



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF ARTS
Department of Political Science



INSIGHTS

Undergraduate Journal in Political Science

Volume 1 Issue 1,
June 2025



In Memoriam and Dedication

The editorial team wishes to dedicate this Insights issue to the memory of **Dr. Tareq Y. Ismael**. Dr. Ismael had an impressive 55-year career at the University of Calgary, with his passion evident in the numerous awards he received, articles, and books he authored. For the editorial team, he also holds a special place in our hearts for assisting in creating the Political Science Association (PSA) during his tenure at the university. Dr. Ismael was always kind, supportive, and brave in his research and life. His research contributions, the challenge of dogma throughout his life, his unwavering commitment to justice in the Middle East, his encouragement for his students to do the same, and his incredible kindness and support will be sorely missed by students and faculty in our department.

“Allah yerhamo”

الله يرحمه

“May God have mercy upon him”

In Loving Memory of **Malcolm Torrance** - Political Science Student, Leader, and Friend.

We remember our friend, who, in a short time, achieved great success, admiration, and respect from his peers and professors. Malcolm's passion for politics was evident, leading him to become the President of the Campus Conservative Association (UCCCA) and a Parliamentary Assistant in the House of Commons. Malcolm was a lifelong student and learner, striving to learn from everyone he met by asking questions and staying curious about politics, history, and the social sciences. We miss him and remember him with respect and love. His absence will be felt by his loved ones, his friends, and the University of Calgary community. We remember his presence with gratitude and continue to be inspired by his leadership and dedication.

Dedication written by: Ismayil Imanli, Political Science Student, University of Calgary

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the Managing Editor	2
Editorial Team	3

ARTICLES

Narratives Of Nationhood: The Struggle For Separatism in Asia AMITOJ HARI.....	5
The West Wants In: Conservative Christianity and Western Canadian Conservatism LOGAN JASPERS	16
Bears and Dragons in the North: An Analysis of Sino-Russian Economic Relations in the Arctic JORDAN LEE	35
Changing Geopolitical Landscape in the Asia-Pacific: Rise of China and The United States' Response ETHAN MARKOWITZ	53
Does Freedom Require Good and Justice? An Examination of Mill's Account on Freedom THU PHAN PHAN NGUYEN GIA THU	71
Private Military Companies in Iraq: An Analysis of Privatization in a Counterinsurgency SOPHIA VITTER.....	80

Letter From the Managing Editor

I am beyond grateful to introduce the first issue of Insights Undergraduate Journal in Political Science! The editorial team is overjoyed with the support and the number of articles we received. We were incredibly impressed with the quality and original analysis of every article we reviewed. The passion and creativity we have been shown through the application process are incredible, and we are honoured to showcase the talent of undergraduate students here at the University of Calgary. I wanted to showcase my appreciation to everyone who supported this project.

I want to take this moment to acknowledge the land where this project was created. It is vital to understand the role of the land as our caretaker; it provides humans and non-human entities with the gift of breath and life and asks only for respect and care in return. Since time immemorial, the Treaty 7 nations have lived in relational partnership with the land as caretakers. The Treaty 7 Nations are made of the Siksikaitsitapi (Blackfoot Confederacy) which comprises the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai Nation. It is also the home of the Tsuut'ina Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and the Goodstoney Nation. It is also the place of life for Métis Nation of Alberta (Districts 5 and 6). The editorial team recognizes the traditional names of where we are situated, Moh'kins'tsis to the Blackfoot, Wîchîspa to the Stoney Nakoda, and Guts'ists'i to the Tsuut'ina. Robin Kimmerer calls for us to acknowledge that "It's not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land." We call our readers to reframe their perspective of land acknowledgements from an obligation, but rather to reflect critically on our relationship with the land and the Nations whose lands we are uninvited guests on. It is important we remember that treaties require settlers to uphold our obligations within treaties, and we call on our readers to critically consider what they can do to uphold their obligations and become good treaty people.

I appreciate all who submitted their work for publication. It's no small feat to put your work out there for critique; it requires immense bravery and reflects your dedication to your pieces. Thank you for trusting us with your words. Editorial decisions are never easy, and many strong pieces were submitted. If your work wasn't chosen this time, it does not reflect its worth or your

potential as a researcher. I truly hope those who were not selected to be published in this issue will consider resubmitting their work for future issues. Every submission showcases and contributes to the high quality, skill, and research ability within the Department of Political Science's Undergraduate community. From the Editorial Team and I, we wish everyone the best in their undergraduate careers and congratulations to those who graduated this year!

Editorial Team

Insights Undergraduate Journal in Political Science was developed and launched in partnership with the Department of Political Science and the Political Science Association (PSA). We are grateful for the support from Dr. Roberta Rice and Dr. Rob Huebert, who supported us along the way and believed in this project from the beginning. The feedback we received from the faculty and the PSA executives is vital to our ability to make this project a reality. The editorial team included Madeline Fleming (Co-Managing Editor), Dr. Rob Huebert (Department Sponsor), and me. The incredible Ryan Perks copyedited it; many thanks to you for guiding us through this process and being very patient with our questions! We are also thankful for the Journal Hosting team at the University of Calgary, particularly Gabriela Mircea, who supported us along the way! Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge and thank our peer review team for their hard work:

Andy Airey

Makda Habtegergesa

Aidha Chaudhary

Lauren Clavelle

Ismayil Imanli

Juan-Felipe Llanos-Salamanca

Fiona Frances Paul

Radoslav Visotski

The editorial team included Madeline Fleming (co-Managing Editor), Dr. Rob Huebert (Department Sponsor), and me. It was copyedited by the incredible Ryan Perks. This publication marks the end of a process that started as an idea in April 2024, after a year of planning, organization, and review. It also marks the end of my tenure as Managing Editor and as a student

at the University of Calgary. I leave this journal in the excellent hands of Madeline Fleming as Managing Editor of Insights. I look forward to participating in the peer review process of future Insights issues, and as a reader! I cannot wait to see where Madeline takes this project next. It has been an absolute pleasure to work with you all.

Go raibh maith agaibh,

Hunter Holt-Barry

Narratives of Nationhood: The Struggle for Separatism in Asia

Amitoj Hari

amitoj.hari@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

This paper examines how states across the continent of Asia have reacted to separatist movements, with a focus on the case studies of Taiwan, Khalistan and Kashmir. This is illustrated through the multilateral and unilateral strategies that have been implemented and the international relations theory of constructivism exposes the undercurrents of these actions. Unilateral responses such as military interventions, sanctions and censorship reflect a state's desire to preserve its territorial integrity and suppress dissent amongst the population. More expansively, multilateral responses, ranging from symbolic support from intergovernmental organizations to selective foreign state investment, reveal the shocking ambivalence of the global community towards self-determination. Constructivism posits that these responses are shaped by socially constructed identities, the domineering narratives and of course, historical context. This explains why Taiwan garners more support than Kashmir or Khalistan, as its alignment with democratic global discourses is advantageous in the current political climate. The paper expresses that success of separatist movements is not solely reliant on legitimacy or morality, but rather how effectively they can mirror the prevailing international norms. In sum, this study highlights that sovereignty and legitimacy are ever evolving and global recognition of separatist aspirations is deeply influenced by the stories that domestic and international actors choose to tell and believe.

Keywords:

Separatism, Constructivism, International Relations, Ethnic Nationalism

Separatist sentiment is often seen as a sign of a free-thinking society, but the road to statehood normally involves an uphill battle against powerful opponents. Secessionist movements in Asia, such as the contested entities of Taiwan, Khalistan, and Kashmir, challenge the concepts of national identity, territorial recognition, and sovereignty. Given these complexities, how have countries unilaterally and multilaterally responded to separatist movements in Asia, and how does constructivism explain these responses? These movements disrupt state borders and international norms, prompting unilateral responses in the form of military suppression, censorship, economic sanctions, and political/legal restrictions. At the same time, multilateral engagement involves diplomacy, mediation, and recognition or suppression of separatist claims. Additionally, constructivism illuminates that state responses are shaped not only by strategic pragmatism toward preserving statehood but also by identities and social contexts constructed on an “intermestic” basis (Boyer et al., 2019). This paper will show that while unilateral responses are rooted in sovereignty and national unity, multilateral engagement reflects global discourses on self-determination, legitimacy, and political ideologies. These responses are driven not just by material power and security but by constructed identities, historical narratives, and international norms. The paper first examines the framework of separatism and then analyzes unilateral and multilateral responses before applying a constructivist perspective to explain these dynamics.

Separatism in this context refers to political movements that advocate for complete autonomy for a specific group, often defined by their ethnic, religious, or territorial commonalities. The emergence of such movements is attributed to the desire for more control over a given group’s cultural, political, and economic affairs (Gupta, 2022). At its core, separatism is rooted in self-determination, as groups seek the right to exercise independent

governance. This desire originates in historical grievances, as the implications of colonization, imposed borders, forced assimilation, and discriminatory practices remain pervasive to this day. For instance, ethnic or religious groups may seek separatism to preserve their heritage and security, while economic exploitation of resource-rich regions fuels civil unrest. Beyond that, nationalism strengthens separatist claims by fostering a national identity distinct from the dominant state narrative. Some movements seek complete independence, while others merely push for autonomy within the existing framework. The methodology also varies with the utilization of anything from diplomacy to armed resistance. However, international recognition is the decisive factor for success, because a movement's resilience is determined largely by its perceived global legitimacy. Ultimately, these movements challenge the delicate balance between state sovereignty and the people's right to self-determination.

Unilateral responses refers to states' independent reactions to critical issues. Unilateral suppression of these movements prevents external interference in domestic affairs but damages a state's legitimacy and soft power if it contradicts international consensus (Thompson, 2009, p. 35). These responses to separatism most notably manifest as military intervention. India's Operation Blue Star (1984) is a prime example, as armed forces targeted Khalistani separatists in the Golden Temple, resulting in mass civilian casualties, religious desecration, and the martyrdom of key leaders (Bhardwaj & Wolpert, 2024). The martyrs, including but not limited to Sant Baba Jarnail Singh Ji, Bhai Amrik Singh Ji, General Subeg Singh, and Baba Tara Singh Ji, are esteemed heroes of the Sikh community who cemented the necessity of secession from a genocidal regime. Police forces continued this suppression of Sikhs, with reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial executions persisting beyond the mid-1990s (Amnesty International, 2003). Similarly, India has made Kashmir the most densely militarized zone in the

world, consistently deploying significant numbers of troops to the region for decades, and particularly since the removal of Kashmir's special autonomous status in 2019 ("Kashmir, world's most militarized zone," 2023). China mirrors this pattern vis-à-vis Taiwan by using large-scale border drills and regular incursions into Taiwanese airspace (Maizland & Fong, 2025). These actions illustrate that armed force, far from a temporary measure, is in fact part of a broader pattern aimed at embedding security forces in contested regions and preventing insurgencies.

Furthermore, states respond unilaterally through political, legal, and economic sanctions. For example, India revoked Kashmir's special status in 2019, which stripped the territory of its constitutional autonomy and control over its land ("Kashmir, world's most militarized zone," 2023). This revocation highlighted India's power to politically and legally suppress separatist governance. Similarly, China enforces its One China policy to isolate Taiwan diplomatically by pressuring nations like Honduras in 2023 to sever ties with Taipei (Maizland & Fong, 2025). By limiting Taiwan's international recognition, China curtails its ability to gain momentum on the global stage. China also blocks Taiwan from trade agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, thus limiting its economic viability (Maizland & Fong, 2025). Moreover, censorship plays a significant role in unilateral suppression. In Punjab, India ordered an Internet shutdown from 18 to 24 March 2023, coinciding the pursuit of separatist leader Amritpal Singh, citing vague threats to public safety (Panjiar & Waghre, 2023). A similar instance occurred in Kashmir when India cut off access to the Internet for over five hundred days beginning in 2019 (Bajoria, 2023). These blackouts reinforced state control by suppressing the spread of separatist narratives and restricting mobilization. These unilateral responses do suppress separatist

movements in the short term; however, the ramifications of these restrictions and human rights violations often lead to further radicalization, prolonged conflict, and greater international scrutiny. It is important to recognize that these patterns reveal that states are not only concerned with national security. Ultimately, the goal is to deoxygenate separatist flames before they can gain legitimacy and external support.

Multilateral responses to separatist movements involve international organizations and foreign state intervention, balancing sovereignty and self-determination. While the United Nations advocates for self-determination, enforcement remains weak. Meanwhile, states engage in separatist conflicts selectively, based on strategic interests rather than moral considerations.

The UN plays a central role in separatist conflicts, with article 1 of the UN Charter serving as the foundational source for self-determination (United Nations, 1945). However, while UN Security Council Resolution 47 (1948) called for a plebiscite in Kashmir, India has yet to conduct such a vote (United Nations Security Council, 1948). Similarly, Taiwan's 2007 UN membership bid was rejected, and China continues to block its participation in organizations like the World Health Organization ("UN rejects Taiwan," 2007; Chen & Cohen, 2020). The UN also remains uninvolved in the Khalistan movement despite Sikhs for Justice holding global referendums on Punjab's independence. Lastly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a regional intergovernmental organization (IGO), has condemned India's policies in Kashmir, though India rejects this as foreign interference (OIC, 2023). All of these instances serve as a reminder of the limitations of international organizations' power.

In terms of the pattern of state responses internationally, the Khalistan movement has led to diplomatic tensions between India and the West. In Canada, the 2023 assassination of pro-Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar led Justin Trudeau to accuse India of violating Canadian

sovereignty. This resulted in reciprocal diplomatic expulsions (Tasker, 2023). The same year, the United States charged an Indian intelligence officer in connection to an assassination plot targeting the founder of Sikhs for Justice, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun (Lucas, 2024). While Khalistan still lacks official recognition, global awareness and condemnation of India's intra- and extraterritorial operations have increased.

Taiwan's fight to maintain its independence remains one of the most contested movements due to China's influence globally. However, the United States remains Taiwan's most potent ally as it supplies arms under the Taiwan Relations Act while maintaining its own One China policy (Maizland & Fong, 2025). Similarly, due to Japan's close cultural ties with Taiwan, it provides strong support through trade, disaster aid, and defence diplomacy (Rickards, 2024). The European Union has also increased its engagement with Taiwan, with Lithuania recognizing Taiwan and opening an unofficial diplomatic office despite Chinese retaliation (Shattuck, 2023). These are all great strides toward maintaining Taiwan's sovereignty, even if China's geopolitical influence still ultimately prevails.

Crucially, self-determination for Kashmir has been historically supported by the UN, but the gesture remains symbolic due to India's refusal to comply (United Nations Security Council, 1948). Pakistan continues to strongly advocate for Kashmiri separatism (Latif, 2025). This support is driven by Islamic commonality and its rivalry with India. However, China, once a supporter of Kashmir's accession to Pakistan, has shifted to a more neutral stance in an attempt to promote regional stability by managing Indo-Pakistani tensions with the United States. As a result, Kashmir's struggle for self-determination, which began in the twentieth century, remains stalled due to shifting global priorities.

In conclusion, multilateral responses to separatism range from symbolic IGO support to patterns of foreign state responses. Western states opt to support the separatist movements without jeopardizing relations with the existing states. North American states, for instance, tend to engage when secessionist conflicts affect diaspora communities or state security. Similarly, China and Pakistan selectively support the movements and prioritize geopolitical interests over ideological consistency. Meanwhile, IGOs like the UN and the OIC lack enforcement power and are limited by international anarchy. What is important to note is that a movement's success depends on its international leverage. This is why Taiwan, with its more significant economic and political influence, receives more support than Kashmir and Khalistan.

Constructivism provides an alternative perspective in international relations theory by emphasizing that state interests are socially constructed through ideas, identities, and norms. Conventional constructivism focuses on how interests emerge through interactions, while critical constructivism questions dominant narratives and norms (Hopf, 1998). Constructivists argue that anarchy is not innately driven by self-help and power politics. Instead, international dynamics are constructed through the state's interactions and shared understandings (Wendt, 1992). Accordingly, state interests can evolve within the global framework, mainly through international organizations that promote new norms and redefine national goals (Finnemore, 1996). Institutions like UNESCO and the Red Cross redefine how states perceive issues like war and science. Interestingly, power in constructivism extends beyond military or economic strength. Since knowledge is socially constructed, those in control of the dominant narrative determine what is "true" in global politics (Guzzini, 2000). Unlike the rigidity of realism or liberalism, constructivism explains global politics by examining underlying factors that inform geopolitical currents.

Constructivism reveals that state responses to separatism cannot be written off as fixed geopolitical realities, as socially constructed identities, historical narratives, and dominant norms provide more insight. Taiwan, for example, remains isolated because China has successfully framed it as an inalienable part of its national identity. By perpetuating the “One China” narrative through the vast reach of its institutions, China manages to paint the continuation of Taiwanese independence as unrealistic. Equally revealing is India’s portrayal of the Khalistan separatist movement. Historically, Sikhs have been a bastion of the wider nation’s traditions of freedom-fighting, activism, and strength. Additionally, the territory of Punjab, with its water supply and its surplus of wheat and rice production, is resource-abundant. As a response, a combination of India’s exploitative relationship with Punjab and the rise of Hindu nationalism resulting in anti-Sikh rhetoric plays a key role in the suppression of the religious minority. Internationally, India’s ability to effectively draw a parallel between Khalistani separatism and terrorism discourages multilateral recognition and delegitimizes the movement. In the case of Kashmir, India emphasizes the danger of external interference from Pakistan and the OIC to its territorial legitimacy. By reframing the movement as an internal matter, India can justify its military occupation and curtail any global intervention. Subsequently, constructivism also explains why international responses vary. Support for separatist movements is not based on the universal principle of self-determination, but rather on an alignment with prevailing norms. Therefore, Taiwan garners more support than Kashmir and Khalistan because its democratic governance and opposition to communism fits within dominant global frameworks. Meanwhile, separatist struggles that have religious or ethnic identities experience diplomatic inactivity, as seen in the cases of Khalistan and Kashmir. These observations underscore that legitimacy is

neither inherent nor guaranteed. Hence, movements that embed their narratives into the dominant global discourse gain traction, while those seen as threats to the status quo are sidelined.

All in all, state responses to separatism in Asia are shaped by security, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Unilateral actions like military suppression and political, economic, and legal restrictions serve to maintain national unity, as seen in India's suppression in Punjab and Kashmir, as well as China's stance on Taiwan. Furthermore, multilateral responses depend on how the movement's approach to self-determination aligns with global politics and legitimacy. This is exemplified by the level of support for Taiwan due to its democratic identity, the rise of support for Khalistan due to extraterritorial infractions by India, and the fluctuation of support for Kashmir according to geopolitical trends. Notably, constructivism highlights that the fate of separatist movements is defined not only by conflict or diplomacy but also by the stories the world chooses to believe. In summary, as the global sphere evolves, perhaps with it will come a wave of recognition for those yearning for sovereignty.

References

- Amnesty International. (2003, 20 January). *India: Break the cycle of impunity and torture in Punjab*. Amnesty International.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA20/002/2003/en/>
- Bajoria, J. (2023). “No internet means no work, no pay, no food”: Internet shutdowns deny access to basic rights in “digital India.” Human Rights Watch.
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic>
- Bhardwaj, S. M., & Wolpert, S. A. (2024, 1 June). Operation Blue Star. *Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Operation-Blue-Star>
- Boyer, M., Hudson, N., & Butler, M. (2019). *Global politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, Y.-J., & Cohen, J. A. (2020, 9 April). *Why does the WHO exclude Taiwan?* Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/why-does-who-exclude-taiwan>
- Finnemore, M. (1996). *National interests in international society*. Cornell University Press.
- Gupta, D. (2022, 27 September). Separatist movements. In *Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm388.pub2>
- Guzzini, S. (2000). A reconstruction of constructivism in international relations. *European Journal of International Relations*, 6(2), 147–82.
- Hopf, T. (1998). The promise of constructivism in international relations theory. *International Security*, 23(1), 171–200.
- Kashmir, world’s most militarized zone in the world, re-militarized as India deploys more troops. (2023, 9 January). *Kashmir Action*. <https://www.kashmiraction.org/kashmir-worlds-most-militarized-zone-in-the-world-re-militarized-as-india-deploys-more-troops/>
- Latif, A. (2025). *Pakistan observes Kashmir Solidarity Day, vows support to independence movement*. Anadolu Ajansi. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-observes-kashmir-solidarity-day-vows-support-to-independence-movement-/3472104>
- Lucas, R. (2024, 17 October). *The DOJ charged a former Indian intelligence official in a foiled assassination plot*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/17/g-s1-28835/justice-department-charges-sikh-separatist-assassination-plot>
- Maizland, L., & Fong, C. (2025, 15 January). *Why China-Taiwan relations are so tense*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy-trump>
- OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation). (2023, 12 December). OIC General Secretariat

expresses concern over the Indian Supreme Court's judgment upholding the unilateral actions taken by the Indian government that stripped the special status of the territory of Jammu and Kashmir [Press release]. https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=40069&t_ref=26810&lan=en

Panjiar, T., & Waghre, P. (2023, 31 March). *Digital censorship in Punjab: Internet shutdowns and account suspensions*. Internet Freedom Foundation. <https://internetfreedom.in/digital-censorship-in-punjab/>

Rickards, J. (2024, 18 June). The curiously cozy relationship between Taiwan and Japan. *The Strategist*. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-curiously-cozy-relationship-between-taiwan-and-japan/>

Shattuck, T. J. (2023, 12 July). *Lithuania's bet on Taiwan and what it means for Europe*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/07/lithuanias-bet-on-taiwan-and-what-it-means-for-europe/>

Tasker, J. P. (2023, 19 September). Trudeau accuses India's government of involvement in killing of Canadian Sikh leader. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-indian-government-nijjar-1.6970498>

Thompson, A. (2009). *Channels of power: the UN Security Council and U.S. statecraft in Iraq*. Cornell University Press.

United Nations Security Council. (1948). *Resolution 47 (1948) / [adopted by the Security Council at its 286th meeting], of 21 April 1948*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/111955/?ln=en&v=pdf>

United Nations. (1945). *Chapter I: Purposes and principles (articles 1–2)*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-1>

UN rejects Taiwan membership bid. (2007, 20 September). *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2007/9/20/un-rejects-taiwan-membership-bid-2>

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–4

June 2025 | Volume 1 | Issue 1

Page 16

The West Wants In: Conservative Christianity and Western Canadian Conservatism

Logan Jaspers

logan.jaspers@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

Commentators on Canadian politics often argue that the Western provinces are more socially conservative than the rest of the country. Indeed, there is a perception that British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba together form a Canadian “Bible Belt,” analogous to the religiously socially conservative South in the United States. Drawing upon secondary research on Canadian history and political science and documentary evidence, this essay argues that conservative forms of Christianity have helped distinguish conservatism in Western Canada and especially in Alberta from the rest of the country, but that the influence of conservative Christianity is more nuanced than simply making Western Canadian conservatism more socially conservatism. The essay shows the religious demographics of the Western provinces compositionally made Western Canadian conservatism more socially conservative on hot button social issues, but by charting out the political thought of Preston Manning, Ernest Manning, and William Aberhart, the essay demonstrates that evangelical theology also influenced Western Canadian conservatism’s distinctly libertarian and populist streaks. In turn, Western Canadian conservatives drifted to conservative parties other than the mainstream conservative party, like Social Credit and the Reform Party, which better speak to the socially conservative, libertarian and populist instincts of Western Canadian conservatives. The essay concludes with a suggestion on future topics of topics within the literature and with a brief summary of the essay’s contents.

Keywords:

Canadian Politics, Political History, Religion and Politics, Alberta Politics

Introduction

When the Mulroney coalition unravelled in 1993, the Progressive Conservatives (PCs) were left in the dust in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba by the newly ascendant Reform Party, speaking to a profound regional divide within Canadian conservatism. As one explanation for this divide, this essay argues that conservative Christianity informed the distinctiveness of conservatism in Western Canada. To this end, it utilizes secondary history and political science research and primary documents while focusing on the Western provinces, especially Alberta, and using conservatism in Eastern and Atlantic Canada as a comparative foil. To substantiate the thesis, the paper is divided into three arguments. First, it makes a straightforward compositional argument—that the preponderance of conservative Christians in Western Canada and especially Alberta has made Western Canadian conservatism comparatively socially conservative on contemporary hot-button issues. Second, the paper argues that the individualism and populism of evangelical theology has influenced Western conservatism's emphasis on fiscal conservatism and democratic reform. Third, it argues that these religiously derived differences help explain why Western Canadians have gravitated to right-of-centre parties other than the PCs. Finally, it terminates with a brief comment on the topic's relevance today and a summative conclusion.

Religion and Contemporary Social Conservatism in Western Canada

Western Canada's religious composition has made the region more socially conservative on moral issues. Generally, actively religious Canadians are more likely to be conservative on issues like abortion and gay rights (Wilkins-Laflamme & Reimer, 2019, p. 867). British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba are disproportionately inhabited by conservative Christians, which has made conservatism in the West more socially conservative. The religious

demographics of the Western provinces are unrealistic; despite occasional descriptions of Western Canada—and Alberta especially—as Canada’s “Bible Belt,” these provinces are less religious than the national average (Banack, 2016, pp. 170–3; Burkinshaw, 1995, pp. 5, 259–60). Likewise, when it comes to moral issues, attitudes in Western Canada barely deviate from those in the rest of Canada (Rayside et al., 2012, p. 5). Instead, Western Canadian social conservatism has been influenced by the fact that evangelicals and other conservative Christians, despite being a minority, are disproportionately numerous in the West (Bowen, 2004, pp. 54–5; Rayside et al., 2012, p. 5; Wilkins-Laflamme & Reimer, 2019, pp. 877–8). While Western Canada may be less religious than the rest of Canada, believers in Western Canada are more religious than their counterparts in other regions.¹

Evangelicals have played a disproportionate role in politics in Western Canada, especially in Alberta. Two of Alberta’s most consequential premiers, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, were themselves fundamentalist preachers. Manning’s son, Preston Manning, a devout evangelical, founded the Reform Party, which was home to evangelicals like Deborah Gray, the first Reform Party member of Parliament, and Stephen Harper, the future Conservative prime minister (Hoover, 1997, p. 201; Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 140–2). Of the fifty-two Reform MPs elected in 1993, around 40 per cent were evangelicals (Hoover, 1997, p. 201). Indeed, Preston Manning and Stephen Harper were both socially conservative; Harper made his opposition to same-sex marriage a prominent issue in the 2006 election (Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 205–6; Wells, 2006, pp. 173–4), and Manning opposed abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality (Rayside, 1998, p. 128; Mackey, 1997, p. 199). At the grassroots level, Reform members were notably

¹ To see a province-by-province breakdown in the West versus the national average with regard to irreligion and conservative Christianity, see appendix A.

socially conservative, passing a resolution at the party's 1995 convention to codify in their platform opposition to same-sex marriage, and Canadian Alliance² voters were significantly more hostile to legal abortion and same-sex marriage than voters of other parties (Rayside et al., 2017, pp. 47–9; Ibbitson, 2015, p. 113). Likewise at the provincial level, the greater proportion of evangelicals inhabiting rural Alberta made the PC caucus more avowedly socially conservative from 1993 onward, as its members were increasingly disproportionately rural; even if MLAs did not share their constituents' religious views, they brought their traditionalism to the legislature, moving the Klein government toward social conservatism (Banack, 2016, pp. 178–9; Martin, 2002, p. 195). Thus, evangelicals consistently shifted the political agenda in Western Canada, both federally and provincially, toward social conservatism, either through their direct involvement in politics or by influencing their representatives to voice their views on moral issues.

It is harder to generalize about the effect of smaller streams of conservative Christianity, like Pentecostals and Latter-Day Saints, on Western Canadian conservatism, but adherents of these faiths are overrepresented in Western Canada as well as among right-of-centre politicians in the West. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary socially conservative federal politician of the 1990s and early 2000s was Stockwell Day. A former pastor and teacher at the Pentecostal Bentley Christian Centre, Day served in Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's cabinet and led the Alliance between 2000 and 2002 (Harrison, 2002, pp. 3–8). Unlike Manning's or Harper's more latent social conservatism, Day's social conservatism was central to his public persona; he rested on the Sabbath during campaigns, appeared on the television program *100 Huntley Street*, and

² The Canadian Alliance was the successor party to the Reform Party, founded as an attempt to unite the then-divided right, though it largely served as a continuation of the Reform Party in terms of its beliefs, voters, and membership.

was even said to be a Young Earth creationist in a CBC documentary aired during the 2000 election (Harrison, 2002, pp. 55, 83–4; Ibbitson, 2015, p. 130; Martin, 2002, pp. 200–1). In his bids for the Alliance’s leadership, Day placed his social conservatism at the forefront of his efforts by campaigning among other conservative Christians, giving speeches in church basements to sell party memberships (Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 153–4; Harrison, 2002, p. 53). Similarly, Latter-Day Saints, who are avowedly socially conservative, are disproportionately concentrated in Alberta, where they became an important political constituency. Despite discomfort with Mormons among some evangelicals, Ernest Manning appealed to Alberta Mormons, converting them into a reliable voting bloc for Social Credit and encouraging them to seek office (Marshall, 2001, p. 249; Mackey, 1997, p. 65; Wiseman, 1981, p. 111). The longest-serving federal leader of the Social Credit Party, Solon Low, was a Latter-Day Saint (Mackey, 1997, p. 30), and Mormons have prominently featured in politics since. Given the fervent social conservatism of both Pentecostals and Mormons, their disproportionate role in politics have thus contributed to making conservatism in the Western provinces more socially conservative (Wilkinson & Ambrose, 2020, pp. 107–28; Brinkeroff et al., 1987, pp. 244–6; Wiseman, 1981, p. 111).

With all that said, the extent to which social conservatism defines Western Canadian conservatism can be overstated. For one, social conservatism is not a solely Western Canadian phenomenon. Prominent Tory philosopher George Grant, from Ontario, was an outspoken opponent of legal abortion (Grant, 1998, p. 115). The federal PCs always had social conservatives among their MPs from the Laurentian and Atlantic provinces, like New Brunswick’s Elsie Wayne, who bitterly opposed abortion and recognition of gay rights (Rayside, 1998, p. 117; Farney, 2008, p. 10). Indeed, the PC caucus between 1988 and 1993 had enough

social conservatives to kibosh discrimination protections for gays and lesbians (Fife, 1993, pp. 137–40). Likewise, despite their religiously derived social conservatism, both Preston Manning and Stephen Harper de-emphasized social conservatism compared to other issues on their agenda (Mackey, 1997, pp. 196–7); in Parliament, Harper voted to protect access to abortion in 2010 and 2012 (Malloy, 2013, p. 194; Banack, 2016, p. 199), and Manning was willing to do the same if his constituents from his riding so wished (Mackey, 1997, p. 199; Banack, 2016, pp. 196–7). Even Stockwell Day softened his opposition to abortion by leaving the issue to a hypothetical referendum (Harrison, 2002, p. 56). Nevertheless, the overrepresentation of conservative Christians in the Western provinces, especially Alberta, has made conservatism in the region more socially conservative, and thus religion is one factor that distinguishes Western Canadian conservatism from conservatism in the rest of Canada.

Evangelicalism, Populism, and Individualism

The religious differences between the West and the rest of Canada have influenced Western Canadian conservatism's positions on economics and institutions. As mentioned, despite his religious beliefs, Preston Manning did not emphasize social issues. The Reform Party's 1989 platform does not mention homosexuality, for example, though the 1996 edition affirmed the party's opposition to same-sex marriage following pressure from the grassroots membership (Reform Party of Canada, 1996, p. 31). Likewise, Reform did not take a stance on abortion or capital punishment beyond affirming them as issues of conscience that ought to be determined in a referendum (Reform Party of Canada, 1989, p. 11; Reform Party of Canada, 1996, pp. 39–40). Instead, the party platforms prioritized fiscal, economic, constitutional, and democratic matters. Reform's foremost priorities were cutting taxes and government spending, balancing the budget, turning the Senate into an elected body, making politics more responsive to Canadians through

referenda and recall legislation, the decentralization of power, and ending the perceived favouritism by the federal government toward Quebec (Reform Party of Canada, 1989, pp. 6–25; Reform Party of Canada, 1996, pp. 10–24, 29–35, 38–42). In sum, the Reform Party defined itself by libertarianism and a democratic, reform-minded populism, themes ostensibly more secular than those that tend to characterize social conservatism (Banack, 2016, pp. 180–1). However, evangelicalism helped foster the libertarianism and populism that distinguishes conservatism in Western Canada through religiously derived senses of individualism and populism.

As an evangelical who attends a Christian and Missionary Alliance church (Mackey, 1997, p. 94), Preston Manning's individualism and libertarianism were reminiscent of evangelical theology. Amid a religious revival in the mid-eighteenth century, conservative American Protestant theology adopted individualistic and populist views of the person and their relationship to God, arguing that the common man was just as qualified to interpret scripture, if not more so, than trained clergymen, and that to be born again, an individual had to undergo a profound emotional conversion experience of their own (Banack, 2013, p. 233). In other words, evangelical thought trusts the wisdom of "the people" in attaining their own salvation rather than privileging the clerical elite. As found by Banack (2016) in a series of interviews with Manning, the former Reform leader acknowledged that the democratic-individualist logic of evangelical Christianity influenced his libertarian and populist political convictions. Manning believed that a bloated federal bureaucracy with sweeping social programs had deprived individuals of agency without adequately providing the welfare such programs were designed to deliver (Banack, 2016, pp. 191–2). Likewise, emulating what he perceived as Christ's faith in the judgment of the common man, Manning deferred to his constituents on various issues, understanding himself as a

facilitator who would present his vision to those he represented, but ultimately accepting their will if they differed (Banack, 2016, pp. 190–2, 196–9). While Manning did his best to separate his public political statements from his theology, the process by which he arrived at his libertarianism and reformism was very much informed by his evangelical notions of individualism and populism.

These evangelical principles of individualism and populism can also be found in the ideologies of William Aberhart and Ernest Manning. Aberhart and Manning explicitly tied politics to their evangelicalism, as both men regularly delivered sermons on the radio while serving as premier of Alberta (Marshall, 2001, pp. 244–5; Guenther, 2000, pp. 95–7). Aberhart, who assumed power amid the Great Depression, was more demagogic in his populism than the Mannings, railing against the Laurentian “Fifty Big Shots” and the local media for being oppositional (Mackey, 1997, pp. 25, 61; Schultz, 1964, p. 198). The Aberhart government briefly implemented recall legislation but quickly repealed it when Aberhart’s own constituents attempted to recall him (Laycock, 1994, p. 241). While not an ardent fiscal conservative like the Mannings, Aberhart’s theology also centred the individual’s need to reform themselves; as a pre-millennialist, Aberhart felt an obligation to lead others to Christ before the rapture, rather than to end poverty in the Social Gospel sense (Banack, 2016, pp. 118–20; Wiseman, 1981, p. 110). Believing that to be born again meant people needed the capacity to understand scripture and convert earnestly, as premier Aberhart sought to relieve the worst of extreme poverty, but not to end poverty altogether, let alone end class divisions or institute public ownership of the means of production (Banack, 2016, pp. 120–1, 127–33). Aberhart’s goal was to cultivate economic freedom so that individuals could focus on spiritual regeneration instead of material, worldly concerns. Ernest Manning’s individualism and populism differed from Aberhart’s in the details,

but his ideology was broadly similar in terms of its underlying principles. Manning's populism was inclusive and conciliatory, emphasizing listening to others and reflecting the views of his constituents. This populism was on display when the Manning government, after holding a province-wide plebiscite on whether to further loosen restrictions on the sale of liquor in 1957, chose to abide by the vote in favour despite Manning's personal opposition to liberal liquor laws (Banack, 2016, pp. 145–7). While not necessarily opposed to government intervention in the economy—the 1946 Alberta Bill of Rights guaranteed social security for jobless adults and pensions for seniors (Mackey, 1997, pp. 39–40)—Manning believed a government detached from the people would fail to adequately provide social services, and that the state's encroachment on welfare provision opened society up to secularization by displacing the role of churches and charity in caring for the poor, helping explain his opposition to national medicare (Mackey, 1997, pp. 73, 84; Banack, 2016, p. 143). As the cases of Aberhart and Manning demonstrate, the principles of individualism and populism, in line with the evangelical theology they both preached, informed conservative thought in Alberta for decades, well before the advent of the Reform Party.

In sum, Western Canadian conservatism is defined in large part by populism and individualism, principles informed by evangelicalism. In these respects, Laurentian conservatism differs strongly from its Western counterpart. Tory thought in Upper Canada was based around the need for the state to maintain a hierarchical, well-ordered society through the maintenance of an established Anglican Church (Westfall, 1989, pp. 36, 196). As a result, even before the advent of the postwar welfare state, Toryism endorsed higher social expenditures in the early nineteenth century to maintain the loyalty of groups like Catholics in Upper Canada (McKim, 2013, pp. 82–3). While not socialist—George Grant, for instance, rejected the NDP's secular conception of

collectivism (Grant, 1995, pp. 58–9, 66–70)—Toryism is communitarian, aiming to conserve institutions by having the state assume paternalistic responsibility for the worse off. This attitude is consistent with PCs like Brian Mulroney labelling social programs a “sacred trust,” or Robert Stanfield endorsing a guaranteed income and wage and price controls (Plamondon, 2009, p. 332; Hayday, 2024, pp. 17–18). Influenced instead by Anglican thought, Toryism lacks the individualism, and thus the libertarianism, of Western Canadian conservatism, rejecting a focus on the individual explicitly to maintain traditional institutions and hierarchies, a view that differs strongly from the democratic populism of conservatism in Western Canada.

Conservative Christianity and Political Parties

Due to these compositional and ideological differences stemming from religion, Western Canadian conservatives have tended to form and support right-of-centre parties other than the PCs at the federal and provincial levels. As mentioned, the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance were examples of such parties. Reform overtly appealed to a sense of Western alienation, framing itself as a defenders of Western interests and criticizing the traditional parties for seemingly pandering to Quebec, famously exemplified in the party’s 1997 advertisement singling out Québécois politicians for mismanaging Canada (Nevitte et al., 2000, p. 91; Blais et al., 1999, p. 201). Reform did not field candidates east of Manitoba in 1988, did not run candidates in Quebec in 1993, and placed but a few token candidates there in 1997. In fairness, in the 2000 election, the Alliance fielded candidates in most Quebec ridings, though all were unsuccessful (Ellis, 2001, p. 81). Likewise, Reform and the Alliance never won seats in the Maritimes, while only ever winning one in Ontario in 1993 and two in 2000. Conversely, the Reform Party and the Alliance were strong enough in all four Western provinces to form the

official opposition in 1997 and 2000, respectively.³ While the federal Social Credit Party never achieved the degree of success enjoyed by Reform, it proved a credible third party, winning a majority of Alberta's seats in every election between 1935 and 1957, consistently electing MPs from British Columbia from 1949 to 1957, and also winning two seats in Saskatchewan in 1935. From 1958 onward, however, Social Credit struggled in the West while, peculiarly, finding success in Quebec due to R  al Caouette's charismatic appeal (Caiden, 1962, pp. 78–80); while the last Social Credit MP to be elected from a Western province was elected in 1965, the party continued winning seats in Quebec up to 1979. Given the ideological differences between the respective conservative camps in Western Canada and the rest of the country, the success of Reform, the Alliance, and Social Credit in federal politics should come as somewhat of a surprise. These parties better reflected the peculiarity of conservatism in the Western provinces, a peculiarity in part derived from conservative Christianity.

Provincially, Social Credit dominated Alberta and British Columbia for decades. Under the leadership of Aberhart and Ernest Manning, Alberta Social Credit formed a majority in every election from 1935 to 1967, rarely facing meaningful competition. The BC branch of Social Credit first won in 1952, forming provincial governments in all but one election until 1991. BC evangelicals proved an essential and reliable part of the Social Credit base (Burkinshaw, 1995, pp. 196–7), and Ernest Manning's *Back to the Bible Hour* broadcasts helped propel BC Social Credit to power (Mackey, 1997, p. 14). Furthermore, the Wildrose Party in Alberta echoed this same conservatism. Under Danielle Smith's leadership, Wildrose focused on the same themes of libertarianism, direct democracy, and Ottawa-bashing, de-emphasizing social issues (Rayside et

³ For a breakdown of seat numbers and vote share for Reform and the Alliance in the Western provinces, see appendix B.

al., 2012, pp. 15–16, 21–2). However, multiple Wildrose candidates made controversial statements prior to the 2012 election, such as the homophobic “lake of fire” blog post and a racist response to a radio interviewer (Rayside et al., 2012, pp. 22–3). While Smith clarified that she did not share those candidates’ views, herself being irreligious, she did not condemn them, reflecting a reluctance to alienate the Wildrose’s conservative Christian base and highlighting the party’s social conservatism (Banack, 2016, pp. 179, 211; Rayside et al., 2012, p. 19). In the cases of provincial politics in Alberta and British Columbia, the influence of conservative Christianity explains both the success of the provincial branches of Social Credit as well as the Wildrose Party’s populist libertarianism and its appeal to social conservatives.

Returning to federal politics, the divide on the Right in the 1990s between Reform and the PCs helped the Liberal Party remain in power, leading to the eventual merger of the Alliance and the PCs in 2003 as the Conservative Party of Canada. Three years later, Stephen Harper led the Conservatives to victory. The Conservative Party, as a merger of the Alliance and PCs, is not a direct continuation of either; though to the right of the PCs, the Harper government accepted Quebec as a distinct society within Canada, maintained the welfare state, and did little to advance democratic reform. On social issues, the Conservatives walked a careful tightrope, holding an unsuccessful and half-hearted vote to reopen the debate on same-sex marriage in 2006 and granting MPs freedom of conscience on abortion bills in 2010 and 2012, while avoiding proactively socially conservative legislation on hot-button issues (Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 216, 370; Malloy, 2013, p. 194). Despite occupying a middle ground between the ideological positions of their predecessors, the Conservatives have retained and even expanded the Alliance’s evangelical base, reflecting the extent to which the Conservative Party is able to “speak the same language” as evangelicals while maintaining the status quo on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage

(Malloy, 2013, pp. 186, 195–6; Rayside et al., 2017, p. 54). Nevertheless, while the Right today is united, the historical divide between conservative parties in Western Canada and in the rest of the country cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the role of conservative Christianity in cultivating that divide.

Conclusion

The southern Manitoba riding of Portage-Lisgar is notable for being the riding with the highest concentration of Mennonites anywhere in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024). In the 2021 federal election, the People's Party of Canada, which advocates for a populist and libertarian agenda along socially conservative lines, finished in a strong second place in Portage-Lisgar, winning over 21 per cent of the vote in the riding despite failing to send any MPs to Ottawa. Indeed, this same area in southern Manitoba also elected Manitoba's only Social Credit MLA, who served from 1959 to 1973, and it is where the Reform Party's first Manitoba MP was elected in 1993 (Wiseman, 1981, p. 110). Similar to evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Latter-Day Saints, Canadian Mennonites are conservative Christians who have been more likely to support right-wing, populist, libertarian parties. The strength of the People's Party in Portage-Lisgar in 2021 demonstrates the enduring appeal of populism and libertarianism in the Western provinces, and, given the growing association of Mennonites with the wider evangelical movement (Burkinshaw, 1995, p. 188), a study of the politics of Canadian Mennonites would be a worthy contribution to the literature on the intersection of religion and politics.

This essay has shown that conservative Christianity influenced Western Canadian conservatism in three distinct senses. First, the disproportionate number of conservative Christians in the Western provinces has resulted in numerous conservative Christians serving in public office, who along with the religious grassroots, have given Western conservatism a more

socially conservative hue than its Laurentian counterpart. Second, evangelicalism's emphasis on individualism and populism has shaped Western Canadian conservatism into a more stridently libertarian and reformist form of conservatism than Laurentian, Anglican-establishmentarian Toryism. Third, these differences have resulted in Western Canadian conservatives forming and backing different parties than the PCs in both federal and provincial legislatures. What form conservative Christianity's influence will take in an increasingly diverse and irreligious Canada is uncertain, but the political history of Canadian conservatism cannot be fully understood without grasping the outsized impact of conservative Christianity on the Western provinces.

References

- Banack, C. (2013). American Protestantism and the roots of “populist conservatism” in Alberta. In J. Farney & D. Rayside (Eds.), *Conservatism in Canada* (pp. 231–48). University of Toronto Press.
- Banack, C. (2016). *God’s province: Evangelical Christianity, political thought and conservatism in Alberta*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Blais, A., Nadeau, R., Gidengil, E., & Nevitte, N. (1999). Campaign dynamics in the 1997 Canadian election. *Canadian Public Policy*, 25(2), pp. 197–205. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3551888>
- Bowen, K. (2004). *Christians in a secular world: The Canadian experience*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Brinkeroff, M. B., Jacob, J. C., and Mackie, M. M. (1987). Mormonism and the moral majority make strange bedfellows: An exploratory critique. *Review of Religious Research*, 28(3), pp. 236–51. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3511378>
- Burkinshaw, R. K. (1995). *Pilgrims in lotus land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia, 1917–1981*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Caiden, N. (1962). The Canadian general election of 1962. *Australian Quarterly*, 34(3), pp. 72–82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20633812>
- Ellis, F. (2001). The more the things change . . . The Alliance campaign. In J.H. Pammett & C. Dornan, (Eds.), *The Canadian general election of 2000* (pp. 59–90). Dundurn.
- Farney, J. (2008, 23 May). *The benefits of office: Canadian conservatives, same-sex marriage and the end of the Tory syndrome?* Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. <https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2008/Farney.pdf>
- Fife, R. (1993). *Kim Campbell: The making of a politician*. HarperCollins.
- Grant, G. (1998). *The George Grant reader* (W. Christian & S. Grant, Eds.). University of Toronto Press.
- Guenther, B. L. (2000). Populism, politics, and Christianity in Western Canada. *Historical Papers 2000: Canadian Society of Church History*, 1(1), pp. 93–113.
- Harrison, T. W. (2002). *Requiem for a lightweight: Stockwell Day and image politics*. Black Rose Books.

- Hayday, M. (2024). Not a contradiction in terms: Exploring the progressiveness of the Progressive Conservatives. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 54(1), pp. 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2023.2301625>
- Hoover, D. R. (1997). The Christian right under old glory and the maple leaf. In C. E. Smidt & J. M. Penning, (Eds.), *Sojourners in the wilderness: The Christian Right in comparative perspective* (pp. 193–217). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ibbitson, J. (2015). *Stephen Harper*. Signal.
- Kirby, J. P. (n.d.). Election-atlas-ca. Retrieved 4 June 2025 from <http://www.election-atlas.ca/>
- Laycock, D. (1994). Reforming Canadian democracy? Institutions and ideology in the Reform Party project. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 27(2), pp. 213–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423900017340>
- Mackey, L. (1997). *Like father, like son: Ernest Manning and Preston Manning*. ECW Press.
- Malloy, J. (2013). The relationship between the Conservative Party of Canada and evangelicals and social conservatives. In J. Farney & D. Rayside, (Eds.), *Conservatism in Canada* (pp. 184–206). University of Toronto Press.
- Marshall, D. B. (2001). Premier E. C. Manning, *Back to the Bible Hour*, and fundamentalism in Canada. In M. Van Die (Ed.), *Religion and public life in Canada* (pp. 237–54). University of Toronto Press.
- Martin, D. (2002). *King Ralph: The political life and success of Ralph Klein*. Key Porter Books.
- McKim, D. (2013). God & government: Exploring the religious roots of Upper Canadian political culture. *Ontario History*, 105(1), pp. 74–97. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050747ar>
- Nevitte, N., Blais, A., Nadeau, R., & Gidengil, E. (2000). *Unsteady state: The 1997 federal election*. Oxford University Press.
- Plamondon, B. (2009). *Blue thunder: The truth about Conservatives from Macdonald to Harper*. Key Porter Books.
- Rayside, D. (1998). *On the fringe: Gays and lesbians in politics*. Cornell University Press.
- Rayside, D., Sabin, J., & Thomas, P. E. J. (2012, October). Faith and party politics in Alberta, or, “Danielle, this is Alberta, not Alabama.” Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. <https://cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2012/Rayside-Sabin-Thomas.pdf>
- Rayside, D., Sabin, J., & Thomas, P. E. J. (2017). *Religion & Canadian party politics*. UBC Press.

- Reform Party of Canada. (1989). *Reform Party of Canada: Platform & statement of principles*. https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformesV2/Canada/CAN_PL_1989_RP_en.pdf
- Reform Party of Canada. (1996). *A fresh start for Canadians: Blue book, 1996–1997, principles & policies of the Reform Party of Canada*. https://www.poltext.org/sites/poltext.org/files/plateformesV2/Canada/CAN_PL_1996_RP_en.pdf
- Schultz, H. J. (1964). Portrait of a premier: William Aberhart. *Canadian Historical Review*, 45(3), pp. 185–211. <https://doi.org/10.3138/chr-045-03-01>
- Statistics Canada. (2024, 8 July). *Census profile, 2021 census of population*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>
- Wells, P. (2006). *Right side up: The fall of Paul Martin and the rise of Stephen Harper's new conservatism*. McClelland and Stewart.
- Westfall, W. (1989). *Two worlds: The Protestant culture of nineteenth-century Ontario*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Wilkins-Laflamme, S., & Reimer, S. (2019). Religion and grassroots social conservatism in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), pp. 865–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423919000544>
- Wilkinson, M., & Ambrose, L. M. (2020). *After the revival: Pentecostalism and the making of a Canadian church*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Wiseman, N. (1981). An historical note on religion and parties on the prairies. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 16(2), pp. 109–12. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.16.2.109>

Appendix A:**Irreligion and Conservative Christianity in the Western Provinces and Canada Compared**

Religious group	% of Adherents in Canada and the Western Provinces ⁴				
	Canada	British Columbia	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba
“No religion and secular perspectives”	34.6%	52.1%	40.1%	36.6%	36.7%
“Other Christian and Christian-related traditions”	2.1%	2.0%	3.0%	2.9%	2.9%
“Pentecostal and other Charismatic Christians”	1.1%	0.8%	1.3%	1.4%	1.6%
“Latter Day Saints”	0.2%	0.3%	1.1%	0.2%	0.1%
“Anabaptists”	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%	1.1%	2.4%

⁴ Data sourced from Statistics Canada (2024).

Appendix B:**Reform Party and Canadian Alliance Strength in the Western Provinces**

Election	Strength of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance by Province, 1988–2000 ⁵			
	British Columbia	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba
1988	0/32 seats, 4.8% of the vote	0/26 seats, 15.4% of the vote	0/14 seats, 0.74% of the vote	0/14 seats, 3.3% of the vote
1993	24/32 seats, 36.4% of the vote	22/26 seats, 52.3% of the vote	4/14 seats, 27.2% of the vote	1/14 seats, 22.4% of the vote
1997	25/34 seats, 43.1% of the vote	24/26 seats, 54.6% of the vote	8/14 seats, 36% of the vote	3/14 seats, 23.7% of the vote
2000	27/34 seats, 49.4% of the vote	23/26 seats, 58.9% of the vote	10/14, 47.7% of the vote	4/14 seats, 30.4% of the vote

⁵ Data sourced from Kirby (n.d.).

June 2025 | Volume 1 | Issue 1

Page 35

Bears and Dragons in the North: An Analysis of Sino-Russian Economic Relations in the Arctic

Jordan Lee

jordan.lee4@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

The Arctic is rich with natural resources, such as natural gas, oil, and critical minerals, which have become increasingly more accessible due to climate change. Along with geopolitical tensions, many countries have included or are considering including the Circumpolar North in their strategy. As an Arctic state, Russia's proximity to the region allows for easier access to these resources; however, Western sanctions and financial constraints have made it difficult to develop means of extracting these resources. This has caused Russia to turn to China, a self-declared "Near Arctic" state, which has been providing financial and technological support for these projects. In return, China seeks to gain energy supplies and expand its geopolitical influence through the Polar Silk Road, the Northern component of its Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords:

Arctic, China, Russia, Economic Cooperation, Sino-Russian Cooperation

Introduction

As Arctic sea ice melts at an accelerated rate, many countries have included the Circumpolar North in their strategic thinking, emphasizing the region's importance. Since outlining its Arctic policies in a 2018 white paper, China has increased its presence in the Arctic in search of new economic opportunities and resource extraction (Puranen & Kopra, 2023, p. 240). This has raised concerns in many Western countries, particularly those within the Arctic Council. Like the West, Russia initially opposed China's increased presence in the Arctic and its self-description as a "Near Arctic State." However, despite Russia's reservations about China, scholars like Lincoln Flake believe that co-operation between the two countries will occur and prevail (Flake, 2013, p. 681). Following Western sanctions after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, co-operation between China and Russia increased, further strengthening their partnership. However, scholars like Jørgen Staun and Camilla T. Sørensen believe such co-operation represents a blunder on Russia's part (Staun & Sørensen, 2023, p. 24).

This paper aims to examine this relationship by asking, how does China's growing presence and interest in the Arctic threaten Russia? The paper will initially unpack what the literature says about the relationship. Following the literature review, an analysis of the relationship's economic element will be conducted. In so doing, the paper aims to understand the relationship and why it exists. Analyzing the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic, and especially its economic dimensions, is also important since doing so provides insights into where co-operation between the two countries, which is ongoing and highly susceptible to change, is heading. While examining the relationship, the paper will offer a discussion of how co-operation with China may pose challenges and security risks to Russia.

Literature Review

With rising geopolitical tensions between the West and the East, the Arctic has become an increasingly important arena for the Sino-Russian partnership. Many Western sources agree that co-operation between Russia and China in the Arctic threatens US hegemony and the liberal international order (MacDonald, 2021, p. 195). As revisionist states, China and Russia are dissatisfied with the current rules-based order. Russia views it as disadvantageous to its interests, and thus a direct threat to its security (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 8). In a 2023 foreign policy concept approved by the Russian president, the country expressed its desire to overturn the current international order and create a “more equitable multipolar world order” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, para. 5, 2023). Similarly, China also hopes to establish a multipolar system. However, China’s economy, unlike Russia’s, has benefited from the current order as it promotes free market capitalism and trade (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 8). Rather than dismantling the system that has helped it greatly, China’s vision of a multipolar world is one where it plays a more influential role in global governance (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 8). Despite not wanting to dismantle the system, China is still considered a threat by countries like the United States. In its summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the US Department of Defense stated that China and Russia’s preferred multipolar order is “one that is consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions” (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2).

Although the literature agrees that Sino-Russian co-operation in the Arctic threatens the West, there is no consensus on whether Russia stands to gain from its burgeoning partnership with China. Some scholars argue that China and Russia benefit from the partnership as it produces “win-win” outcomes, a core principle within China’s 2018 white paper (Lajeunesse et

al., 2023, p. 97; State Council, 2018). The most successful partnership that produced “win-win” outcomes is the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas, or Yamal LNG, project. Russia is one of the top oil-producing countries, surpassing the United States and Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Pincus, 2020, p. 48). Much of Russia’s oil is extracted from the Yamal region and the Russian Arctic (Pincus, 2020, p. 48). Even though Russia has easy access to fossil fuel resources, Western sanctions have crippled the country’s economy, leading to a lack of funding for the Yamal LNG project (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 339). As a country that wants to position itself as a reliable partner in the region, China’s role in Yamal LNG is to provide economic investments and resources. Since 2013, it has therefore invested billions of dollars into the project, with the result that it now owns roughly 30 per cent of shares in the project (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 84). China benefits from the project since it helps it combat energy insecurity (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 2). As of 2022, natural gas exports to China have increased by 35 per cent (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 2). Following this successful co-operation on the Yamal LNG, both countries have partnered in another liquefied natural gas project called Arctic 2 LNG (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 1). Besides those focused on the extraction of liquefied natural gas, there have also been partnerships and projects aimed at extracting critical minerals and conducting scientific research (Dalziel, 2024, p. 23).

In 2017, an agreement was made to incorporate Russia’s Northern Sea Route into the Maritime Silk Road portion of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI (Shibata et al., 2019, p. 198). This resulted in the Polar Silk Road, a significant step toward strengthening Sino-Russian co-operation in the region. Proposed in 2013, China’s BRI aims to connect the Eurasian continent with Africa and stimulate economic development via trade, financial support, and foreign investment (Huang, 2016, p. 314). Developing the Polar Silk Road is essential for China as it significantly decreases the time it takes to ship exports to Europe and allows it to avoid

hazards such as piracy (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 341). China's white paper explains that the country wishes to encourage Arctic states to participate in building the Polar Silk Road, which would foster trade among Arctic countries (State Council, 2018). Working with China would allow Russia to expand and develop infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route. Russia's vision for the Northern Sea Route is to turn it into a competitive trade artery with easy access for all states (Dalziel, 2024, p. 23). Opening up the Northern Sea Route will increase economic development in Russia and allow the country to shed its image as a revisionist power seeking control over the Arctic and to present itself as a more co-operative global partner (Shibata et al., 2019, pp. 196–7). Completing the development of the Northern Sea Route in the Russian Arctic also builds national pride, further cementing Russia's importance and role as an international partner (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 340).

By contrast, other scholars argue that co-operation between China and Russia is disadvantageous for Russia as China's gains have been greater than Russia's, which the latter could interpret as a threat. This reflects the realist assumption that the international system is competitive and privileges the idea of "relative gains." As a state that views anarchy in the Hobbesian sense, it can be assumed that Russia also believes that international competition is a "zero-sum" game. Even though both countries benefit from the Yamal LNG, "zero-sum" consideration prevails within the partnership. Besides gaining resources from trade, China also gains knowledge of how the critical energy sector operates (Pincus, 2020, p. 49). Under realism, partnerships are temporary and only exist when they benefit a state's interests. When China gains sufficient knowledge and participates in the critical energy sector itself, its reliance on trade with Russia will decrease. China will be less incentivized to invest in Russian projects. With Western sanctions and fewer funds for its projects, Russia's economy will be negatively impacted, thus

threatening Russia's wish of becoming the great power it perceives itself to be (Staun & Sørensen, 2023, p. 32).

Another argument for why Sino-Russian Arctic co-operation is a threat to Russia is that it would challenge that country's role in the Arctic and, ultimately, on the international stage. Were China to be included in the Arctic Council, governance in the region would appear to shift away from Russia's interest. Russia takes pride in its proximity to the Arctic, allowing it to become involved in decision-making processes within the region. As a result, Russia is very protective of its identity as an Arctic state (Pincus, 2020, p. 50). It can be said that Russia wishes to "nationalize" the Arctic and to maintain its authority over the region (MacDonald, 2021, p. 200). Since the inception of the Arctic Council in 1996, Russia has taken an extremely conservative approach to regional governance and the question of including non-Arctic states in the organization (Passeri & Fiori, 2019, p. 457). This was most obvious when Russia obstructed China's application to become an Arctic Council observer for seven years, only relenting due to pressure from the Nordic countries (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 98). Since then, Russia has feared that including China would open the Arctic to other non-Arctic states (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 76). And indeed, other Asian countries like Japan, India, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea have joined the Arctic Council as observers. With the inclusion of non-Arctic states, Russia, along with other Arctic states, advocated for making the Arctic Five—comprised of Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, and Norway—as a more exclusive and smaller regional organization, the main governing body in the Arctic (Kobzeva, 2019, p. 103; Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 26).

China's current objective in the region is to maximize its influence so that it can take part in Arctic governance (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). Within the current framework, China has very little power in the Arctic Council as it is an observer state. One way China has been trying

to shift the status quo is by advocating for the inclusion of non-Arctic states in the conversation (Kobzeva, 2019, p. 97). China's argument for why non-Arctic states should become more involved in the Arctic relates to climate change. Since climate change poses an existential threat to every state, China believes that including non-Arctic states in the council would allow for a broader understanding of the results of climate change (Staun & Sørensen, 2023, p. 32). When talking about how it will engage in Arctic affairs, China explicitly mentions that it aims to achieve "win-win" co-operation between Arctic and non-Arctic states, and that all states, Arctic or not, should respect each other's Arctic affairs (State Council, 2018). China's desire to increase Arctic accessibility is diametrically opposed to Russia's own interests in the Arctic. If Russia wants to "nationalize" the region, China wishes to "internationalize" it (MacDonald, 2021, p. 200). Russia wishes to maintain its status as a great polar power; however, China's desire to change the status quo may pose challenges to Russian Arctic sovereignty and jurisdiction, thus threatening Russia. Due to China's advocacy for the expansion of Arctic accessibility, non-Arctic states may ally closely with it, which Russia may see as a threat to its identity as a great polar power.

The literature consists of many policy analyses of various elements of the Sino-Russian relationship in the Far North. One observation worth addressing here is that one's judgment of whether the relationship is balanced depends on the particular element being analyzed. Those who view the relationship as positive for both countries looked at its economic, scientific, or military aspects and argue that both countries benefit from co-operation in these fields. Those who primarily focus on the political aspects of the relationship tend to view it as uneven, emphasizing ideas of sovereignty and Russia's position in both the Arctic and the international system.

Another factor that influences how scholars view the relationship is where they are from. Scholars from the West often analyze the relationship from Moscow's perspective and seek to understand how and why Russia aims to co-operate with China (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018, p. 270). This has resulted in some Western scholars arguing that co-operation between the two will not succeed as Russia's interests and plans for the region are different from those of China (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018, p. 270). By contrast, some Chinese and Russian scholars argue that the two countries' relationship in the North benefits both (e.g., Kobzeva, 2020, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Currently, there seems to be somewhat of a consensus in the literature that the relationship is uneven and a threat to Russia. However, co-operation between the two countries continues to persist, which goes against what most of the literature says about the relationship. Since Sino-Russian co-operation in the Arctic is still a recent phenomenon, the relationship is sensitive to change, especially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and thus it is difficult to determine a winner in the debate over the benefits to be derived from Russian-Chinese co-operation. Besides further research, more time must pass to determine the direction of the relationship.

Economic Element

Before it released its Arctic policy in 2018, China had already co-operated with Russia in many projects that promote economic development, such as the Yamal and Arctic 2 LNG projects. Since then, Sino-Russian co-operation in the Arctic has been economically driven, focusing on resource extraction and shipping, and has largely benefited the two countries (MacDonald, 2021, p. 103). The literature provides several different explanations as to why this partnership exists. As aspiring great powers, both in the region and internationally, China and Russia have similar

interests in wanting to exploit Arctic resources. More importantly, co-operation between the two is a means of decreasing economic dependence on the West, and thus could be seen as a way to balance power in the region.

In 2009, both countries talked about how the Arctic is a “strategic resource base,” as it houses 13 per cent of the globe’s uncovered petroleum supplies, of which 30 per cent is natural gas (Lanteigne, 2015, p. 151). The Arctic is also home to large deposits of critical minerals. With its proximity to the Arctic and a coastline that stretches over 24,000 kilometres, many of these resources are found offshore in areas like Murmansk and the Yamal Peninsula. Russia’s economy is heavily dependent on exporting oil and natural gas as they make up 20 to 24 per cent, respectively, of Russia’s GDP, which explains the country’s need to develop infrastructure and tools to extract these resources (Rautava, 2004, p. 316). As mentioned, Western sanctions have hindered Russia’s ability to build advanced extraction tools. These sanctions have also limited Russia’s access to Western markets, especially in Europe, where Russian oil imports have dropped by 30 per cent (Yadav, 2022).

China has become a crucial partner for Russia as it has been the main provider of investment, with firms such as the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation, or CNPC, funding both the Yamal and Arctic 2 LNG projects (Kapoor, 2024, p. 37). China’s investment in Russian projects benefits China by addressing the state’s energy insecurity. Due to the scarcity of oil and gas deposits in the country, China’s energy insecurity is mainly caused by its overreliance on Middle Eastern oil (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 3). Investing in Russian projects allows China to diversify its natural gas and oil supplies, securing long-term agreements and access to these resources. Besides increasing its energy supply, China’s investments also allow for the construction of channels that expand trade and maritime transportation in the Arctic.

As dissatisfied states within the current rules-based order, China and Russia's economic co-operation in the Arctic is a way of challenging Western dominance in global trade. Like Russia, China also faces economic sanctions from the West, for various reasons, including its human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has resulted in a drop in the purchase of Chinese exports. Since 2018, China and the United States have been engaged in a trade war, and this has only escalated during President Trump's second term as he promises to increase tariffs on all foreign exports. Co-operating in the energy sector and developing alternate trade routes would allow China and Russia to reduce their reliance on the United States and its allies (Townsend & Kendall-Taylor, 2021, p. 1). By not relying on the West, China and Russia can demonstrate how successful their projects are, which may influence Arctic and non-Arctic states to side with them.

The economic relationship between Russia and China can be defined as a strategic partnership. According to Martin A. Smith, a strategic partnership is one motivated by a "broader agreement amongst partners about the overall nature of international relations" (2006, p. 112). The fact that they agree about the nature of international relations and potential or actual security threats results in a stable partnership formed via shared goals and mutual concern for one another (Smith, 2006, p. 112). Relations between states in a strategic partnership will endure after formal agreements or co-operation ends (Smith, 2006, p. 112). Defining this relationship as a partnership rather than an alliance is an important distinction as the meaning of the two terms differ. The former entails fewer obligations, allowing for neutrality and even disapproval vis-à-vis partners while maintaining positive behaviour (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 337). The latter, however, requires both parties to sacrifice their interests for their ally, which explains why scholars believe alliances are stronger than partnerships (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 337; Smith, 2006, p. 112). According

to Smith's definition, China and Russia are in a strategic partnership rather than an alliance. Both countries view the West, especially the United States, as the biggest security threat in the Arctic. Since both face sanctions from the West, co-operating in economic and development projects could be a way to balance power in the Arctic. Besides counterbalancing the West, mutual economic dependence would allow them to pursue their national and shared interests in the Arctic and other regions in Asia, such as Central Asia.

There is little evidence that both countries have given up on their interests in order to ally with one another. As outlined in the 2018 white paper, China wishes to promote itself as a reliable partner for economic investments and global prosperity in the region through "win-win" co-operation (Pincus, 2020, p. 44). This includes co-operating with the United States and other NATO countries in the Arctic. This sentiment, however, is not shared by Russia, whose most recent foreign policy statement has been hawkish toward the United States and the Western world more broadly. If both countries wanted to upgrade their relationship from a partnership to an alliance, they would need to change their attitude toward the West and abandon their individual national interests. Increasing Chinese aggression in the region would induce further sanctions and decrease Western trading partners, severely impacting its economy. If Russia was to adopt China's "win-win" belief and was willing to co-operate with the West, it would go against its own national interests, becoming compliant with the rules-based system and abandoning its wishes for a multipolar system.

Challenges

Although economic relations between the two countries have been positive, there are certainly tensions in the partnership, some of which are problematic for Russia. The first problem, and the most minor of them, is that the number of successful projects has decreased. While Yamal LNG

continues to be successful, Dr. Adam Lajeunesse and others point out that the project's success is a rhetorical tool for showcasing Sino-Russian economic success (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). Since 2012, China and Russia have engaged in twenty-two projects, of which only half have been successful (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018, pp. 274–5). The reality is that there have been many projects, the majority relating to the construction of trade routes, that have seen little to no success. Concerning trade routes along the Northern Sea Route, mutual mistrust over cross-border co-operation in the Sea of Japan has hindered the countries' interactions and projects within the area (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 84). The same can be said about negotiations in the White and Barents Seas. China continues to visit the region to negotiate, sign agreements, and discuss projects; however, little to no action has thus far been taken to actually initiate these projects (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 86).

Russia's pivot to the East has given China a superior position in many of its economic partnerships, which could result from Russia's overdependence on Chinese investments. This overdependence provides China with leverage over Russia. Evidence shows that China has dictated the terms of engagement for many economic projects between the two countries (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). Russia's war with Ukraine has proven to be disadvantageous for China and its Polar Silk Road in the Far North. Although China supports Russia and blames the Russo-Ukrainian War on the West and NATO expansion, the war jeopardizes Arctic stability, which impacts Chinese trade and shipping in the region (Lajeunesse & Lackenbauer, 2024, p. 125). This has resulted in China becoming more hesitant to invest in trade routes along the Northern Sea Route (Lajeunesse & Lackenbauer, 2024, p. 129). If the war further impacts China's ability to trade in the region, China could provide fewer investments for these projects and adopt a more neutral stance on the conflict.

Another contentious area in the Sino-Russian economic partnership is the Northern Sea Route. Jurisdiction over the route is highly debated between the two states, whose respective stances mirror, in their own ways, Canada's claim to the Northwest Passage. Since the 1960s under the "Structure of the Protection of the State Boundary of the USSR," Russia claims the Northern Sea Route as "historical waters," a body of international water that is to be treated like internal waters due to historic titles (Shibata et al., 2019, p. 191; *United Kingdom v. Norway*, 1951, p. 130). Since Russia considers it internal waters, it claims sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route and has exercised its authority through strict regulations. In 2013, Russia issued its "Rules for Navigation in the Water Area of the Northern Sea Route," stating that usage of the area requires an application process and an icebreaker to accompany the vessel in question (Shibata et al., 2019, p. 193). Russia also argues that under article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, Russia has the right to deny passage to those who do not comply with its strict maritime and environmental regulations, giving it further control over the Northern Sea Route (Flake, 2013, p. 683).

China views, however, the Northern Sea Route as an international waterway, meaning that UNCLOS, rather than Russia, dictates the rules of the region. The different interpretations of the Northern Sea Route have led to many challenges for China in the area of shipping. If China wanted to use the Northern Sea Route to ship goods to Europe, it would require Russian approval, which can be difficult to obtain as Russia has previously denied the Chinese access to the Northern Sea Route. In 2012, Russia blocked vessels from performing scientific research in the region (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 99). Russia also altered its submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2021, after China expressed growing interest in the region (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). This creates difficulty for China and other states with

trade-based economies. Similar to how the CNPC and other Chinese natural gas firms contribute large sums of money to Russian LNG projects, China has also heavily invested in building and improving infrastructure in the Northern Sea Route with its implementation of the BRI. Once again, China is given leverage over Russia. It is unlikely that China will decrease funding; however, it could demand concessions, such as greater control of ports or lowering the cost of accessing the route, which would diminish Russian control over the Northern Sea Route.

Conclusion

China and Russia's relationship in the Arctic is meant to balance power as the region consists of Western allies that pose security challenges to the East. One way this relationship manifests is through economic co-operation. As defined earlier, Sino-Russian economic co-operation represents a strategic partnership whereby both countries share the mutual interest of balancing the West via exertions of economic hard power. For Russia, this relationship allows for reduced reliance on Western investment for its Arctic projects and Western markets when selling oil and natural gas. China also benefits from the relationship as it gains new maritime trade routes to Europe and North America and a more reliable way of obtaining resources, such as natural gas and critical minerals.

However, despite the "win-win" results of the Sino-Russian relationship, mutual mistrust and disputes over the Northern Sea Route have posed challenges to the relationship's stability. The Russo-Ukrainian War further adds to the relationship's instability as China has no interest in financing a problematic partner. The many disagreements in the relationship ultimately come down to the two countries' differing perspectives on Arctic governance. As an Arctic state, Russia wishes to maintain the status quo and further establish itself as a great polar power, which explains its mistrust toward China and its claims over the Northern Sea Route. China, however,

poses multiple challenges to Russia's identity as a great polar power by way of its economic leverage and its desire to change the Arctic governance framework, resulting in an insecure Russia.

Sino-Russian economic co-operation in the Arctic will continue to persist, despite the various challenges. Both countries face significant geopolitical threats in the form of Western alliances in the Far North. Russia and China will depend on this relationship to combat the West by increasing their state capacity and influence over Arctic and non-Arctic states. Although the economic element of Sino-Russian relations suggests a positive future for this relationship, analysis of other elements, such as the political and military aspects, is required as this relationship is complex and ever-changing.

References

- Alexeeva, O., & Lasserre, F. (2018). An analysis on Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic in the BRI era. *Advances in Polar Sciences*, 29(4), 269–82.
<https://www.pairault.fr/sinaf/doc/fl2.pdf>
- Dalziel, A. (2024). *Eurasian North—the geopolitics of Russia and China in the Arctic*. MacDonald-Laurier Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep60912>
- Department of Defense. (2018). *Summary of the 2018 national defense strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*. Department of Defense. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF>
- Fiori, A., & Passeri, A. (2019). Beyond the “win-win” rhetoric: Drivers and limits of the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic. *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 5(2), 443–75.
<https://doi.org/10.1285/i20398573v5n2p443>
- Flake, L. E. (2013). Russia and China in the Arctic: A team of rivals. *Strategic Analysis*, 37(6), 681–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.847048>
- Huang, Y. (2016). Understanding China’s Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, framework and assessment. *China Economic Review*, 40, 314–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2016.07.007>
- Kapoor, N. (2024). The Arctic in Russia-China relations: Opportunities and challenges. *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 48(1), 33–45.
https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/forwa48&div=7&g_sent=1&casa_token=&collection=journals
- Kobzeva, M. (2019). China’s Arctic policy: Present and future. *Polar Journal*, 9(1), 94–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2019.1618558>
- Kobzeva, M. (2020). Strategic partnership setting for Sino-Russian cooperation in Arctic shipping. *Polar Journal*, 10(2), 334–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2020.1810956>
- Kobzeva, M. A. (2021). Cooperation between Russia and China in Arctic shipping: Current state and prospects. *Arktika i Sever*, 43(43), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.37482/issn2221-2698.2021.43.89>
- Lajeunesse, A., & Lackenbauer, P. W. (2024). *Selling the “Near-Arctic” state: China’s information and influence operations in the Arctic*. Wilson Center.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/SellingNearArctic-4.pdf>

- Lajeunesse, A., Lackenbauer, P. W., Sukhankin, S., & Bouffard, T. J. (2023). Friction points in the Sino-Russian Arctic partnership. *Joint Force Quarterly: JFQ*, 111(4), 96–106. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3571034/>
- Lanteigne, M. (2015). The role of China in emerging Arctic security discourses. *S + F*, 33(3), 30–5. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0175-274X-2015-3-30>
- MacDonald, A. P. (2021). China-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: A cause for concern for the Western Arctic states? *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 27(2), 194–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2021.1936098>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2023, 31 March). *The concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation*. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/
- Pincus, R. (2020). Three-way power dynamics in the Arctic. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 14(1), 40–63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26891883>
- Puranen, M., & Kopra, S. (2023). China's Arctic Strategy: A comprehensive approach in times of great power rivalry. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 6(1), 239–53. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.196>
- Rautava, J. (2004). The role of oil prices and the real exchange rate in Russia's economy: A cointegration approach. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 32(2), 315–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2004.02.006>
- Shibata, A., Zou, L., Sellheim, N., & Scopelliti, M. (2019). *Emerging legal orders in the Arctic: The role of non-Arctic actors*. Routledge.
- Smith, M. (2006). *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through cold peace to partnership?* Routledge.
- Staun, J., & Sørensen, C. T. N. (2023). Incompatible strategic cultures limit Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 6(1), 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.178>
- Stronski, P., & Ng, N. (2018). *Cooperation and competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16975>
- State Council. (2018, 26 January). “Full text: China's Arctic policy.” State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm

Townsend, J., & Kendall-Taylor, A. (2021). *Partners, competitors, or a little of both? Russia and China in the Arctic*. Center for a New American Security.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30199>

United Kingdom v. Norway. (1951). ICJ Rep 116, 116–44. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/5/005-19511218-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf>

Yadav, N. (2022, 13 July). Middle East is piling up on Russian oil after Europe shunned trade deals with Vladimir Putin. *Benzinga Newswires*.
<https://www.benzinga.com/markets/asia/22/07/28045802/middle-east-is-piling-up-on-russian-oil-after-europe-shunned-trade-deals-with-vladimir-putin>

Zhang, K., Hu, M., Dang, C. N., & Li, L. (2022). The potential of Sino-Russian energy cooperation in the Arctic region and its impact on China's energy security. *Scientific Programming*, 2022, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/8943314>

Changing Geopolitical Landscape in the Asia-Pacific: Rise of China and the United States' Response

Ethan Markowitz

ethan.markowitz@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

The rise of China has challenged the United States' post–Cold War hegemonic dominance, requiring shifts in U.S. security strategy. A series of Chinese actions have prompted these shifts in the past 20 years, which are identified in this paper. This paper examines how and why the United States has shifted its foreign policy in response to China's rise. It analyzes government documents and research from Western and Chinese perspectives to identify U.S. policy shifts and the rationale behind them. Three significant areas of policy change are highlighted: the United States has expanded its military presence in the Asia-Pacific, strengthened military and economic ties with other countries in the region, and pursued economic independence and security, particularly in the semiconductor industry. These shifts represent a major realignment of U.S. foreign policy away from traditional theatres in Europe and the Middle East towards a focus on the Asia-Pacific. In addition, the relationship between the United States and China will play a critical role in shaping the future stability and structure of the international system.

Keywords:

Foreign Policy, International Relations, Sino-US Relations, Security Policy

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has maintained its place as the uncontested leader of the unipolar world order; however, the economic and military rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has begun to challenge this apparent supremacy. Throughout their history together, the United States and China have had conflicting views on security and borders. Massive economic growth since the 1990s has enabled China to expand its military and global influence to the point where it can now challenge the United States. China has begun to enforce its land claims in South Asia and the South China Sea, and it has signalled that it is willing to enforce its claim on Taiwan as well. During the Cold War, Sino-US relations were fragile but stable. Incidents like the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre created tensions between the two countries, but relations remained stable due to economic benefits and aligned interests against the Soviet Union (Roper, 2024). However, China's recent rise to power and increased aggression has made that more difficult, necessitating changes to US security policy beginning in the 2010s. This paper aims to determine how the United States has adjusted its security policy in response to China's growing power and influence.

Before analyzing changes in US foreign policy, it is important to establish what Chinese actions prompted these changes, as well as the United States' core geopolitical interests in the Asia-Pacific region. This analysis will draw on research from Western and Chinese perspectives. I will then identify the changes made in the past twenty years to US foreign policy in response to the rise of China and analyze why these changes were deemed necessary. I have identified three main areas where the United States modified its foreign policy in response to China's rise: The United States has expanded its military presence in the Asia-Pacific, strengthened military and

economic ties with other countries in the region, and pursued economic independence and security, particularly in the semiconductor industry.

A Divergence of Goals and Ideology

According to a 2024 US Department of Defense report, China views the United States as “deploying a whole-of-government effort to contain and suppress the PRC’s rise, presenting obstacles to its national strategy” (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 1). China’s national strategy emphasizes a series of “core interests,” several of which are at direct odds with international law and the geopolitical interests of the United States. Particularly, its claims in the South China Sea are illegal under international law and conflict with the legal maritime claims of five other sovereign nations. China also maintains illegal land claims against India and Bhutan on its southern border (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 4–19). Additionally, China, a socialist nation, is an ideological opposite of the United States.

China’s views on sovereignty and borders put it at odds with American and Western values of self-determination, freedom, and individualism and have led to conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. China views independence movements in Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong as threats to its own national sovereignty and has pursued aggressive economic and cultural integration policies in these regions (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 6). Beijing is also reluctant to endorse any sanctions or actions that disrupt the status quo, fearing international intervention should it face internal instability (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 15). Additionally, China’s global initiatives are increasingly at odds with those of the United States. As China’s economy has grown, the country has expanded its role in the international governance system, utilizing its positions in the UN Security Council, World Trade Organization, and G-20 to pursue its agenda. The PRC is also a member or founder of numerous regional and global organizations designed to

move the international system away from Western dominance, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 14).

Historically, ideological differences between the United States and China have played a relatively insignificant role in Sino-US relations. For decades, China remained a minor power unable to compete with US interests, and co-operation against the Soviet Union proved mutually beneficial (Jie, 2020). Beginning in 2017, the Trump administration framed China as a “revisionist power” and “strategic competitor,” and positioned the rivalry between “free” and “repressive” world orders as a top security concern for the United States (Jie, 2020). While it was the Obama administration that began gradually shifting US foreign policy toward Asia, the Trump administration’s framing of China as a competitor rather than an economic ally brought ideology back to the forefront of Sino-US relations. Additionally, as China has risen as a world power and the differences between US and Chinese world governance strategies have emerged, ideology has begun to play a larger role. China has long opposed the United States’ concept of a liberal international order and its tendency to seek to transform non-democratic states into democracies, but only in recent decades has it been able to offer its own alternative to US influence. The Trump administration sought to prevent China from using its newfound power to establish illiberal spheres of influence in the Asia-Pacific and beyond (Zuo, 2025). As both states exert their influence over the international system, it has become clear that domestic ideologies influence both China’s and the United States’ global governance strategies (Jie, 2020).

Catalysts for Change: Chinese Actions Prompting US Policy Shift

Central to China’s national strategy is the expansion and modernization of its military forces, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). China now maintains the largest active-duty military force in the world, with over two million personnel, as well as the largest navy by number of ships. The

People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has focused on modernizing its surface and submarine forces and has deployed six nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines as part of the PRC's nuclear triad (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 48–52). The PRC has also been expanding and modernizing its nuclear weapons arsenal and is believed to possess over six hundred nuclear warheads (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 102). In addition to expansion, increased aggression by the PLAN and China Coast Guard and the construction of military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea have aggravated tensions between China, its neighbours, and the United States. The PRC also maintains overlapping land claims with India and Bhutan, which have led to deadly skirmishes between the Indian Army and the PLA (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 19). PLA military exercises have also caused tension between the United States and China. For example, China conducted the 2023 Joint Sword exercise in response to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy. The PLAN also conducts operations within the Exclusive Economic Zones of other countries, including the United States (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 45–8).

China states that the intent of its global initiatives is to make the international system fairer to all, specifically to developing countries (Wu & Li, 2021, pp. 67–8); however, Chinese foreign direct investment and technology-sharing initiatives can create economic and strategic dependencies for China and reduce global reliance on American technology. In particular, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, is intended to expand PRC global outreach by providing foreign investment and completing infrastructure projects in developing countries. The PRC has also used the BRI to pursue economic co-operation with participating countries, moving them away from American influence (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 10–12). China's stated goals for the BRI are to supplement regional development, improve Chinese

industry, and provide an outlet for excess industrial capacity; however, critics accuse China of practising debt-trap diplomacy with impoverished countries unable to repay BRI loans.

Additionally, China's state investment bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, gives out low-interest and zero-cash-payment loans in exchange for resource rights or infrastructure access, giving the Chinese government advantages in negotiations should a country default on its loans. The bank also allows China to circumvent international monetary organizations and regulations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Many of the countries participating in China's BRI lack credibility on the international stage, limiting their alternatives for foreign investment (Lindley, 2022). To expand its BRI initiatives beyond infrastructure, the PRC created the Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative, intended to facilitate technology transfer between the PRC and partner countries. Critics of the DSR initiative are concerned that China is creating dependencies on its technology and encouraging the use of PRC technologies for authoritarian governance (US Department of Defense, 2024a, pp. 12–13). In response to increasing BRI initiatives, the United States has also increased its own infrastructure partnerships, particularly in regions of focus for China's BRI. Notably, the 2023 establishment of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor was in direct response to China's BRI initiatives (Zuo, 2025).

Cybersecurity threats originating from the PRC have also raised alarm among US officials. In its 2024 Annual Threat Assessment, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence identified China as the “most active and persistent cyber threat to U.S. Government, private-sector, and critical infrastructure networks” (National Intelligence Council, 2024, p. 11). The first public accusation of Chinese hacking was the “Titan Rain” intrusions into US Department of Defense laboratories between 2003 and 2005. Following this, the frequency of

Chinese cyber-attacks has been increasing since 2011, and they have targeted US government infrastructure as well as major US firms, including a high-profile attack on Google in 2010. Through cyber-attacks, China has also gained access to classified design information on US weapons and missile defense systems (Lindsay, 2015).

At the forefront of Sino-US tensions is the security situation in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan occupies an extremely strategic location in East Asia. It is situated in the middle of the First Island Chain, a series of islands in East Asia that have proven vital to US defence interests in the Asia-Pacific. A Chinese occupation of Taiwan would limit US military operations in the region and hamper the United States' ability to defend itself and its allies (Sacks, 2023). While China is striving for peaceful reunification with Taiwan, it has stated that it will not allow Taiwan to remain separated from China under any circumstances (US Department of Defense, 2024a, p. 6). In 2005, Beijing passed the Anti-Secession Law, which set a legal precedent for a military invasion of Taiwan if "secessionist forces" achieve independence and all options for peaceful reunification are exhausted (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 30). Additionally, the PLA has conducted frequent shows of force and military exercises in the Taiwan Strait region over the past two decades, often in response to US or Taiwanese officials engaging in diplomatic talks. These exercises have increased dramatically since a 2022 visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, signalling Beijing's intent to suppress Taiwanese sovereignty. Following the Pelosi visit, the PLA has shifted its military exercises northward, threatening major population centres like Taipei and demonstrating the PLA's control over the Taiwan Strait (Shattuck, 2023).

US Response: Increased Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific

In 2011, President Barack Obama announced the “Pivot to Asia,” a significant shift in US foreign policy from a focus on the Middle East and Europe to East Asia. With US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan on the decline, the Pentagon shifted the US military presence to Asia in response to threats from China and North Korea. The Obama administration committed 60 per cent of US naval forces to the Indo-Pacific region and redeployed forces no longer needed in Iraq and Afghanistan to other parts of Asia. Although this did not constitute a significant increase above existing force levels, the US military maintains a very strong presence in the region, with over 80,000 American troops in Japan and South Korea alone (Roper, 2024). In response to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, the United States restructured its military deployment from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and Oceania, increasing the US military presence in Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia. This strategy was bolstered by efforts to fortify allied defence capabilities through bilateral and multilateral agreements, which will be discussed in the following section. The Obama administration’s strategy, which was continued in part by the Trump and Biden administrations, was intended to constrain, encircle, and suppress China on all fronts (De Castro, 2018; Zuo, 2025).

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has been fortifying its military presence in East Asia by building a plethora of military bases along the First Island Chain, consisting of bases in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States shifted the focus of its operations to preserving shipping lanes vital to the economies of all nations in the region. In the 1990s, China was not viewed as a major threat; however, Chinese encroachment on Taiwan, the last link in the First Island Chain, caused tensions between the United States and China. In 1995 and 1996, China fired ballistic missiles

into the sea near major Taiwanese cities in response to pro-independence movements in the country. US President Bill Clinton responded by sending two carrier strike groups to the vicinity as a contingency and show of force to China. Control over Taiwan would solidify the PRC's dominance over the First Island Chain and hamper US interests in the region. Both China and the United States conduct military operations along the First Island Chain, but Chinese operations have historically been limited to the Yellow, East, and South China Seas. More recently, according to American and Japanese officials, the Chinese threat increased once PLA ships and aircraft began crossing the First Island Chain into the Pacific, which intensified after 2008. A 2010 incident in which a Chinese fishing trawler rammed Japan Coast Guard vessels within Japanese waters sparked tensions between the two nations. This prompted Japan, with the participation of US troops, to stage military drills for the retaking of disputed islands in the East China Sea. In 2014, President Obama declared in a message to China that the islands were covered under a US-Japan defence agreement (Wirth, 2023).

The United States has also bolstered its military relationship with the Philippines in response to China's rise and increased aggression against Filipino vessels in the South China Sea. The United States had withdrawn all forces from the Philippines in 1992 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rising tensions with China and the 1995–6 Taiwan Strait Crisis prompted American officials to reconsider the United States' military relationship with the Philippines. In 1998, the United States signed the Visiting Forces Agreement allowing for the rotational presence of American troops in the Philippines. With the threat from China increasing and Filipino democracy stabilizing, the US and Philippine governments signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), providing access to five existing Filipino bases for US troops and allowing the construction of new facilities within the bases. In 2023, the two

countries agreed to incorporate four additional bases into the EDCA (Harding, 2024). Since 1951, the United States has also maintained a mutual defence treaty with the Philippines, which threatens to draw it into any conflict between the Philippines and China over holdings in the South China Sea. In July 2024, President Joe Biden reaffirmed the United States' alliance with the Philippines, legitimizing the mutual defence treaty and committing funds toward the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (US Department of Defense, 2024b).

US Response: Expansion of Alliances with Other Pacific Nations

Perhaps most central to the United States' strategy for countering Chinese influence is the expansion of its alliance network in the Asia-Pacific. The United States has long had partners in Northeast Asian nations like Japan and South Korea, but rising tensions and economic competition with China have resulted in the expansion of the American alliance network southward into Southeast Asia and Oceania. As a part of the Pivot to Asia, the Obama administration pursued a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements with nations in Southeast Asia and Oceania. The United States has maintained a strong military relationship with Australia since the end of the Second World War, but recent Chinese assertiveness has significantly strengthened this partnership. Support for the US-Australia alliance has been almost unwavering since the end of the Cold War, and Australia provided strong support for the Obama administration's Asian pivot. As mentioned in the previous section, the United States also bolstered its alliance with the Philippines in response to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, resulting in the signing of the EDCA agreement in 2014 (Yeo, 2019, pp. 117–48). During the Obama administration, the United States strengthened bilateral agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Thailand while deepening partnerships with non-treaty allied states such as Vietnam,

Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. It also deepened its unofficial relationship with Taiwan (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

The United States has also pursued multilateral agreements and increased relations with existing organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2008 the United States became the first non-ASEAN country to appoint an ambassador to the association, signalling increased co-operation between the United States and ASEAN nations. By 2011, the United States had opened a permanent mission to ASEAN in Jakarta and had begun participating in the East Asia Summit. Trilateral relations have become important in managing multiple alliances in the Asia-Pacific. Pressured by Japan and Australia, the United States pursued a Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with the two nations starting in 2002. In the post-9/11 era, amid rising tensions with China, Tokyo and Canberra have reiterated their support for continued dialogue between the three nations. The continued Trilateral Strategic Dialogue has strengthened US-Japan and US-Australia bilateral alliances and deepened relations between Australia and Japan, providing stability in the region (Yeo, 2019). Multilateral relations, such as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, enhance coordination and military interoperability among key allies, which is vital for any future co-operation against China.

Both bilateral and trilateral relationships have facilitated the sale of weapons to Pacific countries, including Taiwan. The United States severed formal diplomatic relations and halted all military aid to Taiwan in 1979 after extending official recognition to the PRC in Beijing. Arms sales to Taiwan continued, and informal relations were maintained through the American Institute in Taiwan. In recent years, however, military aid has resumed. In 2022, Congress passed legislation allowing for the resumption of military aid to Taiwan. This legislation also allowed for Taiwan to receive weapons through American defence stocks, making it the second country

after Ukraine to receive this type of aid. Taiwan has also purchased more than \$50 billion worth of US weapons since 1950, making it the fourth-largest buyer of US weapons, behind only Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Japan (Masters, 2024).

US Response: Bolstering Economic Security

The final major area of US policy change relates to economic security. China's economy has become the second largest in the world, behind only the United States, resulting in competition between the two countries. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, facilitating economic co-operation, but subsequent security developments have made co-operation more difficult. Taiwan is vital to the global economy, with Taiwanese firms producing nearly 70 per cent of the world's semiconductors and 90 per cent of advanced semiconductors. One firm, TSMC, is responsible for the overwhelming majority of advanced semiconductor manufacturing. Any disruption to Taiwan's position in the global economy would be devastating for the entire world, including the United States and China (Sacks, 2023). In response to Chinese threats against Taiwan, the United States has formed and expanded free trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific and made strides toward domestic semiconductor production to reduce its reliance on Taiwan.

Initially characterized by co-operation, economic relations between China and the US grew increasingly strained after the 2008 global financial crisis, when economic insecurities in both countries arose. In the United States, a common point of contention was the large trade deficit with China, which was cited as an indicator of an unfair economic relationship. China also expressed economic security concerns over the US dollar–dominant monetary system. The final turning point was the Trump administration's 2018 trade war with China, which led to a series of retaliatory tariffs from both nations, resulting in adverse economic effects for both

countries (Bulman, 2021). These tariffs were then left largely intact by the Biden administration. In the era of less-than-co-operative economic relations with China, the United States has pursued free trade agreements with other nations in the region. The number of free trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific has increased dramatically since 2000, with over 150 agreements in effect by 2017, and many more on the horizon. President Obama attempted to strengthen and simplify free trade in the Asia-Pacific through regional trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). However, negotiations for the TPP stalled in Congress, and the remaining nations forged ahead with a new version of the agreement, excluding the United States, and putting future US participation in jeopardy (Yeo, 2019).

To pursue self-sufficiency in the semiconductor industry, Congress passed the CHIPS Act, which authorized \$550 million per year in grants between 2023 and 2027 to support research, design, and manufacturing of semiconductors in the United States. The country is the largest consumer of semiconductors, constituting 46 per cent of the global market; however, US semiconductor manufacturing capacity has eroded since the 1990s. In 1990, it accounted for 37 per cent of global semiconductor manufacturing capacity, compared to only 12 per cent today. This means that the United States relies on foreign countries for most of its semiconductor supply, especially Taiwan for its advanced semiconductors. The White House stated that one of the goals for the CHIPS Act was to “reduce our dependence on critical technologies from China and other vulnerable or overly concentrated foreign supply chains” (Peters, 2022, p. 1644). This puts the CHIPS Act at the core of the effort to secure US economic interests. The passing of the CHIPS Act was intended to help reverse this trend, and early data indicates that the effects, while minimal, are mostly working as intended. A macroeconomic analysis determined that the passing

of the CHIPS Act has slightly weakened China's economy, reduced US imports, and increased US exports. This trend is expected to continue in subsequent years (Gu & Cheong, 2024).

Conclusion

The United States has responded to China's global rise to power through a series of foreign policy initiatives. First, it has expanded its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Beginning with the Obama administration's 2011 "Pivot to Asia" strategy, military resources were redeployed from Iraq and Afghanistan to Asia. This military repositioning initiative has resulted in strengthened military bases along the First Island Chain and the re-establishment of a US military presence in the Philippines through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Second, the United States has strengthened its alliance and trade network in the Asia-Pacific, developing a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements to counter Chinese influence in the region. The Obama and Biden administrations deepened military and economic ties with Australia, Japan, and South Korea while forming new partnerships in Southeast Asia and with India. The United States has also deepened its unofficial relationship with Taiwan, continuing weapons sales and renewing military aid. Finally, the United States has pursued economic security measures to reduce reliance on China and other vulnerable nations like Taiwan. Notably, the 2022 CHIPS Act invested in domestic semiconductor manufacturing, representing a shift toward self-sufficiency in an area vulnerable to Chinese influence.

These shifts in foreign policy represent a major strategic realignment for the United States. The country has traditionally been focused on theatres in the Middle East and Europe, so this realignment of focus suggests rising concerns about Chinese political and economic influence through PRC government measures such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road. The United States pursued these changes to maintain its political and economic

dominance in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. During a 2015 state visit to the United States by Chinese President Xi Jinping, President Barack Obama stated that he welcomes the rise of a China that is “peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in international affairs” (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). The relationship between the two countries will likely be a defining feature of the global system for decades to come, with the global rules-based order riding on whether these competing powers can maintain peaceful relations amid their growing rivalry.

References

- Bulman, D. J. (2021). The economic security dilemma in U.S.-China relations. *Asian Perspective*, 45(1), 49–73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2021.0013>
- De Castro, R. C. (2018). The Obama administration's strategic rebalancing to Asia: Quo vadis in 2017? *Pacific Focus*, 33(2), 179–208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12115>
- Gu, S., & Cheong, I. (2024). Impact of the CHIPS Act on the GVC participation of China's electronics industry. *Journal of International Logistics and Trade*, 22(1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JILT-10-2023-0073>
- Harding, S. D. (2024, May). There and back and there again: U.S. military bases in the Philippines. *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/may/there-and-back-and-there-again-us-military-bases-philippines>
- Jie, D. (2020). The emerging ideological security dilemma between China and the U.S. *China International Strategy Review*, 2(2), 184–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00059-3>
- Kelly, T. K., Dobbins, J., Shlapak, D. A., Gompert, D. C., Heginbotham, E., Chalk, P., & Thrall, L. (2014). *The U.S. Army in Asia, 2030–2040*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR474.html
- Lindley, D. (2022). Assessing China's motives: How the Belt and Road Initiative threatens U.S. interests. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 5(4), 72–90. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3111114/assessing-chinas-motives-how-the-belt-and-road-initiative-threatens-us-interests/>
- Lindsay, J. R. (2015). The impact of China on cybersecurity: Fiction and friction. *International Security*, 39(3), 7–47. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00189
- Masters, J. (2024, 25 September). *U.S. military support for Taiwan in five charts*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-military-support-taiwan-five-charts>
- National Intelligence Council. (2024, 4 February). *Annual threat assessment of the U.S. intelligence community*. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>
- Office of the Press Secretary. (2015, 16 November). Fact sheet: Advancing the rebalance to Asia and the Pacific [Press release]. White House. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>

- Peters, M. A. (2022). Semiconductors, geopolitics and technological rivalry: The U.S. CHIPS & Science Act, 2022. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55(14), 1642–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2124914>
- Roper, B. S. (2024). China's rise and the United States' response: Implications for the global order and New Zealand/Aotearoa. Part II: The U.S. response, emergence of a multi-polar order, and New Zealand/Aotearoa foreign policy-making. *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 19(4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2024.2329219>
- Sacks, D. (2023, 20 June). *Why is Taiwan important to the United States?* Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-taiwan-important-united-states>
- Shattuck, T. (2023, 20 September). One year later: How has China's military pressure on Taiwan changed since Nancy Pelosi's visit? *Global Taiwan Brief*, 8(18), 9–11. <https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/09/one-year-later-how-has-chinas-military-pressure-on-taiwan-changed-since-nancy-pelosis-visit/>
- US Department of Defense. (2024a, December 18). *Annual report to Congress: Military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China*. <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>
- US Department of Defense. (2024b, July 30). Joint statement on the Philippines-United States fourth 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue [Press release]. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3854902/joint-statement-on-the-philippines-united-states-fourth-22-ministerial-dialogue/>
- Wirth, C. (2023). Solidifying sovereign power in liquid space: The making and breaking of “island chains” and “walls” at sea. *Political Geography*, 103, 102889. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102889>
- Wu, Z. (吴志成), & Li, Y. (李颖). (2021). 中美全球治理战略比较 [Zhongmei quanqiu zhili zhanlue bijiao / Comparison of global governance strategies of China and the United States]. *现代国际关系* [Xiandai guoji guanxi / Contemporary international relations], 31(662), 61–84. <https://oversea.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2022&filename=XDGJ202106005&uniplatform=OVERSEA>
- Yeo, A. (2019). Complex patchwork: 2008–2017. In *Asia's regional architecture: Alliances and institutions in the Pacific century* (pp. 117–48). Stanford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9781503608443.003.0005>
- Zuo, X. (左希迎). (2025). 美国国家安全战略的全球再平衡 [Meiguo guojia anquan zhanlue de quanqiu zaipingheng / The global rebalance of U.S. national security strategy]. *现代国际关系* [Xiandai guoji guanxi / Contemporary international relations], 35(1), 51–75.

<https://oversea.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2025&filename=XDGJ202501005&uniplatform=OVERSEA>

Does Freedom Require Good and Justice? An Examination of Mill's Account on Freedom

Thu Phan Phan Nguyen Gia Thu

giathu.phannguyen1@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

It can be stated that the notion of *freedom* in modern political philosophy has always started with defining the individual free will in relation to universal morality that resides in reason. In other words, the free will, or the self, follows a system of moral considerations for humanity, which guides the former and their actions towards the virtues of *good* and *just*. While Immanuel Kant and Jean J. Rousseau's notion of freedom posits their own idea of universal morality to drive internal reason. Surprisingly, in J.S Mill's account of freedom in *On Liberty*, he supposes no importance for universal morality in discussing how subjectivities can be free. Mill believes that reason ought not to follow a morality that is not of one's making, arguing that this principle cannot bring *true* freedom. In replacement, the philosopher turns to the notion of utility to drive reason. Thus, this essay will investigate whether Mill's project of *freedom* can bring about a full account of the *good* and *just*, without a universal morality. Through a deep engagement with Kant and Rousseau's notion of freedom, specifically, the former's *concept of duty* and the latter's conception of God, it can be argued that Mill is unable to do so and present the implications of his shortcomings.

Keywords:

Political Thought, Freedom, Agency, John Stuart Mill

In general, it can be stated that within the Western philosophical tradition, principles of freedom have been contingent on defining free will in relation to a universal morality that resides in reason. Universal morality entails a system of moral considerations for humanity that guides one's free will and actions according to criteria that are consistent with notions of the good and the universally just. In Kant, we are able to see that universal moral law is the principal factor in the emergence of reason, and thus of freedom in individuals. By contrast, in Rousseau, especially the *Profession of Faith*, we are able to see that true freedom emerges in the individual's ability to accept God, being that universal morality based on the laws of nature. However, surprisingly, in J. S. Mill's account of freedom in *On Liberty*, he ascribes no importance to universal morality in discussing how subjectivities can be free. Instead, Mill finds that freedom means only the pursuit of one's own good regardless of external interference, if, and only if, the subject's free will does not deprive others of theirs, which he calls the "harm principle" (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 23). Finding the duty toward universal morality to be an external restriction on free will, Mill turns to the notion of utility as the driver of reason. This essay will investigate whether Mill's deviation from the traditional philosophy on freedom can sufficiently encapsulate a full account of a good and universally just self that is necessary for the nature of freedom. It will argue that Mill's project on liberty is unable to do so and present the implications of Mill's shortcomings in this regard. In my engagement with Kant and Rousseau, I will argue that an external order, whether it be human or divine, is essential to a sufficient account of freedom.

Mill's conception of the self relies on the philosopher's formulation of a new type of oppression present within the nature of modern democratic societies, this being "tyranny of the majority" or "social tyranny" (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 9). In this sense, he believed that the majority, the most numerous among the "people," tend to impose their right over the minority due to the

imbalance of political power. In contrast to historical monarchical and autocratic societies, which favoured physical oppression to make populations obedient, this new form of oppression seeps deeper into the subject's body and mind (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 10). More specifically, the majority holds the right to impose its own morality on the minority, by way of ideas and practices through law and under threat of civil punishment (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 10). In consequence, the minority are forced to conform to these external moralities and thereby lose their agency, and thus, the end of their free will. Hence, Mill asserted a simple principle of freedom: the "individual must be sovereign" (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 18). Applying this process, we can see that one's free will, and by extension one's moral considerations as part of reason, must emanate only from the subjective self and nowhere else. In terms of individuals in relation to their society, complete individual freedom exists when institutional power only restricts the agency of subjects when doing so serves to prevent a perceivable harm to others, either physically or mentally. For freedom to exist in one's relation to society, institutional power is only within the right to exercise their power to restrict the agency of subjects, without consent, only if it is preventing a perceivable harm to others, either physical or mental. This consists both of physical violence and the enticement of violence against others. In sum, Mill asserts that his project provides the only valid definition of freedom, where individuals are unencumbered by external forces to experience the absolute freedom of their opinions and sentiments (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 21).

Mill describes his project as a simple doctrine for life. In asserting that the imposition of external morality restricts free will, he also describes the guiding principle of agency as human desire, human happiness, pleasure, and the avoidance of pain. In other words, Mill disregards the need for universal morality as the foundation for reason. He places the pursuit of one's own good, judgment of the means, and its end as decided by the notion of utility to the subject. In this

context, utility is characterized as the preference of one action over another based on which one brings the most individual good (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 39). While that ultimate end is intentionally left undefined, externally, one can assume Mill is referring to actions that serve to preserve or advance liberty for oneself and society. In practice, individual sovereignty entails a person acting on their natural inclinations as they see fit so long as they do not harm others. Moreover, individuals may and indeed must assume their judgment or own morality to be true in that conduct (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 33).

Mill's principle of free will differs greatly from the Kantian theory of freedom. Although both philosophers promote individual freedom over collectivism, Kant's process differs greatly from the one advanced by Mill (Kant, AK 8:35). The traditional discourse of freedom operates on the theoretical separation of the self into external universal morality and subjective inclinations. In this way, one's reason is predicated on the continual negotiation of one's freedom with the contending forces of social constraints created by universal and one's own individual desires. While freedom for Mill is primarily concerned with one's happiness as its sole end, both in one's public and private use of reason, Kant sees such happiness as an empty maxim. Kant's account of freedom concerns humanity's emancipation from its immaturity, in which individual free will is driven by pure reason (Kant, AK 8:35). Kant finds happiness can only bring about a relative condition of freedom incapable of encompassing all individuals because it is necessarily defined by determinations of lesser and greater pleasures (Kant, AK 8:282). In a society driven by happiness, external morality and its social obligations become a barrier to achieving true freedom. Instead, Kant asserts that freedom must be reformulated according to the *concept of duty*. This entails that duty or reason be conducted in accordance with universal moral law, which seeks to achieve the highest good possible in the world (Kant, AK 8:279). In this equation,

happiness and natural inclinations become a secondary end to free will. Since universal moral law is good in itself, Kant believes individuals who are able internalize a moral duty to their own achievement of happiness can experience true freedom in the world (Kant, AK 8:283, 8:288).

Kant's idea of freedom extends to the matter of truth and opinion. To achieve the highest good possible, the free will that conforms to duty follows what is called the "categorical imperative." This represents a clear difference between truth and opinion, and one that is absent from Mill's project on liberty. The categorical imperative states that reason decides on an act based not on what is prudent to one's own well-being, but on the principle of whether the act constitutes a good in itself (Kant, AK 4:416). For instance, faced with the inquiry "What is a human being?," Kant's imperative would say that there is one objective truth to the nature of human beings without conditionality. He would assert that all human beings are rational beings, and all who exist by nature are an end in themselves and as such can't be considered means (Kant, AK 4:428). It follows that within a human moral order or constitutional law, this must be upheld as an unchanging truth.

By disregarding the need for universal morality—in this case, an objective definition of the "human being"—Mill's principles materialize in his support for colonialism. He is quoted as claiming that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government for barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means is justified by actually affecting that end" (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 20). However, proponents of Mill's thought might add that this support for colonialism is a distortion of the philosopher's true views on liberty. As Mill himself said, the free individual has an obligation to bring liberty into being not only for himself, but for humanity at large (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 19). Yet liberty in Mill's view lacks an objective definition because, by principle, freedom is decided by its utility to the individual will. By guiding agency on the basis of its

benefit to one's own happiness, it can be argued that tyranny is consistent with Mill's moral framework. If the individual will has posited less developed societies as yet incapable of free and equal discussion, then such societies might be seen as not fully "human" (Mill, 1859/2009, p. 20). It can be argued, then, that the "harm principle" does not apply, since consent is unnecessary for the uncivilized. Thus, the obligation to humanity consists of the subjugation of other human beings to bring them to a place in which they may experience liberty. Without a universal morality that would constrain such actions, Mill's simple project on freedom actualizes the physical and mental tyranny of an external society if it is deemed utilitarian to do so.

Rousseau's project on freedom diverges from Mill's in ways that prefigured Kant's ideas on the nature of freedom. Starting from a familiar foundation, Rousseau believes that free will is separated between reason and natural sentiments or inclinations. One can will through reason alone, separated or influenced by one's inclinations (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 280). However, what separates Rousseau from Kant is that he believes that humanity alone is unable to produce a sustainable idea of freedom. This inquiry into the nature of freedom is thus laid upon the foundation that God, as the common order, ought to be the principle according to which humanity conceptualizes freedom. Being predicated on the acceptance of the claim that God exists, Rousseau argues that one will see that it is God who has given free beings the ability to act according to one's own freedom (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 281). God does not force the individual to follow a specific moral order; rather, he imbues in them the possibility of choosing between being good or wicked. For Rousseau, in addition to unrestricted free will, God has also given humanity the natural inclinations toward goodness and justice. He asserts that this can be seen in self-reflection, or in the ordinary and common saying "be just and you will be happy" (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 282). Moreover, one can examine within the external world how the

beautiful ordering of nature reflects the order of good and justice in its peace and harmony.

Therefore, suffering and unhappiness falls upon the individual, who through their reason dismisses human nature and abuses their freedom to commit injustice upon themselves or others.

Rousseau's account of freedom can be lived in the united self, who through reason unifies their individual desires with a universal morality that originates from God's common order. In other words, to be free is to be good. More specifically, Rousseau believes that man has a choice. A *good* man is able to use reason to order himself in relation to the common order (i.e., God) and to unite himself with the whole of existence; or he can abuse his freedom to become wicked, ordering the whole in relation to himself as the centre of all things; in this way he is forever being split between his natural inclination to be good and his reason that denies it (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 292). This can be taken as a criticism of Mill, who finds that freedom is exactly such ordering. A notion of freedom driven by utility does not consider the whole of things and thus produces wickedness such as colonialism. Furthermore, Mill's version of freedom would see the subjectivity in constant opposition to one's human nature, because happiness is presupposed in agency. Like Kant, Rousseau believes that happiness must be earned through good and just action. Therefore, Rousseau's project of freedom posits that the act of ordering oneself in relation to God can reveal an objective truth. To believe in God is to respect and nurture His creations, and thus one must both nurture one's own individual freedom by being good and pursue the objective moral obligations in one's relationships with the external world.

It can be concluded that Mill's simple formula for freedom is incapable of bringing about the emergence of a good individual and universally just society. By presenting a case of complete, unrestricted free will, this paper has shown that without a proper definition of morality, Mill cannot provide a simple answer to the question "What is a human being?"

Colonialism is not a distortion of a utility-driven freedom; rather, it is a real and lived possibility. By acknowledging the existence and need for a universal morality, Kant's and Rousseau's respective philosophies on freedom can escape assertions of tyranny and oppression. More precisely, for Kant, the categorical imperative resists the moral relativity that results in social injustices. Rousseau demonstrates that individual freedom only emerges when people act with respect to their innate goodness. Wickedness is a choice, and it is ever-present in the social world. Without the intentional process of acting against it, the individual becomes less free as they live torn from their human nature. Therefore, it must be said that a principle of freedom that declares itself simple should not be taken as the "be-all and end-all." A full account of freedom must recognize the importance of universal external morality, whether Kant's categorical imperative or Rousseau's belief in God. This is because external orders are able to provide the objective truths necessary to differentiate between moral and immoral action.

References

- Kant, I. (2019). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals* (C. Bennett, J. Saunders, & R. Stern, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1785) *AK— Gesammelte Schrigten* (AK-8).
- Kant, I. (1983). *Perpetual peace and other essays on politics, history, and morals* (T. Humphrey, Trans.). Hackett. (Original work published 1795) *AK— Gesammelte Schrigten* (AK-4).
- Mill, J. S. (2009). *On liberty*. Floating Press. (Original work published 1859)
- Rousseau, J. (1979). *Emile: Or on education* (M. Wu, Trans.). Basic Books. (Original work published 1762)

Private Military Companies in Iraq: An Analysis of Privatization in a Counterinsurgency

Sophia Vitter

sophia.vitter@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of armed private military companies on the dynamics of counterinsurgency and governance during the Iraq War. It investigates how the deployment of PMCs - particularly Blackwater - affected relationships between the US military, the Iraqi government, and Iraqi civilians. The paper outlines the historical context that led to the privatization of military functions and explores the operational challenges posed by PMCs, such as poor coordination, friendly fire incidents, and resentment among US troops due to pay disparities. It further analyzes how legal immunity for contractors, granted under Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17, strained US-Iraqi diplomatic relations and weakened the perceived legitimacy of the Iraqi government among Iraqi citizens. The paper also assesses the extent to which PMCs contributed to local hostility and insurgent violence, citing the Fallujah incident as one turning point in particular. By highlighting gaps in oversight, accountability, and cultural sensitivity, the paper argues that the use of PMCs somewhat undermined counterinsurgency goals and complicated nation-building efforts by the US government occupation of Iraq. Ultimately, while PMCs provided tactical support, their unregulated presence and behavior had broader strategic consequences for American goals, which illustrates the risks of privatizing force in conflict zones without robust legal and institutional frameworks.

Keywords:

PMCs, Strategic Studies, Iraq War, Blackwater

Introduction

Following the tragic events of 16 September 2007, in which armed private military contractors working for Blackwater fired on and killed seventeen Iraqi civilians in Nisour Square without evident provocation, outrage and awareness blossomed in the United States (Apuzzo, 2014). However, as an article from *The New York Times* subsequently illustrated, overuse of force was not an issue limited to Blackwater or the massacre at Nisour Square, but one endemic to the private military contracting system (Glanz & Lehren, 2010). How did the use of force by private military companies influence the dynamics between various actors in Iraq, including the Iraqi security forces and government, US military personnel, and local communities? In an attempt to answer these questions, this paper will proceed as follows: First, it will examine the context in which armed private military contractors (PMCs) came to be deployed in Iraq. Second, it will discuss relations between armed PMCs and US forces in Iraq. Third, it will explore how the use of armed PMCs affected relations between the US and Iraqi governments. Lastly, it will examine the effects of the use of armed PMCs on relations between the US government, contractors, and Iraqi citizens.

Context

The push for extensive privatization of military functions emerged in the United States during the 1990s, driven by defence firms and conservative thought leaders aiming to influence the nation's defence strategies (Scahill, 2007). In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, reshaped global security dynamics and the global war on terror meant that the United States suddenly needed more troops than they had (Glanz & Lehren, 2010). In the ensuing years, armed PMCs found themselves deployed alongside American troops in Iraq, comprising a substantial portion—nearly half—of the US forces stationed in the region (Scahill, 2007). While the use of

private contractors was not entirely new, their roles in Iraq transcended traditional support functions, with a select group of highly trained former soldiers contracted to provide security duties, safeguarding American personnel—mainly State Department employees—as well as vital installations. Although far from the only private military company, Blackwater USA, under the leadership of Erik Prince, stood out among other such outfits locally and in media coverage, securing major contracts from the US Department of State to protect diplomats and high-profile visitors like L. Paul Bremer and earning a reputation for their use-of-force incidents (Fitzsimmons, 2016). However, the presence of private contractors in Iraq blurred the lines between military and civilian roles and provided an easy target for the growing anti-Coalition insurgency, sometimes creating confusion within local communities and among military personnel. This led to a litany of incidents, including civilian casualties, skirmishes, and instances where companies were less than co-operative with official authorities investigating incidents (Glanz & Lehen, 2010). Complicating matters further, Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17, endorsed by Bremer—a staunch advocate of PMCs—shielded these contractors from legal repercussions in Iraq while insufficient American legislation meant they would not face justice at home (Scahill, 2007). Nevertheless, a series of high-profile incidents, notably the infamous Nisour Square massacre, prompted revisions to Iraqi laws governing PMCs and spurred the US government to implement stricter oversight measures (Fitzsimmons, 2016). Despite these efforts, PMCs remained deeply entrenched in US operations in Iraq and other conflict zones due to their perceived necessity, although Blackwater's multiple rebrands did not make it more palatable to the US government (Fitzsimmons, 2016).

Relations Between the US Government and Private Contractors

The presence of contractors authorized to carry firearms within US forces' areas of operation potentially presented challenges to the cohesion of US forces and their ability to coordinate with their contractor counterparts. The extent of this issue will be examined by considering factors such as the number of so-called blue-on-white incidents in operations zones and issues of morale within US forces potentially caused by the use of contractors.

Blue-on-white incidents in Iraq involved private contractor firing on military personnel or vice versa. It is difficult to ascertain the details of many of these cases or even the exact number of incidents due to deficiencies in the reporting system used by the Baghdad Reconstruction Operations Center, which did not monitor the behaviour of PMCs, who also had no incentive to be truthful in their reports to Coalition authorities (Dunigan, 2011). However, Dunigan (2011) indicates that blue-on-white incidents may have been caused primarily by the military rather than PMCs, specifically those military personnel who lacked training on how to work effectively with PMCs, as well as an absence of communication devices between the military and PMCs. Regardless of cause, these incidents created a deeper barrier between Coalition forces and PMCs. An alleged friendly fire incident between armed PMCs working for Zapata Engineering and a US military checkpoint resulted in the detainment and abuse of sixteen PMCs by members of the Marine Corps. PMCs' account of the incident, which has been disputed, also reflected resentment over pay differentials: A Marine involved allegedly referred to the detainees as "rich contractors" (Dunigan, 2011, p. 63).

As Petersohn notes, "the assumption is that the better units are coordinated, the less friendly fire incidents will occur" (2013, p. 473). By analyzing incident reports released in a WikiLeaks dump in 2010, Petersohn concludes that PMCs were far less likely to be involved in a

friendly fire incident than either US or Iraqi military forces. However, in his analysis he fails to account for the aforementioned and corroborated PMC tendency to not report incidents or report them inaccurately (Petersohn, 2013). Furthermore, he compares PMC performance to the performance of Iraqi military personnel extensively, which is quite misleading considering that Iraqi military personnel at that time were quite new to the job and still in the process of being trained by the Americans, while most armed PMCs had years of military experience (Petersohn, 2013). He concludes that the incidence rates improved later in the war, in spite of the precipitous rise in violence, as a result of increased coordination between military and PMC personnel (Petersohn, 2013). Dunigan (2011) echoes this conclusion, noting that efforts had been made to increase coordination between PMCs and the military through such measures as the establishment of the Reconstruction Operations Center after these initial failures.

The issues with communication and coordination indicated above resulted in further danger for PMCs and military personnel than just friendly fire incidents. They contributed to the slowed responsiveness of quick reaction forces in response to PMCs that found themselves under attack from insurgents, and they may have contributed to incidents such as the killing of four Blackwater contractors in Fallujah. The Marines outside Fallujah only learned of the contractors' killing on television rather than through official channels, an indication of poor communication (Dunigan, 2011).

Blackwater's disregard for rules was not limited to its treatment of Iraqis but evidently extended to its treatment of the US State Department personnel. On one occasion, a member of the State Department sent to investigate Blackwater was threatened by one of the company's managers. With seemingly few consequences for contractors, the investigation of the incident was subsequently cut short (Risen, 2014). The investigation conducted by Richter and Thomas

also raised concerns over whether Blackwater's behaviour was enabled by embassy personnel (Risen, 2014), a warning that was echoed by the report of one House committee stating that State Department personnel were, potentially inappropriately, aiding in Blackwater's payouts to their victims (House of Representatives, 2007). The feeling among State Department personnel and other clients seemed to be that private military companies kept them safe and provided a valuable service, meaning they were more likely to tolerate excesses from PMCs (Cotton et al., 2010). A survey conducted by the RAND Corporation of State Department and military personnel reported that a large minority of the respondents felt that both private contractors and military personnel did not "make an effort to work smoothly" with each other (Dunigan, 2011, p. 62).

Armed private contractors used for security details cost the American government more than what it would pay an equivalent number of American soldiers, and the former was paid more per day than the latter. A House of Representatives hearing stated that the difference was between \$50,000–\$70,000 and \$400,000 per year for soldiers and PMCs, respectively. This resulted in a recruiting boom for private military companies (House of Representatives, 2007). Not only was the difference in pay severe, but PMCs were able to enjoy benefits not offered to military personnel, including more frequent leave periods, better living quarters, and fewer restrictions, resulting in resentment and tension between military personnel and PMCs (Dunigan, 2011). Despite issues with integration and military morale, a high number of military personnel in the aforementioned RAND Corporation survey expressed the belief that the use of PMCs represented a positive contribution to the war effort (Dunigan, 2011).

Considering the evidence presented above, the main issues surrounding coordination and cohesion seem to be ones that were easily solvable with additional training and improved

communication. While they may have had a minor impact on force cohesion or affected the opinion of the troops directly involved in specific incidents, there were not a significant number of recorded blue-on-white incidents, especially in light of early difficulties with communication. However, one area that might have proven more significant was resentment among US forces stemming from the additional benefits and pay given to contractors. Additionally, contractors' disregard for rules appeared to be an issue, however, as discussed further below, this was mainly the doing of Blackwater, as per the findings of the US and Iraqi governments.

Relations Between the US and Iraqi Governments

This section will examine the extent to which the use of armed private contractors affected relations between the US and Iraqi governments. This will be done by looking at the effects of granting immunity to PMCs who had potentially committed crimes on the perceived legitimacy of the Iraqi government, examining diplomatic relations between the two countries, and tracing the evolution of Iraqi laws applicable to contractors.

Although much has been written about the effects of PMCs on the perceived legitimacy of the US occupation of Iraq, especially the contrast between the United States' supposed commitment to upholding human rights and democracy and the disrespect shown for the human rights of Iraqis by government troops and contractors, very little has been written on how PMC behaviour affected the perceived legitimacy of the newly re-formed Iraqi government. Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Shia Mahdi Army militia, took advantage of the Iraqi government's inability to bring PMCs to justice to undermine Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and call for private military companies to leave the country (Fitzsimmons, 2016). Al-Sadr, as noted by Reuters, "commands the loyalty of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis" and led significant aspects of the insurgency against the United States as well as sectarian violence between Iraqis (Perry,

2023). Thus, al-Sadr could wield sufficient influence to significantly destabilize the Iraqi government should he choose to do so.

In 2003, CPA Order 17 served to grant immunity to PMCs from Iraqi prosecution (Cotton et al., 2010). The order was not issued in an effort to help US forces or PMCs escape justice when they committed crimes against Iraqis, but rather out of concern for the treatment they might receive in Iraqi detention and lack of respect for due process in the Iraqi legal system (Arnpriester, 2017). While US government forces were under a standard system of reporting and justice as per the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which ensured soldiers who committed crimes in Iraq were court-martialed, it took trial and error by the US government to hold contractors to any sort of similar legal standard domestically (Arnpriester, 2017). The legal immunity with which PMCs in Iraq had hitherto operated was removed in January of 2009 with the signing of Status of Forces Agreement between Iraq and the United States, which governed the conduct of Coalition forces within the country, including by bringing armed contractors under the jurisdiction of the Iraqi government (Cotton et al., 2010). This change in Iraqi law came after multiple, highly publicized incidents, including the Nisour Square massacre and the United State' subsequent failure to prosecute the individuals involved, although they were later tried and convicted (Arnpriester, 2017).

Use-of-force incidents resulting in the death of civilians strained relations between the Iraqi government and the United States, most especially in the aftermath of Nisour Square and the later killing of an Iraqi bodyguard by a Blackwater employee. The Iraqi government sought justice, and relations between the two governments deteriorated when it did not immediately appear (Fitzsimmons, 2016). Iraqis were further offended when the initial efforts to seek prosecution failed on technical grounds rather than a perceived lack of guilt on the part of the

accused. The Iraqi government was pleased when the four defendants were finally convicted in October of 2014 (Fitzsimmons, 2016). The US government's primary concern when it came to the deaths of Iraqis at the hands of contractors appeared to be the latter's continued ability to work in Iraq. As illustrated by the 2006 killing of a vice-presidential bodyguard, Raheem Khalif, at the hands of a drunk PMC, hush money to the family of the victim was the solution employed by companies with the co-operation of the State Department (Schmitt, 2007).

Again, it is clear that the actions of Blackwater and of individual contractors associated with the company are primarily to blame for the tension between the Iraqi and US governments, including multiple diplomatic standoffs. Although one firm caused the majority of the consternation surrounding the use of armed PMCs, Blackwater was the Department of State's primary resource for diplomatic protection and had the highest number of personnel among armed PMC companies operating in Iraq (Fitzsimmons, 2016). Thus, the State Department sought to protect them. Actors within Iraq, such as Muqtada al-Sadar, took advantage of this tension to further their sectarian causes and delegitimize the Iraqi government. The effects of the American occupation on Iraq and the behaviour of Americans in the country left a lasting strain on relations between the two countries.

Relations Between the US Government, Private Contractors, and Iraqis

This section will explore the effects of the use of armed private contractors on relations between the US government and Iraqi civilians, and in particular whether it may have potentially contributed to the anti-Coalition insurgency. Several potential factors are examined, including whether the use of private military companies may have indirectly led to the deaths of US troops and whether PMC-civilian incidents, both widely reported and day-to-day, small-scale actions, may have increased hatred of Americans in Iraq.

Perhaps the best early example of PMC missteps that indirectly led to the deaths of US troops was the Fallujah incident in March 2004, when four Blackwater contractors were killed and their bodies burned in an incident reminiscent of a similar event that took place in Somalia in 1992 (captured in the 2001 film *Black Hawk Down*) (House of Representatives, 2007). The killings shocked Americans, and the US government responded by invading the insurgent hotbed of Fallujah, resulting in a large number of civilian and military casualties (House of Representatives, 2007). The long-term effects of the Battle of Fallujah were innumerable: The Sunni population largely boycotted the Iraq elections that brought Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to power, which in turn eventually resulted in the alienation of Sunnis from the Iraqi government (Naji, 2005). The first invasion of Fallujah, Operation Vigilant Resolve, resulted in the deaths of 27 American service members and the turning over of the city to Iraqi troops about a month later (Jackson, 2023). The second invasion, called Operation Phantom Fury, led to the deaths of 95 American service members and the wounding of 560 (Gómez del Prado, 2011). Some sources cite the Fallujah incident and the subsequent invasion of the city as a “turning point in the occupation of Iraq” (Gómez del Prado, 2011, p. 153).

While differing operational objectives between PMCs and Coalition forces influenced their treatment of Iraqi civilians, Iraqi civilians did not or could not differentiate between private contractors and military personnel, and the harm caused by PMCs’ behaviour affected military personnel as well (Dunigan, 2011). There is debate as to whether, in addition to increasing insurgent activity and the targeting of US military personnel, the activities of Blackwater in particular may have resulted in the targeting of its employees and the civilian officials under their protection. Osama bin Laden reportedly offered a reward in 2004 for the killing of L. Paul

Bremer, who was at the time under the protection of Blackwater, in addition to other awards offered for the killing of Blackwater's PMCs (Fitzsimmons, 2016).

Blackwater was far from the only private military company whose employees used force that could be interpreted as beyond reasonable or appropriate, and moreover oversight issues were also not confined to American PMCs. Less than a month after the Nisour Square massacre, an Australian company called Unity Resources Group shot two women they said approached their convoy too quickly (Gómez del Prado, 2011). The same company was also involved in the 2006 shooting of an Australian who it claimed approached its guards too quickly (Gómez del Prado, 2011). Lack of oversight and insufficient vetting in hiring procedures is illustrated by the UK private military company ArmorGroup. In 2009, it hired a discharged British paratrooper with post-traumatic stress disorder who, not long after his return to Iraq, shot three people, an Australian, a Brit, and an Iraqi (Gómez del Prado, 2011).

Several individual civilian deaths or shooting incidents beyond the ones widely reported in news media resulted in a palpable sense of ill will toward Americans in Iraq, including the death of a taxi driver and two other civilians in Kirkuk, which caused protests. The driver's son later stated that the killing of Americans made him happy (Fitzsimmons, 2016). A 2007 article from Montagne and Temple-Raston concluded that, "According to media reports and interviews, resentment occurs mainly because Iraqi civilians do not distinguish between private contractors and U.S. or coalition forces in Iraq. Rather, they see them all as part of the same occupying force" (as cited in Cotton et al., 2010, p. 28). However, the rising hatred was caused not just by seriously offensive incidents and civilian killings but also by the day-to-day lack of consideration for local Iraqis displayed by PMCs. While carrying out their duties, contractors would routinely run civilian vehicles off the road—ostensibly to avoid potential vehicle-borne improvised

explosive devices—and intimidate civilians (Fitzsimmons, 2016). Consistently angering civilians was quite at odds with the hearts-and-minds mission of counter-insurgency, and this discontinuity likely severely affected the US mission in Iraq, a fact admitted even by Erik Prince (Fitzsimmons, 2016).

The evidence discussed in this section shows a clear link between the actions of armed PMCs and the rising hatred of Americans in Iraq, resulting in the deaths of US troops and possibly contributing to an increase in insurgent activity. This is most visible in Fallujah, where a mistake made by four PMCs resulted in an American invasion of the city, troop deaths, and later an increased level of insurgent activity in the city, resulting in a second invasion. Insurgents and terrorists purportedly singled out high-profile officials guarded by the PMCs in question as targets. A brief exploration of use-of-force incidents by non-American PMCs, including members of an Australian and a British firm, shows that these issues were not exclusive to Blackwater or other American contractors; rather, they were a result of the culture created by PMCs generally, and the lack of regulation surrounding them. In addition, just as there was little differentiation in the minds of Iraqi civilians between US government forces and US government contractors, the actions of contractors belonging to other Coalition partners were also potentially incorrectly attributed to Americans. The issue created for Iraqis by armed PMCs was not just the occasional violent incident, but everyday inconveniences created by personnel whose only responsibility was protecting their primary. The occupation failed to win hearts and minds, and private military contractors who were not accountable to that goal contributed to its failure.

Conclusion

The extensive involvement of armed private military companies in Iraq during the post-9/11 era negatively influenced the dynamics between various actors, including the US government,

private contractors, Iraqi security forces, and local communities. The research presented above is meant to shed light on issues surrounding accountability, operational effectiveness, and the broader implications for governance and stability in conflict and post-conflict environments, specifically in nation-building and counter-insurgency operations.

The relationship between the US government and private contractors, specifically in the early years of the US occupation of Iraq, was characterized by difficulties in the coordination and cohesion of military operations and the day-to-day protection of assets. While initial challenges such as communication deficiencies and coordination issues were evident, they perhaps could have been managed with improved training and enhanced communication channels, as well as the establishment of the Reconstruction Operations Center. However, tensions arose due to disparities in pay and benefits between military personnel and contractors, which led to resentment among some members of the armed forces. Despite these challenges, there was a belief among a significant minority of US service members that the use of PMCs positively contributed to the overall war effort.

A point worth noting is that interactions between the US and Iraqi governments were significantly impacted by the actions of PMCs, specifically regarding legal immunity and jurisdictional issues in the context of crimes committed by PMCs. The granting of immunity to contractors by Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17, absent any other way for American prosecutors to bring PMCs to justice, strained relations between the US and Iraqi governments, and also raised questions about the perceived legitimacy of the Iraqi government in the eyes of its citizens. Sectarian actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr took advantage of the US occupation and the behaviour of PMCs to delegitimize the Iraqi government, which is a significant issue in light of the need to create a stable government for the security of the country. Incidents such as the

Nisour Square massacre further exacerbated tensions and led to diplomatic standoffs. This was of course just one of the many incidents, both small and large, that contributed to tensions.

Most notably, the relationship between the US government, private contractors, and Iraqi civilians highlighted the detrimental effects of PMCs' actions on local perceptions of Coalition forces and the overall security dynamics in the country. Incidents involving PMCs, including civilian casualties and everyday interactions, contributed to increased hostility toward Americans, potentially fueling insurgent activity and the targeting of US troops. The lack of oversight and accountability within the PMC industry compounded these issues by making it harder for government or institutional actors to prosecute individual bad actors, leading to further distrust and resentment among Iraqi communities.

In summary, the use of force by private military companies in Iraq altered power dynamics and relationships between various stakeholders to at least a moderate extent. While PMCs tended to serve in security operations rather than full-scale tactical military operations, their actions often had unintended consequences, which highlighted to the US government the need for greater oversight, accountability, and consideration of local dynamics in future military interventions involving PMCs. Greater training, communication, and regulation was developed along the way rather than prior to deployment, resulting in incidents that could have been pre-empted.

References

- Apuzzo, M. (2014, 22 October). Blackwater guards found guilty in 2007 Iraq killings. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/us/blackwater-verdict.html>
- Arnpriester, N. (2017). Combating impunity: The private military industry, human rights, and the “legal gap.” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*, 38(4), 1189–1239. <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jil/vol38/iss4/3/>
- Cotton, S. K., Petersohn, U., Dunigan, M., Burkhart, Q., Zander-Cotugno, M., O’Connell, E., & Webber, M. (2010). *Hired guns: Views about armed contractors in Operation Iraqi Freedom*. RAND National Security Research Division.
- Dunigan, M. (2011). *Victory for hire: Private security companies’ impact on military effectiveness*. Stanford University Press.
- Fitzsimmons, S. (2016). *Private security companies during the Iraq War: Military performance and the use of deadly force*. Routledge.
- Glanz, J., & Lehen, A. W. (2010, 23 October). Use of contractors added to war’s chaos in Iraq. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/middleeast/24contractors.html>
- Gómez del Prado, J. L. (2011). Impact on human rights of a new non-state actor: Private military and security companies. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 18(1), 151–69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590786>
- House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. (2007, 2 October). *Blackwater USA*. United States Government Publishing Office. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-110hhrg45219/pdf/CHRG-110hhrg45219.pdf>
- Jackson, M. S. J. (2023, 23 April). *Operation Vigilant Resolve*. United States Marine Corps. <https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/3350301/operation-vigilant-resolve>
- Naji, Z. (2005, 22 February). *Sunnis set to boycott elections*. Institute for War and Peace Reporting. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/sunnis-set-boycott-elections>
- Perry, T. (2023, 20 July). Who is the Iraqi Shi’ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr? *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/who-is-iraqi-shiite-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-2023-07-20/>
- Petersohn, U. (2013). The effectiveness of contracted coalitions: Private security contractors in Iraq. *Armed Forces & Society*, 39(3), 467–88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609017>

Risen, J. (2014, 29 June). Before shooting in Iraq, a warning on Blackwater. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/30/us/before-shooting-in-iraq-warning-on-blackwater.html>

Scahill, J. (2007). *Blackwater: The rise of the world's most powerful mercenary army*. Nation Books.

Schmitt, E. (2007, 2 October). Report details shooting by drunken Blackwater worker. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/02/world/middleeast/02shooting.html>

Closing Credits

Editorial Team

Hunter Holt-Barry (Managing Editor)
Maddie Fleming (Co-Managing Editor)
Dr. Robert Huebert (Department Sponsor)

Copyediting

Ryan Perks

Peer-review Team

Makda Habtegergesa (PhD Candidate)
Andy Airey (Graduate Student – MA)
Aidha Chaudhary (Undergraduate Student)
Lauren Clavelle (Undergraduate Student)
Ismayil Imanli (Undergraduate Student)
Juan-Felipe Llanos-Salamanca (Undergraduate Student)
Fiona Frances Paul (Undergraduate Student)
Radoslav Visotski (Undergraduate Student)

Article Authors

Amitoj Hari – amitoj.hari@ucalgary.ca
Logan Jaspers – logan.jaspers@ucalgary.ca
Jordan Lee – jordan.lee4@ucalgary.ca
Ethan Markowitz - ethan.markowitz@ucalgary.ca
Thu Phan Phan Nguyen Gia Thu – giathu.phannguyen1@ucalgary.ca
Sophia Vitter – sophia.vitter@ucalgary.ca

Cover Image licensed through Shutterstock (ID: 2351286919) and is contributed by Maria Petrishina.

Special thanks to the Political Science Association (PSA) and the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary for their support of this project and assistance along the way, particularly Dr. Roberta Rice and Dr. Rob Huebert for helping launch Insights, we could not have achieved this without all the support and advice we received!

Insights Undergraduate Journal in Political Science is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Share-Alike License](#). Under this license, authors may share and adapt their contribution, including for commercial purposes, providing that the original work is properly cited.