europe and Asia, increasing the annual number of China-Europe freight trains by 80% from the first quarter of 2021 to the same period in 2022. IISS forecasts that further investment into Central Asian rail networks in Europe will likely decrease due to political developments in Europe, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which precipitated a 34% drop in China-EU freight volume via the Northern Corridor in 2022.[49] The return of ocean freight rates to pre-COVID pandemic rates and the return in reliability of ocean shipping schedules will likewise further decrease investment.[50]

Investing in energy projects overseas has long been a priority for China, predating the BRI. China places significant emphasis on energy security and prefers to secure its energy needs through bilateral agreements rather than relying solely on market prices. From 1991 to 2013, China established four energy transit channels to facilitate maritime trade of oil and natural gas through eastern ports, import Russian oil and gas via a northeast channel, import Central Asian oil and gas via a northwest channel, and import gas through Myanmar via a south channel.[51] The BRI's objective of enhancing energy connectivity builds upon these established routes.[52] Countries along the BRI route possess over 50% of the remaining proven crude oil reserves and more than 70% of natural gas reserves.[53] Chinese total global investment in BRI energy projects between 2013 and 2022 amounted to US$396.4 billion, peaking in 2016 and representing approximately 40% of total BRI economic engagement.[54] Breaking down the investment by region, 32% of BRI investment in Southeast Asia was allocated to energy projects, totaling US$68.5 billion.[55] West and East Asia received USD 83.9 billion in BRI energy investment, accounting for a 59.1% share of their total BRI investments.[56] The Observer Research Foundation defines West and East Asia as the following countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, China, Mongolia, and Russia.

Similarly, South Asia received US$51.06 billion in BRI energy investment, constituting 55.8% of their total BRI investments.[57] While investments in oil, coal, and natural gas-related energy projects dominate, investments in green energy projects are gradually gaining parity. The first six months of 2023 witnessed a significant shift towards green energy investments, with 41% of energy investment allocated to solar and wind projects and an additional 14% directed towards hydropower.[58]

China's investments in energy infrastructure have effectively established a network of oil pipelines through initiatives such as the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic

Corridor, CPEC, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.[59] Xi has personally advocated for further expansions to several of these pipeline networks.[60] However, China has encountered challenges in building natural gas pipelines from Central Asia, with the "Line D" project stalled due to political negotiations and technical complexities.[61] In Southeast Asia, the China-Myanmar natural gas pipeline began operations in 2013 but has fallen short of its intended capacity.[62] Similarly, many of the BRI coal projects have faced setbacks, with over US$65 billion in investment for coal plants either canceled or put on hold.[63] Notably, Xi pledged during a pre-recorded video to the UN General Assembly in September 2021 that China "will not build new coal-fired power plants abroad."[64]

In contrast, BRI investments in renewable energy sources have shown greater success, with approximately 320 overseas hydropower projects globally[65] and steady increases in China's solar and wind power capacity.[66] Wood Mackenzie, a renewable energy consulting firm, estimates that global BRI overseas energy projects have installed 128 gigawatts of power over the past decade, with an additional 80 gigawatts of projects either under construction or at the planning stage.[67] Additionally, China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca for gas and oil imports has decreased from 85% in 2012 to approximately 70% in 2021, partly due to BRI pipelines connecting Myanmar and China, which transport 420,000 barrels per day.[68] China aims to reduce this dependency further with another pipeline from western China to Gwadar, Pakistan, which is expected to be completed between 2025 and 2030.[69] However, logistical and cost challenges may pose obstacles to the successful completion of this pipeline.[70]

Unimpeded Trade

China's NDRC defines unimpeded trade within the BRI as aiming to offer the "greatest convenience" for global trade. This entails the removal of trade and investment barriers, accelerating the customs clearance process, and establishing "exhibition platforms" for information exchanges and free-trade zones among BRI countries.[71] Our assessment of unimpeded trade scrutinized both the overall trade environment and changes in trade volume between countries. Additionally, we examined how China utilized unimpeded trade to export its excess capacity through BRI projects and the deployment of Chinese labor overseas. These were used to inform our assessment of the effectiveness of the "unimpeded trade" initiatives within the BRI framework and their impact on facilitating trade and investment among participating nations as well as Asia at large.

At a macro level, China has inked Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with 26 countries and regional blocs, with an additional ten under negotiation and eight more under consideration. Notable FTAs include agreements with Cambodia, Maldives, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macao, and a separate ASEAN[72] agreement.[73] Ongoing FTA negotiations in Asia involve a phase two South Korean agreement, Sri Lanka, and a joint FTA with Japan-South Korea. Moreover, China is a signatory to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), comprising 15 Asia-Pacific nations.[74] Studies indicate that FTAs can significantly reduce investment barriers between countries.[75] In this vein, China has concluded 107 bilateral investment agreements (BIL). BILs between China and other Asian nations, as of March 2022, encompass Bahrain, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, North

Korea, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.[76] Independent research suggests that FTAs, albeit with some variability based on in-country economic and political factors, contribute to the success of BRI projects and bolster reciprocal trade ties between China and BRI countries.[77]

Between 2012 and 2022, the cumulative value of imports and exports between China and all BRI countries surged to US$19.1 trillion, with an average annual growth rate of 6.5 percent. During this period, cumulative investment between China and BRI countries amounted to US$380 billion. Notably, the value of newly signed construction contracts with BRI countries reached US$2 trillion, with Chinese contractors achieving a turnover of US$1.3 trillion. In 2022 alone, the value of imports and exports between China and its partner countries totaled approximately US$2.9 trillion, constituting 45.4% of China's total foreign trade for the same period. This marks a notable increase from 39.2% in 2013.[78]

Furthermore, the total value of imports and exports facilitated by Chinese private enterprises with BRI countries surpassed US$1.5 trillion, accounting for 53.7% of the total trade between China and these nations over the same timeframe.[79] Recent data from China's State Council indicates a continued uptrend in Chinese trade with BRI countries in 2023, with total trade volume reaching US$2.7 trillion. This volume represented 46.6% of China's total foreign trade, marking a 1.2% increase from the previous year.[80]

SEA has witnessed substantial investment inflows since the inception of the BRI in 2013. SEA has seen the highest investment overall, aside from brief spikes observed in investment in the Middle East during 2016-2018 and 2022.[81] Notably, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Myanmar rank among the top ten countries most closely connected to China through trade.[82] ASEAN imports from China surged by 70% between 2017 and 2022, totaling US$432 billion, while ASEAN's exports to China also experienced a robust growth of over 55% during the same period. ASEAN emerged as China's largest trading partner in 2020, contributing to 11.4% of China's total trade volume in 2022.[83] However, ASEAN countries experienced a notable decline in trade volume in 2023, attributed to China's sluggish economic recovery post-COVID and overall tepid trade growth. Notably, energy exports witnessed a 20% increase during this period.[84] In response, China has pledged to bolster its purchases from ASEAN nations to stimulate economic activity and reinforce trade relations.[85]

In South Asia, bilateral trade has grown substantially, soaring from US$96.25 billion in 2013 to US$187.55 billion in 2021. Significantly, the proportion of China's exports to South Asia relative to its total exports surged from 1.89% in 2004 to 4.74% in 2018, marking a significant uptrend. Conversely, the proportion of China's imports from South Asia declined over the same period. China's total trade value with South Asia, compared to its overall trade, also saw a notable increase from 1.7% to 3.03% between 2004 and 2018, notably accentuating this trend following the launch of the BRI in 2013. It is important to highlight that although India stands as China's largest trade partner in South Asia and does receive Chinese investment, it is not formally a part of the BRI framework.[86]

In a decade of the BRI, the trade dynamics between Central Asia and China have undergone remarkable expansion. From a

modest turnover of US$500 million in 1991, the total trade volume surged to US$30 billion by 2016, marking significant growth.[87] This figure has since soared to a record high of US$70.2 billion as of 2022.[88] Trade momentum has persisted into 2023, with robust growth observed in trade volume between China and key Central Asian partners. Notably, trade between China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan surged by 26.8% in the first six months of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan also experienced notable increases in trade turnover, with growth rates of 12.3%, 27.6%, and 84.7%, respectively.[89] Among these nations, Kazakhstan emerges as China's largest trade partner in Central Asia, boasting a total trade turnover of US$18.25 billion.[90] Furthermore, the cumulative Chinese investments in Central Asia have surpassed US$53 billion as of 2023, with an additional infusion of US$3.7 billion following the China-Central Asia Summit held in Xi'an in May 2023.[91]

Financial Integration

China's main goals for financial integration are to build a currency stability system, an investment and financing system, and a credit information system in Asia. China further expressed a desire to cooperate on bilateral financial regulations and a risk management system. On a macro level, China has established multilateral financial cooperation organizations like the China-Central and Eastern Europe Interbank Consortium, the China-Arab Countries Interbank Association, the China-ASEAN Interbank Association, the ASEAN Plus Three Interbank Cooperation mechanism, China-Africa Interbank Association, and the Association of China-LAC Development Financial Institutions. Additionally, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China has formulated the Belt and Road Interbank Regular Cooperation (BRBR) mechanism.[92] China has also established intergovernmental, multilateral institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which prioritizes investments into BRI projects, and the New Development Bank, established by BRICS states to serve as a financial safety net for developing countries.[93] Chinese banks have established 145 offices in 50 BRI countries as of June 2023. Within SEA, Singapore and Vietnam both have branches of China's five major banks, with other SEA countries having one each.[94] As of now, Chinese banks are not widespread throughout South and Central Asia, but the director of the finance research institute at the People's Bank of China has called for expanded bank branches along the BRI.[95] BRI countries have further pushed financial integration by enabling UnionPay services – as of June 2023, 131 BRI countries opened UnionPay services, and 74 BRI countries had opened UnionPay mobile payment services.[96]

China has engaged in cooperation for financial regulations and supervision. By the end of 2016, the People's Bank of China signed MOUs with 42 overseas anti-money laundering organizations. The China Banking Regulatory Commission has signed MOUs or exchange notes with 29 BRI countries on bilateral regulation and supervision with financial authorities. The China Securities Regulatory Commission has signed 64 MOUs with 59 countries regarding securities regulation. The China Insurance Regulatory Commission has also enhanced its connection with the International Association of Insurance Supervisors to cooperate on insurance regulation between BRI countries.[97] China has additionally signed several MOUs with international finance institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to strengthen "third-party market cooperation in investment." According to

China's State Council, these MOUs and agreements have all been designed to coordinate regional regulatory mechanisms, promote efficient allocation of funds, enhance risk control, and create more ideal investment conditions for financial institutions.[98]

In terms of currency exchanges, China had signed bilateral currency swap agreements with the central banks or other currency authorities of 35 countries, 21 of which are BRI countries, by August 2016. Within Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan's central bank signed a bilateral currency settlement on border trade. China had established 18 more RMB clearing banks by June 2016, seven of which were located in BRI countries.[99] The RMB has further been gaining prominence for use in cross-border transactions. Reuters reported that the RMB overtook the USD as the most widely used currency for cross-border transactions in March 2023. Reuters calculated that cross-border transactions in RMB rose to a value of US$549.9 billion, representing 48.4% of transactions.[100] SEA has shown a growing interest in reducing the usage of USD in favor of RMB. In June 2022, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) announced a new emergency liquidity arrangement that can be funded in RMB.[101] Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia's central banks are participating in the arrangement.[102] Those three central banks each also renewed agreements with PBOC that are "implicitly aimed at reducing dollar usage in cross-border payments."[103] Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar have all also announced efforts to reduce dollar usage in favor of the RMB or local currency.[104] Though not the only factor in this push for reduced dollar usage, BRI has increased the prominence of the RMB in BRI regions due to its usage in infrastructure projects. BRI has additionally caused RMB-denominated bond markets to emerge, simplifying the process of obtaining funding in RMB and facilitating access to Chinese currency and financial institutions.[105] Dollars still dominate East and Southeast Asian exports – approximately 80% of their exports were invoiced in dollars in 2019.[106] This is, however, a drop from roughly 90% in the early 2000s through mid-2010s.[107]

People-to-People Bonds

China's objective with people-to-people bonds under BRI is to "build a common understanding" among participating countries. China's NDRC emphasizes cooperation in various domains such as tourism, science, culture, education, health, and poverty alleviation among BRI nations. Recognizing the inherent difficulty in objectively measuring a concept as subjective as "people-to-people" bonds, our assessment prioritized tangible aspects such as tourism, scientific collaboration, and educational exchanges over abstract notions such as "common understanding."[108] Specifically, we analyzed quantifiable indicators such as tourism activities, cultural exchanges, the influx of tourists, the number of exchange students, and scientific cooperation agreements between China and other BRI countries. In taking this approach, we are confident that this work can concretely evaluate the effectiveness of "people-to-people bonds" within the BRI framework.

The "Vision and Actions" document emphasizes the significance of both cultural exchanges and tourism in garnering public support for the BRI. In alignment with this objective, China has entered into tourism and cultural cooperation agreements with 144 BRI countries and established 20 tourism offices in 18 nations, with eight being BRI participants.[109] Additionally, China has expanded its cultural exchange mechanisms, which include institutions such as the Silk Road International League of

Theaters, the Silk Road International Museum Alliance, the Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals, the Silk Road International Library Alliance, and the Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries. These entities boast a combined membership of 562, encompassing 326 cultural institutions from 72 BRI countries.[110] China also inaugurated the Cultural Silk Road initiative, facilitating cultural programs and exchanges such as Lunar New Year celebrations and the Nihao China tourism promotion program. China highlights the reciprocity of these cultural exchanges, encompassing exhibitions, film festivals, art festivals, book fairs, music festivals, and collaborative efforts in radio, film, and television program translation and exchange. As of June 2023, China has established 46 cultural centers in 44 countries, including 32 BRI participant nations.[111]

Since the inception of BRI, China has witnessed a notable uptick in outbound tourism, with outbound tourists increasing by 77% from 15.49 million in 2013 to 27.41 million in 2017.[112] Data from The World Bank indicates a substantial rise in international departures for tourism from China, increasing from 98 million in 2013 to 154 million in 2019. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a significant decline in outbound tourism, with international departures plummeting to 20 million in 2020.[113] The pandemic, coupled with domestic issues and travel restrictions, has prompted a shift in Chinese tourist preferences toward domestic travel.[114] While it remains uncertain when or if this trend will reverse, analyses from travel industry sources suggest that Chinese international flight capacity and the number of international trips remain far below pre-pandemic levels.[115] Nonetheless, the BRI has notably boosted the influx of Chinese tourists to BRI countries, attributed to measures such as visa exemptions, reduced tourism taxes, collaborative events like "tourism years," enhanced infrastructure connectivity, and the establishment of tourism cooperation mechanisms like the Silk Road Tourism Promotion Union, the Maritime Silk Road Tourism Promotion Alliance, and the Tea Road International Tourism Alliance.[116] Notably, Chinese tourist arrivals in Southeast Asia surged from 16.4 million in 2013 to 32.3 million in 2019, constituting 23% of all arrivals in 2019. However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, international flights from China to Southeast Asia experienced a sharp decline of 64% compared to 2019, with international seat capacity standing at 57% of pre-pandemic levels.[117] Despite the increasing levels of outbound tourism from China, BRI appears to have had a minimal effect on inbound tourism from other BRI countries to China. Statistics from China's National Bureau of Statistics show inbound tourists increased at a much lower rate – overseas visitor arrivals increased from 129 million in 2013 to 145 million in 2019.[118]

China has been active in promoting people-to-people bonds via education exchanges. China has implemented four major programs under the BRI education initiative: the Silk Road 2-way Student Exchange Enhancement, the Silk Road Cooperation in Running Educational Institutions and Programs Enhancement, the Silk Road Teacher Training Enhancement, and the Silk Road Joint Education and Training Enhancement Program. These four programs were launched in 2016 and are designed to make China an attractive destination for education by providing resources to overseas students, building cooperation between industry and vocational colleges, teacher training, and joint education and training programs between China and BRI countries.[119] Other efforts to attract international students have included opening

313 Confucius Institutes in 132 BRI countries.[120] Confucius Institutes aim to teach Mandarin and other languages and courses related to BRI projects. Confucius Institutes also offer scholarships to study in China.[121] China has set up several other scholarships for international students in BRI countries through the Silk Road Program under the Chinese Government Scholarship scheme for universities and research institutions, as well as through Luban Workshops for vocational education institutions.[122] According to data from China's Ministry of Education (MOE) and UNESCO, the number of international students in China jumped from 397,635 in 2015 to 489,172 in 2018 following the implementation of China's BRI education initiatives. The number of international students saw only a slight increase from 2018 to 2020, increasing to 492,185, before falling to 292,611 in 2022 following the COVID-19 pandemic.[123] According to the MOE's most recent 2018 data, 60% of international students came from Asia, with South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan constituting the top three.[124]

Educational exchanges have also led to scientific cooperation. In the runup to the First Belt and Road Conference on Science and Technology Exchange, held in November 2023, China emphasized the depth of its scientific cooperation with BRI partner countries. Vice Minister of Science and Technology Zhang Guangjun noted that China has signed intergovernmental agreements with 80 governments and scientific and technology cooperation, supported 10,000 scientists from BRI partners to come to China, trained 16,000 scientific and technological management personnel in BRI countries, and jointly built more than 50 laboratories in a variety of fields with BRI partners.[125] Bai Chunli, who is seen as a driving force behind BRI's scientific advancements and current president of the Alliance of International Science Organizations (ANSO), stated that BRI has signed 200 agreements with 151 countries and 32 organizations. In addition, the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) has established ten overseas science and education centers and collaborated on more than 100 research projects with BRI partner countries.[126] CAS, of which Bai was the former president from 2011-2020, is running the scientific side of BRI on three parallel tracks: inside China, outside China, and the Digital Belt and Road. Inside China, CAS has established five "centres of excellence" that host 200 Ph.D. students annually. Outside China, CAS has opened the ten aforementioned research training centers in Africa, Central Asia, South America, South Asia, and SEA. In Thailand, for example, the CAS Innovation Cooperation Center in Bangkok assists Thai universities and technology companies in working with their Chinese counterparts. The Digital Belt and Road platform allows BRI partner countries to share data and scientific research obtained during their collaborative projects with China and other BRI countries. ANSO plays a key role in facilitating scientific cooperation by organizing and funding research and scholarships focused on issues of sustainable development, food security, and water scarcity in BRI partner countries.[127] ANSO, under Bai, has attracted 78 members from 52 countries – members include national academies, universities, national research institutes and agencies, and international organizations.[128] Former Chinese Minister of Science and Technology Wang Zhigang claimed that China had signed 114 science and technology agreements (STAs) and established cooperative ties with 161 countries as of 2020. However, researchers have noted that the STAs they assessed tend to be vague without specific mechanisms for cooperation. Researchers have speculated

that STAs likely have a foreign policy purpose over a scientific purpose, especially when signed with countries with low scientific capacity.[129] Other researchers have found that BRI has promoted science and technology innovation, but only to a certain extent – BRI significantly increased the ratio of cooperative patents to China's total patents but did not proportionally increase the ratio of cooperative patents to BRI partner countries' total patents. That being said, BRI has also been found to have "shortened the institutional distance between countries" in science and technology by providing a cooperation platform and has improved BRI partner countries' "innovation foundation and capabilities."

Analysis: The Impact of a Decade of the Belt and Road Initiative on Asia

Having conducted a comprehensive analysis of the development impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Asia, utilizing a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative approach, we have determined that the BRI has exerted a significantly positive impact on the region over the past decade. It is important to note that some data was necessarily sourced from the Chinese government and was only available from Chinese government sources. To help alleviate some opacity issues, we used additional data from international and independent sources when possible. The BRI's linkages, particularly *facilities connectivity*, and *unimpeded trade*, have notably enhanced regional infrastructure and trade value among BRI participants, with a focus on underdeveloped regions in Central and Southeast Asia.

Our assessment suggests the *policy coordination* linkage has facilitated the establishment and expedited implementation of BRI projects, thereby easing trade barriers and assisting in financial cooperation within the BRI framework. Although assessing financial integration presented challenges due to China's reluctance to release financial data, our review suggests that *financial integration*, particularly cooperation among financial institutions of member states, has likely increased as a result of the BRI, positively influencing the initiation and completion of regional development projects, especially in infrastructure.

Despite data opacity, we also assess that the BRI has achieved some degree of standardization or cooperation in financial regulations among member states, as evidenced by significant increases in trade among BRI member states under the project's umbrella. While evaluating *people-to-people* exchanges remains inherently subjective, the data unequivocally demonstrates that cultural exchanges, tourism, and scientific collaboration have witnessed dramatic increases under the BRI framework, adjusted for the impact of COVID-19.

Ultimately, after a decade of the BRI, we conclude that the project has significantly impacted Asia's economic and developmental trajectory, particularly in the infrastructure development of underdeveloped nations within the region. In terms of *policy coordination* and p*eople-to-people bonds*, China has undoubtedly increased its reach across Asia. China has signed over 100 MOUs with countries looking to join the BRI and over 200 project cooperation documents with countries and international organizations. These cooperation documents and MOUs have directly impacted areas like air travel, technical standards, and cross-border investment and financing channels. China's *people-to-people bond* outreach efforts have increased tourism, education exchanges, and scientific cooperation between China and BRI nations. While there is room to debate

the concrete impact of these MOUs and cooperation agreements, China has, by the numbers, made important strides in connecting itself with the rest of Asia.

The true successes of the BRI come from China's promotion of *facilities connectivity* and *unimpeded trade* between BRI countries. In terms of transportation infrastructure, China has expanded railways through Central and Southeast Asia and highways throughout Central Asia. China has likewise expanded energy pipelines throughout Central and Southeast Asia. Although some pipelines have faced economic and geographic difficulties, such as the "Line D" project, or have fallen short of intended capacity, such as the China-Myanmar natural gas pipeline, China has managed to reduce its reliance on the Strait of Malacca for energy imports by 15 percent. This benefits BRI countries by reducing congestion and the risk of ship collisions with oil tankers in the busy Strait.

China's efforts at promoting *unimpeded trade* have seen the cumulative value of imports and exports between China and all BRI countries increase to US$19.1 trillion, with an average annual growth rate of 6.5% between 2012 and 2021. Southeast Asia has seen the most significant increases in bilateral trade, particularly ASEAN countries; ASEAN imports from China increased by 70% between 2017 and 2022, while ASEAN's exports to China also grew by over 55% during the same period. Data from Asia Society has likewise shown this increase in trade between China and ASEAN as a whole.

Even at the country-by-country level, the increase in China's trade share with individual nations with ASEAN shows that most ASEAN nations have increased their trade share with China by roughly 5 percent. Indonesia and Vietnam saw the largest share increases by 10% and 15% respectively. Singapore saw the smallest share increase. Asia Society's data notably does not include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, or Myanmar, but does show that trade between China and major ASEAN nations is increasing. Financial integration has been somewhat less successful, but China has successfully expanded the reach of Chinese banks into Asia, increased the value of cross-border transactions in RMB, and reduced the number of exports between East and Southeast Asia invoiced in USD by 10 percent.

Recommendations for U.S. Engagement and Policy Alternatives to the BRI

Global opinion polls suggest a favorable view of the Belt and Road Initiative among its participating nations.[130] While criticisms of "neo-colonialism" and "debt trap diplomacy" are not without merit, they often fail to resonate with much of the postcolonial Global South when directed at the BRI.[131] Thus, these charges, being perceived as levied by one perpetrator at another, appear hypocritical.

Furthermore, China, dubiously framing itself as a "fellow developing nation" in external messaging, has effectively used the BRI, along with other multilateral initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, to craft a narrative of solidarity with developing nations.[132] Accordingly, contemporary U.S. policy lines of effort that seek to "expose" Beijing as predatory and authoritarian have done little to sever the ties between China and developing countries.[133]

BRI participants are more likely to engage with those who provide immediate, tangible improvements to their daily lives rather than abstract ideals.[134]

In light of our macro-level analysis using the five linkages framework, we recommend that U.S. counter-BRI measures focus on *facilities connectivity* and *infrastructure development*. Our review identified these two areas as the most effective linkages to BRI and highly relevant to stakeholders. This is due to their role in enhancing domestic commercial capacity through the development of highways, railways, and energy infrastructure throughout South and Central Asia, which resulted in an increase in regional trade volume and a greater flow of goods and capital into the Global South. By concentrating on these specific aspects, the United States can position itself to offer pragmatic alternatives that address the region's needs.

Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Partnership (IP2) as a BRI Competitor

Our analysis identifies *facilities connectivity* and *infrastructure development* as the most potent elements of the BRI framework. To counter the BRI in this domain effectively, the United States should consider creating a regionally focused Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Partnership (IP2), including South and Central Asia. This initiative would be dedicated to transparent, environmentally responsible, and stakeholder-inclusive infrastructure development, positioning itself as a direct competitor to the BRI. The United States could integrate the certification process under the Blue Dot Network to ensure that all projects meet the highest quality, sustainability, and transparency standards. By incorporating the Blue Dot Network's existing certification process, IP2 would align with international best practices and provide a clear signal to investors and stakeholders about the commitment to responsible infrastructure development. This strategic move could enhance the credibility and attractiveness of IP2 as a viable alternative to the BRI, fostering greater trust and cooperation among participating nations.

While multilateral alternatives like the European Union's Global Gateway and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment already exist, our linkage analysis indicates that none of these options provide the streamlined decision-making, flexible financing, and tailored solutions that a unilateral U.S. infrastructure initiative could offer. Free from the competing priorities and interests of multiple donor countries, such an initiative has the potential to be more efficient and responsive to the needs of partner nations.[135] Moreover, from a national security and soft power perspective, a unilateral U.S. approach could significantly enhance the potential for stronger regional bilateral relationships and better alignment with the broader strategic objectives of the United States' existing Indo-Pacific Strategy.

The United States could finance IP2 by establishing a Sustainable Infrastructure Development Fund (SIDF) under the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, offering a competitive edge against Chinese developmental funding initiatives like the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the New Development Bank. The SIDF would stand out by not only providing more favorable rates but also by emphasizing sustainability and minimal environmental impact—areas of significant concern for BRI participant nations and where the United States can leverage its substantial technological and experiential advantage to offer a superior alternative to current Chinese capabilities.[136] The SIDF would operate as a dedicated fund to finance infrastructure projects in underdeveloped regions, with a strong emphasis on sustainability and minimal environmental

impact, and would include a grant system to support local initiatives that align with sustainable development goals.

In the context of IP2-funded projects, a Community-Driven Infrastructure Planning (CDIP) approach should be adopted to address concerns about China's central planning of projects.[137] This approach would mandate local stakeholder involvement in the planning stages of infrastructure projects to ensure that developments meet the actual needs of the local population, supplemented by mechanisms for ongoing dialogue between project developers and community representatives throughout the project lifecycle. A Transparency in Infrastructure Financing (TIF) policy could further enhance this initiative, requiring full disclosure of project financing details to ensure accountability and prevent corruption. International financial institutions like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank could be invited to partner and guarantee standards for transparency in infrastructure investments, presenting the SIDF as a preferable alternative to the opaque BRI and ensuring that the U.S. initiative targets issues of genuine stakeholder concern.[138]

Another vulnerability of infrastructure projects under the BRI is China's tendency to either import Chinese labor or engage in questionable labor arrangements with the local population.[139] The IP2 could address this by instituting a Fair Labor Initiative, which, as a prerequisite for obtaining funding from the SIDF, would require the use of local laborers and adherence to fair labor practices as collectively determined by IP2 participants. The IP2 could be supported by a monitoring body backed by regional multilateral organizations such as ASEAN, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

These policy recommendations aim to position the United States as a constructive partner in Asia's development, advancing its security interests and promoting a narrative of constructive competition with the BRI. The focus should be on creating synergies where possible and offering credible alternatives that align with the tangible benefits the BRI has provided to the region, thereby fostering an environment wherein U.S. competition with China is targeted at vulnerabilities within the BRI's stakeholder-relevant successes.

Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

In conducting an objective macro-level case study review of BRI, we recognized the absence of existing studies that evaluate the initiative through its five stated linkages. Consequently, our analysis was inherently limited to a high-level case study review.

Our work aimed to craft a strategic U.S. response grounded in the actual impact of the BRI on stakeholders rather than an assessment clouded by geopolitical concerns and idealistic influences. Having established a strategic direction and top-level policy recommendations based on the initiative's impact, we propose further refinement of our five-linkage framework. To this end, we suggest employing statistical quantitative tests such as regression analysis for *policy coordination*, network analysis for *facilities connectivity*, trade gravity models for *unimpeded trade*, co-integration tests for *financial integration*, and social network analysis for *people-to-people bonds*. These methodologies will provide a more granular understanding of the BRI's effects.

Despite the current dearth of comprehensive statistical analysis within our framework, we are confident that subsequent research will corroborate our findings: *facilities connectivity* and *infrastructure development*

stand as the most beneficial aspects of the BRI for participants, especially in Asia's "global south."[140] Thus, we maintain that establishing a unilateral U.S.-administered program such as the proposed Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Partnership is the most effective and relevant strategy for the United States to meaningfully compete with China for influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Ultimately, despite its broader geopolitical implications and potential long-term negative effects, the BRI has had a discernible positive impact on its participants over the past decade, particularly in infrastructure development. Regional stakeholders value these immediate, tangible benefits more than long-term detriments or abstract ideological challenges. Given the likelihood that the BRI will persist and continue to wield a positive influence for both the region and China, the United States must adopt a stance of constructive competition, focusing on projects that address the BRI's most successful and stakeholder-relevant achievements.

About the Authors: *Frank Hoffman is pursuing an M.A. in Asian Studies and a Certificate in Diplomatic Studies at Georgetown University. He holds an M.A. in International Politics and Military Affairs from The Citadel Military College of South Carolina. A U.S. Army veteran, Frank spent a significant portion of his military career in the Indo-Pacific and works as an analyst in the defense industry.*

Ian Jones holds an MPAff from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. Jones spent six years living and working in China and currently works for a think tank researching Asian economic and security issues.

Appendix

Table 1. Assessment metrics and indicators for the five linkages

Linkage	Assessment Metric	Indicator
Policy Coordination	Basis of Cooperation	Frequency of high-level exchanges
		Number of MOUs signed under a BRI framework
	Cooperation Achievements	Effectiveness of policy coordination
Facilities Connectivity	Transportation Infrastructure	Number of completed projects
		Level of connectivity
	Energy Facilities	Number of completed projects
		Oil/Natural Gas/Electricity transmission capacity
Unimpeded Trade	Trade Environment	Trade/Investment barrier removal
		Business environment
	Trade and Investment Volume	Total bilateral trade and investment increases/decreases
Financial Integration	Financial Cooperation	Currency exchanges
		Cooperation in financial regulations
		Cooperation among banks and financial institutions
People-to-People Bonds	Tourism	Number of international tourists to China/BRI countries
		Number of international cultural exchanges
	Science and Education Exchanges	Number of international students in China
		Number of scientific cooperation agreements

[1] Xi Jinping, "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future" (speech, Astana, Kazakhstan, September 7, 2013), *Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China Toronto*, http://toronto.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/201309/t20130913_7095490.htm.
[2] Xi Jinping, "Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament" (speech, Jakarta, Indonesia, October 2, 2013), *ASEAN-China Centre*, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.
[3] National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 28, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/2015zt/xjpcxbayzlt2015nnh/201503/t20150328_705553.html.
[4] Christoph Nedopil. "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative," *Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University*, December 2023, https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/.
[5] Our paper considers the following countries, by region: Southeast Asia -- Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam ; Central Asia -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan ; South Asia -- Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
[6] Xi Jinping. "Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 3rd 'Belt and Road' International Cooperation Summit Forum (Full Text)," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, October 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202310/t20231018_11162839.shtml.
General Office of the State Council, "Statement from the Chairman of the Third 'Belt and Road' International Cooperation Summit Forum (full text) (第三届"一带一路"国际合作高峰论坛主席声明（全文）)," October 19, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202310/content_6910132.htm
[7] Daniel F. Runde. "Enabling a Better Offer: How Does the West Counter Belt and Road? (Congressional Testimony)," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, May 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/enabling-better-offer-how-does-west-counter-belt-and-road; Mercy A. Kuo. "Blue Dot Network: The Belt and Road Alternative," *The Diplomat*, April 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/blue-dot-network-the-belt-and-road-alternative/.
[8] National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative*," The State Council of the People's Republic of China*, March 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/2015zt/xjpcxbayzlt2015nnh/201503/t20150328_705553.html
[9] "Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council of the People's Republic of China*, March 2015.
[10] "Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council of the People's Republic of China*, March 2015.
[11] National Development and Reform Commission, "Vision and Actions."
[12] "GLOBALink | Chinese Modernization Provides Alternative Approach to Development: Experts," Belt and Road Portal, *China Economic Information Service, State Information Center*, May 2024, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0MMFL8S4.html.
"BRI Creates New Paradigm for International Cooperation," Belt and Road Portal, *China Economic Information Service, State Information Center*, October 2023, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/01AOI8ND.html.
[13] "Xí Jìnpíng Zài Zhōubiān Wàijiāo Gōngzuò Zuòtán Huì Shàng Fābiǎo Zhòngyào Jiǎnghuà [Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech at the Symposium on Peripheral Diplomacy]," *Xinhua*, October 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm; Nadege Rolland. "A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative," *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)*, April 2019, https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/.
[14] Brahma Chellaney. "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy," *Project Syndicate*, January 2017, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01.
[15] "Encyclopedia on the Belt and Road Initiative: What Is Policy Coordination?" *National Development and Reform Commission*, July 2021, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/netcoo/goingout/202107/t20210730_1292615.html.
[16] "Encyclopedia on the Belt and Road Initiative," *National Development and Reform Commission*.
[17] Eleanor Atkins et al.,"Two Paths: Why States Join or Avoid China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (July 1, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad049, 3-4.
[18] Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative".
[19] Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative".
[20] National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Vision and Actions."

[21] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future," *The State Council Information Office*, October 2023, http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/zfbps_2279/202310/t20231010_773734.html.
[22] "Resolution 2344 (2017) on the Situation in Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, March 2017 http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2344.
[23] "Beijing Communiqué of the Belt and Road Health Cooperation & Health Silk Road," National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, August 2017, http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2017-08/18/c_72257.htm.
[24] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "The Belt and Road Initiative."
[25] Shannon Tiezzi. "Which World Leaders Came to China's 3rd Belt and Road Forum?," *thediplomat.com*, October 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/which-world-leaders-came-to-chinas-3rd-belt-and-road-forum/.
[26] Yue Lu, Wei Gu, and Ka Zeng, "Does the Belt and Road Initiative Promote Bilateral Political Relations?," *China & World Economy* 29, no. 5 (September 2021): 57–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12387, 64.
[27] Yue Lu, Wei Gu, and Ka Zeng, "Does the Belt and Road Initiative Promote Bilateral Political Relations?," *China & World Economy* 29, no. 5 (September 2021): 57–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12387, 79.
[28] Xinhua. "Key Takeaways from BRI White Paper," *The State Council of the People's Republic of China*, October 2023, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/11/content_WS6526994fc6d0868f4e8e024a.html.
[29] Xinhua, "Key Takeaways from BRI White Paper."
[30] David Herbling. "Huawei-Backed Cable Linking China, Europe, Africa Lands in Kenya," *Bloomberg*, March 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-29/huawei-backed-cable-linking-china-europe-africa-lands-in-kenya.
[31] National Development and Reform Commission, "Silk Road E-Commerce Boosts Two-Way Trade between China, Countries along BRI Route," *en.ndrc.gov.cn* (People's Daily), November 2022, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/news/mediarusources/202211/t20221103_1340809.html.
[32] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "The Belt and Road Initiative."
[33] Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, "China Steps up Efforts to Promote 'Air Silk Road' - Xinhua Silk Road," *en.imsilkroad.com*, May 2022, https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/327848.html.
[34] "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Aviation," *CAPA - Centre for Aviation*, June 2018, https://centreforaviation.com/analysis/airline-leader/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-aviation-427350.
[35] Xinhua, "Key Takeaways from BRI White Paper."
[36] "Yàzhōu Jīchǔ Shèshī Tóuzī Yínháng Xiédìng [Agreement on Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank]," *Belt and Road Portal*, October 2016, https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/1672.html.
[37] Matt Sheehan and Jacob Feldgoise. "What Washington Gets Wrong about China and Technical Standards," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/27/what-washington-gets-wrong-about-china-and-technical-standards-pub-89110.
[38] Tim Rühlig. "The New Geopolitics of Technical Standardisation: A European Perspective - Future Europe Journal," *Future Europe*, April 2023, https://feu-journal.eu/issues/issue-3/the-new-geopolitics-of-technical-standardisation-a-european-perspective/.
[39] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "The Belt and Road Initiative.
[40] Meia Nouwens, "China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade On," in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2023: Key Developments and Trends* (Routledge, 2023), 90–116, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/aprsa-2023/aprsa-2023.pdf, 93.
[41] Meia Nouwens, "China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade On," in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2023: Key Developments and Trends* (Routledge, 2023), 90–116, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/aprsa-2023/aprsa-2023.pdf, 94-95.
[42] Michael Cox et al., "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Southeast Asia" (CIMB Southeast Asia Research (CARI), October 2018), https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-China-SEA-BRI.pdf, 8.
[43] World Bank Group, "Belt and Road Economics: Opportunities and Risks of Transport Corridors" (World Bank Group, July 2019), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/715511560787699851/pdf/Main-Report.pdf, 52-53.
[44] Nouwens, "China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade On," 97.
[45] Nouwens, "China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade On," 97-98.
[46] Christopher K. Colley. "The Emerging Great Game: Chinese, Indian, and American Engagement in South Asia," *Stimson Center*, April 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/emerging-great-game-china-india-america-engagement/.
[47] Nouwens, "China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade On," 98.
[48] Allison O'Neil. "A New Turn for BRI in South Asia?," *Georgetown Securities Study Review*, January 2024, https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2024/01/23/a-new-turn-for-bri-in-south-asia/.

[49] Nouwens, "China's Belt and Road Initiative a Decade On," 98-99.
[50] Ganyi Zhang. "China-EU Rail Freight: A Highly Sensitive Market," *Upply*, February 2023, https://market-insights.upply.com/en/china-eu-rail-freight-a-highly-sensitive-market
[51] Seetao. "China's Four Major Energy Strategic Channels," *Seetao*, April 2021, https://www.seetao.com/details/78656.html.
[52] Girish Luthra and Prithvi Gupta. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Energy Sector: Progress, Direction, and Trends," *Observer Research Foundation*, December 2023, https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20231205104224.pdf, 5.
[53] Philipp Galkin, Dongmei Chen, and Junyuang Ke. "China's Energy Investment through the Lens of the Belt and Road Initiative," *King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center*, January 2020, https://doi.org/10.30573/ks--2019-dp83, 11.
[54] Girish Luthra and Prithvi Gupta, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Energy Sector," 7.
[55] "China Global Investment Tracker," *American Enterprise Institute*, https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/ (accessed January 2024).
[56] Girish Luthra and Prithvi Gupta, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Energy Sector," 13.
[57] Girish Luthra and Prithvi Gupta, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Energy Sector."
[58] Christoph Nedopil, "China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023 H1," *Green Finance and Development Center* (Fudan University, June 2023), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.13892.19841, 11.
[59] Zheng Xin. "CNPC Sees Closer BRI Energy Ties," *China Daily*, October 2023, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/17/WS652de939a31090682a5e8ed7.html; Indermit Gill, Somik V. Lall, and Mathilde Lebrand. "Winners and Losers along China's Belt and Road," *Brookings*, June 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/winners-and-losers-along-chinas-belt-and-road/.
[60] Xinhua. "Xi Calls for Enhancing China-Turkmenistan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," *The State Council of the People's Republic of China*, October 2023, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/19/content_WS6531197dc6d0868f4e8e0733.html.
[61] Chen Aizhu and Marat Gurt. "China Prioritising Turkmenistan over Russia in next Big Pipeline Project," *Reuters*, May 2023, https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/china-prioritising-turkmenistan-over-russia-next-big-pipeline-project-2023-05-24/.
[62] Neslihan Topcu. "A Relationship on a Pipeline: China and Myanmar," *China Research Center*, October 2020, https://www.chinacenter.net/2020/china-currents/19-3/a-relationship-on-a-pipeline-china-and-myanmar/.
[63] Alvin Lin and Jake Schmidt. "China Announces It Will Not Build New Coal Plants Abroad," *NRDC*, September 2021, https://www.nrdc.org/bio/alvin-lin/china-announces-it-will-not-build-new-coal-plants-abroad.
[64] "Full Text of Xi's Statement at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *Xinhua*, September 2021, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/22/c_1310201230.htm.
[65] Projects include The Lower Se San 2 Dam in Cambodia, the Nurek Hydropower Plant Rehabilitation Project in Tajikistan, and the Tarbela 5 Hydropower Extension Project, Suki Kinari Hydropower Project, and the Phandar Hydropower Station in Pakistan.
[66] Gavin Maguire. "Column: China Widens Renewable Energy Supply Lead with Wind Power Push," *Reuters*, March 2023, https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/china-widens-renewable-energy-supply-lead-with-wind-power-push-2023-03-01/.
[67] Wood Mackenzie. "China Belt & Road Initiative Brings in 128 GW Installed Power Capacity in 10 Years | Wood Mackenzie," *www.woodmac.com*, November 2023, https://www.woodmac.com/press-releases/china-belt-and-road-10-years-on/.
[68] Girish Luthra and Prithvi Gupta, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Energy Sector," 14.
[69] "Infographics | China-Central Asia Ties at a Glance ," *eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn*, May 2023, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/318492.html.
[70] Luc Parrot. "Dire Straits: China's Energy Import Insecurities and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'" *London Politica*, March 2023, https://londonpolitica.com/global-commodities-watch-1-blog-list/dire-straits-chinas-energy-import-insecurities-and-the-malacca-dilemma.
[71] "Encyclopedia on the Belt and Road Initiative: What Is Unimpeded Trade?" *National Development and Reform Commission*, July 2021, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/netcoo/goingout/202107/t20210730_1292625.html.
[72] ASEAN is comprised of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
[73] "China's Free Trade Agreements," *Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of Commerce*, Mofcom.gov.cn, http://fta.mofcom.gov.cn/english/fta_qianshu.shtml (accessed January 29, 2024).
[74] China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia, and the ASEAN member states.

[75] Beibei Hu, Yuying Jin, and Kai Wang. "How Free Trade Agreement Affects the Success of China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects," *International Studies of Economics*, October 2022, 484–98, https://doi.org/10.1002/ise3.32, 485-486.
[76] Hannah Feng. "China's Free Trade Agreements Framework," *China Briefing*, 2022, https://www.china-briefing.com/doing-business-guide/china/why-china/china-s-international-free-trade-and-tax-agreements; "Central Asia: New Trade Deals Signed on Sidelines of BRI Forum," *EurasiaNet*, October 2023, https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-new-trade-deals-signed-on-sidelines-of-bri-forum.
[77] Beibei Hu, Yuying Jin, and Kai Wang, "How Free Trade Agreement Affects the Success of China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects," 489.
[78] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[79] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[80] "China's Trade with BRI Countries Booms in 2023," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*, January 2024, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/pressroom/2024-01/12/content_116937407.htm.
[81] Nathalia Lozano Murphy. "BRI Investment in Asia: Nature of the Different Subregions' Approaches," *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies* (Universidad de Navarra, September 2023), https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/bri-investment-in-asia-nature-of-different-approaches-by-subregion.
[82] Michael Cox et al., "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Southeast Asia," 4.
[83] "ASEAN-China Economic Relation," *ASEAN*, 2020, https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/.
[84] Shay Wester. "Balancing Act: Assessing China's Growing Economic Influence in ASEAN," *Asia Society*, November 2023, https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/balancing-act-assessing-chinas-growing-economic-influence-asean.
[85] CK Tan. "China Vows to Boost Southeast Asia Imports as Growth Slows," *Nikkei Asia*, September 2023, https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade/China-vows-to-boost-Southeast-Asia-imports-as-growth-slows.
[86] Ling Zhou et al. "A Study on the Belt and Road Initiative's Trade and Its Influencing Factors: Evidence of China-South Asia's Panel Data," *PLOSE One* 18, no. 4 (April 2023): e0282167–67, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0282167, 6-8.
[87] Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Overland, "China's Belt and Road Initiative through the Lens of Central Asia," in *Regional Connection under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation* , ed. Fanny M. Cheung and Ying-yi Hong (London: Routledge, 2018), 115–33.
[88] "The First China-Central Asia Meeting of the Ministers of Economy and Trade Was Held," Ministry of *Commerce of the People's Republic of China*, April 2023, http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/significantnews/202304/20230403405704.shtml.
[89] "2023 Nián 6 Yuè Jìn Chūkǒu Shāngpǐn Guó Bié (Dìqū) Zǒng Zhí Biǎo (Měiyuán Zhí) [Table of Total Value of Import and Export Commodities by Country (Region) in June 2023 (USD Value)]," *General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China*, July 2023, http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/5157413/index.html.
[90] Meray Ozat. "Navigating China's Path to Engagement in Central Asia," *Caspian Policy Center*, August 2023, https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/energy-and-economy-program-eep/navigating-chinas-path-to-engagement-in-central-asia.
[91] Meray Ozat, "Navigating China's Path to Engagement in Central Asia."; Dewey Sim and Laura Zhou. "China Can Help Central Asian 'Brethren' to Unite, Xi Jinping Tells Xian Summit," *South China Morning Post*, May 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3221093/china-can-help-central-asian-brethren-unite-xi-jinping-tells-xian-summit.
[92] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[93] Wen Wang et al., "Progress on the Belt and Road Initiative: A Four-Year Evaluation ," in *Regional Connection under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation* , ed. Fanny M. Cheung and Ying-yi Hong (London: Routledge, 2018), https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5Hd0DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT7&dq=china+regional+financial+integration+belt+and+road+initiative&ots=w2NvARJF7Z&sig=JJ9J0qaHqttiMf1_NXvPDDmS64o#v=onepage&q&f=false.
[94] Poshan Yu, Zuozhang Chen, and Yingzi Hu, "The Impact of Belt and Road Initiative on Regional Financial Integration – Empirical Evidence from Bond and Money Markets in Belt and Road Countries," *The Chinese Economy* 54, no. 4 (December 25, 2020): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2020.1857061, 10.

[95] Ding Feng and Denise Jia. "China Central Banker Pushes Banks to Expand along Belt and Road," *Nikkei Asia*, September 2023, https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Caixin/China-central-banker-pushes-banks-to-expand-along-Belt-and-Road.
[96] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[97] Wen Wang et al., "Progress on the Belt and Road Initiative: A Four-Year Evaluation."
[98] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[99] Wen Wang et al., "Progress on the Belt and Road Initiative: A Four-Year Evaluation."
[100] "Yuan Overtakes Dollar to Become Most-Used Currency in China's Cross-Border Transactions," *Reuters*, April 2023, https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/yuan-overtakes-dollar-become-most-used-currency-chinas-cross-border-transactions-2023-04-26/.
[101] "The PBOC Joined the BIS' Renminbi Liquidity Arrangement," *The People's Bank of China*, June 2022, http://www.pbc.gov.cn/en/3688110/3688172/4437084/4586998/index.html.
[102] Robert Greene. "Southeast Asia's Growing Interest in Non-Dollar Financial Channels—and the Renminbi's Potential Role," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/22/southeast-asia-s-growing-interest-in-non-dollar-financial-channels-and-renminbi-s-potential-role-pub-87731.
[103] Greene, "Southeast Asia's Growing Interest in Non-Dollar Financial Channels."
[104] "Myanmar Looks to Baht, Yuan for Border Trade to Cut Reliance on US Dollar," *South China Morning Post*, March 2022, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3170503/myanmar-looks-thai-baht-chinese-yuan-border-trade-cut.
[105] Prateek Gupta. "Southeast Asia Considers a Shift Away from the Dollar: Can the Renminbi Take the Centre Stage?," *ICS Research Blog*, August 2023, https://icsin.org/blogs/2023/08/02/southeast-asia-considers-a-shift-away-from-the-dollar-can-the-renminbi-take-the-centre-stage/.
[106] Gustavo Adler et al. "Dominant Currencies and External Adjustment," *IMF*, July 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2020/07/16/Dominant-Currencies-and-External-Adjustment-48618.
[107] Robert Greene, "Southeast Asia's Growing Interest in Non-Dollar Financial Channels."
[108] Encyclopedia on the Belt and Road Initiative: What Is People-to-People Bond?", *National Development and Reform Commission*, July 2021, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/netcoo/goingout/202107/t20210730_1292633.html
[109] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[110] "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*, September 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202309/t20230926_11150122.html.
[111] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.
[112] LI Zhifei and Zhang Chenchen, "International Tourism Cooperation Based on 'the Belt and Road': Strategy and Path," *Confrontation and Cooperation: 1000 Years of Polish-German-Russian Relations* 6, no. 1 (December 1, 2020): 25–31, https://doi.org/10.2478/conc-2020-0003, 26.
[113] "International Tourism, Number of Departures - China," *The World Bank*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.DPRT?locations=CN (accessed January 2024)
[114] Giulia Interesse. "China's Tourism Sector Prospects in 2023-24," *China Briefing*, August 2023, https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-tourism-in-2023-outlook-trends-and-opportunities/
[115] Monica Pitrelli. "What happened to the Chinese travel boom everyone was waiting for? It stayed in China," *CNBC Travel*, July 2023. https://www.cnbc.com/2023/07/26/china-travel-boom-happen-but-recovery-is-underway.html
[116] Taohong Li et al, "Does the Belt and Road Initiative Boost Tourism Economy?," *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 25, no. 3 (January 5, 2020): 311–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2019.1708758, 320.
[117] Gary Bowerman. "Why Do Chinese Tourists Matter so Much in South East Asia?," *Asia Media Centre*, October 2023, https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/features/why-do-chinese-tourists-matter-so-much-in-south-east-asia/.
[118] "Overseas visitor arrivals in China from 2010 to 2020 with an estimate for 2021 (in millions)," *Statista*, November 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/234785/international-tourists-arrivals-in-china/.
[119] "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact on Education Sector," *USANAS Foundation*, October 2023, https://usanasfoundation.com/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-its-impact-on-education-sector; "Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative - Xinhua Silk Road," *Xinhua Silk Road Information Service*, August 2016, https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/313227.html#:~:text=Silk%20Road%20Joint%20Education%20and%20Training%20Enhancement%20Program.
[120] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*.

[121] "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact on Education Sector," *USANAS Foundation*.
[122] "The Belt and Road Initiative," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*."
[123] "Total number of foreign students studying in China from 2014 to 2018", *Statista*, April 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1092488/china-total-number-of-foreign-students/.
[124] "Nearly 500,000 International Students Study in China," *Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China*, April 2019), http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/media_highlights/201904/t20190415_377952.html.
[125] "China Looks Forward to Enhancing Tech, Innovation Cooperation with BRI Partner Countries - Global Times," *Global Times Staff Reporters*, October 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300855.shtml.
[126] Zhang Zhihao. "Sci-Tech Cooperation Key for BRI Partners," *China Daily*, February 2023, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/27/WS63fc0acca31057c47ebb0fc8.html.
[127] Ehsan Masood. "How China Is Redrawing the Map of World Science," *Nature*, May 2019, https://www.nature.com/immersive/d41586-019-01124-7/index.html.
[128] "ANSO Members," Alliance of International Science Organizations, http://www.anso.org.cn/membersNetworks/members/ (accessed January 2024).
[129] Caroline S Wagner and Denis Fred Simon, "China's Use of Formal Science and Technology Agreements as a Tool of Diplomacy," *Science & Public Policy* 50, no. 4 (June 28, 2023): 807–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scad022.
[130] Alicia García-Herrero and Robin Schindowski. "Global Trends in Countries 'Perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative," *Bruegel*, 2023. https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/WP%2004_0.pdf
[131]Sarina Patterson. "The BRI at 10: A report card from the Global South," *AidData*, 2024. https://www.aiddata.org/blog/the-bri-at-10-a-report-card-from-the-global-south
[132] "China's Renewed Commitment to Developing Nations: Insights from BRI White Paper," *The China Paper*, 2023. https://www.thechinapaper.com/chinas-renewed-commitment-to-developing-nations-insights-from-bri-white-paper/
[133] "The US-China relationship in 2024 is stabilized but precarious," *Brookings*, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/us-china-relations-in-2024-are-stabilized-but-precarious/
[134] Samantha Custer, Atsushi Horigoshi, and Kyle Marshall. "BRI from the Ground Up: Leaders from 129 countries evaluate a decade of Beijing's signature initiative," AidData, 2024, https://www.aiddata.org/publications/bri-from-the-ground-up.
[135] Choi, Ajin, "Unilateral versus Multilateral Strategies in the US Exchange Rate Policy: Focusing on the State Centered Approach," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 141-157.
[136] Xue Gong. "The Belt and Road Initiative Is Still China's 'Gala' but Without as Much Luster," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/03/belt-and-road-initiative-is-still-china-s-gala-but-without-as-much-luster-pub-89207.
[137] Manjari Chatterjee Miller. "Recipient Countries Hold the Key to China's BRI Success*," Council on Foreign Relations*, 2022. https://www.cfr.org/article/recipient-countries-hold-key-chinas-bri-success
[138] Jonathan E. Hillman. "Corruption Flows Along China's Belt and Road," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2019. https://www.csis.org/analysis/corruption-flows-along-chinas-belt-and-road; Elaine K. Dezenski and Josh Birenbaum. "Tightening the Belt or End of the Road? China's BRI at 10," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 2024. https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/02/27/tightening-the-belt-or-end-of-the-road-chinas-bri-at-10/; Kevin Yao and Ellen Zhang. "China's 2023 GDP shows patchy economic recovery, raises case for stimulus," *Reuters*, January 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-q4-gdp-grows-52-yy-below-market-forecast-2024-01-17/#:~:text=BEIJING%2C%20Jan%2017%20(Reuters),the%20outlook%20for%20this%20year.
[139] Jennifer Hillman and Alex Tippett. "Who Built That? Labor and the Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021. https://www.cfr.org/blog/who-built-labor-and-belt-and-road-initiative; "Forced Labor: The Hidden Cost of China's Belt and Road Initiative," *U.S. Department of State*, 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Forced-Labor-The-Hidden-Cost-of-Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf
[140] The term "Global South" is generally understood to refer to low- or middle-income countries located in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. It is a geopolitical and economic classification that contrasts with the "Global North," which includes wealthier, more developed nations. The Global South is not strictly defined by geography, as it includes countries in the northern hemisphere and excludes Australia and New Zealand, which are in the southern hemisphere.

Assessing the Efficacy of U.S. Policy in The Sahel: A Multifaceted Approach

Curtis Smith

This article critically examines the limitations of U.S. policies in the Sahel, a region beset by extremism, political instability, and humanitarian crises. The current U.S. strategy, which relies heavily on former colonial powers and lacks direct engagement with individual Sahelian nations, has proven inadequate. The growing influence of Russia and China further complicates the geopolitical landscape, challenging U.S. interests. To address these issues, the article proposes a revised U.S. approach that includes utilizing the Section 7008 waiver to maintain assistance post-coup, fostering direct bilateral relations, investing in sustainable development and good governance, enhancing regional cooperation, and expanding non-military support. This new strategy aims to build resilient communities and governance structures, ultimately promoting long-term stability and prosperity in the Sahel. By aligning U.S. efforts with the specific needs of Sahelian countries, the proposed approach seeks to counter the influence of other global powers and support regional security and development.

Introduction

The Sahel region, encompassing Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan, and Nigeria, has emerged as a focal point of geopolitical significance due to its strategic location, natural resources, and ongoing security challenges. U.S. policy in the region has come under scrutiny against the backdrop of jihadi-Salafist terrorist insurgency, political instability, and economic vulnerability. This paper finds that increased U.S. engagement in Niger and the Sahel region positively correlates with improvements in security, governance, and regional stability. By examining empirical data and case studies, the paper evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of current U.S. policy in Niger and the Sahel and offers constructive recommendations for its enhancement.

The Sahel region faces a complex and interrelated set of challenges that threaten stability and security. These challenges include jihadi-Salafist terrorist insurgency, political instability, economic vulnerability, and the erosion of democratic governance.

U.S. policy in the Sahel has traditionally emphasized stability through diplomatic engagement, capacity-building efforts, and support for regional initiatives. The reliance on former colonial powers such as France has been ineffective in addressing the complex and evolving security challenges in the Sahel. The withdrawal of U.S. and French forces, coupled with recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has created a security vacuum that jihadist groups have rapidly exploited.

The expansion of jihadist groups in the Sahel is well-documented. Groups like Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM, an al-Qaeda affiliate, and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have capitalized on weakened state governance and the lack of effective counterterrorism operations to increase their territorial control and influence.[1] The Soufan Center reports that JNIM now controls approximately 40% of Burkina Faso's territory, and their influence continues to spread into neighboring regions, threatening broader West African stability.[2]

The withdrawal of international forces and the subsequent rise in jihadist activities have

broader implications for regional and global security. The instability in the Sahel has not only led to a humanitarian crisis but also posed a significant threat to international security. The U.S. Institute of Peace emphasizes that the spread of violent extremism from the Sahel into coastal West African states such as Benin and Togo illustrates the potential for a wider regional conflict. The involvement of other global powers, notably Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC), complicates the geopolitical landscape.

The current U.S. foreign policy towards Niger and the Sahel predominantly relies on diplomatic initiatives and limited support for regional security efforts. However, this approach has proven insufficient to counter the growing threats of terrorism and state fragility. The United States has traditionally relied on French influence to shape its strategy in the Sahel, but as French influence wanes, the United States must adjust to a new reality. Despite the rollout of the new U.S.-Africa initiative, U.S. policy remains regional rather than state-focused.

To address these shortcomings, the United States should invoke the Section 7008 waiver for Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, leveraging the amendment from September 2022. This action is crucial to safeguard American national security interests and overcome the current limitations in policy. Applying section 7008 will represent a significant effort at addressing the root causes of instability in Niger and the Sahel, promote democratic governance, and safeguard American interests in the region.

The Crisis in The Sahel

The Sahel region faces a web of interconnected issues that endanger regional stability and security. The challenges of a jihadi-Salafist terrorist insurgency, political instability, economic vulnerability, and the erosion of democratic governance have triggered a humanitarian crisis, resulting in an increasing number of displaced individuals and those needing aid.[3]

Humanitarian Crisis

The London School of Economics and Political Science reports that over twenty-four million people in the Sahel region require some kind of assistance. This group includes 4.9 million displaced persons, 870,000 refugees, and 6.5 million young people and women needing gender-related support. In 2023, over 20,000 people in the border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger experienced catastrophic levels of food insecurity.[4] Approximately 19.1 million people are food insecure, representing a 77 percent increase since 2019, the highest in a decade.[5] These statistics are not just numbers; they provide a clear picture of the magnitude of the crisis, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted humanitarian interventions, making the Sahel crisis one of the fastest-growing crises in the world.[6] It also underscores the broader implications for regional stability and international security, making a compelling case for increased global attention and support.

Jihadist Terrorist Insurgencies and Violence

The situation in the Sahel has significantly deteriorated, as the once dormant Tuareg rebellion has once again been reignited. The Tuareg people, organized under the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), have always sought an autonomous state and have aligned themselves with multiple Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine to push Malian government forces out of the north.[7] The jihadi-Salafist terrorist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal

Muslimeen (JNIM) was formed by a merger of several al-Qaeda splinter groups.[8] The emergence of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) has greatly intensified violence in the Sahel. Both JNIM and ISGS have pushed south into the Liptako-Gourma region, threatening the security of West Africa's once relatively stable coastal states. JNIM has recently gained control over territory in northern and central Mali, while ISGS has been confined to the north of Burkina Faso and western Niger due to internecine clashes with JNIM that began back in 2020.[9]

Islamic State affiliates and al-Qaeda operatives have exploited weak governance structures, porous borders, and socio-economic grievances to expand their influence, perpetrate violence, and destabilize governments. Extremist organizations such as JNIM, ISGS, Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP), and others are exploiting such weaknesses and are continuing to launch indiscriminate attacks on government forces and civilians.[10] According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), more than 12,000 people were killed by terrorists in 2023, the majority of whom were civilians.

For more than five years, armed Islamist groups across the Central Sahel have systematically used sieges, threats, kidnapping, improvised explosive devices, and landmines as war tactics to control supply routes and expand their influence.[11] In Burkina Faso, more than 1 million people live in areas fully or partially besieged by armed groups and face daily violence. According to Amnesty International, groups such as al-Qaeda affiliate Ansaroul Islam are besieging at least 46 localities and committing war crimes.[12] These groups also impose "zakat" (forced taxation) and have been responsible for the destruction and looting of civilian infrastructure, including places of worship, health centers, food reserves, water services, and bridges. They have also frequently targeted humanitarian workers. Violence between rival ethnic militias and community-based self-defense groups has resulted in reprisal attacks and numerous human rights abuses.[13]

Educational and Infrastructure Challenges

Children in the Sahel have fared particularly poorly. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has issued a child alert because children were caught in the conflict.[14] In Burkina Faso, three times more children were killed by jihadist-Salafists during the first nine months of 2022 than during the same period in 2021. Most of the children died from gunshot wounds during attacks on their villages or because of improvised explosive devices.[15] Armed groups across the Sahel block access to villages and towns, sabotage water supplies, and contribute to severe conditions. [16]

Armed groups that oppose state-administered education systematically burn and loot schools and threaten, abduct, or kill teachers. In Burkina Faso, 2,500 schools and 135 health centers have been closed,[17] while more than 8,300 schools in total have shut down across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger because they were directly targeted.[18] Teachers have fled because parents were displaced or too frightened to send their children to school, and as a result, more than one in five schools in Burkina Faso have closed. In contrast, 30 percent of schools in Niger's Tillaberi region are no longer functional due to the conflict.[19]

Democratic Erosion and External Influences

Moreover, the erosion of democracy in the Sahel exacerbates its security. Corruption, authoritarianism, and electoral fraud undermine governance and exacerbate

societal grievances, providing fertile ground for extremist recruitment and activity.

Finally, the possibility of losing The Sahel to Russia and China is genuine. Despite disbanding the Wagner Group, Russia has heavily re-engaged in the Sahel through its new Africa Corp. Russia's new expeditionary force boasts more than five thousand troops in Africa, with more than 4600 of those in Sub-Saharan Africa.[20] It maintains three major airbases and plans to expand this force to more than 20,000 troops.[21] Conversely, China is now Africa's biggest trading partner, with Chinese trade with Africa topping $200 billion annually. Over 10,000 Chinese firms are operating throughout the African continent, and China's economic presence in Africa is four times that of the United States.[22] In contrast to the United States' restriction on arms and training, Beijing provides arms to African nations and offers professional military education.[23]

The United States Foreign Policy Posture in the Region

The current U.S. Administration's foreign policy towards Niger and the Sahel advocates for diplomatic initiatives and support for regional security efforts like the G5 Sahel Joint Force. While these endeavors aim to address security challenges and bolster stability, security efforts have proven insufficient to counter the growing threats of terrorism and state fragility.

Over the last two decades, the United States has spent 3.3 billion dollars on security assistance in the Sahel. This assistance has included tactical training, equipping partner militaries and elite special counterterrorism units, and engaging these militaries in large-scale military-to-military exercises and smaller-scale advise-and-assist missions.[24]

Following the recent spate of coups in the region, the United States has responded to these armed takeovers by suspending security assistance in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea since 2021.[25] However, in Chad, a long-standing U.S. security partner, the U.S. has refrained from labeling the regime change as a coup and has not imposed or suspended assistance.[26]

U.S. engagement in the continent has primarily been facilitated through previous colonial powers such as France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Portugal. This approach is based on the belief that these partner nations have a better understanding of the intricacies of their former colonies.[27] In the Sahel, the United States has traditionally relied on French influence.[28] However, as French influence in the Sahel wanes, the United States can no longer rely on France's assistance to conduct its foreign policy. Although the United States is more popular than France in West Africa, it is also adjusting to a new reality. The United States is searching for an alternate base in the region now that it must leave Niger.[29] The Pentagon has reportedly been in preliminary talks with the governments of Benin, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire about opening a drone base in one of these countries, likely in preparation for the closure of the U.S. drone base in Niger.[30]

Additionally, U.S. policy thus far has favored short-term stability over the democratic interest of the African population. During the Cold War, the U.S. supported unpopular and undemocratic rulers. Notable examples include U.S. support for the regimes in Chad, Gabon, and Cameroon. Two long-standing leaders are no longer in power. Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon was deposed by a military coup, while Idriss Déby from Chad was replaced by his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, after meeting a premature death on the battlefield. Cameroon's leader, Paul Biya, is facing mass domestic unrest.

The door has been opened for the PRC, which has taken a comparatively lighter, more hands-off approach.[31] In response, most recently, the United States has attempted to lay out a strategy to stabilize the region. In 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken unveiled a new U.S. engagement strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa revolving around four strategic objectives. The U.S.-Africa Strategy calls for the promotion of fair and open societies, advancing democratic efforts and tackling security challenges, supporting a robust pandemic recovery, and encouraging climate adaption and green energy transitions.[32]

The U.S. aims to achieve these goals through "more consultative dialogue between the U.S. and African states, broadening senior-level engagements, strengthening civil societies, deepening relations with the African Union and regional bodies, and encouraging U.S. private sector engagement in Africa."[33] As part of the new engagement strategy, the U.S. plans to increase embassy staffing and ramp up funding since staffing at key African diplomatic embassy posts and special envoy posts have been notoriously vacant in the last few years, and many diplomatic missions are chronically underfunded.[34]

The new engagement strategy also aims to "support sustainable development efforts that build resiliency across the spectrum from food security to gender equality."[35]Although this strategy will not introduce new initiatives, it seeks to reinvigorate existing ones. Secretary of State Blinken emphasized that "the United States will not dictate Africa's choices, and neither should anyone else."[36]

The security policies that Secretary of State Blinken introduced in his speech on the new U.S. engagement strategy have proven ineffective so far. In July 2023, President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted in a military coup.[37] It was not until October 2023 that the Biden Administration formally acknowledged the military takeover as a coup, which, under Congressional mandates, required the suspension of cooperation of military and economic aid to the country. The suspension resulted in the withholding of $200 million in aid and another $442 million allocated for trade and agricultural assistance.[38]

In March 2024, a high-level U.S. diplomatic delegation visited Niger to engage with key political and military leaders. Led by Marine Corps Gen. Michael Langley, commander of U.S. Africa Command; Mary Catherine Phee, Assistant Secretary of State for African affairs; and Celeste Wallander, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASDISA), the delegation met with Nigerien Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine, several cabinet members, as well as the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, Niger's ruling military junta. The meeting focused on expressing concerns over Niger's potential relationships with Russia and Iran and discussed the status of U.S. troops in the country.[39]

After the meeting, Colonel-Major Amadou Abdramane, a junta spokesperson, announced U.S. flights over Nigerien territory were now illegal.[40] Insa Garba Saidou, a local activist who assists Niger's military leaders with communications, criticized the United States for pressuring Niger to choose between its strategic partners.[41] Furthermore, Colonel-Major Abdramane announced that the Nigerien government "denounced with force the condescending attitude" of the head of the U.S. delegation, which he said, "had undermined the long relationship between the two countries."[42]

The U.S. policy in the Sahel has primarily aimed to promote stability through diplomatic engagement, capacity-building efforts, and support for regional initiatives. Historically, this policy relied on engagement through former colonial powers rather than direct interaction with individual nations. However, a string of coups and the subsequent Congressionally mandated suspension of aid to Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, has disrupted this approach, effectively halting U.S. capacity-building and cooperative efforts in the region. As a result, the United States is now seeking an alternate host nation to base its counterterrorism and surveillance operations. In the following sections, I will explore how the shortcomings of the current policy necessitate a shift toward more direct, nuanced engagement with Sahelian countries. By examining existing U.S. foreign policy frameworks and their limitations, I will propose a comprehensive strategy to enhance stability and counter extremist influences in the Sahel.

Evaluating the Present Strategy: A Critical Assessment

U.S. current policy towards Niger and the Sahel fails to address the gravity of the threats facing the region adequately. Without robust intervention, jihadi-Salafist terrorist groups are expanding their influence and territorial gains, which could potentially lead to the collapse of the fragile Sahelian states, invoking an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, and the proliferation of terrorism across the whole of West Africa. The withdrawal of international forces has led to increased violence across the Sahel. The Counter Extremism Project reports that the number of jihadist attacks has surged, with November 2023 witnessing the second-highest number of reported incidents since the beginning of their monitoring.[43] This trend highlights how jihadist groups capitalize on the reduced foreign military presence to expand their influence and control.

The waning influence, and in several cases, the wholesale expulsion of the former colonial powers, has left the United States without a flow-through for its engagement with African nations. Absent this and considering Secretary of State Blinken's new U.S.-Africa initiative, one would expect a more granular U.S. approach to its African foreign policy. Instead, the United States shifted its engagement-by-intermediary policy approach from former colonial powers to institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Union. The U.S. continues to fail to engage African nations on a state-by-state and state-*to*-state basis.

Despite the rollout of the new U.S.-Africa initiative in which the U.S. policy was to fully staff and fund its perpetually understaffed and underfunded embassies and consulates to promote more state-to-state engagement, the U.S. has continued its policy of regionalism, engaging African nations through intermediaries, instead of bi-laterally, viewing African nations through a monolithic prism. Additionally, despite Blinken's proclamation in his speech unveiling the new initiative that "the United States will not dictate Africa's choices, and neither should anyone else," U.S. policy continues to do just that. The statements from the Nigerien government spokesperson Colonel -Major Amadou Abdramane, that "denounced with force the condescending attitude" of the head of the recent high-level U.S. delegation, along with the statement from Nigerien government communication assistant Insa Garba Saidou, which criticized the U.S. for trying to force Niger to choose between its strategic partners, demonstrates a continued patronizing policy that has not changed.

Section 7008 of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2023 is the law that restricts U.S. military and economic assistance to nations that have suffered from unconstitutional changes in their government.[44] As written, Section 7008 applies when "a duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d'état or decree" or "a coup d'état or decree in which the military played a decisive role in the ousting of a duly elected head of government."[45] It is no doubt that Section 7008 applies in the case of Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Gabon. That Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Guinea, and Gabon suffered coup d'etat is without debate. As initially written and narrowly interpreted, Section 7008 does not allow the U.S. the flexibility to engage in nuanced foreign policy.

In December 2022, Congress made two changes to Section 7008. The first allows restricted assistance to "support a democratic transition." The second, and most important in the context of Niger, is that Congress included a waiver that allows the secretary of state to "waive funding restrictions on a program-by-program basis if the secretary certifies and reports to appropriations committees that the waiver is in the national security interests of the United States."[46] It is unfathomable that a waiver exists allowing the U.S. to re-engage economically and militarily in the Sahel, yet it has not been applied. The reliance on regional initiatives without direct U.S. involvement and support leaves indigenous forces lacking the necessary resources and capabilities to effectively combat extremist groups and safeguard American interests in the region. While diplomatic engagement is essential, it *must* be coupled with tangible military support and *strategic intervention* to address the root causes of instability and promote long-term security and stability. The United States must commit itself to a *whole of government* engagement diplomatically, economically, and militarily or risk a growing regional challenge.

Recommendations

The U.S. government must apply the Section 7008 waiver to Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger utilizing the September 2022 amendment on the basis that such a waiver is necessary to protect US national security interests. Allowing jihadists to gain control of a massive territory in northern Africa and use it as a haven is a threat to the national security of the United States and its allies. Additionally, such a territory would provide these groups the resources to fund a global terrorist network and provide a launch point into the rest of West Africa. The vast uranium-rich deposits in Niger would allow the proliferation of dirty bombs on an unprecedented scale and potentially allow for the supply of material to hostile nation-states such as Iran and North Korea. Section 7008 waiver based on national security would apply in this case. I therefore propose the following:

1. **Application of Section 7008 Waiver:** Utilizing the waiver provision of Section 7008 to resume military and economic assistance to Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger is crucial for countering jihadist threats and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This waiver would allow the U.S. to allocate funds toward security assistance programs, capacity-building initiatives, and development projects to address underlying instability drivers. While the exact budgetary allocation would depend on specific program requirements and needs assessments, a sizable portion of Africa's U.S. foreign aid

budget should be earmarked for this purpose. A preliminary estimate suggests that allocating an additional $500 million annually towards security assistance in the Sahel could effectively support indigenous forces, strengthen governance institutions, and enhance socio-economic development, thereby contributing to regional stability and security.

2. **Increase Engagement:** Enhancing diplomatic efforts and high-level engagement with Sahel governments requires additional resources for staffing, operational costs, and diplomatic initiatives. Allocating an additional $50 million annually towards embassy staffing, travel expenses, and diplomatic initiatives in the Sahel would enable the United States to bolster its regional presence and engagement. This investment would facilitate regular dialogue, coordination, and collaboration with Sahel governments, regional organizations, and international stakeholders, thereby strengthening partnerships and promoting collective action towards addressing shared security challenges.

3. **Enhance Military Support:** Increasing funding and training for indigenous forces is essential for building their capacity to combat extremist groups effectively. In addition to financial resources, providing advanced military hardware is necessary to enhance their operational capabilities on the ground. Specific equipment from the U.S. inventory could provide includes night vision technology, helicopters (such as Black Hawks and Cobra attack helicopters), armored vehicles (Stryker, MRAPs, stored M1A2 Abrams, retired Bradelys), intelligence assets (satellite intelligence, Global Hawk intelligence, communications intelligence), and artillery (Howitzers, mortars, MLRS). Allocating an additional $1 billion annually towards military assistance programs in the Sahel would enable the procurement and provision of essential equipment, resources, and logistical support to indigenous forces, thereby strengthening their ability to counter jihadist threats and maintain security and stability in the region.

4. **Strategic Intervention:** Conducting direct and targeted military strikes against jihadist groups requires careful planning, coordination, and intelligence sharing with indigenous forces and regional partners. While the exact cost of such operations would vary depending on the scale and scope of military engagements, allocating an additional $500 million annually towards counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel would enable us to conduct targeted airstrikes, special operations, and intelligence-driven missions aimed at disrupting terrorist networks, degrading their capabilities, and rolling back their influence. This investment would support ongoing efforts to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, disrupt supply chains, and neutralize high-value targets, enhancing regional security and stability.

5. **Protect Strategic Assets:** Safeguarding critical U.S. interests, including the drone base in Northern

Niger and uranium deposits, requires enhanced security measures and surveillance capabilities. Investing in infrastructure upgrades, perimeter security, and surveillance technology would mitigate the risk of attacks or infiltration by extremist groups. Allocating an additional $100 million annually towards security enhancements and counterterrorism measures at strategic assets in the Sahel would strengthen their protection and resilience, thereby safeguarding American interests and preventing their exploitation by hostile actors.

6. **Counter Chinese and Russian Influence:** Countering Chinese and Russian influence in the Sahel requires a comprehensive strategy that leverages American resources, expertise, and partnerships to promote sustainable development and strengthen governance institutions. Investing in economic development projects, infrastructure initiatives, and capacity-building programs would demonstrate U.S. commitment to the region's stability and security. Allocating an additional $200 million annually towards development assistance and governance support in Niger and the Sahel would enable us to counterbalance Chinese and Russian investments, promote democratic governance, and foster long-term stability and prosperity in the region.

7. **Support Democratic Governance:** Promoting and supporting democratic governance in Niger and the Sahel requires sustained investment in technical assistance, capacity-building support, and financial resources. Strengthening electoral processes, enhancing rule of law mechanisms, and combatting corruption are essential for consolidating democratic gains and promoting human rights. Allocating an additional $50 million annually towards democracy promotion initiatives and civil society engagement would empower local communities, strengthen governance institutions, and uphold democratic values, thereby fostering political stability and inclusivity in the Sahel.

8. **End Patronizing and Paternalistic Policies:** Ending regionalism and multilateral approaches to diplomatic engagement requires a paradigm shift towards granular, state-to-state engagement with African nations. Investing in language and cultural training for diplomats, expanding embassy staffing and resources, and fostering direct dialogue and collaboration with Sahel governments would enhance mutual understanding and trust. Allocating an additional $20 million annually towards diplomatic initiatives and cultural exchange programs would facilitate more nuanced and effective engagement with African nations, thereby promoting respectful and equitable partnerships based on mutual interests and shared values.

The total additional funding recommended for the region amounts to a paltry $2.42 billion annually. Consider that during the 2023 holiday season, Americans spent over $850 billion on holiday shopping—which averages more than $2.3 billion *per day*. In comparison, the proposed $2.42 billion annual allocation for the Sahel is a modest investment for promoting stability, security,

and democratic governance in the region. By implementing these recommendations and allocating resources accordingly, the U.S. can effectively address the root causes of instability in Niger and the Sahel, promote democratic governance, and safeguard American interests in the region. Moreover, an initiative-taking and comprehensive approach will help prevent further escalation of violence, mitigate the risk of terrorism, and promote long-term peace and prosperity in the Sahel and the broader coastal regions of West Africa.

About the Author: *Curtis Smith is a Master of Arts candidate in International Relations at Tufts University in the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, with a Master of Arts in Global Affairs from the University of Oklahoma. His research focuses on U.S. policy in the Sahel, emphasizing security and development.*

[1] "IntelBrief: Jihadist Groups Threaten to Destabilize the Sahel and Coastal West Africa," *The Soufan Center*, April 2023, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-april-4/
[2] "IntelBrief: Jihadist Groups Threaten to Destabilize the Sahel," *The Soufan Center*.
[3] "Support urgently needed to avert a deeper Sahel crisis, UNHCR's protection chief warns," *United Nations High Commission on Refugees*, March 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/press-releases/support-urgently-needed-avert-deeper-sahel-crisis-unhcr-s-protection-chief
[4] "10 million children in extreme jeopardy in central Sahel as insecurity seeps into neighbouring countries – UNICEF." *UNICEF*, March 2023, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/10-million-children-extreme-jeopardy-central-sahel-insecurity-seeps-neighbouring
[5] Tope Shola Akinyetun. "What is driving violence in the Sahel," *London School of Economics and Political Science*, July 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/07/10/what-is-driving-violence-in-the-sahel/
[6] "Humanitarian crisis in Sahel region of Africa," *World Health Organization*, 2023, https://www.who.int/emergencies/situations/humanitarian-crisis-in-sahel-region-of-africa
[7] Center for Preventative Action. "Violent Extremism in the Sahel (Global Conflict Tracker)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2024, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel
[8] Center for Preventative Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel."
[9] Center for Preventative Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel."
[10] Center for Preventative Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel."
[11] "Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)," *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*, May 2024, https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/mali/
[12] "Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)," *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*,
[13] "Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)," *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.*
[14] "10 million children in extreme jeopardy," *UNICEF*.
[15] "10 million children in extreme jeopardy," *UNICEF*.
[16] "10 million children in extreme jeopardy," *UNICEF*.
[17] Akinyetun, "What is driving violence in the Sahel."
[18] "10 million children in extreme jeopardy," *UNICEF*.
[19] "10 million children in extreme jeopardy," *UNICEF*.
[20] Simon Speakman Cordall. "Under new general, Russia's Wagner makes deeper inroads into Libya," *Al Jazeera*, February 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/25/under-new-general-russias-wagner-makes-deeper-inroads-into-libya
[21] Cordall, "Under new general, Russia's Wagner makes deeper inroads into Libya."
[22] James Jay Carafano. "U.S.-Africa policy adrift," *GIS*, September 2023, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/us-africa/
[23] Carafano, "U.S.-Africa policy adrift."
[24] Alexander Noyes. "The Case For A Governance First U.S. Security Policy In The Sahel," *Hoober Institution*, June 2023, https://www.hoover.org/research/case-governance-first-us-security-policy-sahel.
[25] Noyes, "The Case For A Governance First U.S. Security Policy In The Sahel."
[26] Noyes, "The Case For A Governance First U.S. Security Policy In The Sahel."
[27] Catherine Nzuki and Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, August 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/potential-and-limits-new-us-strategy-sub-saharan-africa
[28] Michael Shurkin. "No more business as usual: The US needs a broader engagement strategy in West Africa," *Atlantic Council*, February 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/no-more-business-as-usual-the-us-needs-a-broader-engagement-strategy-in-west-africa/
[29] Shurkin, "No more business as usual."
[30] Shurkin, "No more business as usual."
[31] Nzuki and Dizolele, "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategic for Sub-Saharan Africa."
[32] Nzuki and Dizolele, "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategic for Sub-Saharan Africa."
[33] Nzuki and Dizolele, "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategic for Sub-Saharan Africa."
[34] Nzuki and Dizolele, "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategic for Sub-Saharan Africa."
[35] Nzuki and Dizolele, "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategic for Sub-Saharan Africa."
[36] Nzuki and Dizolele, "The Potential and Limits of the New U.S. Strategic for Sub-Saharan Africa."

[37] Ruth Maclean and Eric Schmitt. "Niger Orders American Troops to Leave Its Territory," *The New York Times*, March 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/17/world/africa/niger-orders-american-troops-out.html?smid=url-share
[38] Maclean and Schmitt, "Niger Orders American Troops to Leave Its Territory."
[39] David Vergun. "U.S. Working Diplomatically With Niger on New Path of Cooperation," *U.S. Department of Defense*, March 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3710272/us-working-diplomatically-with-niger-on-new-path-of-cooperation/
[40] "US holds out hope for partnership with Niger," *Africa News*, March 2024, https://www.africanews.com/2024/03/19/us-holds-out-hope-for-partnership-with-niger//
[41] "US holds out hope for partnership with Niger," *Africa News*.
[42] Rachel Chason, Omar Hama Saley, and Rachel Pannett. "Niger junta announces end to military relationship with United States," *The Washington Post*, March 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/16/niger-junta-end-us-military/?pwapi_token=eyJ0eXAiOiJKV1QiLCJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJyZWFzb24iOiJnaWZ0IiwibmJmIjoxNzEwNjQ4MDAwLCJpc3MiOiJzdWJzY3JpcHRpb25zIiwiZXhwIjoxNzEyMDMwMzk5LCJpYXQiOjE3MTA2NDgwMDAsImp0aSI6I
[43] Center for Preventative Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel."
[44] Sarah Harrison. "Impacts of Section 7008, the 'Coup Restriction', on U.S. Policy in Niger," *Lawfare*, August 2023, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/impacts-of-section-7008-the-coup-restriction-on-u.s.-policy-in-niger
[45] Harrison, "Impacts of Section 7008."
[46] Harrison, "Impacts of Section 7008."

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Islam for Legitimation in the Aftermath of the Second Chechen War

Gonzalo Rosillo Odriozola and Camilo Torres Casanova

In the aftermath of the Second Chechen War, political actors resorted to the use of Islam as a legitimation tool. The Russian authorities in Moscow, the Chechen authorities in Grozny, and the Activist-Salafist movements all relied on the representations produced by religion to demand political power and legitimacy. All actors refer to their interpretation of Islam as 'traditional,' 'unique,' or 'correct,' even when they differ significantly. This article aims to explore the relationships of interdependence between particular Chechen political actors and their use of Islam as a political tool. As a result, it finds that while there are unique traits to each actor's use of Islam, this dynamic also follows a structure of co-dependence and varies depending on which two actors are involved. Interdependence is demonstrated through a graphic framework that illustrates the relation between Moscow and Grozny's use of Islam is based on an exchange of interests; the link between Grozny and Umarov's activist Salafist movement is based on the quest for the 'real' Chechen Islam; and the relation between Moscow and the activist Salafist movement expresses itself on the continued resistance to the Russian government, amid the Global War on Terror.

Introduction

On August 7, 1999, two armies of Chechen, Dagestani, and international militants invaded the neighboring Republic of Dagestan in the Russian Caucasus. In early September 1999, these groups orchestrated a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgodonsk, which recently designated Prime Minister of Russia Vladimir Putin immediately classified as Chechen terrorism.[1] In response, the new Russian government immediately called for the execution of a bombing campaign against Chechnya, giving way to the Second Chechen War. The conflict eventually stabilized with the Russian capture of Grozny and the Kremlin appointment of Akhmad Kadyrov as president of the Putin-backed government of Chechnya in May 2000. However, for the next several years, armed insurgencies continued to operate through guerrilla warfare and terrorism. On April 16, 2009, Moscow declared the end of the counterterrorist operation in Chechnya, officially putting an end to the conflict.

The aftermath of the Second Chechen War involved constant political instability and violence, including the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov in 2004, the periodic fragmentation of the Grozny-based government into opposing militias, and the Kremlin's designation of Ramzan Kadyrov as Prime Minister of the Republic in 2006. Even after Kadyrov's appointment in March 2006, his government faced backlash from other factions of the previous independentist movements in Grozny. Notably, former separatist leader Dokka Umarov founded the Caucasus Emirate, which comprised the political territory of the Chechen Republic, in October 2007 and declared himself emir of the new political entity in stark opposition to Kadyrov's leadership. In 2015, the Caucasus Emirate pledged allegiance to the

Islamic State.

The end of the Second Chechen War was accompanied by an attempt by the Russian government to "normalize" or "Chechenise" the region. Moscow accepted the Kadyrov clan's assumption of power in Chechnya, establishing a dictatorial and nepotistic system in exchange for "feudal loyalty" to the central government.[2] The government in the region reliably defends Moscow's positions in the international arena, while domestic politics has become almost exclusively Kadyrov's domain. During this "normalization" process, Kadyrov managed to build the image of the "good Chechen," loyal to Moscow and a pious Muslim. According to 2010 data, 95% of the population practices Shafi'i and Hanafi Islam, and many are also Sufis.[3] Chechen Islam, with particularities derived from regional folklore and traditions, has been the fundamental pillar on which Kadyrov has built his legitimacy, in opposition to the "foreign" Islam of Salafism. Kadyrov also emphasized the concept of a "holy Russia," where Chechen Islam coexists with the other denominations accepted by Moscow.

In this context, a considerable part of the literature about the evolution of today's Chechnya agrees on the relevance of Islam as a key political element. There is an academic consensus that motivations and discourse amid the First Chechen War were purely nationalistic, where Islam appeared only as one element of Chechen identity and not its essential trait. In contrast, during and after the Second Chechen War, different forms of Islam were claimed as determining components of the armed and political struggle in the territory by all actors. Consequently, Islam was used by the Chechen leadership in Grozny (and, by extension, to Putin's authority in Moscow) to legitimize the need for the population to remain loyal to the government while other groups used Islam to encourage resistance.

This essay aims to explore how Islam has been used as a legitimation tool by various actors in Chechnya in the aftermath of the Second Chechen War. At this point, it is indispensable to note that this article will use Robertson's definition of *legitimation*. According to that proposition, *legitimacy* is related to an institution's entitlement to be obeyed.[4] In that sense, the use of Islam as a tool to foster legitimacy is a process by which the different actors seek to increase their entitlement to obedience using that set of beliefs.

This paper identifies three main actors who sought political legitimacy through the instrumentalization of Islam. First is the Russian government (alternately referred to in this paper as 'Moscow,' 'Putin,' or 'the Russian authorities'). This includes the Russian executive, as well as Russia's Muslim supreme authorities, mainly those located in Moscow and Ufa. Second is the Chechen authorities (also labeled as the 'Chechen government,' 'Grozny,' or simply 'Kadyrov'). These authorities, loyal to Moscow, differ from those of the defunct Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya (ChRI). Third is the Salafist-jihadist movement led by Umarov until he died in 2013. This Salafist (or simply jihadist) activist movement, also called Wahhabist by the Chechen authorities, rejected both traditional Sufi Russian and Chechen Islam to instead seek independence via the creation of an Islamic state in the North Caucasus.

This article's central argument is that the three actors' strategies for using Islam as a legitimation tool are co-dependent. Umarov's Salafist-jihadist discourse was constructed in opposition to both the Russian government's and the Chechen authorities' instrumentalization of Islam. In the case of the last two, references to the former are constant even though they have practically quelled the threat. Moreover, in the Moscow-Grozny relationship, two paradoxical readings exist of what 'good Islam' represents, one pre-eminently Russian and the other from Grozny, which has come to be called 'Kadyrovism.'

With regards to structure, this paper will be made up of three sections: (i) a brief description of the three actors' defining traits of the use of Islam for legitimation; (ii) an analysis of the relations that appear between the three actors' use of Islam; and (iii) concluding thoughts.

Every Actor's Different 'Islam'

Moscow's Islam

Despite the prominence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a political actor, Islam is quite present in Russia. According to a 2010 census, the country hosts around 15 million nominal Russian Muslims from all regions (and over two million additional migrants).[5] Notable concentrations of Russian Muslims are in the North Caucasus (including Chechnya and Dagestan), the Moscow region, and Western Siberia. The majority of Russian Muslims are Sunni (90%), including some belonging to the Hanafi and Shafii sub denominations. The remaining 10% are part of other schools, like the Shia denomination, and, as will be seen further on, the Chechen Sufi variety of Islam.[6]

Within that context, the institutional landscape of Russian Islam deserves mention. Even though there is no clear recognition of a main authority in the general Muslim creed, the Russian community has accepted the leadership of centralized entities. Namely, the Central Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Russia was established in Ufa, and a parallel Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Russian Federation came to be in Moscow. These institutions are in constant competition to secure the backing of the Russian state as the main authority over the Russian Muslim population, as well as to acquire the loyalty of mosques and become the representatives of the community at large.[7] Marlène Laruelle, an expert on illiberalism and Russian ideology, also mentions the existence of a Spiritual Administration for North Caucasian Muslims based in Makhachkala and the Moscow-located Russian Council of Muftis.[8] Hence, the environment is quite diverse, and one of the characteristic traits is the existence of efforts toward institutionalizing the practice of these beliefs.

The differences and degree of competition between the religious authorities are extreme: it would be inaccurate to depict them all as part of one system.[9] More specifically, the country's ecosystem is one where a central authority of religious rule is lacking but where the State does have a coordinating role in accepting what has a place (or not) in the political system.

Thus, the role of the Kremlin to guarantee utter control of Islam is part

of its strategy for legitimation, and the response of Muslim authorities has been to adopt a 'compliant' position where they have decided to avoid taking positions that could antagonize Moscow.[10] Russian legislation reinforces this relationship by distinguishing between 'traditional' religions, which have equal rights, and 'non-traditional' religions, which are considered alien and even terrorist in some cases. This classification is the inheritance of a system that came to be in the late 1990s when former President of Russia Boris Yeltsin was pressured to divide the status of religious associations. This influence resulted in the drafting of a Federal Law *On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* in 1997. While the law did not use the terms 'traditional' or 'non-traditional,' it did reference specific creeds as strongly related to the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia.[11] Sibgatullina, a professor of illiberal regimes at the University of Amsterdam, proposed the same thesis contrasting religious groups in Russia using this 'traditionalist paradigm.'[12]

The division of creeds into traditional and non-traditional influenced different spheres of Russia's politics. For one, the ROC uses said ideology explicitly, naming other religions as part of 'independent ethno-confessional minorities.'[13] Furthermore, the recognition of said minorities by the ROC is completely linked to their recognition that the Orthodox religion is a key and dominant element in the formation of Russian identity. This is the context in which Islam is regulated institutionally and which acquires importance to understand the use of religious belief as a tool of legitimation by the Russian state. Moreover, the adoption of provisions that limit the existence and activities of other religious groups is justified from a national security perspective. In the case of Islam, government control has been supported by various religious leaders as part of the struggle against terrorism and extremism. Even more so, statements by multiple muftis in the country agreed with the text of amendments that strengthened control by the State, justifying this decision on the need to fight the terrorism that appears in 'pseudo-religious' organizations.[14] Hence, the institutional perspective helps make visible the legal dimension of the legitimation strategies, which will be further analyzed in the next section.

Conversely, a different dimension is that of the beliefs that are professed as part of mainstream Russian Islam. In that sense, the 'traditional' form of Russian Islam (independent of the institutions promoting it) is a specific creed. Some of the main elements of this 'traditional' variant include absolute allegiance to the Russian state, civic patriotism, adherence to *Hanafi*sm, and the valorization of Sufi traditions.[15] These components were the product of the consensus of religious authorities of the country during Soviet times and differentiate this school from all other forms of 'non-traditional' Islam. Hence, this second possible dimension to constructing official narratives of Islam in Russia should be a new analysis point to explore possible legitimation strategies for every actor. In the following section, these dimensions of 'traditional' Islam (either accepted by the relevant institutions or fits within the ideological contours of the admitted schools) will be reviewed as potential mechanisms of legitimation of the

Russian state *vis-a-vis* the other actors.

Grozny's Islam

Chechen Islam is one of the most distinctive forms of the religion, combining elements of Sufi thought and local traditions. Moreover, Sufi Islam is considered a source of unity for the people of the republic.[16] The authorities in Grozny, particularly Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen government, fostered a unique form of Islam to legitimize his rule.

This form of Islam has been understood as unique by scholars in the field, even if the Chechen leadership proclaims it to be the same 'traditional' creed as professed by the Russian state. Kadyrov's version of Islam is a simplistic reinterpretation of the Sufi denomination coupled with other social norms.[17] Thus, Kadyrov-accepted religious beliefs combine local folklore, nationalist practices, and Muslim customs. For instance, some of the most common rituals of the Republic include the public repetition of the name of God and the chapters of the *Quran*, as well as the promotion of pilgrimage to the tombs of local saints.[18] It is worth noting that some of these practices would be considered idolatry (and thus, banned) under 'traditional Russian' Islam. This prohibition is accompanied by a very strict interpretation of religious beliefs, so puritanical norms are instituted as forms of social control. For instance, the authorities placed restrictions concerning the consumption of alcohol, gambling, and physical appearance. The control of the regime in this sense has gone so far as to declare the required lengths for beards for men to differentiate them from *jihadists*, demanding the use of the *hijab* for women (though not in the colors traditionally related to Wahhabism) and the prohibition of Western and 'radical' media. A 2015 study on the policies of the Chechen government revealed a clear intent of legitimation through Islam and imposed conditions on the social order of the Republic.[19] More so, the authorities have carried out a policy for the construction of mosques in the country and the elimination of monuments that support the idea of an Islam that is distant from Russia. Specifically, monuments in memory of the victims of Soviet deportations (which remind the public of the existence of a Chechen plight in opposition to Moscow) are no longer accepted as they go against Kadyrov's 'unifying' strategy. Thus, Kadyrov has been intent on creating and promoting his particular vision of Islam, which, in turn, produces a specific social order over the population.

Laruelle supports this view and emphasizes the importance of Islam as a central pillar that defines Kadyrov's regime and creates a social order in tandem with the leader's personal inclinations for control over the population.[20] Kadyrov created a public image based on traditional 'Sufi' practices intermingled with Chechen culture and customs. Given the uniqueness of this set of beliefs within Muslim tradition, his government is also defined as the protector of the original Chechen form of Islam. Thus, Muslims who profess political ideas that go against Kadyrov's (and Putin's) are seen as radicals, infidels, and even terrorists. Moreover, the central idea is that only one form of Islam is traditional and Chechen.

Activist-Salafists' Islam

In 2007, former President Dokka Umarov of the ChRI proclaimed a Caucasus Emirate in the region, with an apparent Salafist inclination. This ideology was in direct opposition to traditional Chechen Sufism. However, the support of some sectors of the population was not based on theological grounds but rather on dissatisfaction with the authorities in Grozny and the lack of a real alternative to Moscow's policies. Likewise, many of the movement's warlords had moved toward Salafist positions to obtain foreign funding, mainly from the Persian Gulf, for their war against Russia.[21] Umarov's declaration of the Caucasus Emirate resulted in a series of dynamics that have been present in the region at least since the early 2000s, including poor socioeconomic conditions, an ethno-nationalist population, and the endurance of archaic tribal social institutions. These conditions facilitated the spread of a militant form of Salafism, which overshadowed the once-dominant Chechen separatism. A sense of regional solidarity or internationalism in opposition to Russians served as an ideological basis for this transition. As a means to unite the people, members of the Chechen resistance made use of Islam to overcome historically strong *tariqa* affinities, with the final aim of creating a non-ethnic Islamic theocracy.[22] This way, militant Salafism is considered the only political counterweight to Moscow and an alternative plan to tackle society's problems.[23] Finally, with the creation of the Emirate, Umarov confirmed the ideological shift of part of the Chechen rebellion, splitting it into Islamists and nationalists.

It was upon this Salafist-takfiri jihadist ideology that Dokka Umarov based the Caucasus Emirate, definitively abandoning the nationalist goals of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya and traditional Chechen Sufism.[24] The foundational goal of this new emirate was "to liberate the Islamic *Ummah* (community) from *jahiliyyah* (barbarism) and rid the world of *murtads* and *kuffar* (infidels) in order to establish Sharia law on the whole earth."[25] This use of Quranic vocabulary and Arab-Muslim titles is an attempt at religious legitimacy by Umarov's insurgents, for instance, by calling themselves *mujahideen* (warriors for the faith) and claiming the need to create *dar al-Islam* (land of peace).[26]

Rather than purely doctrinal causes, the limited spread of this ideology can be attributed primarily to three factors: 1) the search for funding by various warlords in the inter-war period;[27] 2) the conviction by a small part of the population that this was the only real opposition to Moscow's power;[28] and 3) the exacerbation of the conflict produced by the excessive Russian military reaction.[29] The rising popularity of Salafism at the expense of traditional Chechen Sufism led to the fragmentation and radicalization of the rebel movement. The principal contention between Chechen factions was the incompatibility of Salafi jihadism and traditional Chechen Sufism. As a result, the close alliance between Chechen warlords and well-funded jihadi groups secured relevant positions for both Salafists and foreign jihadists within the hierarchy of the separatist movement.

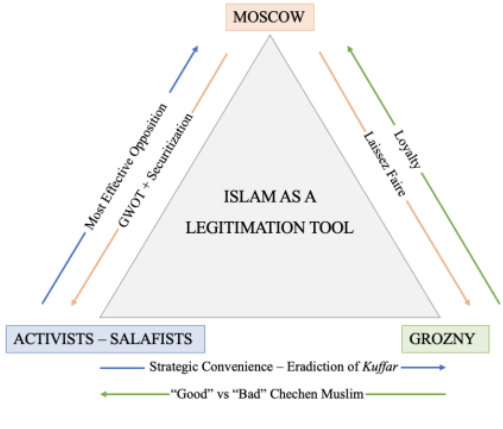
Lastly, the declaration of the Emirate essentially confirmed the collapse of the Ichkeriyan process. In fact, after Kadyrov's victory and the post-war

schism within society, the plan for an independent Chechnya became less appealing.[30] Furthermore, the failure of Salafist factions to create an Islamic State in Chechnya was a consequence of the rejection among the traditional Chechen Sufi population instead of the result of the Russian armed intervention.[31] Because of the low support within Chechnya and the poor military and financial capacity, these Wahhabists sought support in surrounding areas with the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate.

The Co-Dependence of Strategies for Legitimation Through Islam

This section will analyze how each relation among the actors is bidirectional and how all are key components of each other's use of Islam as a legitimation tool (Figure 1). Each axis represents one of the three main actors and their particular 'Islams." The arrows refer to the bidirectional relationships under which we placed the 'key' element defining them. As such, the relationship between Moscow and Grozny's use of Islam is based on an exchange of interests: Grozny offers 'loyalty' to Moscow in exchange for '*laissez-faire*' in internal matters (concretely, the conduction of the particularities of Kadyrov's Sufi Islam). The relation between Grozny and Umarov's activist Salafist movement is based on the quest for the 'real' Chechen Islam: Grozny labels Salafi-wahhabists as 'bad Chechen Muslims' to build its conception of the 'good Chechen Muslim,' whereas the activist-Salafists portray Grozny as '*kuffars*' that need to be eradicated while gaining access to foreign funding and fighters. Lastly, the relation between Moscow and the activist Salafist movement expresses itself through the continued resistance to the Russian government: Moscow depicts these rebels as terrorists and its effort to defeat them as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) to justify the securitization of Islam, while the activist Salafist rebellion gained popularity among part of the Chechen population mainly because it offered the only effective opposition to Russia's power.

Figure 1. Interdependence of Islam as a Legitimation Tool



Moscow - Grozny: Laissez-faire in Exchange for Loyalty

Moscow, the Permissive Authority

The first relationship worth mentioning is between Moscow and Grozny. The Russian authorities have a *laissez-faire* approach towards the Chechen government and its use of religion as a legitimation tool. An initial factor to consider is the difference between the practice of Chechen and Russian Islam. As was mentioned in the previous section, there are very marked doctrinal differences between both currents. In particular, comparing both belief systems shows that the base ideology is quite different. On the one hand, Russian Islam (as professed by religious authorities) is a mixture of several ideological loyalties,

which contrast against the backdrop of Soviet political culture. The combination includes some Hanafi elements, the valorization of Sufi practices, and a high degree of State allegiance as a central component.[32] This combination together assumes the role of a "traditional" Islam that is accepted by the State and marked by a clear emphasis on loyalty to the State.[33] On the other hand, Chechen Islam is heavily influenced by local customs, can be described as a complex mixture of denominations, and has also taken a strongly puritanical dimension to it. Hence, there are two diametrically different forms of religion, and it might be hard to place the Chechen variety within the limits of what is 'traditional' from Moscow's point of view.

Nonetheless, the promotion of this sort of "non-traditional" Islam is a consequence of the risks associated with religious transnationality or 'global' forms of Islam that could influence Russia. The existence of forms of Islam that span across different States is seen as a threat to national security, as it weakens the protagonism of the Kremlin and generates the possibility of identifying foreign actors.[34] Hence, the strategy of the State is related to the support of local forms of Islam, which are in utter disconnection with each other but profess unwavering loyalty to Moscow. Moreover, the *modus operandi* of the authorities is one of co-optation of religion. The government has sought to centralize power and delegate authority only to selected institutions, which are supposed to keep control of beliefs and the political allegiance of Muslim communities. The benefit of the latter strategy is that the central government is not the actor dictating allegiance, which could endanger its standing with local communities or generate resentment. Even more so, "by allowing Islam to be addressed at the regional level, republican regimes are allowed to garner legitimacy through, for example, their association with regional identities."[35]

In the case of Chechnya, the Kremlin has chosen to maintain this same policy of delegation only to selected institutions despite the severe ideological differences between Russian and Chechen Islam. However, Chechen Islam has also enjoyed a more extensive set of liberties than the practices that occur in other republics. It is worth mentioning that the Kadyrov regime has promoted the adoption of a hardline interpretation of Islam, which imposes consequences on the lifestyle of the people in the territory. These policies include the tightening of control over the consumption of alcohol, the prohibition of gambling, and the establishment of 'moralization' programs, which have had a considerable impact on the rights of women.[36] Even more so, these restrictions not only align with the official Russian doctrine of Islam but have even been codified as law. For instance, Grozny has barred the entry of citizens of Danish origin and strongly voiced condemnation of *Charlie Hebdo*, even organizing a massive protest against the magazine. Sometimes, the contradiction is even more direct, such as when Kadyrov blatantly ignored the Russian State requirement for Grozny to investigate the occurrence of attacks against women.[37] Further, Kadyrov has personally threatened important Russian political figures like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, declaring him 'the enemy of all Muslims.' These policies and actions seek to reinforce Kadyrov's strategy of presenting himself as one of the leaders of the Islamic world, not only in Russia.

Then, it is possible to see the contradiction here. The form of Islam that Grozny promotes is not only against Russian law in several of its aspects but is even in contradiction to the security perspective that the Kremlin has imposed upon said religion

specifically. This was done by countering the 'local' focus of 'traditional' Russian Islam. The consequence of said inconsistency is that Moscow has assumed a laissez-faire position concerning Chechen religious leadership. Here, the central element is that Grozny's Islam is viable only if it presents a strong allegiance to the Russian state. In return, Moscow disregarded the specific elements of the religion that did not fit with the 'traditional' view. Thus, the strategy in this case goes beyond the one that applies to the other republics, as it forces the Russian state to lose more control. However, the form of legitimation is clear: as long as allegiance is evident, institutional backing by religious authorities from Moscow is present towards Grozny.

Kadyrov, the Grand Loyalist

Kadyrov has been intent on continuing to enjoy the relative 'liberty' that Moscow grants through a strong demonstration of loyalty towards the Russian regime. Kadyrov has made a clear pledge of allegiance to the Kremlin, the most underscored aspect of Chechen Islam, to maintain its status as 'traditional' and therefore 'accepted' by Moscow. It is easy to see how Kadyrov has aimed to exhibit displays of patriotism and steadfast support for Moscow, as well as condemnation for every form of religious belief that is not in tandem with the Kremlin's views.

One of the most interesting strategies used to reinforce allegiance to the Kremlin is the creation of discursive and dogmatic connections between Chechen Islam and elements of Russian identity. Kadyrov affirmed that Islam should embody the spirituality of the Russian motherland under the leadership of the ROC. Additionally, the Chechen authorities carried out a policy to eliminate monuments that support the idea of an Islam that is distant from Russia. Specifically, monuments in memory of the victims of Soviet deportations, which could serve as reminders of the existence of a Chechen plight in opposition to Moscow, are no longer accepted as they go against Kadyrov's 'unifying' strategy. The most outstanding element is the idea of 'Kadyrovism' as a distinct political ideology that serves as a tool for both the Kremlin and the Chechen leader.[38] The two most important components of 'Kadyrovism' are the appropriation of Chechen identity as directly included within Russian nationalism and, more importantly, the implementation of a hardline form of Islam related to the 'traditional' Chechen denomination. Likewise, another notorious practice is Kadyrov's rehabilitation of previously rejected religious figures from Islam, but that had solid inclinations for Chechen unification with Russia. This happens in addition to Kadyrov's self-promotion as the one who was able to 'convert' jihadists into loyalists and who is also a Muslim leader at the same level as others from the Gulf and the Middle East.

Moreover, references have been made to the idea of 'Holy Russia' as one entity that combines all Russians' spiritual beliefs. This idea, therefore, centralizes the devotion of all believers in the country. This statement is significant if understood next to the notion of 'Holy Russia' as one that is linked directly to the existence of the motherland and brings forth its foundational myth. Moreover, according to Cherniavsky, the concept is thoroughly connected to Russian orthodoxy and expresses both the political culture predominant in the country and the importance of religion to identity.[39] In this way, a notion that is a consequence of orthodox thought and Russian identity also enshrines Muslim belief. Hence, references to the concept by both Kadyrov and the head of the Central Muslim Spiritual

Directorate, Talgat Tadzhuddin, are demonstrations of devotion to the state itself as a defining element of the religious beliefs of spiritual leaders of the Republic. This is also underscored by the contact between Kadyrov and the Moscow Patriarchate, which is evidence of each other's identification as legitimate political actors. Even more, it is remarkable that some of these approaches have been strongly criticized by other religious authorities in the country, but this has not had a significant impact.

On a related note, Kadyrov has also been keen on presenting himself as unwaveringly loyal to Putin. This is demonstrated by both a ceremony in which around 20,000 members of the Chechen special forces swore allegiance to Putin or the fact that Kadyrov presents himself as a 'Putin-man' or a 'Kremlin man.'[40] This devotion is also related to the value of the motherland as part of Chechen Islam and continues to set an atmosphere in which attacks on Putin are attacks on the state and, therefore, on the religious dogma itself. The latter has gone so far as to suggest Kadyrov drop the title of President to be called imam of Chechnya to promote the unity of the republics, given that the only president can be the one in Moscow.[41]

From this viewpoint, it becomes apparent that Chechen authorities are employing a strategy of legitimization by framing loyalty as a defining element of Islam. In other words, if Kadyrov defends the Russian state, that is only because by doing so, he is defending Chechen Islam. This position, in turn, allows the regime to enjoy Moscow's favor and thus continue imposing the social order that is now dominant in Grozny.

Moscow and Activist Salafism: Rebels or Terrorists?

Terrorists

The legitimation relation logic that exists between Moscow and the activist Salafist movements in Chechnya has influences from both a narrative of securitization and the label of terrorism. In this sense, the use of labels is part of the strategy of the Kremlin to face 'illegitimate,' 'non-traditional,' or 'radical' forms of Islam (like Umarov's movement). Russia pursued a policy of non-negotiation with Chechen separatists, branding all of them as 'terrorists,' which acquired international legitimacy after 9/11.[42] This strategy of labeling Chechen resistance as 'terrorists' was unsuccessfully pursued by Yeltsin, as the international community supported the 'underdog' and most of the Russian population opposed the war.[43]

Putin framed the Chechen conflict as a part of the GWOT to avoid criticism and opposition to Russian excesses in the war.[44] Thus, Putin's Chechenization plan and its absolutist strategy in Chechnya were accepted internationally, as Russia became an essential partner of the GWOT.[45] This alleged 'War *on* terror' allowed Russia to pursue a 'War *of* terror' against radical (non-traditional) Islam, giving the concept of 'counterterrorism' an Orwellian meaning that justified brutally dealing with the Chechen insurrection.[46] Moscow presented the attacks by the Chechen separatists as an international terrorist threat,[47] to which all the members of the Chechen opposition belonged.[48] In short, Putin successfully played the 'Islamic terrorist' card, with almost no opposition from the international community and increasing support within Russia, especially following different attacks such as the one in Nord-Ost in 2002 or the Beslan school siege of 2004.[49]

Moreover, this discourse has been re-employed as part of the assignment of labels

to so-called terrorists (or radical Islamists). The logic of securitization has been present in the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Islam.[50] From the Kremlin's point of view, forms of Islam that are 'bad' include those that are not loyal to the State and that seek to destabilize it. Additionally, allegiance to the state is a central element of 'pious' Muslim beliefs. Even more so, the dynamic of securitization has been carried out through legislative means so that all forms of what is radical are purged from Russian society. In particular, the fight against extremism has been intensified through different policy instruments, such as prosecutions and the prohibition of several organizations as part of restriction lists.

Therefore, there is an ongoing fight to suppress ideologies deemed radical, which typically coincide with anti-government rhetoric. For that, Moscow's approach to activist Salafist movements is one of labeling. In that sense, the existence of the tag is necessary as a way in which separatist views are purged and refused by Russian society in general. This way, if those who profess beliefs like Umarov are seen as terrorists, this justifies both the Kremlin's targeting and the emphasis placed on accepted forms of Islam, which do not endanger the national security or territorial integrity of the Russian Federation as a whole.

Rebels

The rhetoric of national liberation that most activist Salafists employed was abandoned after the declaration of the Caucasus Emirate by Umarov in 2007.[51] In its place, a non-ethnic Islamist project was put forward, aiming to attract fighters and resources from abroad. Nevertheless, the primary motivation for the armed struggle remained the fight against Moscow, which kept the first place in the jihadist's hierarchy of hatred well above the Chechen authorities.[52] Thus, Umarov's promise to establish said trans-ethnic sharia state was conditioned upon the expulsion of the Russian occupier.[53]

This discourse gained support thanks to the excessively violent Russian military intervention and the targeting of Salafists (including non-jihadists) by Moscow and Grozny due to the endurance of archaic and clan-based loyalties.[54] This prosecution triggered an avalanche-like escalation of violence, as the clannish social organization and loyalties led the paternal relatives of the detained to seek vengeance for this 'disgrace.'

At this point, many conceived Salafism as an alternative ideology providing relatively simple solutions for society's complex problems. Additionally, Salafism's growth had a political motivation rather than a theological one, as an increasing number of Chechens started to see jihadism as the only actual political counterweight to the Moscow-dominated state institutions.[55]

Despite the radical Islamist elements of this rebellion, one of the main guiding principles remained the fight against Moscow. Even though the project of an independent Chechnya lost appeal, those who still saw Moscow as their main enemy joined the activist-Salafist movement as it became the most effective mechanism to keep opposing the Russian occupation.

Kadyrovism and Activist Salafism: The Question for the 'Good Chechen'

'Good' vs 'Bad' Chechen Islam

The Chechen authorities have managed to construct a distinct political ideology that has come to be known as 'Kadyrovism,' which is used as a tool by both the Kremlin and the Chechen leader.[56] This ideology

includes two key components: the appropriation of Chechen identity as directly included within Russian nationalism and, more importantly, the implementation of a hardline form of Islam in line with traditional Chechen practices. In this way, Grozny has established itself as an authority capable of administering the 'moral and spiritual passport' for deviant forms of Islam.

Since its arrival to power, Kadyrov has created a public image based on traditional Sufi Islam, which is inexorably linked to Chechen culture and customs.[57] Kadyrov has managed to prevail over the ethno-nationalist discourse that, in opposition to Moscow, also used Islam as a tool for legitimization and mobilization. This redefinition of the Chechen Muslim ideology, linked to loyalty to Grozny and Moscow, is accompanied by the rejection of all those forms of Islam that reject the authority of these two actors, categorizing them as radicals, infidels, and even terrorists. This construction of the idea of the 'good Chechen Muslim' was particularly successful due to its antagonization of the Wahhabist/Salafist enemy, who embodied 'bad Islam,' foreign and far removed from its customs and traditions. As Kroupenev indicates, Kadyrov used the popular rejection of foreign forms of Islam, establishing himself as the defender of the true form of the Chechen faith.[58] The infiltration of foreign Wahhabist/Salafist elements contributed to the fragmentation and radicalization of the Chechen separatist movement, legitimizing Kadyrov's discourse and policies.

The resistance of the traditional Chechen population to the Salafist discourse was key to the failure of the project of the Islamic state of the Caucasus. However, despite the eventual defeat of the movement led by Umarov, references to it from Grozny are constant, reminding the population of the danger of deviating from traditional Chechen Islam, of which Kadyrov is the main defender. An illustrative example of this is the eighth-minute-long political advertisement broadcasted every day after the evening news, which promotes the Chechen regime's legitimacy by referring to the foundational myth and Kadyrov's traits as a pious Muslim leader who protects Chechen beliefs. This advertisement includes the official reference to the 'negative past' of the *de facto* independent Chechnya of the interwar period to later praise the 'positive present.' Furthermore, there is a strong message around the religious defining traits of Chechen identity and the differences that exist between the 'traditional' Sufi view of Islam and the radical Wahhabist foreign ideology that turned the region into one of the centers of international terrorism.[59] Another illustrative example is provided by Vlaeminck, who explores visual media (through films and TV shows) in Russia and Chechnya to analyze the image built around Kadyrov and the perceptions he promotes.[60] As an example, in one of the reviewed films, the author calls attention to the depiction of two different forms of Chechens: a Sufist 'good' image and a 'Wahhabist' character that is savage and evil. In that spectrum, Kadyrov is the leader who holds the legitimacy of the 'good' Chechen Muslim and who has a central role in the fight against the common enemy, which is 'radical' Islam.

In short, the construction of the 'good Chechen Muslim' promoted by Kadyrov was carried out largely in opposition to the 'bad Muslim,' radicalized by foreign tendencies that distanced themselves from tradition. The regime uses constant references to this dichotomy to legitimize the Kadyrov government and loyalty to Moscow.

Activist Salafism: Religious Conversion or Convenience?

The activist Salafism that spread in Chechnya from the inter-war period onwards was a break with traditional Chechen Sufi Islam. With the decline of the Caucasus emirate, the rebellion led by Dokka Umarov abandoned nationalism in favor of a project of non-ethnic Islamic theocracy.[61] As is customary in jihadist movements, the discourse that supported this project was a dualistic Manichaeism, presenting their enemies (i.e., Moscow and Grozny) as infidels whom the *mujahideen* were supposed to eradicate.[62]

However, the germ of this apparent religious conversion does not lie in theological motives but rather in the search for funding and support from rebel leaders.[63] The Russian government's lack of support for Mashkadov's government facilitated the entry of radical Salafist elements into Chechnya, through which a significant number of warlords secured an influx of money and foreign fighters. The excessively violent Russian military intervention facilitated the fragmentation of the rebel movement and the radicalization of a larger number of fighters, who turned to these new Salafist positions.[64]

However, the project did not obtain sufficient support in Chechnya due to the popular rejection of this new form of Islam, which was far from the Sufi tradition. That is why Umarov's declaration of the emirate can be interpreted as the confirmation not only of the failure of the project of the Republic of Ichkeria but also of the Salafi reformist wave. Umarov sought to attract young Muslim fighters, both from Chechnya and the surrounding republics, to this idea of a Sharia-ruled trans-ethnic state, taking advantage of the discontent some felt towards Moscow and the local Sufi authorities.[65] As illustrated by Hankey, the Salafist resistance tried to diffuse the conflict over a wider area by framing it as a religious struggle, gaining financial resources and combatants from Islamists who were more willing to answer such a call to arms than to take arms to fight for Chechen independence.[66]

In short, while it is true that Umarov and a considerable number of Chechen rebels adopted Salafi-jihadist positions, the main motivations and causes were the search for greater support to continue their armed struggle.

Conclusions

The use of Islam by the three mentioned actors follows a structure of interdependence. This interdependence is there even if there are different denominations that the Russian state, Kadyrov, or activist-Salafist movements in Chechnya promote as 'traditional,' unique, or accepted forms of Islam. More than that, what appears as an element of interest is that each narrative requires the others to have a certain power of legitimation over the actions of the actor. In the case of the Russian authorities, the supporting logic is one of recognition of certain forms of Islam, either through their institutionalization or their identification with specific beliefs. From this point, the relationships with each actor are framed within a security logic of combat against radicals and extremists (as with Umarov's movement) or overall tolerance despite some friction (as demonstrated in the relationship between Moscow and Grozny). In this view, the legitimacy sought is related to the government's policies, like the support of Kadyrov's regime. Thus, the legitimacy of said continual approach depends on the existence of a group of Muslims classified as radical and threatening to national

security (Umarov) and one that is 'safe' and fits within the accepted institutional and ideological contours of Russian Islam. Here, it is pertinent to say that the actual degree of theological closeness between Kadyrov's Islam and that of the Russian state is a matter of further research and exceeds the scope of this article.

As a counterpart, the Chechen authorities' use of religion is much more connected to their own legitimacy as recognized political actors in the Republic. For Kadyrov, the use of Islam again is a tool that does not seem to follow a very clear ideological project but is built from a unique understanding of Muslim beliefs in conjunction with local traditions and nationalist practices. The power behind said combination is that Kadyrov's placement as a defender of his own brand of Islam makes him the legitimate leader of the Chechen people. However, the power of this narrative is only present if the other actors are part of the discourse. Regarding Moscow, Kadyrov's argument of representing the 'traditional' and accepted creed is only valid if tolerated by the state's religious authorities and the Kremlin. Moreover, the Chechen leader's argument depends on Putin not cataloging it as one of those organizations that pose a risk to the security of the Russian Federation in general. For that, Kadyrov must show loyalty to Moscow and make his Islam brand one that identifies with Putin's regime. On the other hand, presenting himself as 'the good Chechen Muslim' is only possible in opposition to 'the Bad Chechen Muslim,' a role that is accomplished by Umarov's movement. In this regard, more investigation into the current content of Chechen Islam and the specific relationship between Grozny and the national Muslim authorities could be necessary.

Finally, the activist Salafists' position in the structure of legitimation is mediated by the importance of its vocation of resistance. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the movement was created to better represent the unconformity of a part of the population with both the Chechen and the Russian state and calling for the republic's independence. Hence, the position that they seek to legitimate is their role as main combatants against the other actors. For that, the role that the movement sought to play required the other actors in the narrative to portray itself as the real resistance. In the case of Moscow, this relation is a consequence of the discourse that Umarov was the only viable opposition to the Kremlin, as Kadyrov had already betrayed the group. Furthermore, the use of Islam in its most radical forms also helps Umarov distinguish himself (and his movement) from traditional Chechen Islam and depicts him as closer to Wahhabist movements from other regions of the planet. The creation of this image turned out to be highly profitable for the movement in both economic and logistical terms. In this dimension, valuable questions for further research can focus on the later pledge of allegiance of the movement to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and how that decision plays into our proposed model. Additionally, it should be noted that Umarov's assassination in 2014 left space for further fragmentation of the movement. This is despite constant references in the discourse of the actors supporting his specific movement. Thus, additional research is needed to analyze the political culture within this form of opposition.

About the Authors: *Gonzalo Rosillo Odriozola holds a master's degree in International Security from the Paris School of International Affairs (Sciences Po) and a dual bachelor's degree in International Relations and Business Administration from IE University (Spain). His research centers on the European Union's external action and diplomacy, focusing on the Middle East and North Africa region.*

Camilo Torres Casanova holds a Master of Laws in National Security Law from Georgetown University Law Center, a Master of International Security from the Paris School of International Affairs (Sciences Po), and a bachelor's degree in Law from Universidad de los Andes (Colombia). His research centers on the relationship between human rights and international security, as well as peace and conflict studies, with an emphasis on Europe and Russia.

[1] While this is the official version, there are different perspectives to this story, mainly that the Russian government was behind the apartment bombings.
[2] Marlène Laruelle. "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?," *IFRI*, March 2017, https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/kadyrovism-hardline-islam-tool-kremlin
[3] Itekushev. "В Чечне Наблюдается Высокая Степень Религиозной Нетерпимости," *Caucasus Times*, February 2017, https://caucasustimes.com/ru/v-chechne-nabljudaetsja-vysokaja-stepen-r/.
[4] David Robertson. *A Dictionary of Modern Politics* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002).
[5] Marlène Laruelle. "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration" *IFRI*, December 2021, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle_russia_islam_2021.pdf.
[6] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[7] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[8] Laurelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?"
[9] Gulnaz Sibgatullina. "The Muftis and the Myths: Constructing the Russian 'Church for Islam.'" *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2023, 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2185899.
[10] Gulnaz Sibgatullina, "The Muftis and the Myths: Constructing the Russian 'Church for Islam.'"
[11] Renat Irikovič Bekkin. *People of Reliable Loyalty Muftiates and the State in Modern Russia* (Södertörns Högskola, 2020)
[12] Gulnaz Sibgatullina. "The Muftis and the Myths: Constructing the Russian 'Church for Islam.'"
[13] Renat Irikovič Bekkin. *People of Reliable Loyalty Muftiates and the State in Modern Russia*.
[14] Renat Irikovič Bekkin. *People of Reliable Loyalty Muftiates and the State in Modern Russia*.
[15] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[16] Miranda Hankey. "Faith in Politics: Ramzam Kadyrov, Islam, and Hegemony in Chechnya.," *Master Thesis at Charles University in* Prague, 2015, https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/64175/120186200.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
[17] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[18] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[19] Hankey, "Faith in Politics: Ramzam Kadyrov, Islam, and Hegemony in Chechnya."
[20] Laurelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?"
[21] Marta Ter Ferrer, "El Emirato Del Cáucaso, El Otro Frente de Rusia," *Notes Internacionals CIDOB* 129 (2015).
[22] Alexander Knysh. "Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 4 (2012): 315–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2012.656343.
[23] Emil Souleimanov. "The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency," *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 4 (2011): 155–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00517.x.
[24] Darion Rhodes. "Salafist-Takfiri Jihadism: The Ideology of the Caucasus Emirate," *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)*, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09453.
[25] Rhodes, "Salafist-Takfiri Jihadism: The Ideology of the Caucasus Emirate," 20.
[26] Souleimanov, "The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency."
[27] Julie Wilhelmsen. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement." *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 1 (2005): 35–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966813052000314101.
[28] Souleimanov, "The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency."
[29] Artem Kroupenev. "Radical Islam in Chechnya." *SSRN*, January 2009, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1333154.
[30] Souleimanov, "The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency."
[31] Kroupenev, "Radical Islam in Chechnya."
[32] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[33] Kaarina Aitamurto. "Discussions about Indigenous, National and Transnational Islam in Russia," *Religion, State and Society* 47, no. 2 (2019): 198–213, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2019.1582933.
[34] Aitamurto, "Discussions about Indigenous, National and Transnational Islam in Russia."
[35] Rebecca Fradkin, "The Co-Optation of Islam in Russia," *Hudson Institute*, February 2020, https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-co-optation-of-islam-in-russia
[36] Laurelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?"
[37] Tanya Lokshina. "'You Dress According to Their Rules,'" *Human Rights Watch*, March 2023, https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/03/10/you-dress-according-their-rules/enforcement-islamic dress-code-women-chechnya
[38] Laurelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?"

[39] Michael Cherniavsky. 'Holy Russia': A Study in the History of an Idea," *The American Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (1958): 617, https://doi.org/10.2307/1848883.
[40] Laurelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?"
[41] Tom Balmforth. "Титулованная Вертикаль Власти." ИноСМИ. ИноСМИ info@inosmi.ru+7 495 645 66 01ФГУП МИА "Россия сегодня" 15860, January 2022, https://inosmi.ru/20100817/162209671.html. [A translation of the Russian version was consulted]
[42] Wilhelmsen, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place."
[43] John Russell. "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11." *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 101–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000322937.
[44] Dov Lynch. "'The Enemy Is at the Gate': Russia after Beslan," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 81, no. 1 (2005): 141–61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3569192; John Russell. "Chechnya: Russia's 'War on Terror' or 'War of Terror'?", *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 1 (2007): 163–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130601072761; Svante E Cornell. "The War Against Terrorism and the Conflict in Chechnya: A Case for Distinction," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2003): 167–84, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45289246.
[45] Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens."
[46] Russell, "Chechnya: Russia's 'War on Terror' or 'War of Terror'?"
[47] Lynch, "'The Enemy Is at the Gate': Russia after Beslan."
[48] Russell, "Chechnya: Russia's 'War on Terror' or 'War of Terror'?"
[49] Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens."
[50] Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration."
[51] Irina Mukhina. "Islamic Terrorism and the Question of National Liberation, or Problems of Contemporary Chechen Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 6 (2005): 515–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500236923.
[52] Mark Youngman. "Ideology along the Contours of Power: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 2 (2020): 11–26, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26910404.
[53] Knysh, "Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate."
[54] Souleimanov, "The Caucasus Emirate: Genealogy of an Islamist Insurgency."
[55] Hankey, "Faith in Politics: Ramzam Kadyrov, Islam, and Hegemony in Chechnya."
[56] Laurelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?"
[57] Hankey, "Faith in Politics: Ramzam Kadyrov, Islam, and Hegemony in Chechnya."
[58] Kroupenev, "Radical Islam in Chechnya."
[59] Marat Iliyasov. "Security and Religion: The Discursive Self-Legitimation of the Chechen Authorities," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 10, no. 3 (2021): 247–75, https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-bja10029.
[60] Erik Vlaeminck. "Islamic Masculinities in Action: The Construction of Masculinity in Russian Visual Culture about the Chechen Wars," *Religion, State and Society* 47, no. 2 (2019): 248–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1564544
[61] Knysh, "Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate."
[62] Youngman, "Ideology along the Contours of Power: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate."
[63] Wilhelmsen, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place."
[64] Kroupenev, "Radical Islam in Chechnya."
[65] Knysh, "Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate."
[66] Hankey, "Faith in Politics: Ramzam Kadyrov, Islam, and Hegemony in Chechnya."

An official publication of the Center for
Security Studies at Georgetown University's
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service