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Contents

Admission and Evasion:
The Use of the Terms "Failure" and "Responsibility" Following the October 7 Attack and their Impact on the Discourse Space between the Political and Military Echelons[1]

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The relationship and discourse between the military and the political echelons serve as the crucible for national strategy. This interaction generates the necessary friction between military imperatives and political logic, fostering the joint learning processes required to develop a knowledge base essential for its formulation. When this vital discourse is disrupted, the state's ability to define national aims, translate them into clear political directives, and ultimately achieve the objectives of war is severely compromised.

This article utilizes the "discourse space" as a meta-analytical concept to examine the disruption of the diagnostic-strategic learning process within the political and military echelons. The analysis focuses on the decision-making surrounding the war that commenced following the October 7, 2023 massacre. Since a learning process inherently includes a process of conceptualization, we chose to analyze the use of the terms "responsibility" and "failure" by the political and military echelons. These terms hold the potential to influence the framing of "reality" and to reflect the profound chasm and crisis of trust between these echelons. This, in turn, manifests in their impact on the formation of a closed discourse space between the leadership tiers—that is, a discourse space that inhibits strategic learning and disrupts any possibility for a diagnostic-strategic learning process, which is an integral part of decision-making, particularly during wartime. The political echelon's insistence on focusing specifically on military investigations (conducted as part of an internal organizational review) and confining them solely to the military sphere without treating them as a necessary prelude to investigating the political failure or as a foundation for a joint learning process, eroded trust. This, coupled with the political leadership's clear reservations about and avoidance of establishing a state commission of inquiry to examine broad governmental responsibility for the attack, destroyed the essence of shared responsibility.

Trust and shared responsibility are two necessary conditions for an open discourse space between the echelons. In its absence, the joint strategic learning process was disrupted and as a result, a gap has emerged between the military's micro-level conceptualization and the political echelon's macro-level conceptualization of events, particularly regarding the military nature of the failure, as well as in the disparity between the echelons regarding the concept of responsibility itself. Both these factors preclude the capacity for macro-level inquiry.

Introduction

The Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, confronted Israel with one of the most complex challenges in its history as a state. The massacre perpetrated under the cover of this attack, considered the most severe since the Holocaust, led Israel to embark on the longest war in its history. The searing "basic surprise" (Lanir, 1983) was perceived as a nadir for both the security establishment (the intelligence community in particular) and the political echelon. The ensuing war, the consciousness of a national catastrophe, and the need to identify those responsible, focused public attention on the responses of the military and political echelons to the attack, the accountability it demanded, and the relationship between them.

Relations between the echelons were already fraught and strained prior to the war, following a year (since January 2023) of intense public controversy that had developed over the government's spearheading of judicial reform. This reform provoked widespread opposition among segments of Israeli society, and the military became embroiled when reserve soldiers and officers, who were among those protesting the measure, threatened to cease their voluntary reserve service.

The political echelon perceived this threat as "insubordination" (*"sarvanut"*) and as a grave danger to the military's operational readiness and national security. Consequently, it regarded the military echelon with criticism and even suspicion, citing the problematic manner, in its view, in which the military command handled the issue. The political echelon extended this suspicion to the intelligence warnings conveyed to it by the military during that same year (Elran & Michael, 2023).

The Hamas attack of October 7 occurred at a low point in relations between the political and military echelons, and at a time when public trust in Israel in both echelons, particularly in the IDF Chief of Staff (CoS), had been eroded and after some fluctuations had again reached a profound low. These trends persisted with 56 percent support recorded for CoS Herzi Halevi and 49 percent for CoS Eyal Zamir in the first two months (from March 2025) of his tenure.[2] The military echelon (as well as the GSS) succeeded in overcoming the initial chaos, regrouping, and transitioning from a defensive to an offensive posture; several of its senior officials also publicly declared their responsibility for the October 7 attack. Conversely, the political echelon hesitated, equivocated, refrained from assuming responsibility for the attack, and even attempted to shift the blame onto the military and the GSS, which had already acknowledged their failure and accountability.

Warfare manifests the gravity of civil-military relations in its most pronounced and complex form. These relations are, in themselves, a foundational component of national security, as was aptly articulated by Chief of Staff (CoS) Eyal Zamir in his address at the change-of-

command ceremony for the Military Colleges on August 14, 2025: "One of the central issues in national security is the inter-echelon connection and the reciprocal relationship between the military echelon and the political echelon" (Zitun, 2025b). In wartime, the military echelon expresses its professionalism and capabilities; with the goal of synchronizing the military effort with the political effort, and applying military force to achieve political objectives. The relationship between the political and military echelons, and the discourse space they share, function as the crucible for national strategy—the locus where the necessary friction between military logic and political logic is generated. This, in turn, fosters joint learning processes that enable the development of the knowledge base relevant to the formulation of national strategy. When this relationship is disrupted, the political echelon will struggle to define the political purpose, translate it into clear policy directives, and ultimately achieve the objectives of war (Michael, 2008).

National strategy in general, and the political purpose and the definition of war aims specifically, are the product of discourse between the echelons. The essence of this discourse is a joint learning process, and its outcome is the construction of a shared knowledge base and common conceptualizations (Michael, 2016). Such discourse requires two necessary conditions: mutual trust and shared responsibility. In the absence of these conditions, inter-echelon relations are disrupted, and a productive learning discourse is rendered impossible. The military echelon's ability to present its professional positions candidly and its duty to fully obey the political echelon alongside the political echelon's obligation to support the military and permit it to operate autonomously (subject to its professional judgment, and so long as the military course of action remains relevant to achieving the political objectives) expresses the essence of shared responsibility (Bland, 1999). This constitutes a normative ideal model for describing civil-

military relations, wherein both echelons share responsibility for the control of the military and the outcomes of military action.

> In our assessment, the very admission of failure and acceptance of responsibility by the military echelon (and the GSS) led the political echelon to absolve itself of any responsibility for the failure. It proceeded to impose accountability squarely on the professional ranks and to frame the October 7 disaster as a military and intelligence failure.

The focus of the current research puzzle is the deepening crisis of trust between the military and political echelons regarding the nature of shared responsibility (Bland, 1999) for the October 7 failure. In our assessment, the very admission of failure and acceptance of responsibility by the military echelon (and the GSS) led the political echelon to absolve itself of any responsibility for the failure. It proceeded to impose accountability squarely on the professional ranks and to frame the October 7 disaster as a military and intelligence failure.[3] A blatant example was seen in Prime Minister Netanyahu's press conference on May 21, 2025, where he characterized the Hamas attack as one of "flip-flops, Kalashnikovs, and pickup trucks" and stressed his intention to investigate the military failure exhaustively (Eichner & Zitun, 2025). We do not disregard the argument that Prime Minister Netanyahu has personal reasons for not accepting responsibility and for clinging to his position, namely those related to his ongoing trial and the advantages of managing it as an incumbent. However, in this article, we seek to posit an alternative or additional explanation, albeit partial, for the breakdown in inter-echelon relations. As such, our explanation focuses on analyzing the discourse space between the echelons, based on the military's conceptualizations of "failure" and "responsibility." As will be argued, these conceptualizations provide the political echelon

with a means of evading broad governmental responsibility for the events.

The political echelon's choice to frame the October 7 disaster as a military and intelligence failure significantly diminishes the magnitude and essence of the catastrophe's *political* dimension, as well as the political echelon's own share of responsibility for its very occurrence. (This includes, for instance, Netanyahu's attempt at the same press conference to assert that there was no connection whatsoever between the aid from Qatar, which he had encouraged, and the October 7 attack).[4] The political echelon's evasion of accountability, and its framing of the event as a military/intelligence failure without internalizing the political failure, annihilates the essence of shared responsibility and erodes the military's trust in the political leadership. We therefore seek to investigate how the use of the terms "failure" and "responsibility" in relation to the October 7 disaster shaped the discourse space between the echelons, reflected the nature of their relationship, and affected their ability to conduct the joint learning process necessary for national strategy and formulating a response to the attack.

We contend that the way the military conceptualized the terms "failure" and "responsibility" has implications extending beyond inter-echelon relations alone, pertaining directly to the respective accountability of each echelon for the October 7 disaster. Specifically, the military's conceptualization of failure draws no distinction between the magnitude of *this* failure and that of other military and operational failures of entirely different orders of magnitude, thereby effectively reducing and normalizing this exceptionally severe event— that is, rendering it as "just another" military failure, akin to others of a significantly lesser scale. This maneuver allowed the political echelon to absolve itself of responsibility for the disaster, frame it as an *exclusive* military failure, and thus lay accountability solely at the military's door. Given the military's advantage as an epistemic authority (Michael, 2008, 2010),

this framing assisted the political echelon in constructing the war's conduct as military rather than political. Consequently, it increased the military's influence over strategy formulation, policymaking, and decision-making related to the war.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design. The central research question is as follows: How did the military echelon's use of the terms "failure" and "responsibility" influence the discourse space that evolved between it and the political echelon, and in what ways did this reflect the essence of their relationship? To examine these terms in the context of October 7, we analyzed their various manifestations and applications by military officers, government ministers, and officials in both echelons. Data was drawn from publicly available sources— including news articles, reports, opinion pieces, social media posts, tweets, and press conferences, as well as print, broadcast, and online media—which served as channels for the parties to address the public.

The primary methodological tool for this study is Discourse Analysis. This approach allows for a focus on language and its rhetorical organization (whether written, spoken, or signaled) and facilitates an examination of how knowledge and meaning are organized, communicated, and reproduced through institutional practices. The specific sub-category employed is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a key methodological tool for exposing the nexus between discourse, power, and social construction. In this regard, examining the use and comprehension of the terms "failure" and "responsibility" in the context of the October 7 events serves not merely as a descriptive device. It is also a crucial tool for investigating the social construction of socio-political power, aiming to decipher the processes by which power relations and ideologies are shaped and disseminated. CDA thus aids in examining how discourse tools and rhetorical strategies

influence public opinion, reinforce systems of dominance, shape the public's perception of reality (Van Dijk, 2008), and, in sum, delineate the discourse space between the military and political echelons. We emphasize that the selection of these terms is not arbitrary. Both concepts are central to the public discourse surrounding the October 7 attack; they serve as a critical axis in inter-echelon relations generally and during times of crisis specifically; and they directly disrupt the concept of shared responsibility, which constitutes a foundational component of functional civil-military relations.

Theoretical Framework: On the Nature of Concepts, Definitions and the Constructions of "Reality"

Events occurring around us do not have an independent existence; rather, they are contingent upon the meaning we ascribe to them (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This meaning is a product of social construction; it is contextually embedded and determines our course of action (Weick, 1995, 2001). Leaders, including military commanders, are the ones who imbue events with meaning, thereby interpreting them and creating "reality" (Ancona, 2012; Shamir, 2007). Within this process, definitions are a crucial tool for shaping "reality"; therefore, the choice to use one definition over another is not arbitrary. It allows one to influence and construct meanings and, through them, to shape narratives. As such, definitions are an inherent component of the sensemaking processes of individuals, leaders, and organizations alike. The shaping of "reality" and the construction of meaning have been extensively examined in organizational literature (for examples see Weick, 1995, 2001) concerning leaders who are perceived as responsible for constructing the organization's "reality" (Ancona, 2012; Shamir, 2007) and, consequently, for the framing of events. To frame means to select certain aspects of a perceived "reality" and make them more salient (Hallahan, 1999), as framing reflects a process of both inclusion and exclusion. The frame defines the situation ("reality") by demarcating what lies within it what remains external to it (Goffman, 1974). Definitions of a situation can alter meanings and delineate a range of acceptable behaviors, thus possessing great power (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 11). A frame is, therefore, a mental model: a set of ideas and assumptions that an individual holds to understand and negotiate a particular issue (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Carmit Padan (2017) examined framing processes in a military context and found that commanders' framing is executed according to how each perceives "reality," interprets it, and wishes to construct it in a manner that serves their commanding-leadership identity, their operational repertoire, and, in some cases (depending on their command position and role), their career management within the organization (Padan & Ben-Ari, 2019). She thus deduced that "Framing Work" serves as an interpretive framework of action for leaders, one that reflects the organizational mechanisms embedded within the military's organizational culture (Padan, 2017).

In this vein, the organizational culture of the IDF intertwines the management of operational events with the commander's leadership. This is reflected in the military perception that the way the commander manages an operational event will determine its definition. This is a perspective that classifies the nature of an operational event only ex post facto and emphasizes that the definition of an event in combat units is not fixed but rather subject to social construction by the commander (Padan, 2017). In this regard, it was found that while defining an operational event as a crisis implies it was mismanaged (and thus that the commander's leadership was found wanting at the critical moment), when a commander defines an operational event as a failure, the implication is that the unit failed. Consequently, there is no absolute identification between the commander and the failure. It was further found that when commanders define an operational event as a failure, they subsequently pinpoint the specific points of failure, thereby

ensuring they do not repeat these errors in the next engagement. Therefore, as the IDF's organizational culture cultivates an adaptive leadership that learns from one operational event to the next, it is not inclined to dismiss commanders who have failed in their duties (Padan, 2017).

> **As the IDF's organizational culture cultivates an adaptive leadership that learns from one operational event to the next, it is not inclined to dismiss commanders who have failed.**

The encounter between the military and political echelons discussed in this article is an intellectual one, where knowledge infrastructures, which rely on concepts and their interrelations within an emergent context, are articulated. These are the respective knowledge infrastructures of each echelon within the discourse space that exists between them (Michael, 2008, 2012). The formative dimensions of this discourse space are those of political guidance and content, or conceptualization. Since the military echelon in Israel has acquired the status of an epistemic authority (Michael, 2008, 2010)—a reliable source of knowledge in the domain of military and security affairs— the conceptual framework proposed by the military to construct the "security reality" (including regarding October 7) has had a formative influence on the boundaries of the discourse. This extends to the broader discourse space, encompassing the topics and issues deliberated in political-policy dialogue. In this situation, the political echelon in Israel lacks the capacity and a sufficiently developed civilian institutional infrastructure capable of systematically and profoundly generating knowledge and developing competing alternatives to the military's knowledge infrastructure. Consequently, even in cases where the political echelon is skeptical of the

military's interpretations and recommendations, it has no real capacity to present a more viable alternative. Military knowledge, translated into a sophisticated conceptual system, becomes the shared knowledge base for both echelons and, in effect, the sole and exclusive knowledge base. In this reality, which Kobi Michael (2012) terms an "intellectual vacuum" one of two possibilities occurs: either the analysis of a complex reality is based on military concepts and knowledge infrastructures, or the military echelon expands and encroaches into a deeper engagement with non-military issues.

The interrelations between the political and the military echelons can be described on a continuum. At one end, relations are characterized by conflict and a struggle for political power and influence; at the other, they include components of cooperation and attribute weight to social values and systems of checks and balances (Michael, 2010). Regarding this relationship, Dov Tamari argues: "In Israel, there is no security concept that can serve as a regulating conceptual system for statesmen and soldiers. Relevant knowledge concerning anticipated crises and security matters is not developed within Israeli governments" (Tamari, 2007, p. 31). Michael (2007) contends that in this situation, the military remains the almost exclusive and hegemonic knowledge authority. Thus, a reality of pronounced asymmetry in favor of military knowledge is created. When the political echelon is devoid of knowledge (and even its political thinking is biased towards military logic), the military echelon becomes the epistemic authority. This leads to the informational dependence of the political echelon on the military, the military's domination of the discourse space between the echelons, an almost total erosion of civilian oversight vis-à-vis the military's argumentative capacity, and, in sum, a blurring of the boundaries between the spheres of responsibility and authority of the political and military echelons (Michael, 2010, p. 124).

Shared Responsibility as a Basis for Understanding the Relationship Between the Political and Military Echelons

The organizing logic of civilian control, as a key concept regulating and shaping the relationship between the political and military echelons, lies in creating a mechanism that ensures the military echelon functions as an advisor, force-builder, and operator of military force in accordance with the political echelon's directives and in a manner that serves the latter's objectives (Michael, 2010). Shared Responsibility (Bland, 1999) is a central concept for understanding this relationship. Douglas Bland proposed it as a normative-ideal model for civil-military relations, according to which both echelons share responsibility for the control of the military and for the outcomes of military action. The principle of civilian control is ensured via the existence of effective, clear, and agreed-upon mechanisms of accountability and shared responsibility and should enable stability in relations between the spheres.

Shared responsibility is manifested in the military echelon's ability to present its professional positions candidly (lit. "without fear") and its duty to fully obey the political echelon. Concurrently, it requires the political echelon to provide backing to the military and allow it to operate autonomously, subject to its professional judgment and expertise, and so long as the military course of action remains relevant to achieving the political objectives. According to Bland (1999), shared responsibility cannot exist without mutual trust between the echelons: the political echelon must trust in the military's full commitment to fulfilling its directives and its complete, unqualified acceptance of the war's objectives as defined by the political leadership. The military echelon, in turn, must trust in the absolute backing it will receive from the political echelon, knowing it will never be made the exclusive scapegoat for failed missions, but rather that the political leadership will stand with it to share the responsibility.

Regarding the normative idea of shared responsibility, it is crucial to emphasize that this norm governing inter-echelon relations in Israel had already been violated several times prior to October 7, 2023. However, the breach on and following October 7 has been exceptionally acute and extreme. In the IDF strategy documents (2015 and 2018), then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot addressed the essence of shared responsibility. According to the interpretation by Kobi Michael and Shmuel Even, "The Chief of Staff is asking the political echelon to bear responsibility for the task of aligning military action with political objectives—a task in which it is a central partner. This is intended to improve the chances of success and to prevent the political echelon from subsequently disavowing responsibility with claims that it was unaware of the IDF's capabilities or the magnitude of the threat" (Michael & Even, 2018, p. 29).

Shared responsibility is a necessary condition for shaping an open discourse space and for developing joint, sustained learning. Only thus can the echelons "break down the walls" in their thinking (HaCohen, 2014, cited in Michael, 2016, p. 121). Concurrently, a reciprocal relationship exists between shared responsibility and trust: the very existence of shared responsibility contributes to and strengthens trust, while established trust reinforces the echelons' willingness to maintain shared responsibility.

It is important to stress that even in the case of effective shared responsibility and an open, sophisticated discourse space, within which (while it should be free from hierarchical constraints) there is no equality between the echelons, the relationship must be conducted under the direction and control of the political echelon. In this sense, an open discourse space does not imply equal discourse. On the contrary, the discourse between the echelons must be conducted as an "Unequal Dialogue," according to Eliot Cohen (Cohen, 2003, pp. 189-202). Cohen, who in his seminal book *The Supreme Command* developed the

conceptual framework of civil-military relations as a critique of the field's normative theories, based his findings on four historical case studies (Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion). He concluded that:

> What transpired between a president or prime minister and a general was a dialogue between non-equals. A *dialogue* in the sense that both sides expressed their opinions openly, and sometimes even aggressively, not just once, but time and again; and **between non-equals** in the sense that the supreme authority of the civilian leader was unequivocal and unchallengeable [...] The system practiced by these men was one of continuous dialogue throughout the conflict, and was far removed from the simplistic conventions of "normative" theory on civil-military relations (Cohen, 2003, pp. 189-190 (in the Hebrew version), emphasis not in original).

Even when the political echelon contests its interpretations and recommendations regarding the operational environment, it lacks the genuine capacity to posit a viable alternative. Consequently, military knowledge, translated into a sophisticated conceptual apparatus, becomes the de facto shared knowledge base for both echelons and, in effect, the more dominant one.

The Necessity of an Open Discourse Space

Rebecca Schiff (2012) further posits that the formalization of the learning and knowledge-production process is actualized via a "Targeted Partnership." This principle, which ensures congruence between military action and the political objective, while securing the supremacy of political logic over military logic, constitutes the substantive essence of civilian control. It is distinct from the absolute subordination of the military to the elected political echelon, which represents the procedural-normative dimension of civilian control (Michael, 2010).

Such congruence between military action and political aims can only be sustained under conditions of an open discourse space, one that sustains diagnostic-strategic learning processes and thereby enables the production and development of shared knowledge (Michael, 2016). Yet, because the military echelon has established itself as an epistemic authority (Michael, 2012), even when the political echelon contests its interpretations and recommendations regarding the operational environment, it lacks the genuine capacity to posit a viable alternative.[5] Consequently, military knowledge, translated into a sophisticated conceptual apparatus, becomes the de facto shared knowledge base for both echelons and, in effect, the more dominant one. This situation leads to the political echelon's informational dependence on the military, the military's domination of the discourse spaces between them, an almost total erosion of civilian oversight *vis-à-vis* the military's claims (Dauber, 1998), and a blurring of the boundaries between their respective spheres of responsibility and authority (Michael, 2010, p. 124).

Unlike a closed discourse space, characterized by discussions and the presentation of alternatives within a fixed, structured, or essentially ceremonial process, an open discourse space is characterized by challenging extant knowledge by re-examining existing conceptual frameworks and perceptions. It is a necessary condition for developing diagnostic-strategic learning processes, which are nourished by the direct encounter of tensions with knowledge infrastructures, and which enable the clarification and validation of the political directive's relevance (Michael, 2016). Such a discourse space necessitates dismantling the rigid distinction between the military and political echelons during their encounter

and a "flattening" of their hierarchical and dichotomous structure. The conditions for an open discourse space, which facilitates complex diagnostic-strategic learning, require a process of interrogating and interpreting "reality" and understanding its characteristics, in a manner that generates a common conceptual language regarding both facts and their significance. This shared language makes it possible to reduce the subjective dimension inherent in judging "reality" and, from that basis, to formulate a relevant and consensual political-strategic purpose, with the aim of enacting change and reshaping that reality.

Analysis of Findings: "Failure" and "Responsibility" as Factors Shaping the Conduct of the Political and Military Echelons in the Context of the October 7 Disaster

An examination of the definitions applied in public discourse to describe the October 7 disaster reveals that they are diverse rather than uniform or coherent. These include: "Black Sabbath," "massacre," "grave omission" ("*mehdal*"), "crisis," "disaster," and "abandonment" ("*hafkera*"). In contrast, an analysis of the definitions used by the military echelon, including senior IDF commanders, shows that it has consistently adhered to the term "failure" and its various linguistic derivations. For example, in a letter to soldiers circulated on October 17, 2023, the then-Head of Military Intelligence ("Aman"), Major General Aharon Haliva, wrote: "Aman, under my command, failed in providing a warning for the terrorist attack carried out by Hamas" (IDF Editorial, 2023). In the fifth "Combat Brief" published by the Chief of Staff (CoS) on March 7, 2024, to IDF commanders, he wrote: "We failed in protecting civilians" (Halevi, 2024).

The declarations of responsibility by the CoS and the Head of Military Intelligence were joined by other senior officers in public statements: On October 18, 2023, the Head of the Home Front Command, Major General Rafael David (Rafi)

Milo, stated: "We failed in securing the southern front" (Shemesh, 2023). On November 16, the Air Force Commander, Major General Tomer Bar, said: "We failed in the mission" (Harel, E., 2023). The Gaza Division Commander, Brigadier General Avi Rosenfeld, wrote to the municipal heads of the Gaza envelope on June 9, 2024, upon announcing his departure and retirement from the IDF: "On October 7, I failed in my life's mission to protect the Gaza envelope" (Zitun & Tzuri, 2024). In a special statement following the findings of the "Be'eri investigation" into October 7, the IDF Spokesperson stated: "The IDF failed in its mission to protect the citizens of Israel... The public deserves answers" (IDF Editorial, 2024). Conceptually, failure is a discrete, time-bound event. It is past-oriented and refers to a negative outcome or the non-achievement of a specific goal. It is an instance or situation where something did not function as planned or did not reach its objective. Failure can be singular or recurring and generally focuses on the final result; it is always circumstantial and consequential, and it typically carries a negative connotation (Shvika, 1997; Scott & Marshall, 2009).Responsibility, in contrast, is procedural and continuous, focusing on the *response* to an event or failure, and it possesses a clear orientation toward the present and future. Its essence is to acknowledge one's part in a situation, take ownership of the errors or decisions that led to the outcome, and learn from the experience to perform better in the future (Bovens, 2007). Responsibility is an approach, a conscious choice to act in a certain way given the circumstances, and it has a positive connotation. One can fail without bearing responsibility (by blaming others or ignoring failure), and one can bear responsibility even when an absolute failure did not occur—for example, by taking responsibility for improving an existing process (Dweck, 2006). Thus, while failure is an inevitable component of action, responsibility is what transforms failure into important lessons and a lever for growth and future success (Edmondson, 2019).

Bearing responsibility manifests in various ways, and several central types can be distinguished. First is *personal responsibility*, which refers to an individual's moral accountability for their actions and decisions, stemming from concepts of autonomy and free will (Oshana, 2006). Second, in the military context, *command responsibility* is recognized—a legal and moral principle by which a commander bears responsibility not only for their own actions but also for the actions or inactions of their subordinates (Porat, 2022). Concurrently, in the political echelon, the principle of *ministerial responsibility* applies, whereby a government minister is accountable for their ministry's activities and all that occurs within their domain of authority, even if not directly involved in a specific decision (Bogdanor, 2005). Finally, one can speak of *collective responsibility*, which is attributed to an entire group, such as a government or a general staff, that jointly bears the consequences of its decisions and omissions (May, 1987).

> It is crucial to emphasize that by choosing to define the October 7 disaster as a "failure" (akin to other failures in operational routine), the military leadership activated two processes: normalization and magnitude reduction. Through this term, the disaster becomes "just another" internal military-organizational event from which to learn, correct, and recover, as with other operational failures.

The disparity between the definitions of October 7 events in the public discourse and the military officers' consistent coupling of the term "failure" with their descriptions has not shifted throughout the war, up to the time of this writing. We contend that this choice is not arbitrary; it reflects a significant tool used by the military echelon to shape "reality," both externally and internally (Weick, 2001). By choosing to define the October 7 disaster using the term "failure," the senior military echelon initiates two processes: On the civilian

level, a public debate over blame attribution is forestalled by the preemptive admission of responsibility—a debate that would be necessitated by the use of other terms like "grave omission" ("mehdal"), "disaster" or "abandonment." On the internal organizational-military level, using the term "failure" frames the day's events in an organizational context, which endows the failure with the meaning of being a product of professional ("operational") errors made by the military and establishes it as a platform for learning and correction. Therefore, the implication of choosing the term "failure" is that the commander can identify the points of failure—in other words, the errors that led to it—and thus will know not to repeat these errors in the next engagement. Such a definition is a product of how the concept of "failure" is constructed within the IDF's organizational culture and its mechanisms—from operational training courses to operational conduct. The words of CoS Herzi Halevi at the Military Intelligence Directorate change-of-command ceremony (August 21, 2024) exemplify this perception of failure as a motivating factor for learning, suggesting that the learning of those who failed will be superior: "You who were seared, who smelled the scorch of failure, you will know how to think about how to fix it" (Padan, 2024).

A further examination of public statements by senior military commanders reveals that they create a distinct linkage between "failure" and "responsibility." This is evident in the following examples: In the letter to soldiers on October 17, ten days after the attack, Head of Military Intelligence Major General Aharon Haliva wrote: "We did not fulfill our most important mission, and as the Head of Aman, I bear full responsibility for the failure" (IDF Editorial, 2023). At an official national event on May 12, 2024, the candle-lighting ceremony at the Western Wall, CoS Halevi added: "As the commander of the Israel Defense Forces during the war, I bear responsibility for the fact that the IDF failed in its mission to protect the citizens of

Israel on October 7" (Cohen & Eichner, 2024). At the change-of-command ceremony for the 98th Division, the outgoing commander, Brigadier General Dan Goldfus, stated: "We all failed. We in the IDF failed to protect the citizens of Israel. We failed to protect the residents of the Gaza envelope" (Buchbut, 2024).

It is crucial to emphasize that by choosing to define the October 7 disaster as a "failure" (akin to other failures in operational routine), the military leadership activated two processes: normalization and magnitude reduction. Through this term, the disaster becomes "just another" internal military-organizational event from which to learn, correct, and recover, as with other operational failures.[6] We must briefly clarify the distinction between the military debriefing mechanism ("tahkir") and a state commission of inquiry ("va'adat hakira mamlakhtit"). The primary declared objective of an operational (military) debriefing is lesson-learning and the improvement of future processes. It focuses on *what* happened and *how* to prevent its recurrence, not on *who* is to blame. According to IDF regulations, the "tahkir" is intended as a tool for internal organizational learning and is therefore based on the cooperation and candor of those involved, with the understanding that its findings will not be used in command or legal proceedings against them. In contrast, the purpose of a state commission of inquiry is far broader. According to Section 1 of the Commissions of Inquiry Law (1968), a commission is meant to investigate "a matter of vital public importance." Although it also produces systemic lessons, a central part of its role is to determine responsibility, both institutional and personal, within the political and military echelons. Its findings can include personal recommendations, such as dismissal from office, which carry immense public and political weight (Blander, 2025). This distinction clarifies that the military's use of "failure" and its focus on the "tahkir" are part of an internal organizational paradigm that is neither suitable nor sufficient for addressing the magnitude of

the October 7 disaster (nor the public's need for total accountability, both military and political).

In stark contrast to the declarations by senior military figures regarding their assumption of responsibility for the failure, the absence of similar declarations from many in the political echelon, the Prime Minister and/or government ministers, was conspicuous.[7] A tweet by the Prime Minister, initially published in the early hours of October 29, 2023, reflected his attempt to cast responsibility for October 7 at the feet of the military echelon: "At no point and at no stage was a warning given to Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding Hamas' intentions of war. On the contrary, all security officials, including the Head of Military Intelligence and the Head of the GSS, assessed that Hamas was deterred and sought an arrangement ("hasdara"). This was the assessment presented time and again to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet by all security officials and the intelligence community, including right up until the outbreak of the war" (Shalev, 2023). The Prime Minister's tweet drew criticism from former senior military officials, including Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, two former CoSs who were serving as ministers without portfolio in the "National Emergency Government" formed after the attack (which served until June 2024). In a tweet responding to the Prime Minister, Gantz wrote: "This morning especially, I want to support and strengthen all security officials and IDF soldiers, including the CoS, the Head of Aman, and the Head of the GSS. When we are at war, leadership must show responsibility… The Prime Minister must retract his statement from last night and cease dealing with this issue" (Gantz, 2023). Eisenkot added in a statement that [the PM] must "immediately cease criticizing the systems for which he is responsible" (Shalev, 2023). Furthermore, Eisenkot's words convey a message (with a personal inflection) that the political echelon is not a passive entity, as it bears responsibility for the military's functioning. He was implying that the political echelon is responsible for the military echelon, and as such, bears

responsibility for its performance—this is the very expression of shared responsibility. Not only can it not construct itself as a passive actor, but it is incumbent upon it to ask questions and demand answers from the military. After facing criticism for the tweet (including from other former military leaders, such as former CoS Gabi Ashkenazi), Prime Minister Netanyahu deleted it. However, in publishing that initial tweet, he had already proposed an alternative, distinct, and contradictory framing regarding responsibility for the October 7 disaster, one that cast accountability onto the military. This framing continued to resonate and was perpetuated despite the retraction (Mordechai & Yadlin, 2024).[8]

An examination of statements by Gantz and Eisenkot reveals their attempt to establish a degree of shared responsibility for the October 7 disaster, encompassing both echelons. Although both belonged to the political echelon at the time, they had only recently left uniform. Thus, in response to a question at a press conference on October 26, 2023, about whether he saw himself as responsible for the "conception" regarding Hamas, Minister Gantz replied: "Anyone who was a partner in the leadership and guidance of the State of Israel, in any role, cannot absolve himself of responsibility, and that includes me" (Rubinstein, 2023). In an interview with the investigative program *"Uvda"* on January 18, 2024, Minister Eisenkot stated: "There is a sharp and clear responsibility for everyone who was in a military or political position on that day, and there is responsibility for everyone who was there ten years before, including myself as Chief of Staff, and parallel figures: defense ministers, prime ministers." Later in the interview, Eisenkot emphasized the responsibility of both echelons: "Whether they took responsibility or not... They [political and security echelons] don't need to *take* responsibility; it is theirs" (*Uvda*, 2024a).

Their words weaken and create a stark contrast to the flight of the political echelon, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, from admitting its part in the failure and from bearing

responsibility. In this sense, their statements do not represent the conduct of the political echelon they were part of, and certainly not after they resigned from the government. The claim by these former senior officers that each echelon holds a degree of shared responsibility is also reflected in an article by military analyst Amos Harel: "The intelligence-defensive blunder ("mehdal") is the direct responsibility of the security leadership, including the Minister of Defense, the CoS, the Head of the GSS, and other senior officials. But this disaster has another address, one that is currently making every effort to shake off any shred of responsibility—Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu" (Harel, A., 2023).

A further expression of the political echelon's attempt to evade responsibility involved accusations regarding the intelligence warning for the war. As detailed later, in May 2024, the IDF confirmed that the Prime Minister had received four warning documents from Military Intelligence between March and July 2023. But there were other tactics employed by parts of the political echelon to construct the discourse space in a way that would deflect and distance responsibility from itself. These included, on the one hand, publicizing the Prime Minister's schedule, and on the other, ministers casting blame on factors and processes unrelated to the political echelon's functioning before October 7. These tactics also sought to divert public attention from the question of responsibility for the disaster and worked to re-contextualize it, that is, to shape "reality." Among these rhetorical tactics, the following can be noted:

a. (a) Reviving the Disengagement issue: About two weeks after October 7, ministers began to point to the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip as the "original sin" that led to the attack. Criticism from right-wing parties focusing on the security aspects of the disengagement drew responses from the left, which focused on its unilateral nature. The return of the disengagement

discourse deflected public attention from the question of responsibility for the October 7 disaster, particularly that of the incumbent political echelon (for example, Binyamini, 2024; Shragai, 2023).

b. (b) Meetings with Major General (res.) Yitzhak Brik: By May 2024, the Prime Minister had met six times with Brik, who had long warned of the IDF's lack of readiness for war. In meeting with Brik, the Prime Minister signaled that the military was solely responsible for the October 7 disaster (Radio North, 2024).

c. (c) The reservists' refusal to volunteer (in protest at the judicial reform): After October 7, claims were heard, primarily from right-wing ministers, that the reservists' call to refuse service in protest of the judicial reform had weakened Israel. In their view, this sent a message to the enemy that Israel was less protected and therefore more vulnerable. In this discussion, ministers accused the reservists of harming Israel's security and pointed an accusatory finger at them for their part in the weakness of the Israeli response on October 7.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, as of this writing, has not declared responsibility for the October 7 disaster. When he addressed the question, he employed three primary tactics in an attempt to change the frame of the discourse on the subject: (a) Postponing accountability until "after the war": "October 7 was a black day in our history... This blunder ("mehdal") will be investigated to the end. Everyone will have to provide answers, me included. But all of that will happen after the war" (Eichner, 2023). "I said, and I repeat, after the war, we will all have to provide answers, me included. There was a terrible blunder here, and it will be investigated... I promise that no stone will be left unturned" (Srugim News, 2023). With these words, the Prime Minister deferred any acceptance of responsibility. (b) Expressing sorrow for the events: As he did in an interview with *Time* magazine on August 4, 2024: "I said that after the war there will be an independent

> **Prime Minister Netanyahu, as of this writing, has not declared responsibility for the October 7 disaster. When he addressed the question, he employed three primary tactics in an attempt to change the frame of the discourse on the subject: (a) Postponing accountability until "after the war": "October 7 was a black day in our history... This blunder ("mehdal") will be investigated to the end. Everyone will have to provide answers, me included. But all of that will happen after the war"**

commission of inquiry, and everyone will have to provide answers, including me. But you can't do that in the middle of a war. Am I sorry? Of course, of course. I am deeply sorry that something like this happened" (Cortellessa, 2024). (c) Publishing the tweet on October 29, 2023 (despite its deletion), reflected his attempt to do so, adding that the information he had did not indicate Hamas' intention for war ("At no point... was a warning given... regarding Hamas' war intentions") (Hauser Tov, 2023). Moreover, it seems the most faithful representation of the political echelon's position and conduct regarding accountability was evident in Prime Minister Netanyahu's press conference on May 21, 2025. His focus was on his reference to Hamas' "flip-flops attack" ("mitkefet hakafkafim"), a phrase intended to emphasize and magnify the military echelon's failure, while declaring his insistence on "investigating this matter to the end." With these words, he deflected responsibility onto the military echelon while simultaneously ignoring, denying, and even attempting to nullify the responsibility of the political echelon and his own as Prime Minister.

Another expression of the formative influence of the military's use of "failure" on the construction of responsibility is evident in the media coverage of the political-security cabinet meetings, coverage based largely on leaks. This coverage positioned the military and political echelons as adversaries and described a toxic interaction between them. From this

coverage, it emerged that the "blame game" over responsibility was a continuation of cabinet discussions and underpinned other topics of debate including questions of responsibility for the disaster and the management of the war. Below are three examples of such areas of contention:

1. **The Warning of War**: On May 23, 2024, the IDF confirmed, in an official response to a Freedom of Information request submitted by the *Hatzlacha* organization, that the Prime Minister had received four warning documents from the Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman) between March and July 2023. The military refused to disclose the content of these letters to the Israeli public but stated that they concerned a warning "of proximate danger of military escalation." It added that this warning had crystallized considering the socio-political crisis in Israel surrounding judicial reform, arguing that the crisis over this issue was harming social cohesion. The military emphasized that the last of the four letters was sent before the Knesset approved the cancellation of the "Reasonableness Standard" on July 24, 2023, which was in the eyes of many in Israeli society a controversial move by the executive to limit the oversight power of the judiciary. That letter noted that Israel's enemies "identify an historic opportunity to change the strategic situation in the region following the immense crisis of the judicial revolution, the likes of which they have never seen before" (Eichner, 2024a). The response from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to this publication was that the report—alleging the Prime Minister received warnings from Aman's research division about a possible attack from Gaza—was "the opposite of the truth."

> Not only is there no warning whatsoever in any of the documents regarding Hamas' intentions to attack Israel from Gaza, but they provide a completely opposite assessment. The only two references to Hamas in the four documents state that Hamas does not want to attack Israel from Gaza and is oriented toward an "arrangement" ("hasdara") (Eichner, 2024a).

The General Security Services (GSS) also partook in this warning of impending war. It was reported in the media that GSS Director Ronen Bar delivered his assessment to the Prime Minister on the eve of the Knesset vote on the Reasonableness Standard on July 24, 2023. In their meeting, he told him: "I am providing you today with a warning for war. I cannot give a precise day and time. But this is the warning" (Eyal, 2024). The PMO issued a press release regarding this assessment as well, on August 29, 2024, stating:

> Prime Minister Netanyahu did not receive a warning for war in Gaza. Not on the date mentioned in the article, and not a moment before 06:29 on October 7. On the contrary, all security officials clarified explicitly—as appears in the protocols of the discussions until the eve of the war—that Hamas was deterred and sought an arrangement. Furthermore, just days before October 7, the GSS' assessment was that stability in the Gaza Strip was expected to be maintained for the long term (Ha'aretz, 2024).

2. **The Aims of the War**: The dispute regarding the aims of the war manifested in a recurring skirmish between the PMO and the IDF Spokesperson. The War Cabinet approved four war aims, but the Prime Minister's slogan of "Total Victory" captured the most public attention. In March 2024, approximately six months after the war began, a poll by Channel 13 News and Prof. Camil Fuchs was broadcast, showing that 61 percent of respondents answered in the negative to the question, "Will the war in Gaza end in the toppling of Hamas?" Even at this stage, the public appeared highly skeptical of

defining the war's aim as "total victory." IDF Spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari stated in a June 2024 interview with Channel 13 News that "while the IDF is close to a *military* defeat of Hamas, it is impossible to destroy the terrorist organization... Hamas is an idea... Whoever thinks it can be eliminated is mistaken... This notion of destroying Hamas... is simply 'throwing sand in the public's eyes'" (Shafran Gittelman, 2025). The PMO responded by stating: "The Political-Security Cabinet defined one of the war's goals as the destruction of Hamas' military and governmental capabilities. The IDF is, of course, obligated to this" (Ynet, 2024).

Furthermore, in a Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee discussion on August 12, 2024, Defense Minister Gallant cast doubt on the "total victory" objective espoused by the Prime Minister: "I hear the tam-tam drums and this nonsense about 'total victory.' It's a shame that same courage wasn't displayed behind closed doors." In response, the Prime Minister stated that the Defense Minister "is adopting the anti-Israel narrative" (Schlesinger, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson, Hagari, stated in his briefing on August 25, 2024: "We are committed to one, central war aim: the return of the hostages" (Eichner & Zitun, 2024). His words angered a "political source," who subsequently released a statement to the media:

> The IDF Spokesperson's choice to mention only one war aim in his statement this evening—while ignoring the other war aims—is in complete contradiction to the definitions and directives of the political echelon. The war aims were and remain: the return of our hostages, the destruction of Hamas' military and governmental capabilities, ensuring that Gaza will never again be a threat to Israel, and the safe return of the residents of the north to their homes (Eichner, 2024b).

These statements starkly illustrate the gap between the echelons regarding the definition of war aims and, in effect, the absolute absence of a shared conceptual infrastructure.

3. **The Question of "The Day After"**: In mid-May 2024, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant held a press conference. The reason for it, he stated, was the Prime Minister's refusal for six months to discuss the governance structure in the Gaza Strip after the war, an issue known as "The Day After." Gallant claimed the Prime Minister's refusal "is eroding the military's achievements" and is dragging Israel toward a reality where, "in the absence of a governing alternative to Hamas... two bad options will remain: Hamas rule or Israeli military rule. Both alternatives are bad." His words added a further layer to the CoS' prior assessments that "if a political decision is not made, IDF soldiers will have to return and operate in places where they have already operated" (Assaraf et al., 2024).

In a video published in response to Gallant, the Prime Minister stated that he refused to formulate a diplomatic plan of action because he believed "one must first destroy Hamas... The first condition for 'the day after' is to eliminate Hamas, and to do so without excuses" (Elimelech, 2024). The conceptual and substantive incongruence between the two echelons on this issue, as well as the confrontational atmosphere, was highlighted when Minister Itamar Ben Gvir attacked Gallant's remarks and called for his dismissal: "From Gallant's perspective, there is no difference between whether Gaza is ruled by IDF soldiers or by Hamas murderers. This is the essence of the 'conception' of a Defense Minister who failed on October 7." Meanwhile, Minister Gantz, identified with the military echelon's position, backed Gallant, stating: "The Defense Minister is speaking the truth" (Assaraf et al., 2024).

The findings above indicate that the political crisis between the Prime Minister, the government, and the Defense Minister was influenced by the strained and toxic relations between the political and military echelons.

However, it also influenced these relations, exacerbating the tension and toxicity. The compromised infrastructure of the discourse space between the echelons and the absence of a strategic learning process hindered the political echelon's ability to lead the effective realization and development of a strategic purpose, as it understood it. Furthermore, the findings show that the tension and crisis of trust between the echelons spilled over into the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister. The latter was perceived by the Prime Minister as being "fully identified with the military," confrontational in his conduct, and in some cases, even "subversive." This was especially true regarding Gallant's contacts with the US Biden administration, which was highly critical of the Prime Minister and was perceived as working to oust him (Ilanai, 2025).

Discussion and Summary

The discourse space serves as an analytical tool for describing and analyzing the interrelations between the military and political echelons. Friction between different knowledge infrastructures within this space renders it a learning sphere. Under conditions of an *open discourse space*, characterized by the exploration of extant knowledge through the re-evaluation of conceptual frameworks and existing perceptions, the political echelon are empowered to formulate a political-strategic purpose based on its understanding of "reality" as the product of a diagnostic-strategic learning process.

This article utilized the discourse space as an analytical organizing concept to examine the disruption of this diagnostic-strategic learning process within the political and military echelons, focusing on the decision-making surrounding the war that commenced after the October 7, 2023 attack. Since a learning process inherently includes conceptualization, we chose to analyze the use of the terms "responsibility" and "failure." These terms held the potential to influence the framing of "reality," to reflect the

profound gap and crisis of trust between the echelons, and to define the nature of their shared responsibility. This article has demonstrated how the military echelon's conceptualization of the October 7 disaster as a "failure" deepened the crisis of trust, affected the essence of shared responsibility, framed the war's trajectory as military rather than political, and consequently influenced strategy, policymaking, and the decision-making processes of the war.

A healthy discourse between the political and military echelons, whose essence is a joint learning process and whose outcome is the construction of a shared knowledge base and common conceptualizations, necessitates two indispensable conditions: mutual trust and shared responsibility. Chief of Staff (CoS) Eyal Zamir aptly defined this in his address at the Military Colleges' change-of-command ceremony on August 14, 2025 (against the backdrop of tensions with the Defense Minister, who had refused to approve the CoS' latest round of appointments):

> Mutual trust and full cooperation are the key to success. Victory on the battlefield depends not only on military strength but also on inter-echelon cohesion [...] At the heart of cohesion is trust. With trust, power is born. Only when they operate in harmony can we... break the enemy, win, and secure the future of the state (Zitun, 2025b).

In the absence of these conditions, the inter-echelon relationship is disrupted, and a productive learning discourse is rendered impossible (Michael, 2016). The crisis of trust led to the formation of a closed discourse space devoid of a diagnostic-strategic learning process. This, in turn, disrupted any ability to create the additional, necessary shared conceptualizations required to frame "reality" and devise an agreed-upon strategy that would permit the political echelon to lead the effort

toward realizing its preferred political-strategic purpose for the war. In this state, the echelons' ability to manage an open discourse space, one that relies on trust and is grounded in a joint learning process, was vitiated, as was their ability to institutionalize the principle of shared responsibility. This principle could have bridged the gaps between them and served as a precondition for a "Targeted Partnership" (Schiff, 2012) that enables the design and implementation of the best civilian policy and military strategy for the state.

Through the uniform use of the term "failure" by senior military officers, and by imbuing it with a unique meaning outside the inter-echelon discourse space, the military echelon confined that space to a defined framework. This truncated the conceptual infrastructure for interpreting "reality" and the range of alternatives for consideration. Thus, the military echelon, identifying "strategic helplessness" (Michael, 2010) within the political echelon, both constricted the discourse space and transgressed its boundaries. In effect, the military's assumption of responsibility for the October 7 disaster was tantamount to a call for the political echelon to bear its responsibility, that of aligning military action with political objectives, but in practice, the political echelon did not heed this appeal.

The causal meaning ascribed to "failure" as a product of professional errors (Padan, 2024) manifested one of the most significant barriers to open discourse. This interpretation framed the disaster as a "technical problem" requiring "simple learning" (single-loop learning), whereas understanding the October 7 disaster demanded a "complex diagnostic learning" (double-loop learning) process. The military leadership's adherence to the "tahkir" (debriefing) mechanism, which focuses principally on tactical and operational issues for knowledge development, vitiated the value of experiential learning. It did not serve the requisite knowledge and cognitive development, undermined the necessary

strategic learning process, and, by definition, failed to address the formulation of the political-strategic purpose required for managing the war. For example, the "Be'eri debriefing," the first military investigation presented to the public, drew significant criticism for its focus on the micro-tactical characteristics of the battle (IDF Editorial, 2024), while lacking a broader context or any reference to the General Staff's role in the disaster. This was further compounded by the case of Brigadier General (res.) Oren Solomon, who was dismissed and arrested on charges of leaking classified documents after his own debriefing, which was highly critical of senior command, and was completely ignored by that same command (Naim, 2025).

Concurrently, the political echelon's insistence on focusing on the military debriefings as the "linchpin" of the joint learning process, while evading the establishment of a state commission of inquiry,[9] (akin to those formed after the Yom Kippur War or the Sabra and Shatila massacre) and avoiding learning within its own sphere of responsibility, eviscerated the discourse space. In effect, the military framed the failure at the tactical level and responsibility at the personal level; meanwhile, the political echelon framed the failure within the military-strategic domain and left responsibility outside the political sphere. This gap between the military's micro-conceptualization and the political echelon's macro-conceptualization regarding the military nature of the failure, coupled with the disparity regarding "responsibility," precludes the ability to investigate the event at the macro-level. This is the clearest manifestation of the absence of a joint strategic learning process.

The military echelon's adherence to the terms "failure" and "responsibility" convincingly contrasted with and highlighted the political echelon's avoidance of these same terms, cementing the latter's public image as one evading accountability. It is plausible that this contrast was perceived by the political echelon as a form of defiance by the military, adding

another layer to the perceived confrontational nature of the military's conduct. This was evident in Brigadier General Dan Goldfus' speech, in which he challenged the political echelon ("We will not flee from responsibility… you, however, must be worthy of us") (Kuriel & Zitun, 2024);[10] the IDF Spokesperson's statements (Zitun, 2025a); CoS Halevi's steadfast opposition to the re-occupation of the Gaza Strip and the imposition of military rule; and the "intimate" relationship with the US administration, which was a thorn in the side of the political echelon (Ilanai, 2025).

The military's use of the term "failure" provided the political echelon with a "discourse escape route" from a discussion of its own failure and accountability, leading to its disavowal of shared responsibility as a necessary foundation for civil-military relations. The result was a platform for the emergence of a toxic interaction between the echelons, derived (in part) from the causal link the military itself had forged between "failure" and "responsibility." In effect, the use of the term "failure" rendered visible the extent to which Israel's governing systems are influenced more by personal and political considerations than by substantive, systemic, or state-level concerns. This situation reflects the "judicialization," as defined by Gal-Nur (2004), of Israeli politics. It may lead the public to develop a cynical perception of its elected officials and appointed professionals, and a growing apathy that manifests in intensified public distrust in the government, protests, and reduced voter turnout in Israel's frequent elections (Koenig, 2023). All this contributes to the erosion of the value-based and institutional foundations of Israeli democracy, placing it on a slippery slope toward the attenuation of the Israeli central government's very capacity to function.[11]

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Notes

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2 The fluctuations in the level of public trust in the army are reflected in INSS surveys conducted in March 2025 and May 2025.

3 An example of statements by politicians regarding their share of blame for the failure was given in the television program "Uvda," which quoted Treasury Minister Bezalel Smotrich on the need for political resignations: "We have a few days of legitimacy until the extent becomes clearer. In another forty-eight

hours they will call on us to resign over this failure and they are right." ("Uvda," 2024b).

4   "What led to October 7 was not Qatari money. That's just a huge bluff […] What led to it was a chain of failures that must be investigated, and I insist that they be fully investigated." (Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a press conference on May 21, 2025).

5   At a study evening of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic & Security Affairs held on February 11, 2025, former Chief of Staff and Knesset Member Gadi Eizenkot claimed that "there has been a decline in the culture of knowledge building at the political level." In his view, this decline derives from concentrating too much power in security systems (Intelligence, Planning, Operations, GSS, Mossad) relative to civilian systems, which he described as "atrophied." Eitan Ben David, former senior GSS officer, added that, "The weakness of Israel's political-strategic thinking reflects the weakness of the NSC [National Security Council]." According to him, this organization is unable to present strategic alternatives and "is therefore failing to challenge the existing mode of political-strategic thinking." See https://tinyurl.com/29e9jbub from the 25th minute.

6   Not only that, defining the disaster as a failure limits it to the time of the attack, October 7, and thus avoids reference to an even larger failure, the series of faulty decisions over the years that led to October 7.

7   With the exception of Bezalel Smotrich, who said immediately after the massacre: "I take responsibility, for what was and what will be […] We have to admit with honesty and pain—we failed to protect the security of our citizens" (Bersky, 2023); and also Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who said: "I am responsible for the security system, I was responsible for it over the past two weeks, including during very difficult events" (Dvori, 2023).

8   A similar event took place on February 18, 2025 when a senior figure in the Prime Minister's office, identified as the Prime Minister, declared that the release of four hostages' bodies on February 19 and the release of six living hostages on February 21 were the result of changes in the negotiating team, led by the head of the GSS Ronen Bar and head of the Mossad Dedi Barnea, alongside General (Res.) Nitzan Alon, whom he accused of engaging in "give and give rather than give and take." https://tinyurl.com/4uh83dcy

9   On May 5, 2025 the Government of Israel decided not to set up a commission of inquiry, saying that this was not the right time. https://tinyurl.com/2z5spnxv

10   In response to the officer's strong criticism of the politicians, he was reprimanded by the Chief of Staff. In fact this reprimand amounted to proof of the flippant way in which the senior ranks treated his criticism so that the Chief of Staff could feel he had "done his duty."

11   This issue is a grave by-product of the situation but goes beyond the scope of the present paper and will therefore be discussed separately.

The Weaponization of Empathy: Universalism, Identity Politics, and Cognitive Security

A Multidisciplinary Analysis with Strategic Implications

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Empathy is a universal human capacity essential to social cohesion, yet it is highly vulnerable to weaponization. The aftermath of the October 7 Hamas massacre provided a dramatic case study of this phenomenon. Instead of universal condemnation, segments of Western intellectual and activist discourse produced a striking moral inversion, systematically redirecting empathy from victims to perpetrators while rationalizing the atrocities.

Drawing on insights from moral philosophy, psychology, and postcolonial theory, this article applies Critical Discourse Analysis to forty key texts, to analyze this narrative inversion. It argues that this response is the result of a structural collapse of universal principles into identity politics. The analysis identifies four recurring discursive patterns that drive this process: reframing terrorism as resistance, delegitimizing victims through colonial coding, declaring performative solidarity, and framing Israel's military response as genocide.

By tracing these dynamics to similar patterns following 9/11 and during European jihadist attacks, the paper reveals a critical vulnerability in the cognitive resilience of open societies. The findings lead to policy recommendations for communication strategies designed to reaffirm universality, counter disinformation, and protect democratic legitimacy in the contemporary information battlespace.

Keywords: Empathy, Universalism, Identity Politics, Moral Relativism, Postcolonial Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Delegitimization, Cognitive Security, Cognitive Warfare.

Introduction

Empathy is a fundamental human instinct, rooted in neurobiology and cultural evolution (Batson, 2011; Decety & Lamm, 2006). It alerts us to suffering but cannot, by itself, establish justice or truth. That role belongs to universal moral principles, which stand above circumstance, culture, and identity.

This paper rejects moral relativism and rests on a foundational premise: while perception is subjective, truth is not. Even uncertainty

conforms to some kind of order; ethics, too, must rest on universals. Philosophical traditions diverge on this point. In the Enlightenment tradition—from Spinoza (as a precursor) and Kant to later heirs such as Rawls—moral judgment is anchored in universal principles that restrain partiality; according to this view, empathy must be guided and not left to rule (Kant, 1998/1785; Rawls, 1971; Spinoza, 2002/1677). By contrast, postmodern thinkers often treat morality as contingent narrative, undermining the claim to a universal basis (Baudrillard, 1994/1981; Deleuze, 1994/1968; Derrida, 1976/1967; Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984/1979).

This distortion was dramatically exposed in the aftermath of the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023—the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust. By any universal standard, the deliberate targeting of civilians through mass murder, rape, mutilation, and kidnapping demands unequivocal condemnation. Yet in certain progressive Western circles, the response was ambivalent. Atrocities were contextualized, even rationalized, as the "inevitable" outcome of colonial oppression. In this inversion, perpetrators were judged not by their actions but by their identity, and empathy flowed toward aggressors rather than victims. These responses were not monolithic: Alternative progressive voices did condemn the October 7 atrocities and reaffirm universal principles. The analysis that follows identifies dominant trends in specific activist, academic, and media networks, while acknowledging diversity within these milieus.

This phenomenon raises urgent questions for both political theory and national security. Why does empathy, an instinct so deeply embedded in human psychology, become inverted in this way? How does ideology transform an impulse to care into a justification for cruelty? And most critically for Israel, how does selective empathy affect legitimacy, security, and the conduct of information warfare in a world where perception increasingly shapes strategic outcomes?

To address these questions, the paper combines three perspectives. Philosophically, it traces the erosion of Enlightenment universalism in the face of identity-based moral relativism. Psychologically, it identifies the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that distort empathy and lead to ideological inversions. Strategically, it analyzes the weaponization of empathy as a tool of cognitive warfare aimed at undermining the resilience of democratic states.

> **By any universal standard, the deliberate targeting of civilians through mass murder, rape, mutilation, and kidnapping demands unequivocal condemnation. Yet in certain progressive Western circles, the response was ambivalent. Atrocities were contextualized, even rationalized, as the "inevitable" outcome of colonial oppression. In this inversion, perpetrators were judged not by their actions but by their identity, and empathy flowed toward aggressors rather than victims**

The argument advanced here is that empathy, when untethered from universal principles, becomes a liability: morality collapses into partiality, the oppressed are granted moral immunity, and supposed oppressors are denied standing. This selective empathy corrodes the universal foundations upon which liberal democracies—and Israel as a Jewish and democratic state—depend for legitimacy and survival. For Israel, this is not a philosophical debate but an urgent national security challenge: when empathy is inverted and weaponized, it erodes legitimacy, constrains policy, and weakens resilience in the cognitive domain. In today's environment, where perception is as critical as deterrence, the weaponization of empathy must therefore be recognized as both an ethical problem and a national security challenge.

Methodologically, the paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of forty texts—including academic essays, activist manifestos, and media interventions—published between

October 7, 2023 and March 2024. These texts were selected because they exemplify dominant discursive trends in progressive intellectual and activist circles. This approach makes it possible to identify recurring patterns—including the reframing of atrocities as resistance, the delegitimization of victims through "settler"/complicity coding, performative declarations of solidarity, and the framing of Israel's response as genocide—and to highlight their strategic consequences for Israel and for the resilience of liberal democracies (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2008).

> **Empathy alone cannot serve as a moral compass.**

The paper is structured as follows: the first section outlines the theoretical framework, reviewing literature from psychology, moral philosophy, and postcolonial studies. The second explains the methodology and corpus. The third presents the empirical findings from the discourse analysis. The fourth section provides the core analysis and discussion, diagnosing the mechanisms of this inversion and tracing their strategic implications. The final section offers policy recommendations to reinforce universal principles and cognitive resilience in liberal democracies.

Theoretical Framework

This section builds the multidisciplinary framework required to diagnose the weaponization of empathy. It traces a clear line of vulnerability: from empathy's neurobiological origin as a partial instinct, to the philosophical collapse of the universal principles that sought to discipline it, and finally to the ideological take-over of this undisciplined emotion by identity politics.

1. Empathy as a Neurobiological Instinct
Empathy has long been understood as a foundational human instinct—with rare neurological exceptions such as psychopathy or extreme sociopathy – that enables cooperation, social cohesion, and moral conduct. In evolutionary terms it functioned as a survival mechanism: Early human groups that could recognize and respond to the suffering of others were more likely to endure (Batson, 2011). Yet empathy is not impartial. Social neuroscience demonstrates that individuals experience stronger empathic responses toward in-group members than toward outsiders (Decety & Lamm, 2006). This partiality underscores why empathy alone cannot serve as a moral compass. Without universal principles, it risks being redirected by ideological or identity-based filters.

2. Moral Philosophy: Universalism Versus Relativism
The Enlightenment tradition sought to discipline empathy by grounding it in universals. Kant's categorical imperative demanded that moral action be judged according to maxims that could be willed as universal law (Kant, 1998/1785). For Spinoza, in the *Ethics,* all beings are modes of the same Nature, bound by necessary laws; perception may distort reality, but it cannot abolish its structure (Spinoza, 2002/1677). Rawls, in the same vein, later echoed this commitment by proposing that principles of justice are those chosen under a "veil of ignorance," where individual identity and interests are bracketed (Rawls, 1971). Equally emblematic was the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,* which proclaimed liberty, equality, and dignity as inherent rights binding on all, rather than culturally contingent values (France. National Assembly, n.d.).

To this genealogy, Friedrich Nietzsche adds an important dimension. Rejecting transcendent universals and metaphysical absolutes, he reads becoming through *will to power*: an immanent dynamic of force-relations, contestation, and recurrent reconfiguration (Nietzsche, 2002/1886). This is not a moral universal, but an account of how life displays regularities without appeal to transcendence,

thereby denying arbitrariness. What appears chaotic is patterned by the interplay of forces—colliding, recurring, and reorganizing in shifting configurations—without immutable laws. In this sense, Nietzsche converges with Spinoza in rejecting both transcendental dogma and moral relativism. Both affirm necessity and structure without appealing to divine or cultural absolutes, even though their metaphysical frameworks diverge (Nietzsche, 2002/1886; Spinoza, 2002/1677).

By contrast, some postmodern and deconstructionist approaches question the very status of universals. Foucault emphasized the contingency of "regimes of truth," while Derrida underscored the instability of meaning (Foucault, 1980; Derrida, 1976/1967). In these frameworks, universals are often recast as discursive constructs, and morality becomes plural and a matter of perspective (Lyotard, 1984/1979; Deleuze, 1994/1968; Baudrillard, 1994/1981). While such critiques illuminate the exclusions historically embedded in appeals to universality, they also risk eroding the possibility of a shared moral ground—precisely the ground needed to check partiality and to discipline empathy.

3. French Theory and the Temptation of Illiberal Revolutions

The impact of these ideas was amplified by their transatlantic migration. While Foucault and Derrida's critiques were situated within a specific European context, their diffusion into American universities during the 1970s and 1980s—popularized as *French Theory*—reshaped U.S. academia (Cusset, 2008). What were originally subtle critiques of universality and power were sometimes simplified into a worldview where truth was recast as narrative, morality as perspective, and universality as exclusionary (Cusset, 2008).

The paradox became particularly visible in the Western reception of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Several French intellectuals, most notably Michel Foucault, romanticized

the uprising as an authentic expression of spiritual resistance to Western modernity (Afary & Anderson, 2005). Yet the regime that emerged contradicted principles of secularism, women's rights, and individual liberty that the Enlightenment and human rights discourse had sought to uphold (Afary & Anderson, 2005).

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4. Orientalism and the Logic of Essentialized Identities

As Edward Said argued, "Orientalism" is not merely a set of descriptions but a *regime of representation* that encodes power into perception (Said, 1978). According to Said, Western intellectual traditions often projected simplified, symbolic identities onto the "East," portraying it as an object of fascination, victimhood, or moral purity, while simultaneously coding the West as inherently dominant or oppressive. While Said's critique targeted imperial representations, its later appropriation in postcolonial and progressive discourse often reproduced the same essentialism in reverse: the non-West was cast as perpetually virtuous and wronged, while Western democracies were positioned as oppressive in essence.[1]

5. The "New Proletariat"

A further dimension of this genealogy is the shift from economic class struggle to identity-based struggle. Where once the "oppressed" were defined primarily by socio-economic status, they are now defined by race, ethnicity, and

post-colonial position. This transformation was strategic. In much of the West, the traditional working-class base of the left—historically the backbone of socialist and progressive politics—has drifted toward nationalist and even far-right movements, attracted by appeals to sovereignty, cultural preservation, and resistance to globalization. Deprived of this constituency, progressive movements sought a new "proletariat" in racial minorities, immigrant communities, and post-colonial populations, recasting them as the symbolic victims of systemic injustice.

Barbara Oakley's notion of "pathological altruism" adds another dimension: compassion detached from discernment can lead to policies that harm both self and others (Oakley et al., 2012). It marks the point where empathy ceases to be prosocial and becomes self-destructive. Gad Saad extends this to "suicidal empathy," whereby moral instincts, unmoored from universals, undermine survival itself (Saad, 2020).

In this symbolic reframing, Jews—despite centuries of persecution culminating in the Holocaust—were increasingly recoded as "white," "colonial," or "bourgeois." This erasure of historical trauma and cultural diversity was necessary to maintain the dichotomy between "oppressed" and "oppressor." Jewish vulnerability, both past and present, was minimized or denied, while antisemitism itself was often reframed as a form of "anti-colonial resistance." By contrast, Muslim immigrants, racial minorities, and post-colonial groups were elevated to the role of the new proletariat: bearers of systemic victimhood whose suffering was assumed to confer moral immunity.

This reconfiguration has profound consequences. It replaces universal principles of justice with a form of moral essentialism in which identity, rather than conduct, determines moral worth. As Laurent Bouvet observed in his analysis of cultural insecurity, the collapse of

universalism into group-based claims fragments the moral order and erodes the possibility of impartial standards (Bouvet, 2015).

This process is also driven by a powerful dynamic of "competitive victimhood," where moral legitimacy is treated as a zero-sum game. For one group to be elevated as the ultimate symbol of oppression, the historical and present-day victimhood of competing groups, such as Jews, must be minimized, erased, or delegitimized (Chaumont, 1997; Taguieff, 2002).

6. Psychological Mechanisms of Distorted Empathy

Beyond ideology, psychological mechanisms deepen the vulnerability of empathy to distortion. Trauma bonding, first theorized in the study of abusive relationships, describes the paradoxical attachment of victims to their aggressors, a psychological attempt to regain coherence or control (Dutton & Painter, 1993). On a societal scale, this mechanism can manifest as solidarity with violent actors framed as liberation movements, even when their methods violate fundamental rights.

Similarly, Anna Freud's concept of "identification with the aggressor" describes how individuals or groups internalize the worldview of those who wield power over them (Freud, 1992/1936). In postcolonial Western discourse, this mechanism often manifests as a compulsive need to adopt the narrative of the perceived "subaltern," even when that narrative entails hostility toward liberal-democratic norms. The result is not genuine solidarity, but submission disguised as empathy. This dynamic is powerfully captured in *Soumission* (Houellebecq, 2015), where the Western intellectual elite gradually embraces an authoritarian ideology—not through coercion, but through resignation, moral fatigue, and the psychological comfort of surrender.

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2012). It marks the point where empathy ceases to be prosocial and becomes self-destructive. Gad Saad extends this to "suicidal empathy," whereby moral instincts, unmoored from universals, undermine survival itself (Saad, 2020). He illustrates this through the uncritical embrace of mass immigration policies—framed as humanitarian imperatives—yet blind to long-term effects such as cultural fragmentation or the importation of illiberal norms and ideologies.

7. Performative Morality and Virtue Signaling

The ideological and psychological distortions of empathy are amplified by the performative nature of modern public discourse. As Pierre Bourdieu theorized, public discourse often functions as a field of symbolic capital, where recognition and prestige are distributed according to visible alignment with dominant moral norms (Bourdieu, 1991). Building on Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital, recent empirical research demonstrates how this mechanism operates in the form of moral grandstanding—a status-seeking expression of virtue signaling in which individuals use moral discourse to enhance their standing within a group (Grubbs et al., 2019). Social media amplifies this dynamic: outrage is rewarded, nuance penalized, and empathy reduced to symbolic capital rather than universal principle.

This dynamic echoes Max Weber's distinction between the "ethic of conviction" (acting from principle regardless of consequences) and the "ethic of responsibility" (acting with awareness of consequences) (Weber, 2004/1919). Extreme progressivism, in its theatrical forms, often sacrifices both: conviction is reduced to rhetorical purity, and responsibility to performative alignment. Kantian duty is abandoned in favor of appearances. In such an environment, empathy becomes a token of group identity.

Conclusion of Framework

Empathy is universal in potential yet selective in practice. Enlightenment universalism sought to discipline it through shared principles; postmodernism destabilized universals; identity politics has reallocated moral worth along symbolic lines. Reinforced by psychological reflexes and performative incentives, these shifts created the conditions in which empathy itself could be weaponized—legitimizing some violence while excusing others.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how empathy was framed, distorted, and selectively allocated in segments of progressive Western discourse following the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023. CDA, as developed by Fairclough and van Dijk, provides analytical tools to uncover how language reflects and reproduces power relations, ideological assumptions, and moral framings (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2008). This approach is particularly suited for examining the convergence of psychological mechanisms, philosophical concepts, and political narratives in the cognitive domain of national security.

Research Design

The research design is interpretive and exploratory rather than experimental. The goal was not to measure causal variables statistically but to map recurring discursive patterns. The analysis combined three dimensions:

- **Philosophical** – how relativist and postcolonial frameworks undermine universality.
- **Psychological** – how mechanisms such as trauma bonding, identification with the aggressor, and pathological altruism reinforce ideological framings (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Freud, 1992/1936; Oakley et al., 2012; Saad, 2020).

- **Strategic** – how selective empathy impacts Israel's legitimacy and the resilience of liberal democracies in information warfare.

Corpus

The corpus comprises approximately forty texts produced between October 7, 2023, and March 2024—a period of intense public debate encompassing two distinct yet connected phases. The first captures the immediate reactions, in which some actors openly justified or romanticized the massacre itself, with little or no recognition of Israeli civilians as victims. The second covers the subsequent reframing, during which attention shifted almost entirely to Israel's response and the original atrocity was morally displaced or erased.

The corpus includes academic essays, activist manifestos, and media interventions in English and French, drawn from mainstream outlets, academic blogs, activist organizations' websites, and major social media platforms. Selection emphasized influence and paradigmatic value rather than statistical frequency, consistent with CDA's qualitative orientation. Three criteria guided inclusion: (1) Authority—authors or institutions with recognized influence in shaping discourse (e.g., Judith Butler; Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups); (2) Visibility—texts achieving wide circulation or citation (e.g., Raz Segal's *"textbook case of genocide"* article); (3) Representativeness—clear exemplification of one of the core discursive patterns (e.g., the BLM Chicago paraglider graphic as performative solidarity).

Influence was measured not by outcomes but by a text's capacity to serve as an influential model within the broader discursive inversion.

Analytical Strategy

Coding proceeded iteratively. A pilot analysis of 10 texts was first conducted to refine categories and indicators before applying them to the full corpus. The final coding scheme included four recurring categories: (i) reframing perpetrators as anti-colonial or "armed resistance" actors; (ii) delegitimizing victims through "settler"/ complicity coding; (iii) performative declarations of solidarity; and (iv) framing Israel's military response as "genocide." For each category, specific linguistic and rhetorical markers were identified in advance (e.g. labels such as "settler," "resistance," "genocide," or binary slogans). These markers served as a coding guide, ensuring that interpretations remained consistent across texts and preventing ad hoc shifts in judgment.

Operationalization of the Framework

The framework was operationalized by integrating Fairclough's triadic model: (i) micro-level textual features (lexicon, modality, transitivity); (ii) discursive practices (production, circulation, uptake across activist, academic, and media arenas); and (iii) macro-level social practices (postcolonial and identity-based moral frameworks). In line with van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, attention is paid to the mental models and social representations that guide selective empathy (e.g., moral categorization of "oppressed/oppressor"), thereby linking linguistic choices to shared ideological schemas.

Ethical Considerations

All sources analyzed were public texts. Identifying details of individual authors are anonymized where necessary to protect privacy while preserving the integrity of the discourse analysis.

Limitations

As with all qualitative approaches, the findings are interpretive rather than statistical and do not claim exhaustiveness. The relatively small corpus cannot represent all discourses produced after October 7. However, CDA allows individual texts to be linked to broader ideological and cultural trends, providing insight into recurring mechanisms of selective empathy and their implications for national security.

While the study did not employ formal intercoder reliability testing—a method more common to quantitative content analysis—, its qualitative rigor was ensured through alternative measures, including predefined coding categories, linguistic markers, and iterative consistency checks. This approach mitigated subjectivity and strengthened confidence that the findings reflect recurring structural mechanisms rather than isolated interpretations.

Findings: October 7 and the Discursive Inversion of Empathy

The Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023, constitutes a moral watershed in contemporary conflict. From the perspective of universal ethics, the atrocity should have elicited unequivocal condemnation. Yet, in segments of Western progressive discourse, the attack was not narrated as a crime against humanity but reframed as a symptom of colonial oppression and resistance.

To enhance the empirical clarity of the study, the analysis below provides representative examples drawn from forty texts. These examples are not an exhaustive catalogue but illustrative cases that reveal how a common discursive logic appeared across different arenas of public discourse. This section applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to highlight recurring discursive patterns, culminating in the most significant move: the framing of Israel's military response as genocide.

1. Reframing Terrorism as Resistance

A recurrent discursive pattern was the reframing of the October 7 massacres as resistance. Prominent intellectuals, such as Judith Butler (Bherer, 2024), explicitly described the massacre as an "act of armed resistance," rejecting its classification as terrorism or antisemitism and situating it within a broader struggle against colonial domination. This rhetorical shift displaces agency from perpetrators toward historical structures, recoding intentional mass violence as a structurally determined response.

2. Delegitimizing Victims through Complicity and "Settler" Coding

Another common strategy involved stripping Israeli victims of civilian status by portraying them as complicit in systemic injustice. A statement issued by Palestine solidarity groups at Harvard on October 9, 2023, declared Israel "entirely responsible for all unfolding violence" (Hill & Orakwue, 2023), thereby erasing the distinction between civilians murdered on October 7 and state institutions. Such rhetorical moves collapse the civilian/combatant boundary and delegitimize empathy toward victims.

3. Performative Solidarity and Virtue Signaling

A third pattern emphasized solidarity as ritual performance. On October 11, 2023, the Chicago branch of Black Lives Matter published (and later deleted) a graphic depicting a paraglider with a Palestinian flag—an explicit reference to the October 7 method of attack—circulated as a symbol of support (Center of Extremism, 2023). Online, pre-packaged graphics and binary slogans such as "Silence is violence" spread within hours of the massacre. In such cases, empathy functioned as symbolic capital to signal group belonging.

4. Framing Israel's Response as Genocide

The most significant discursive move was the immediate framing of Israel's military response as "genocide." On October 13, 2023, Holocaust and Genocide Studies scholar Raz Segal described the events as a "textbook case of genocide" (Segal, 2023), a formulation that quickly circulated through activist and academic networks. The term "genocide," used as a maximalist framing device, stripped Israel of any claim to self-defense and completed the inversion in which the October 7 atrocities vanished from the frame while Israel alone was positioned as the ultimate perpetrator.

Discussion

The findings above identified the dominant discursive patterns; this Discussion interprets their broader significance. It shows how language, memory, and affects converge to erode universal moral standards and how these dynamics are strategically exploited within the field of cognitive warfare.

1. Analytical Mechanisms: Language as Identity and Memory as a Weapon

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, linguistic choices themselves reveal the moral architecture of a discourse. Terms such as "genocide" or "resistance" function as identity markers, signaling moral alignment within a polarized field and transforming language into a vector of belonging. This mechanism contributes to what discourse theorists describe as the construction of a *collective ethos*—a shared discursive identity uniting speakers through common values and emotional orientations (Amossy, 2010). In the progressive field examined here, this ethos assumes the moralized form of a "community of the righteous," in which moral credibility rests not on factual accuracy but on affective conformity. Through this process, empathy ceases to be a universal moral faculty and becomes a marker of group legitimacy.

The rhetorical move to frame Israel's response as "genocide" is the ultimate example of this mechanism, and it did not emerge in isolation. Long before October 7, the accusation of "genocide against the Palestinians" had functioned as a recurring motif in anti-Zionist discourse, operating in tandem with the trope of Israel's *nazification* (Taguieff, 2002; Wistrich, 2012). Both draw upon the symbolic reversal of the Holocaust: the descendants of its victims are cast as their moral heirs-turned-perpetrators, while Palestinians are positioned as the "new Jews." This dynamic exemplifies what Chaumont (1997) calls *competitive victimhood,* in which moral legitimacy depends on occupying the highest rank in the hierarchy of suffering. It is a powerful illustration of what historian Henry Rousso (1990) identified as a "syndrome" of memory—a "past that will not pass" (*un passé qui ne passe pas*) which ceases to be history and becomes an obsessive and infinitely malleable, moral script for the present.

By conflating Israel with Nazism and Gaza with a concentration camp, the rhetoric transforms moral outrage into a performative identity statement—an act of belonging within this "community of the righteous" defined by its opposition to Israel.

2. The Erosion of Universal Standards

From the Enlightenment to the post–World War II human rights regime, dignity, liberty, and equality were framed as universal and non-negotiable. Yet after October 7, rights and empathy were redistributed along identity lines: perpetrators coded as "oppressed" were granted legitimacy, while victims labeled "colonial" were stripped of theirs. This inversion undermines the very premise of human rights: if dignity depends on identity, it is no longer universal but contingent.

Such asymmetry is not new. After the September 11 attacks, some commentators rationalized Al Qaeda's terrorism as "blowback" against U.S. imperialism. In the 1970s, segments of the European radical left romanticized groups such as the Red Brigades or the Red Army Faction (RAF) as authentic expressions of revolutionary struggle, minimizing their violence against civilians. Following the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks in France, a similar pattern appeared within certain activist and intellectual circles: jihadist violence was contextualized as the product of marginalization, while victims were at times dismissed as complicit in "provocation." In each case, the targeting of civilians was reframed as structurally determined rather than morally accountable, and empathy was redistributed according to identity-based categories rather than conduct. Violence was excused when committed by actors cast as oppressed, while democratic states

were held to standards so absolute that their own suffering was delegitimized.

This dynamic finds its contemporary political expression in what some analysts call the "Red-Green alliance," where certain far-left (Red) and Islamist (Green) movements converge around a shared anti-imperialist and anti-Western narrative. A key manifestation of this alliance is the "Palestinization" of a segment of progressive identity, where the Palestinian cause is elevated from a political issue to the primary marker of moral and political belonging. This centrality, which often recodes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the symbolic epicenter of all global injustices, helps explain why solidarity can become a pre-packaged identity ritual rather than a nuanced response to specific events (Taguieff, 2002).

3. Israel as a Paradigm: Implications for Liberal Democracies

For Israel, the weaponization of empathy constitutes a direct strategic liability. October 7 was reframed by some actors as colonial resistance, undermining Israel's legitimacy and recasting its self-defense as aggression. Delegitimization campaigns by hostile states and transnational movements exploit this discursive environment, leveraging progressive guilt and solidarity with the "oppressed" while erasing universal principles that would otherwise condemn terrorism.

This dynamic demonstrates how empathy itself becomes a weapon in information warfare. By inverting roles of victims and perpetrators, hostile narratives manipulate Western audiences, influence policy debates, and weaken Israel's ability to sustain international support. October 7 was thus not only a physical assault but also a discursive attack on Israel's legitimacy.

This vulnerability, however, is not unique to Israel. Other democracies face similar risks when adversaries exploit narratives of victimhood. The 9/11 attacks, European jihadist terrorism, and Cold War–era justifications of left-wing extremism all illustrate the same mechanism:

violence reframed as resistance, empathy redistributed along identity lines.

The collapse of universality produces a broader loss of moral clarity. Democracies that excuse violence as resistance undermine both domestic resilience and international credibility. Externally, disinformation thrives when political and intellectual elites embrace relativism. Internally, double standards erode trust in institutions, fuel disillusionment among citizens, and weaken cohesion.

October 7 was reframed by some actors as colonial resistance, undermining Israel's legitimacy and recasting its self-defense as aggression

Israel thus represents both a unique and paradigmatic case. Its circumstances are singular, yet the dynamics observed—delegitimization of victims, normalization of violence, and moral double standards—recur across democracies. Israel is therefore not only defending its own legitimacy but also serving as a test case for whether universalism can survive as the foundation of democratic order.

4. Cognitive Security as the New Battlespace

This entire process is a textbook example of cognitive warfare. Cognitive warfare refers to the deliberate targeting of perception, judgment, and emotion as operational domains. Unlike classical propaganda, it exploits pre-existing beliefs and moral reflexes rather than fabricating falsehoods. The objective is to shape collective meaning itself — to make certain interpretations socially and morally dominant. In this sense, the manipulation of empathy becomes a strategic instrument: it shifts moral perception before facts are even debated, pre-empting rational deliberation.

The weaponization of empathy does not operate through conventional disinformation, but through a far more sophisticated exploitation

of a society's pre-existing ideological vulnerabilities. Hostile actors understand that they do not need to systematically invent falsehoods when they can amplify and accelerate a genuine collapse of universal and shared principles from within.

This strategy is not limited to manipulating Western discourse. A parallel can be seen in the documented influencer operations conducted by the Iranian regime, which have targeted the Israeli public on social media in recent years with the goal of deepening internal divisions and sowing societal chaos. By amplifying polarizing content related to political debates, judicial reforms, or religious-secular tensions, these campaigns aimed to erode national resilience from the inside.

Whether by exploiting postcolonial guilt in Western academia or political friction within Israel, the underlying strategic goal is identical: to erode social cohesion, paralyze political will, and dismantle the normative foundations of democratic legitimacy. This aligns with doctrines of hybrid warfare where the goal is to manipulate an adversary into voluntarily making self-defeating decisions. Consequently, defending against this multifaceted threat requires a robust national cognitive security strategy aimed at reinforcing the shared values that serve as a society's immune system against such narrative attacks.

Policy Recommendations: Communication Strategy Grounded in Universal Values

The findings of this study reveal that selective empathy, when detached from universal principles, is a strategic liability. Israel and other democracies confronted with narrative warfare must therefore adopt communication strategies that both defend legitimacy and proactively reaffirm universality. These strategies should operate along three complementary axes: offensive communication, defensive communication, and strategic framing.

1. Offensive Communication: Anchoring Israel in Universal Democratic Values

Selective empathy corrodes legitimacy when moral claims are framed in identity-based terms. Findings suggest that democracies, and Israel in particular, should consistently present themselves as part of the liberal-democratic family, grounded in shared principles such as liberty, equality, and the rule of law.

- **Democratic Norms as Strategic Anchors:** Political speeches, media engagements, and diplomatic outreach should explicitly highlight Israel's adherence to democratic values such as judicial independence, civil rights protections, and minority representation. A state's legitimacy and influence are significantly enhanced when its values are perceived as attractive and aligned with universal norms, a core component of "soft power" (Nye, 2004).

- **Providing Concrete Evidence of Universalism in Practice:** Abstract appeals to democracy gain strength when supported by tangible examples—for instance, humanitarian aid operations, Supreme Court rulings protecting minority rights, or contributions to global health and technology. Evidence-based communication strengthens credibility and reduces perceptions of propaganda.

- **Positioning Israel as a Contributor to Global Goods:** Innovations in medicine, disaster relief, and environmental management should be framed as contributions to humanity. This framing aligns with theories of "public diplomacy as global public goods provision," which argue that states enhance legitimacy by emphasizing their positive-sum contributions to shared challenges (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008).

- **Narrative Framing Grounded in Universality:** Communication strategies should stress that selective empathy betrays progressive values themselves by excusing violence and eroding universal human rights. By framing Israel's

struggle as part of the broader defense of liberal democracy, offensive communication situates national security within a compelling strategic narrative designed to shape the normative global order (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

- **Build Alliances with Alternative Progressive Voices and Amplify Counter-Narratives:** Strategic communication should actively identify, engage, and amplify the voices of those within progressive circles who continue to uphold universal values. Such an alternative critique from within is a potent tool for fracturing the dominant hostile narrative and exposing its intellectual and moral incoherences, thereby seizing the initiative in the normative debate.

2. Defensive Communication: Countering Distortions and Selective Empathy

Distorted narratives thrive when left unchallenged. The findings indicate that democracies must develop rapid, technologically sophisticated, and consistent responses to disinformation and discursive inversions.

- **AI-Powered Semantic Monitoring and Rapid Response:** Defensive communication can be significantly enhanced through AI-driven semantic monitoring systems. Moving beyond simple keyword detection, these platforms are able to identify, at scale, discursive patterns such as delegitimization of victims or narrative inversion. By analyzing millions of social media posts across multiple languages, they enable the early detection of hostile campaigns before they reach critical mass, thus opening a crucial window for timely intervention. The primary challenge is to preserve credibility and avoid perceptions of state propaganda. To mitigate this risk, outputs should prioritize factual accuracy and transparency, relying heavily on verifiable open-source intelligence and independent validation.

- **Consistency in Condemnation**: Credibility ultimately depends on applying the same ethical standard to all violence. Condemning violence consistently—regardless of perpetrator identity—reinforces Israel's claim to universality and preempts accusations of hypocrisy. A publicly available ethical baseline could serve as a reference point across official communications.

Communication strategies should stress that selective empathy betrays progressive values themselves by excusing violence and eroding universal human rights

- **Engaging Independent Validators**: Independent academics, legal experts, and humanitarian professionals can provide authoritative contextualization. Their credibility is particularly important when addressing skeptical audiences. Democracies should therefore invest in structured frameworks that facilitate rapid engagement with such validators, while ensuring their independence and transparency.

- **Highlighting Systemic Risks**: Finally, communications should stress that selective empathy does not only harm Israel but also undermines the universality of human rights and the resilience of liberal democracies more broadly. Comparative references to other democratic contexts (e.g., EU or US cases) can demonstrate that selective empathy erodes moral clarity universally, rather than only in relation to Israel.

3. Strategic Framing: Linking Israel's Struggle to the Liberal-Democratic Order

Israel's delegitimization should not be treated as an isolated case but as part of a broader erosion of universal values. Strategic communication must therefore emphasize the shared stakes for all democracies.

- **Drawing parallels with other democracies**: By highlighting similarities between Israel's security challenges and those faced in Europe or North America (Islamist terrorism,

disinformation, radicalization), Israel's legitimacy can be framed as inseparable from the survival of democratic norms.

- **Reaching progressive audiences on their own terms**: Progressive values such as equality and dignity can serve as bridges. Communication should stress that selective empathy betrays these values by excusing violence and eroding universality. This approach requires careful navigation, as it risks being dismissed as cynical appropriation if not executed with genuine intellectual honesty and a willingness to differentiate legitimate policy critique from outright delegitimization.

- **Differentiating critique from delegitimization**: Recognizing legitimate criticism of Israeli policies while firmly rejecting challenges to Israel's right to exist and to self-determination strengthens intellectual honesty and credibility.

Conclusion

The weaponization of empathy is a core vulnerability for democracies in the cognitive battlespace. The policy recommendations outlined above—grounding offensive communication in universal values, deploying technologically advanced defensive measures, and strategically framing Israel's struggle within the broader liberal-democratic order—are designed to address this challenge directly. They seek to reclaim empathy as a universal resource, disciplined by truth and moral clarity.

The hijacking of this fundamental human instinct reveals a profound strategic crisis. When morality collapses into partiality, it erodes international legitimacy, constrains freedom of action, and leaves societies exposed to disinformation and illiberalism. For Israel, the stakes are immediate, but the challenge is universal.

This study argues that reclaiming empathy requires both normative clarity and technological adaptation. AI-driven monitoring can detect hostile narratives early, while structured engagement with independent validators can embed universality in practice and strengthen cognitive resilience. From a research perspective, further empirical work could test how communication strategies centered on universal anchors reduce tolerance for narratives that justify violence.

Ultimately, the implication for policymakers in Israel and across the democratic world is clear: cognitive resilience must be treated as a strategic asset, as essential as deterrence or technological superiority. The task is to reaffirm universal values, and to do so with a humility that acknowledges their past failures. A viable universalism for the twenty-first century cannot be a Western inheritance to be imposed; it must emerge as a point of convergence for human reason. The central normative ambition must not resurrect a Eurocentric moral authority, but should reconstruct a minimal shared ground of prohibition that no actor may relativize through identity, grievance, or historical alibi. Without such a baseline, the cognitive field remains vulnerable to those who instrumentalize moral ambiguity for strategic effect.

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Notes

1   This critique concerns subsequent appropriations of postcolonial discourse, rather than Said's original argument

Growing Tensions amid Dialogue: China-United States Relations in the Biden Era

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Relations between China and the United States during the four years of the Joe Biden administration were characterized by constant efforts to prevent escalation and by American adoption of the "Chinese approach," which maintains that discussion of contentious issues should be minimized, while instead focusing on areas where cooperation is possible. These efforts succeeded in preventing significant crises in relations, the biggest of which was the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan and the shooting down of the Chinese espionage balloon in US airspace, from escalating to direct super-power or regional clashes. Moreover, these crises drove the emergence of a mechanism of strategic coordination and a series of high-level meetings. This paper analyzes the issues that comprised the core of relations during these four years and examines how, despite growing tensions in each case, the superpowers managed to avoid confrontations that would undoubtedly have had huge impacts on the entire world.

Key words: China, United States, President Biden, President Xi, strategic mechanism, regional disputes, superpower rivalry, diplomatic crises, diplomacy

Introduction

China presents the most important foreign policy challenge for the United States, and it has many facets, among them, diplomatic, economic, and military. Contrary to almost every other issue, it appears that both Republicans and Democrats in the United States view China as a challenge to the undisputed international standing of the U.S. since the end of World War II. The U.S., therefore, invests copious resources in its efforts to achieve an advantage over China in a range of areas, while simultaneously pursuing cooperation with it.

The first Donald Trump presidency is remembered mainly for his trade war with China, leading to incidents of low-intensity friction with the second-largest power on the planet. Thus, at the end of Trump's first presidency in 2020, relations were at a low ebb.

The tension between the two superpowers did not ease when Biden was sworn in as US President, nor during his term, although he was considered less hawkish than his predecessor. In addition, during the four years of the Biden Administration, there were substantial crises in

relations, although the relations nevertheless remained stable, and escalation and loss of control were avoided. The question arises: How, despite numerous significant crises, did the two powers maintain functioning relations, and what methods were used to manage the disputes between them and with their respective allies.

China and the United States have different approaches to managing disputes, which are underpinned by opposing interests and different core values. China prefers to manage disputes and tensions rather than solve them (Evron, 2015), with the stability of allied regimes at the top of its list of priorities, as this approach helps it to continue profiting from relations with them (Sun & Zoubir, 2017). Sometimes China tries to influence the situation via multilateral forums such as the UN, while exploiting the platform to criticize American failures (Evron, 2015). China's tactics were well summarized by Wang Peng, President of the Chinese University for Foreign Affairs, which is subordinate to the Foreign Ministry, when he said that "Sharing in both prosperity and sorrow creates a sense of brotherhood of interests […] It rises above the mentality of a zero-sum game of traditional geopolitics; a search for common ground while deflecting disputes" (Kewalramani, 2025).

The American approach to handling crises is very different from the Chinese approach. The United States attempts to resolve disputes and work towards sustainable agreements. It also often appoints a special envoy to a region to address crises directly. The American approach encourages the parties to sign peace treaties, and the American mechanism encourages direct dialogue at various levels on matters under dispute (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

Despite the crises between China and the United States during the Biden administration, the two countries developed a mechanism of consultation and dialogue that operated above and below the surface, even when mistrust between them was very high. The purpose was to avoid escalation. In order to examine the mechanisms used by the superpowers to minimize tensions, this paper analyzes the content of official statements published after meetings between the parties throughout the Biden Administration period, as well as the issues discussed at those meetings and their frequency, to identify ideological trends and rhetorical patterns. This method of analysis helps us not only understand the frequency with which various matters were discussed but also to assess their importance in the web of inter-power relations, and the way in which Chinese and American policies were formulated and revised over the four years, to understand the contexts in which tension-reducing mechanisms were employed.

Both superpowers used relatively conciliatory rhetoric towards one another, enabling them to lower the flames and create an image of normality even in times of tension.

The analysis of these sources revealed that both superpowers used relatively conciliatory rhetoric towards one another, enabling them to lower the flames and create an image of normality even in times of tension. Some will say that the United States adopted the Chinese approach, which seeks shared opportunities, pursues joint gains (win-win), and disregards problems, rather than the American tendency to pursue direct dialogue on matters of contention. Adopting this approach enabled them to overcome crises with relative success. This paper examines why the superpowers chose the Chinese method of crisis management, and when and how this approach was evident in the course of the Biden Administration.

Areas of Friction and Responses

The beginning of Biden's presidency was characterized by a series of incidents between the United States and China and by efforts to create mechanisms to prevent further deterioration in relations until a measure of calm

was achieved. The frictions that shaped those four years included the visit by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan, the Chinese espionage balloon that was discovered floating above the United States, and critical global crises such as the war between Russia and Ukraine, and between Israel and Hamas. All these crises took place in the shadow of an end to the coordination between the superpowers in various aspects in the first half of the Biden presidency.

The tension between China and the United States at the beginning of Biden's tenure was particularly noticeable when senior officials from both governments met in Alaska in March 2021, some two months after the new administration entered the White House, for three marathon rounds of talks that lasted two days. As evidence of the talks' importance, both sides sent senior representatives: China sent Foreign Minister Yang Jie-Chi, and the US sent Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan (BBC News, 2021a).

Notwithstanding the good will, the talks were rather acrimonious. On the first day, the Chinese delegates accused the American delegates of "arrogance and hypocrisy" (Jakes & Myers, 2021), while the Americans accused the Chinese of "an attack on basic values" (CNA, 2021). The summit ended after two days, without the conventional joint statement, but after both sides had expressed their concerns and positions on the issues central to them: China on interference in its domestic affairs, the "One China principle", sanctions and Cold War mentality; and the United States on Taiwan, human rights, espionage and Chinese military actions against US allies. Although this meeting could have set a combative tone for relations between the superpowers under the new administration, in effect, the foundations were laid for a consultation system. This was only the first, albeit unpleasant, step towards the establishment of tension reduction mechanisms that lasted throughout Biden's term.

In the following months, relations continued to deteriorate gradually, while the US made several moves that China perceived as challenging and adversarial: In June 2021, some two months after the tense Alaska summit, Biden encouraged the leaders of NATO and the G7 who were meeting in Britain, to condemn China on human rights infringements that US delegates had raised at the meeting in March but were dismissed by their Chinese counterparts (Collinson, 2021). China responded angrily to Biden's actions, and its embassy in the UK published a statement that "the G7 group of nations is exploiting issues relating to Xinjiang in order to engage in political manipulation" (AFP, 2021). Three months later, the AUKUS alliance was formed by Australia, Britain, and the United States. Its declared purpose was "to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific that is also safe and stable," but apart from cooperation among its member states on various matters, including the development of weapons systems, most of the media coverage on the subject dealt with the fact that Australia intended to purchase nuclear submarines. China viewed this development as dangerous and opposed it (BBC News, 2021b). The American invitation of Taiwan to participate in the democracy summit (Pamuk, 2021) and the Pacific Rim exercise, the world's largest marine military exercise, run by the American Navy (Everington, 2021), also soured relations between the US and China.

China did not remain indifferent to these steps and adopted countermeasures to express its displeasure with what it perceived as American aggression and escalation of tensions. After the Pacific Rim exercise, China stepped up its military activity in the Indo-Pacific region and conducted the first joint patrol with the Russian Navy in the Japan Sea (Xuanzun & Yuandan, 2023), at a time when "Western countries are building hostile regional security organizations such as the Quad and AUKUS" (Xuanzun & Yuandan, 2021). Additionally, China tightened its export restrictions and worked on improving its global position by accelerating

Chinese technological development. The Chinese government set itself an ambitious target of increasing its R&D funding by over seven percent each year from 2021 to 2025, in order to reinforce its status on innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and quantum computing (Yao, 2021). In February 2022, a few days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia announced that their relationship was to be framed as a partnership without borders, condemned the AUKUS alliance, called for an end to NATO expansion, and expressed shared concerns over the American plan to deploy missile defense systems in various parts of the world (Reuters, 2022).

The increasing tensions between the superpowers following the establishment of AUKUS and the Pacific Rim exercise were dwarfed by two crises, the first in July 2022 and the second in February 2023, which confirmed each party's worst fears.

China, which is wary of American interference in what it perceives as its internal affairs, particularly the Taiwan issue, woke up in July 2022 to an announcement by Member of Congress Nancy Pelosi, at that time Speaker of the US House of Representatives, of her intention to visit Taiwan as part of a tour of several countries in East Asia. The Chinese government tried to pressure and threaten to have the visit canceled. Some in the American administration even joined in to pressure Pelosi, indicating an attempt to reduce the level of tensions, but to no avail. The visit took place in August of that year. It drew a barrage of complaints from the Chinese government, which took the very unusual step of cutting ties with the American administration, including military coordination on the prevention of mis-calculation (2022, Herb & Cheung), and of embarking on its biggest-ever military exercise around Taiwan (Plummer, 2022).

About six months later, it was the turn of American concerns over Chinese espionage to be realized when a Chinese balloon was observed floating over Alaska, western Canada, and the United States mainland. The balloon was shot down a week later over Southern California and sent to the FBI laboratory for examination. American fears were confirmed when it was discovered that the balloon carried data-collection equipment and even American technology (Tatlow, 2025). However, the information it collected was apparently not transmitted to China (Kube & Lee, 2024). The incident shook the administration. The former US Ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, said in an interview that "after the balloon incident […] I think that this was the most tense moment […] between the world's two strongest military powers" (WSJ, 2025). Perhaps Burns' concern was heightened by the fact that, following this event, China decided to cut off the few channels of communication between senior officials that remained intact after the Pelosi crisis.

Secretary of State Blinken tried to play down the incident in order to rescue his visit to Beijing, planned for the following week, and thereby protect the already fragile relations, but following media coverage and social media attention on the incident, he was forced to postpone the visit (Pamuk et al., 2023). Despite the potential for escalation, both sides chose to minimize the seriousness of the event and avoid stronger rhetorical or diplomatic reactions. Biden called the incident "a small breach" that was done unintentionally and was embarrassing for the Chinese government, which did not apparently intend to spy on the United States (Yousif, 2023). The weak American response, which did not reflect the administration's great concern, shows that the Americans had decided to conduct their foreign policy in an unexpected way. Instead of harsh condemnations, they opted to lower the tone and try to conduct the discussions with China behind the scenes.

At first, the Chinese also tried to minimize the incident, claiming that it was a civilian balloon engaged in research and meteorological work. Unusually, the statements coming from Beijing were almost apologetic in nature, and

the Chinese authorities even said that they "regretted the aircraft's unintentional entry into American airspace due to force majeure" (Wong & Wang, 2023). After Blinken canceled his planned visit and the United States shot down the balloon, China changed its tone. A spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused the Americans of "over-reacting" and called the interception "unacceptable and irresponsible" (Wong & Wang, 2023). However, notwithstanding the severe condemnation from the Ministry, China did not condemn the interception at the UN. The responses of both China and the United States illustrate the way in which, at this stage, the parties chose relatively conciliatory rhetoric and preferred cautious crisis management over conflict escalation.

Reducing Tensions

Despite his government's almost apologetic response to the balloon incident, Wang Yi did not expect the United States to aggravate the crisis (Magnier & Wang, 2023), with the hope that it would not irreversibly harm the countries' relations. A few months later, in mid-2023, the tone of both countries changed, and there was a real effort on both sides to improve relations and downplay the tensions by activating existing and new channels of strategic communication. This trend continued for quite some time and eventually stabilized relations between the powers.

The first meeting that took place in this context was between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, in the framework of what was later called the strategic channel. The statement published by Chinese state media after the meeting, which was intended to establish firm ground for the relations, shows the importance attached by the Chinese to the stabilization of relations and the clarification of the Chinese position on the issues of Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific, and the Russia-Ukraine war (Delaney, 2023). These topics were raised regularly during meetings between the parties.

The meetings remained within the limits of purely strategic discourse, with no substantive change in either Chinese or American policy. For both parties, the purpose of the strategic channel and the diplomatic meetings was to stabilize relations and create an appearance of calm. Both sides knew that the meetings were not intended to resolve their various disputes. The strategic channel laid the groundwork for a change in the United States' approach, as shown by the gradual adoption of the Chinese approach to conflict management, which focused on shared interests and ignored or sidelined disputes. This approach enabled both sides to respond solely through diplomatic means, without taking any actual steps or changing their policies. In certain cases, the US delegates even refrained from raising disputed issues at formal meetings, as part of an effort to maintain stability and prevent escalation. This conduct helped both sides manage tensions, stabilize relations, limit overt friction, and sideline sensitive issues.

Communication Between the Powers

Communication and discussions between the superpowers continued throughout the four years of the Biden presidency. In the first year, they were far from a top priority, but in 2022, following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and the resulting deterioration in relations, the various aspects of such communication—military, economic, and in UN forums and initiatives—, became a central subject of discussion. Although there was a great deal of talking, there was no real breakthrough in the establishment of stable mechanisms for coordination, and communication between the parties remained context-dependent. In 2024, regular contact declined in importance, although the number of discussions on military communication quadrupled, perhaps due to the tension in the South China Sea and the need to avoid escalation. That year, it became clear that the parties had chosen to manage their

disputes through dialogue rather than by taking concrete steps to reduce each other's military presence or by setting clear rules of conduct, such as patrols in the South China Sea.

As already mentioned, in order to renew their communication, China and the United States established a strategic channel of communication led by Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, and Jake Sullivan, the American National Security Advisor. The first seeds of this channel were sown at a Xi-Biden meeting in Bali, Indonesia, in November 2022 (Sevastopulo, 2024), leading to a series of important meetings between officials from the two countries at various levels of seniority.

Apart from the meetings between Wang and Sullivan, other senior diplomatic officials held meetings, some on the margins of international summits and forums such as ASEAN and the International Trade Organization, and others on the soil of one of the powers, both in the US and in China. These constituted the majority of meetings that year, although there were also a few telephone calls and video calls at various levels. The large number of meetings shows that the parties had decided to prioritize diplomatic discourse (52 meetings that year, compared to half that number in other years) to stabilize relations, even though vast disagreements remained. Such a development is desirable but certainly not inevitable, since each superpower could have chosen escalation and more forceful ways to extract concessions from the other superpower, or could simply have neglected the maintenance of relations and let them deteriorate.

The climax came when 2023 ended with a meeting between military commanders of the two countries, a meeting that had not taken place since the rift between the sides' security establishments following Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. No other concrete steps were taken to rebuild military trust. This reinforces the impression that the purpose of the meetings between senior Chinese and American officers was to establish a mechanism to ease tensions while adopting

Number of meetings between the parties by year
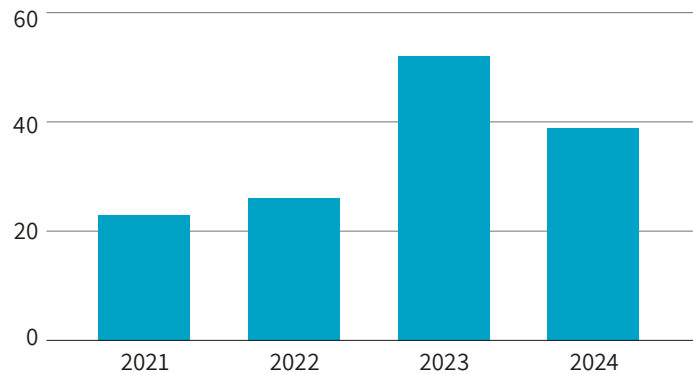
Source: Authors' data

the Chinese approach of managing disputes and sidelining friction, with an understanding that the main points of disagreement remained unchanged.

The most senior members of the administrations, Presidents Xi and Biden, met three times over these four years and spoke by telephone or video twice more. Each president has his own rhetorical style, but they strove to achieve the same goal: collaborating wherever possible, avoiding discussions of controversial matters or overly strong statements that could lead to escalation. In general, while Biden preferred to adopt a practical tone, paying direct attention to areas where the powers could cooperate, President Xi chose dialogue based on ideology. At their very first encounter Xi defined three principles and four matters that should form the basis of the relationship; at the second, he told Biden about internal social processes in China and about the history of Taiwan; at the third he spoke of modernization; at the fourth his topic was his vision for their relationship; and at the last meeting he summarized the lessons to be learned from relations between the countries.

President Xi used the final meeting to send a message to the next American administration, setting out the "four red lines" that he said "must not be challenged or crossed": the question of Taiwan, democracy and human rights, "China's system and path" (its system of

Number of mentions of regional conflicts in China-US talks, 2021-2024
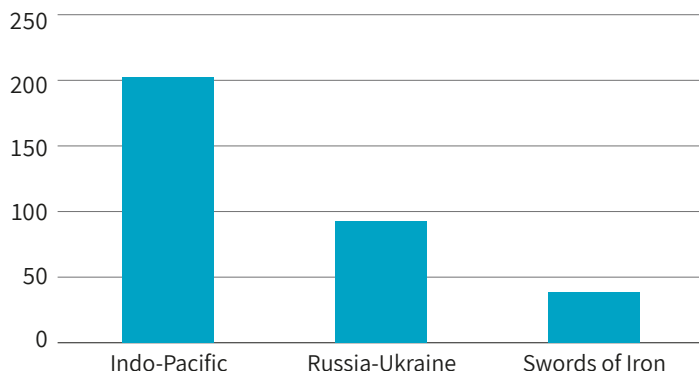
Source: Authors' data compiled from official statements issued by the US and China

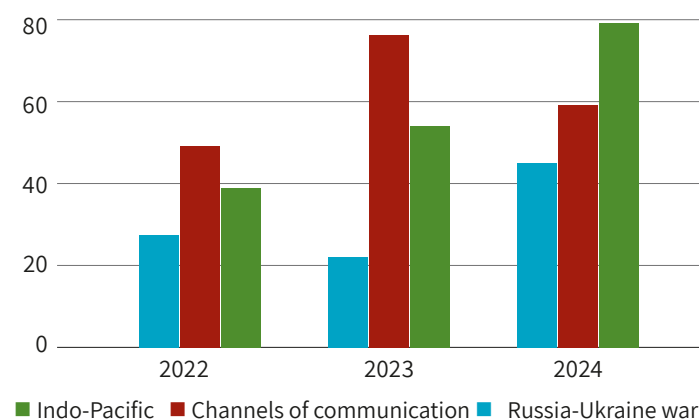## Mentions of various subjects in discussions between the powers, 2022-2024

Source: Authors' data compiled from official statements issued by the US and China

government), and China's right to development (Xinhua, 2024b). Bringing these four issues together revealed what was really worrying President Xi: American interference in matters that he perceives as internal Chinese affairs. This includes Taiwan, which for him is a rebellious Chinese province, the Chinese style of government and its attitude to opponents and ethnic minorities, or China's economic agenda and its manufacturing capabilities. Xi's red lines underscored his attempt to remain within recognized boundaries and perhaps also avoid contentious ones, such as the South China Sea. China was certainly not ready for the

United States to conduct military activity in the region. Still, Xi avoided mentioning this subject and stuck to less controversial matters, in which the status quo was not expected to change. Despite their different styles, neither president was ready to take blatant political steps, and even when the mutual statements included warnings about red lines, they remained within the limits of conciliatory discourse. Both sides were careful not to threaten concrete actions or to take substantial measures, even on subjects in dispute. This conduct reinforces the general picture: rhetorical handling of tension while avoiding actual escalation, in accordance with the Chinese approach.

Regional Conflicts

During Biden's presidency, regional conflicts were discussed roughly 400 times, accounting for 86.33 percent of all meetings. This category includes talks on Taiwan, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas war. When Russia invaded Ukraine in January 2022, the war in Europe became the focus of talks between the parties. However, in 2023, the focus of talks on regional conflicts turned to tensions in the Philippines and to the Israel-Hamas war. This trend shows the importance of both direct and implicit discourse on regional matters, while maintaining the dominance of regional disputes in which China and the United States were involved either directly or indirectly. Despite their importance, the exchange of views remained largely rhetorical. The United States adopted the Chinese approach to conflict management and refrained from accusing China of fueling tensions in these arenas, although it had increasing evidence of Chinese activities in areas of tension such as Taiwan, Ukraine, and Israel.

The Taiwan Issue

This was the only subject raised by both parties at every discussion between President Biden and President Xi, as each country firmly asserted its position and stuck to its policies. At every

meeting, China emphasized that the Taiwanese issue was crucial to relations between the superpowers and constituted a red line, the infringement of which was unacceptable. Beijing frames its attitude towards Taiwan according to the "One China principle," whereby the Chinese Communist Party is the sole legitimate government on both sides of the Strait. The U.S., however, recognizes the "One China policy," which has meaningful implications for China's claims and Taiwan's status. However, throughout the period, the United States continued to walk the tightrope and express a dual position, which, on the one hand, recognizes China as the legitimate and sole representative of both China and Taiwan, but on the other hand maintains elaborate contacts with Taiwan, including significant trade in weapons, to China's displeasure.

At the Presidents' first encounter in November 2021, which was a virtual meeting due to the Covid pandemic, the President of China accused Taiwan of seeking American support in its quest for independence, and even implicitly threatened his US counterpart when he said that American cooperation would be "very dangerous, like playing with fire, and anyone who plays with fire, gets burned" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Despite the centrality of the issue for both superpowers, neither China nor the US translated their statements into actions, and it seems that raising this subject at every meeting amounted to little more than paying lip service, with no attempt to alter the status quo. The presidents mentioned the subject, but there were no harsh mutual accusations nor expressions of interest in increasing military activity. Throughout the period, aircraft and ships of the People's Liberation Army continued to cross the halfway line in the Taiwan Strait without arousing any notable American reaction, notwithstanding strong statements and American policy that vigorously objected to increasing tensions in the Strait. It appears that the Biden administration chose to adopt

the Chinese approach, seeking to minimize its disagreements with China rather than settle them through significant diplomatic or military moves.

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The Russia-Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine War put China and the United States on opposite sides of a conflict in Europe, but once again, they chose not to escalate any disagreements with their allies. While China called again and again for "a just, lasting and binding peace agreement" in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025), and President Xi even suggested to President Biden that NATO countries should conduct a dialogue with Russia (Shala et al., 2022), behind the scenes the Chinese Foreign Minister told European leaders that China did not want to see Russia lose in Ukraine, because it feared that the United States would turn its attention to China after the war (Bermingham, 2025). Contrary to China's conciliatory public statements, the United States declared its support for Ukraine and its opposition to the Russian invasion, even attempting to form a pro-Ukraine Western coalition (Clark & DOD News, 2024). Despite their opposing positions, the countries remained committed to maintaining the cautious dialogue established before the war broke out.

Two days before the invasion, the subject was discussed in a telephone call between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Wang stressed that "all parties must act with caution and seek to resolve the crisis through dialogue." In contrast, Blinken stressed America's "unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity"

(Ng, 2022), but did not ask China to utilize its new status as Russia's "partner without borders" to halt the incursion into Ukraine.

> During those months, further evidence of Chinese aid to Russia accumulated, but the Biden administration downplayed its significance by focusing on Ukraine's rights rather than on Russian aggression and the Chinese aid that enabled Russia to operate continuously.

One month later, the two leaders conducted a virtual meeting, which showed signs of a more resolute American approach. A summary of the discussion released by the Chinese side stated that "President Biden explained the United States' position and expressed readiness to communicate with China to prevent a deterioration of the situation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). By contrast, the American announcement stated that "President Biden described the consequences for China if it supplied material support to Russia while it was carrying out brutal attacks against towns and civilians in Ukraine" (The White House, 2022a). President Biden spoke even more harshly to President Xi, but no threat materialized. The United States placed its first sanctions on Chinese companies that assisted Russia in its war in Ukraine, only at the end of 2024 (Tang, 2024b). However, despite Biden's stronger statements, this conversation reflected a dynamic of cautious dialogue, notwithstanding the significant gap between the parties. Each side stressed its position without descending into open diplomatic conflict. This rhetorical choice could be evidence of both parties' wish to avoid controversy where it was clear there could be no agreement, due to their shared interest in preventing escalation, even in the case of extreme disagreements with far-reaching consequences.

Throughout the Russia-Ukraine war, China and the United States continued this trend of managing tensions rather than seeking solutions, and their discussions of the war gradually declined. In 2023, there were fewer mentions of the war, even though the superpowers were at the height of their marathon of meetings, and the Ukraine issue remained at the heart of American foreign policy. During those months, further evidence of Chinese aid to Russia accumulated, but the Biden administration downplayed its significance by focusing on Ukraine's rights rather than on Russian aggression and the Chinese aid that enabled Russia to operate continuously (The White House, 2022b).

The dwindling references to the war and American statements indicate that both sides had adopted the Chinese approach to crisis management. China intentionally pushed the issue to the fringes of the agenda, without publicly supporting those who declared they shared a "partnership without borders," but also without condemning them. The United States, for its part, reiterated its position in a clear and determined manner but avoided direct escalation against China, even when it had information that China was aiding the Russian war effort. It also avoided an intensive debate on the issue, which would have required it to raise the issue of Chinese aid to Russia.

The Middle East and the Swords of Iron War

Another area of tension during the period under discussion was the Middle East. Although this region did not involve direct conflict between China and the United States, that does not mean there was no competition between the parties; instead, all tension was channeled via third parties, i.e., they competed indirectly. In this sense, the Middle East has been a focal point of the struggle for influence between the superpowers during Biden's presidency.

The Swords of Iron War erupted when thousands of Hamas terrorists infiltrated southern Israel, completely eroding any trust between Israel and the Palestinians. Therefore, there was little chance for a dialogue to be

mediated by China, which Israel, anyway, perceived to be biased against it. The war also quickly became another indirect platform for the diplomatic struggle between China and the United States. Chinese policy focused on economic development in the region and maintained economic and diplomatic ties with Israel, while also severely criticizing both Israel and the United States on the international stage (Ben Tsur, 2025). Unlike China, the United States stood beside Israel almost without reservations and gave it diplomatic and military support. On this matter too, despite the opposing positions and actions of the two superpowers, the tension did not lead to a deterioration in relations. They rarely mentioned Israel and the Palestinians in their discussions and ignored the war almost completely.

The United Nations Security Council, of which both countries are members with veto power, is the main arena where China and the US censure each other, during the Swords of Iron War and more broadly. There, they conduct a kind of "clash of declarations." Both countries have proposed resolutions relating to the war to this important forum, and each has vetoed the proposals of the other. China explained its use of the veto against an American proposal, stating that Israel had the right to defend itself (Magid, 2023) by claiming that the proposal did not call for a ceasefire or an end to the fighting. According to the Chinese UN Ambassador, the American proposal was "extremely unbalanced and confused right and wrong" (Permanent Mission of China, 2023).

The US vetoed a Chinese proposal in the UN Security Council that called for a ceasefire, maintaining that it failed to condemn Hamas (Lederer, 2023), which naturally led to Chinese protests. Such criticisms were not only raised when parties exercised their veto in the Security Council, but also at key moments during the war, highlighting the rhetorical and ideological gap between the sides. A year after the war began, Geng Shuang, Deputy Chinese Ambassador to the UN, strongly condemned the United

States: "Without the repeated defense of one side by the United States, many resolutions of this Council [the UN Security Council] would not have been so blatantly rejected or breached," adding that the US should use its influence to "pressure Israel to stop its military action without delay, as required by Council resolutions, and give the Palestinians who have suffered for so long a chance to live" (Khaliq, 2024). These pronouncements from the Chinese representative, harsh as they were, had no effect on diplomatic relations between the US and China, such as breaking off or limiting dialogue between them, of which China had previously shown it was capable, and were not expressed directly to the American delegates but only via the UN platform (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2024; Xinhua, 2024a).

Formal dialogue between the powers on the war also took place outside the UN, although it was more limited. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke several times with his American counterpart, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and with Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Just one week after the war began, on October 14, 2023, Wang expressed to Blinken the need to convene an international peace conference to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Consulate General, 2023). That same week, Wang told his American counterpart that "the immediate preferences are to achieve a ceasefire and a reduction of tension, in order to avoid exacerbating the humanitarian crisis" (Xinhua, 2023).

Contrary to the Chinese declaration, the White House statement said that the United States had spoken to China in the framework of diplomatic contacts on behalf of Israel, and the American Secretary of State told his Chinese counterpart that Hamas must cease its attacks and release the hostages (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Both announcements could be interpreted as genuine efforts to cooperate and end the war, but they remained merely diplomatic gestures that did not reflect a genuine commitment to solving the problem.

> **When Washington suggested to China that it join its multilateral task force to act against the Houthis' threat to shipping routes, China refused (Van Staden, 2023), even though Chinese ships also benefited from free and safe passage through the Bab El-Mandeb Straits, and most of the cargo involved originates in China.**

When Washington suggested to China that it join its multilateral task force to act against the Houthis' threat to shipping routes, China refused (Van Staden, 2023), even though Chinese ships also benefited from free and safe passage through the Bab El-Mandeb Straits, and most of the cargo involved originates in China. This refusal symbolized not only China's reluctance to join an initiative led by the United States but also its general tendency to avoid military interference in disputes in other parts of the world and its preference to allow the United States to act as the global policeman, thus saving itself unnecessary risk and cost. This is a rare case in the course of relations between the countries during the Biden presidency, in which the US sought to return to its traditional method of solving crises, trying to reach a solution. China did not cooperate with the American attempt, and rather than responding with threats or anger, the US acquiesced.

> **While Washington is seen as supporting developed Western nations, China wishes to exploit the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other geopolitical developments to position itself as the representative of developing countries**

US support for Israel is continually expressed in actions, including frequent visits to Israel by senior American officials, sending aircraft carriers to the region in response to threats from Iran, and the famous speech in which US President Joe Biden warned against the opening of additional fronts against Israel. Not only

did all this once again show the Chinese that Israel was deeply embedded in the American-Western "camp," but also, contrary to the theory they had tried to construct over the preceding years, that the United States had not retreated from the Middle East. If their theory had proven correct, it would have helped Beijing portray the US as an unreliable ally and draw the Gulf States closer to itself, and perhaps even Israel, albeit to a lesser extent.

In response to what China perceives as the U.S.'s unambiguous siding with Israel, Beijing attempts to present itself as "neutral" and therefore not supporting either of the warring sides. It believes that this perception allows it to criticize the United States for what it sees as a morally defective stance and double standards. In addition to tarnishing America's reputation, these claims are used by Beijing to refute allegations against it made by Western countries, led by the United States. At the same time, China is also interested in differentiating itself from its Western counterpart. While Washington is seen as supporting developed Western nations, China wishes to exploit the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other geopolitical developments to position itself as the representative of developing countries.

Conclusion

Before Biden's inauguration in January 2021, relations between China and the United States were very tense. During the next four years, the relationship experienced many more upheavals, both big and small, culminating in the visit by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives to Taiwan and the Chinese balloon found floating above US territory. These and other incidents during the Biden administration had the potential to increase tensions between the powers and cause considerable damage to their relations. This negative outcome was apparently avoided due to a decision by both governments, the Chinese and the American, to maintain low tensions through regular dialogue at the highest levels, while focusing on areas where

cooperation was possible rather than on areas of friction and disagreement. This decision, which can be characterized as embodying the Chinese approach, was expressed in both rhetorical and practical ways. In rhetorical terms, senior officials on both sides, including the superpowers' presidents, tried to interact in ways that encouraged cooperation and reduced the negative consequences of crises.

In practical terms, most of Biden's term in office was characterized by an intensive series of meetings between senior Chinese and American officials, intended to build and strengthen mechanisms of consultation, exchange of information, and collaborative work. The choice of this approach can also be seen as a way of managing tensions between two superpowers who understand that they have no choice but to create mechanisms for dialogue in order to avoid escalation leading to dangerous conflict with international ramifications.

The Swords of Iron War changed the Israeli outlook, if not in practice, at least in awareness. Throughout the war, China criticized Israel's actions, while the United States, under President Biden, stood with Israel almost without reservation. This experience makes it evident that Israel must not change its pro-Western and pro-American leaning and that it needs to adopt a clear policy. It is essential to maintain economic and civilian cooperation with China as a significant trading partner, while continuing to strengthen its strategic relations with the United States. At the same time, it will be challenging to avoid China's problematic attitude towards it, which is unlikely to change as long as the war in Gaza continues, despite tactical improvements in recent months (Ben Tsur, 2025). It is also important to remember that Israel and its war with Hamas were not top priorities for the powers, even if they provided fertile ground for mutual taunts. In fact, Israel and the war have hardly been discussed between the powers, perhaps due to an understanding that there is a deep division between them on this issue and little potential for cooperation, like the case of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The attitude of both powers to the Swords of Iron War clarified beyond any doubt that the rivalry between them is not only, or perhaps even mainly, driven by conflicts of interests, but by ideological differences, which have even been defined as a "battle of ideas." While one side sees itself as the leader of the developing world and the champion of revolutionary national liberation movements, the other sees itself as the leader of the free world and defender of democracy. It remains to be seen whether the Chinese approach to managing relations between the powers, which the Biden administration apparently adopted, will also be practiced by the second Trump administration. Initial indications suggest that while President Biden has chosen moderation and the marginalization of disputes, President Trump prefers the opposite approach, which revolves around applying pressure through high trade tariffs and confrontation on issues of disagreement, alongside attempts to build a personal relationship with President Xi. It appears that Trump is less likely to confront China on non-economic, less significant matters. As evidence, his administration announced that it would review parts of the AUKUS Alliance (Reuters, 2025), established during the Biden administration, that are of particular concern to China.

Looking back on these four years, China can point to some success in showing the United States that it should take China's views, interests, and red lines into account, and even adopt its approach to inter-power relations. Cutting off most of the channels of communication between them following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was a clear indication that China takes very seriously what it perceives as American, if not presidential, support for Taiwan's independence. Perhaps even more importantly, the crisis China created enabled it to examine the US commitment to the existing arrangement and to maintain two-

way communication to prevent escalation. The United States responded quickly and in a way that even China probably did not expect, by sending an airlift of senior officials eastwards to try to narrow the gap between the countries. These officials discussed subjects on which cooperation was possible with their Chinese counterparts, while avoiding areas of disagreement—illustrating their willingness to adopt the Chinese approach.

This approach proved to be effective, and ties between the powers gradually returned to normal. Military coordination was the last element to be restored, perhaps due to a conscious decision by China to keep the most important aspect of relations with the United States to the end, to see whether it would cross any of China's red lines. Indeed, after the Pelosi incident, there were no more visits to Taiwan by senior members of the Biden administration, apart from a visit about 18 months later by a delegation of Congress Members (American Institute in Taiwan, 2024), which was also criticized by the Chinese side (Tang, 2024a).

The fact that this approach was adopted and worked is, first and foremost, evidence of the Biden administration's willingness to accept the Chinese way of working, and of its openness to different methods, based on its understanding that relations between the powers and the avoidance of escalation are more important than insistence on direct talks on areas of deep division. Moreover, it is possible that both governments understood that discussions of matters where there are strong disagreements, such as the war between Russia and Ukraine and China's support for Russia's war effort, not only do not help to resolve the dispute but also create further dangerous tensions between China and the US. This understanding is important because it reflects a kind of acceptance of the world order in which China is a rising power and the United States cannot always impose its wishes on it; it is better to ignore matters that could lead to military escalation and focus on areas where cooperation is possible.

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Great Power Interactions in the Arctic: EU, Russia, USA, and China

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The Arctic region has become a focal point of competition between leading global powers—the EU and USA against China and Russia. This paper will review the interactions of these great powers in relation to climate change, economics, and security in the Arctic, and argue that the countries' priorities in the Arctic are wildly different, with each actor placing a different emphasis on what it considers to be the most important interest.

Keywords: Arctic, High North, USA, EU, Russia, China, Global Warming, Militarization

Introduction

The Arctic is a remote region at the top of the world, defined as north of 66° North latitude. Despite its cold and isolated nature, the Arctic is home to approximately four million people, ten percent of whom are Indigenous (Arctic Council, n.d.-a). The region encompasses eight countries with territory north of the Arctic Circle: the United States, Canada, Greenland/Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (Arctic Council, n.d.-b). Of these eight, five—the United States, Canada, Greenland/Denmark, Norway, and Russia— are considered Arctic littoral states, meaning they have direct coastlines along the Arctic Ocean (Degeorges, 2013). Iceland, despite being an island nation with its northernmost island above the Arctic Circle, is not classified as an Arctic littoral state because the sea to its north is the Greenland Sea, which is part of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Arctic is rich in natural resources, including rare earth elements, fish stocks, and hydrocarbons. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the region holds approximately 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its undiscovered natural gas (eia, 2012). These resources are unevenly distributed; for instance, the majority of undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves are situated in Russian territory (Balashova and Gromova, 2017). Russia stands as the dominant Arctic power, possessing the largest share of land, population, coastline, natural resources, and military presence in the region (Paul and Swistek, 2022).

> According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the region holds approximately 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its undiscovered natural gas

The Arctic, once a key theater of Cold War strategic competition, is again becoming a site of great power rivalry. During the Cold War, the region was seen as a potential corridor for nuclear attacks, as the shortest route for intercontinental ballistic missiles between the United States and the Soviet Union crossed the Arctic (Teeple, 2021). After the Cold War, the

ARCTIC REGION

Source: CIA World Factbook

region experienced a period of relative calm under the informal arrangement of "High North, Low Tensions" (Ikonen, 2015), with the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy founded in 1991, which became the Arctic Council in 1996, whose charter forbids it from dealing with Arctic or other security issues. However, a new era of strategic competition is emerging, driven by the increasing interest of China—which calls itself a "near-Arctic state"—and Russia's militarization of the region, alongside the strategic recalibration by the U.S., NATO, and Arctic allies such as Canada the EU. On top of that, those tensions have been turbocharged by the Ukraine War (Pechko, 2025). While military experts largely agree that the Arctic is unlikely to be the starting point for a great power war, there is growing consensus that any broader conflict involving major powers could quickly extend into the region, given its proximity to

key players (Boulègue et al., 2024). As such, maintaining readiness in the Arctic while managing the risks posed by climate change is essential for all actors involved.

For many years, Arctic states adhered to the principle of "High North, Low Tensions," a norm exemplified by the cooperative efforts of the Arctic Council (Taub and Pellegrin, 2024). The latter is an intergovernmental forum composed of the eight Arctic states, six Indigenous peoples' organizations (the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council), and numerous observers, including both states and international organizations with interests in the Arctic (Arctic Council, n.d.-b). Among the observers, two are particularly relevant to this paper: China, which is a permanent observer, and the European Union, which is a de facto observer. Despite being a consensus-based and non-binding forum, the Arctic Council has achieved notable success, including three legally binding agreements on Coast Guard coordination, oil spill cleanups, and scientific cooperation (Arctic Council, n.d.). The Council's working groups also address a broad range of Arctic issues, excluding military security (Arctic Council, n.d.).

However, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the work of the Arctic Council was suspended. At the time, Russia held the rotating chairmanship, and the other Arctic states—collectively referred to as the "like-minded" Arctic countries or A7—made it clear that they could not continue cooperation with Russia under the circumstances (Congressional Research Service, 2024). In 2024, the Council resumed limited activity, with working groups meeting remotely (Arctic Council, 2024). The Council has remained partially suspended, although the chairmanship, which rotates every two years, has since passed from Russia to Norway and is now held by Denmark/Greenland (Edvardsen, 2025).

Climate change, security, and economic opportunities are the main features of the Arctic's geopolitics. These elements are interlinked with each other. For example, climate change makes many economic opportunities in the Arctic possible. This is because many of the economic resources in the Arctic have been made accessible by the retreat of the ice that made accessing these resources—whether above or below the sea —possible. Economics interacts with security as well. Given that many of the resources could become targets in the event of war, or provoke geopolitical crises or intrigue, many countries are increasing their military assets in the Arctic to protect these resources. This is especially the case with Russia. However, climate change and security have also been intertwined in the Arctic. This has been demonstrated by the thawing permafrost which has ruined infrastructure throughout the Arctic.

This paper will review and compare the interests of China, the EU, Russia, and the USA regarding climate change, security, and economics and argues that their priorities regarding the Arctic are wildly different, with each actor placing a different emphasis on what it considers to be the most important interest.

Climate Change

Climate change is an urgent and accelerating challenge in the Arctic, which is warming nearly four times faster than the global average (Rantanen et al., 2022). This rapid warming is causing a dramatic reduction in sea ice (WWF Arctic, 2025), exposing the region to increased economic activity, such as expanded use of the Northern Sea Route and access to previously unreachable hydrocarbon reserves. However, these developments come with serious environmental and public health consequences. The thawing of permafrost not only releases vast quantities of greenhouse gases but may also, along with the melting glaciers, unleash ancient pathogens to which modern humans have no immunity (Wolfson, 2025) Moreover, Arctic Indigenous communities—already

among the most vulnerable populations—face existential threats to their way of life, cultural continuity, and food security. Despite these risks, some states perceive climate change in the Arctic not as a crisis to be mitigated, but as an opportunity to exploit emerging economic and strategic advantages.

The divergence among these four powers' Arctic climate strategies is stark. The EU promotes a cautious, mitigation-oriented approach grounded in science and multilateralism. China and Russia prioritize strategic advantage and economic gain, often at the expense of climate responsibility. The United States, once a climate leader, now appears to be stepping back from meaningful Arctic engagement under the Trump 2.0 administration. This imbalance weakens the potential for coordinated global climate action at a time when the Arctic is warming nearly four times faster than the rest of the planet. Without alignment among these major powers, the region faces the risk of accelerated environmental degradation, ecosystem collapse, and irreversible global climate tipping points.

Russia

Russia is one of the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters, a position reinforced by its intensive exploitation of Arctic fossil fuels (Tracy, 2023). These activities not only add directly to global emissions but also accelerate warming in one of the most fragile regions on earth. Ironically, while Russia drives Arctic warming, it is also increasingly vulnerable to its effects. Melting permafrost undermines infrastructure, Arctic communities face food insecurity and health risks, and ecosystems are disrupted (Polovtseva, 2020). Yet Moscow tends to view climate change less as a crisis than as an opportunity, seeing new possibilities for resource extraction as sea ice recedes (Hardy, 2025). This pragmatic, if short-sighted, stance is reinforced by Russia's reliance on hydrocarbon revenues and its growing isolation following the invasion of Ukraine. While officials speak of sustainability,

such rhetoric is largely symbolic, masking a lack of real mitigation (Sönmez, 2025).

The Russian Arctic's contributions to climate change are varied and severe. Melting permafrost releases methane, a greenhouse gas many times more potent than carbon dioxide, creating a dangerous feedback loop (Polovtseva, 2020). Black carbon from shipping along the Northern Sea Route also exacerbates warming. Produced by burning heavy fuels, it not only heats the atmosphere but also settles on snow and ice, darkening surfaces and hastening melt (McVeigh, 2022). Meanwhile, drilling, mining, and combustion of Arctic fossil fuels release vast additional emissions (Tracy, 2023).

The effects are already visible. Much regional infrastructure was built on the assumption of permanently frozen ground. As permafrost thaws, pipelines, roads, and buildings warp or collapse, creating economic and safety risks (Polovtseva, 2020; Shemetov, 2021). Indigenous peoples such as the Nenets face cultural and economic challenges: reindeer herding is threatened by ice crusts that block access to lichen, disrupting both livelihoods and traditions (Stammler, 2023). Industrial accidents also reveal how warming interacts with human activity. In Norilsk, one of the world's most polluted cities, thawing permafrost caused a fuel tank to rupture in 2020, spilling tens of thousands of tons of diesel into rivers. While climate change did not directly cause the leak, it created the conditions for disaster and complicated cleanup (Polovtseva, 2020).

Russia's economic model reinforces this trajectory. The retreat of Arctic ice is seen in Moscow as a logistical advantage, opening new mining and drilling sites and reducing transport costs (Bradley, 2023). Longer ice-free shipping seasons make it easier to move resources via the Northern Sea Route, linking Arctic hubs more directly to Asian markets. This has allowed Russia to expand extraction while bypassing the need for expensive inland infrastructure. After the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's reliance on Arctic revenues only deepened. Oil, gas, and mineral sales now provide a financial lifeline to support military operations, even as they worsen global warming (Fenton and Kolyandr, 2025; Savytskyi, 2024).

Some Russian elites even portray climate change as beneficial. Warmer temperatures might, in their view, expand Siberian farmland or reduce heating costs. President Vladimir Putin has dismissed environmental activism and downplayed climate risks, reflecting a broader indifference—and at times opportunism—within the political leadership (BBC, 2024). This mindset helps explain Russia's lack of meaningful climate commitments. Its most recent nationally determined contribution under the Paris Agreement avoided real emissions cuts, leaning instead on forests as carbon sinks (Savytskyi, 2024). Yet experts note that fires, logging, and degradation undermine the forests' capacity to offset emissions (Koralova, 2024).

In practice, Russia's Arctic remains both a driver and a victim of climate change. Its extractive strategy delivers short-term gains but deepens long-term risks for its people, ecosystems, and infrastructure. With domestic incentives for mitigation weak and geopolitical isolation high, Russia shows little willingness to alter course. Its policies remain largely symbolic, combining ambitious rhetoric with limited action, while the region it dominates continues to warm at more than twice the global average.

EU

The European Union approaches climate change in the Arctic through three major lenses: scientific research, the green transition, and international cooperation. These priorities align with the EU's broader climate agenda and foreign policy goals, but they have come under strain since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Although cooperation with Russian institutions has been suspended, EU climate researchers acknowledge that progress on Arctic climate monitoring is difficult without Russian participation, given the sheer scale of Russian territory in the region.

The EU has long prioritized climate science as a foundation for effective Arctic policy. Projects like EU-PolarNet, supported under the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe frameworks, are designed to coordinate European polar research and strengthen the continent's scientific capabilities in the Arctic (EU-PolarNet, 2024). Through other initiatives, such as the Copernicus Climate Change Service and the Copernicus Marine Service, the EU also gathers critical satellite and observational data related to Arctic oceanography, sea ice, and permafrost changes (Copernicus, 2024). Targeted programs like Nunataryuk, which focus on permafrost thaw and its effects on northern communities, further exemplify the EU's comprehensive scientific approach to Arctic climate risks. Shared infrastructure, including the Arctic Research Icebreaker Consortium (ARICE), helps EU member states pool resources like icebreaker vessels to support pan-European polar research (ARICE, n.d.). This scientific collaboration is essential for understanding the Arctic's role in the global climate system.

The EU's second major concern is the Arctic's role in the green transition. As part of the European Green Deal, the EU has called for leaving Arctic hydrocarbon reserves untouched, framing Arctic fossil fuel development as incompatible with Europe's climate goals (Rankin, 2021). However, as demonstrated by EU oil company activity, this ideal is not upheld. At the same time, the Arctic holds strategic value for the green transition in other ways. The region may supply critical raw materials—such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements—needed for renewable energy technologies and battery production. Moreover, the EU sees potential in Arctic offshore wind energy, which could become a key component of its broader strategy to decarbonize energy systems (Wilson, 2020). These dual imperatives—preserving Arctic ecosystems while responsibly sourcing key resources—create tensions in EU policy, especially as external powers like Russia and China continue to develop Arctic hydrocarbons.

International cooperation is the third pillar of the EU's Arctic climate engagement. Before 2022, the EU promoted multilateral and bilateral scientific cooperation with key Arctic players including Russia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This approach enabled European researchers to gain access to datasets and fieldwork opportunities across the circumpolar Arctic. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally disrupted these patterns. Following the invasion, the EU adopted a policy of suspending institutional collaboration with Russian scientific bodies. Researchers from Russian universities and institutes were cut off from EU-funded programs, and many were unable to communicate with foreign colleagues due to fear of repression (Matthews, 2023). The threat of politically motivated arrests—sometimes referred to as "hostage diplomacy"—further discouraged travel and collaboration. In parallel, a growing number of EU researchers became uncomfortable with the prospect of working alongside Russian scientists who either supported the war or were compelled to voice support under pressure. One senior EU researcher summed up the mood by saying that few EU researchers want to work with a Russian scientist who says, "Let me tell you why we had to invade Ukraine"—a scenario that epitomized the irreconcilable political and ethical tensions at play (Wilson Center, 2024).

Despite the political rupture, EU climate scientists are acutely aware that Russian cooperation is essential to comprehensive Arctic monitoring. Over half of the Arctic's landmass and coastline lies within Russia, and Russian territory hosts a significant number of key climate observation sites. Since the war began, European researchers have been operating with data from less than half of their usual Arctic data points, leaving critical gaps in monitoring climate feedback loops like permafrost thaw, methane emissions, and sea ice retreat (Wilson Center, 2024). As a result, there is growing frustration in Europe's scientific community about the

limitations of the current research environment. Many researchers acknowledge the need for eventual re-engagement with Russian science. Nevertheless, strong support for Ukraine and concern over legitimizing Russian aggression continue to constrain such collaboration. While individual partnerships between EU and Russian scientists are technically permitted, they remain rare and politically sensitive, with little institutional support or protection.

It is worth pointing out that there are some differences between EU-Arctic states and the rest of the EU when it comes to climate change. EU Arctic states seem to be less interested in drilling for fossil fuels in the Arctic than states like France and Italy. Additionally, EU Arctic States view the Arctic as a resource base more than the European Commission does, as the Commission 's primary attitude to the Arctic is as an area that should be treated as a nature reserve. As a result, there are some differences when it comes to how the EU vs. the EU Arctic states view global warming in the Arctic.

As the world's leading producer of solar panels and a major investor in renewable energy infrastructure, China has tried to positioned itself as a credible actor in global climate governance. By contrast, the U.S. has been seen as regressing into climate denial

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USA

U.S. climate change policy has become increasingly erratic and polarized, particularly when comparing the period before the second Trump administration to the current era, whose policy seems to deny climate change, hinder it's scientific investigation and exacerbate the climate crisis. Prior to President Trump's return to office in 2025, federal agencies such as NASA were central players in Arctic climate research. These agencies led efforts to map coastal erosion, monitor the rising sea-level in Alaska, track permafrost thaw, and measure greenhouse gas emissions such as methane

from wildfires. Academic institutions and think tanks also played an active role in studying both the science of Arctic climate change and its social and policy implications. For example, the Polar Institute at the Wilson Center examined governance challenges and national climate policy (The White House, 2023; Wilson Center, n.d.).

Following Trump's reelection, however, the US government adopted a stance of climate science denial, resulting in sweeping cuts to climate-related research and institutions. The administration's FY2026 budget proposed $163 billion in spending reductions, largely targeting nondefense discretionary spending. These cuts significantly affected agencies involved in environmental research, such as NASA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (Washington Post Staff, 2025). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a key agency for Arctic and oceanic climate data, faced a proposed budget cut of nearly $1.7 billion, reducing its total funding to $4.5 billion (KCCI, 2025). This erosion of support for evidence-based policymaking has further marginalized climate science within the federal government. The closing of the U.S. Arctic Research Consortium was another example of how the USA is decimating climate science. Even institutions like the Wilson Center, previously regarded as politically neutral, were targeted for defunding by Elon Musk's DOGE (Hansen, 2025).

The United States' retreat from global climate leadership has provided a strategic opening for China. As the world's leading producer of solar panels and a major investor in renewable energy infrastructure, China has tried to positioned itself as a credible actor in global climate governance. By contrast, the U.S. has been seen as regressing into climate denial. This stark divergence has made it easier for Beijing to present itself as a responsible power—especially among countries most affected by

global warming. Arctic nations grappling with melting permafrost and coastal erosion, Pacific Island countries facing existential threats from rising sea levels, and African states already experiencing climate-driven desertification and food insecurity may be increasingly receptive to China's messaging. In this context, the Trump administration's climate posture not only undermines US credibility in international environmental diplomacy but also accelerates the erosion of American influence in strategic regions vulnerable to climate change.

It seems that the second Trump administration chose not only to reverse the Biden administration's policies but also to go further. While the first Trump administration did not see significant cuts to the budgets of government agencies conducting climate change research, his second term saw deeper reductions. It is worth noting that many senior U.S. Arctic scientists—who had been in the federal service under the Bush administration and encouraged younger scientists who joined under Obama to remain during Trump's first term–ultimately retired because of the administration's hostile stance toward science. The first Trump administration's anti-climate science approach also extended into foreign policy. For example, during at least one Arctic Council meeting, then–Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sought to exclude any reference to climate change from the joint communiqué.

China

China has a few key concerns regarding climate change in the Arctic. The Chinese are particularly interested in three overlapping issues: science, access to resources, and governance. These priorities are seen by Beijing as central to its recognition as an Arctic stakeholder. They also provide China with added leverage in its strategic rivalry with the United States and the West more broadly, helping to enhance China's legitimacy in international forums and supporting its long-term positioning in great power competition.

Chinese interest in Arctic climate science is rooted in self-interest. Coastal cities like Tianjin and Shanghai face existential threats from a rise in sea-level if current emissions trends continue unchecked. In recent years, China has also suffered from intensified typhoons and other climate-related disasters. These domestic vulnerabilities drive China's expanding investment in polar research. Through scientific expeditions aboard research vessels like the Xuelongs and Ji Di, and operations at its Arctic research base in Ny-Ålesund, on the Norweigan island of Svalbard, China has conducted studies on ice thickness, ocean salinity, and climate change patterns in the Arctic (Khanna, 2025; Wei et. al., 2019). This research serves two purposes: understanding climate impacts at home and projecting scientific credibility abroad. By contributing to global climate knowledge, China bolsters its image as a responsible actor. However, it's also worth noting that Chinese science has been accused of having a dual purpose of both civilian use and military applications.

The second major climate-related concern for China is the increased access to Arctic natural resources. As the ice sheet continues to thin due to global warming, the region is becoming more accessible for economic exploitation. China has taken a strong interest in energy and mineral extraction possibilities in the High North. A notable example is the Yamal LNG project in Russia's Arctic, in which Chinese companies are major investors. The project's ability to ship liquefied natural gas to China via the Northern Sea Route—an increasingly viable path thanks to climate change—demonstrates the strategic economic opportunities that warming has enabled (Puranen and Kopra, 2023; Sakib, 2022). Additionally, China has conducted research vessel voyages around mineral-rich offshore areas along the Alaska coast, which might indicate an interest in seabed mining off of Alaska in international waters (Lajeunesse and Lalonde, 2023).

The third issue tied to climate change is Arctic governance. China has long argued

that global warming has turned the Arctic into a region of international concern, with implications far beyond the eight Arctic states. As a result, it claims that non-Arctic states should have a say in how the region is managed (State Council, 2018). Beijing promotes the idea that the Arctic is part of the global commons, and that climate change necessitates inclusive governance (Doshi, Dale-Huang and Zhang, 2021). This position directly challenges the current Arctic Council structure, which limits decision-making to member states. China's call for a more open Arctic governance regime is not just rhetorical—it reflects a long-term effort to shift the rules in its favor, aligning with broader Chinese approaches to multilateralism and institutional influence.

> The EU's Arctic strategy reflects a precautionary and science-based approach that prioritizes environmental protection, sustainable development, and the rights of Indigenous communities

These concerns—scientific, economic, and institutional—are tightly interwoven in China's campaign to be recognized as an Arctic stakeholder. China has consistently cited its scientific contributions to justify its status as a permanent observer in the Arctic Council, a position it achieved in 2013. At the same time, its 90 billion dollars of investment in the Arctic signal a growing economic footprint, further reinforcing its stakeholder claims. And by promoting the idea that climate change makes the Arctic relevant to all, China aims to rally support from other non-Arctic states and expand its influence in regional governance.

Global warming in the Arctic also intersects with China's broader rivalry with the West, particularly the United States. China has sought to position itself as a leader in climate governance at a time when U.S. leadership on the issue has been inconsistent—most notably during the Trump administration's

withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Some small island nations have looked favorably upon China's climate posture, in part because of its rhetorical commitment to addressing climate change (Rasheed, 2025). In this context, climate leadership becomes another front in the wider struggle for international legitimacy and geopolitical influence.

Comparison

The approaches of China, the European Union (EU), the United States, and Russia to climate change in the Arctic reveal deep divisions in global environmental governance. While all four are major emitters of greenhouse gases, their policies toward a warming Arctic differ significantly in ambition, intent, and consequence. These differences have far-reaching implications—not only for the Arctic itself, but for the broader global climate system.

The European Union has emerged as the most climate-forward actor among the four powers. The EU's Arctic strategy reflects a precautionary and science-based approach that prioritizes environmental protection, sustainable development, and the rights of Indigenous communities. Brussels has set ambitious climate goals aimed at decarbonization and explicitly supports international efforts to limit Arctic exploitation. It has also taken a strong stance on reducing black carbon emissions and banning oil exploration in vulnerable Arctic areas. Despite internal inconsistencies and occasional greenwashing within member states, the EU consistently promotes climate-sensitive Arctic policies in multilateral forums, attempting to align economic interests with ecological responsibility.

China, by contrast, views Arctic warming through a largely opportunistic lens. As melting ice opens up previously inaccessible sea routes and resources, Beijing has moved to secure a foothold in the region under the label of a "near-Arctic state." Chinese climate rhetoric often emphasizes participation in global governance, and the country has joined Arctic

Council activities as an observer. However, China's engagement is largely driven by strategic and economic calculations rather than a commitment to climate mitigation. While promoting itself as a responsible stakeholder, China benefits from maintaining lower environmental standards at home, allowing its industries to compete globally while exploiting Arctic infrastructure and shipping opportunities. Climate change is seen less as a crisis and more as a pathway to national advantage.

The United States' position has shifted dramatically over recent years. Under previous administrations, the U.S. was a global leader in Arctic climate science and adaptation. Agencies such as NASA, NOAA, and the EPA conducted pioneering research on Arctic warming, sea ice decline, and community displacement. Support programs were established for Alaska Native populations facing erosion, thawing permafrost, and habitat loss. However, the return of the Trump administration has reversed much of this progress. Climate change has been downplayed or denied, scientific research has been defunded, and environmental regulations rolled back. This retreat from Arctic climate engagement weakens US leadership globally and removes a key voice for science-based policymaking in the region, leaving a policy vacuum at a critical moment.

Russia stands apart as the most extractive and least environmentally constrained of the four powers. The Kremlin views Arctic warming as a net benefit, providing greater access to oil, gas, and mineral reserves as well as opening the Northern Sea Route for commercial shipping. Rather than addressing the climate risks tied to permafrost melt or black carbon emissions, Russia has accelerated Arctic development—often with minimal environmental oversight. The Arctic has become a key economic lifeline for Moscow, particularly in financing the war in Ukraine through energy exports. Russia's official climate discourse includes vague commitments to sustainability, but in practice, environmental mitigation remains

a low priority. Exploitation continues even in the face of infrastructure collapse and growing harm to Indigenous communities.

Economic Interests

Economic interests in the Arctic are increasingly shaped by the opportunities created by climate change. As global warming accelerates the melting of sea ice, previously inaccessible resources—such as hydrocarbons and mineral deposits—are becoming more attainable. In response, China, the European Union, and the United States each approach the emerging Arctic economy with distinct strategies and priorities. Although the Arctic remains a marginally profitable region at present, the economic potential is gradually improving as environmental barriers diminish. While the region may not yet be ready for full-scale economic exploitation, it is steadily moving closer to becoming a viable frontier for investment and development. The EU remains committed to environmentally conscious development and scientific cooperation. China and Russia pursue extractive, infrastructure-heavy models that seek to leverage Arctic change for national gain. The United States, once more aligned with the EU, is now repositioning itself as a resource competitor.

Russia

Russia's economic strategy in the Arctic centers on three interlinked priorities: resource extraction, infrastructure development, and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) (Rumer, Sokolsky, & Stronski, 2021). The region holds immense reserves of hydrocarbons, minerals, and other resources that underpin Russia's energy exports and industrial capacity. The Yamal Peninsula has become the cornerstone of Arctic gas production, home to Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2. Other Arctic areas host major oil fields, further strengthening Russia's export position (Kontorovich, 2015). Beyond hydrocarbons, the region is rich in nickel—mined at Norilsk, which is one of the world's largest producers—, critical for steel and batteries (Geological Survey of

Norway, 2016). Murmansk contains deposits of rare earth elements vital for electronics and defense technologies (Kalashnikov et. al., 2023). Russia also ranks among the top global producers of gem-quality diamonds (Bennett, 2021), while lithium extraction led by Rosatom signals an ambition to enter green supply chains (Reuters, 2025). Coal is also present, though declining global demand limits its importance (Staalesen, 2019).

Exploiting these resources requires significant infrastructure, but much of the Arctic remains inaccessible (U.S. Congress, 2015). Harsh climate, permafrost, and remoteness drive up costs of construction and maintenance, while road, rail, and port facilities remain sparse. Historically, Russia partnered with Western firms to overcome these challenges. Before the 2014 annexation of Crimea, companies like ExxonMobil, Shell, and Total supplied capital and advanced offshore drilling and LNG technology, enabling projects such as Arctic LNG-2 to proceed with greater technical sophistication and safety standards (Closson, 2017). These partnerships highlighted Russia's reliance on foreign expertise for Arctic development.

The rupture with the West after 2014 forced Russia to pivot. Sanctions targeted energy and financial sectors, leading Western firms to withdraw. In their place, China emerged as Moscow's key partner. State-backed Chinese companies and banks provided critical funding, logistical support, and technology for Arctic projects. This partnership allowed Russia to sustain development momentum, but it also created new tensions. Russia is cautious about granting Beijing too much leverage in a region central to its sovereignty and security. While Chinese investment is welcomed, Moscow balances cooperation with limits on Chinese influence to preserve strategic autonomy (Rao and Gruenig, 2024).

The Northern Sea Route forms the third pillar of Russia's Arctic economic vision. Stretching from the Bering Strait to the Barents Sea, the NSR lies entirely within Russia's exclusive economic zone (Ustymenko, 2025). By cutting shipping times between Europe and Asia by up to 40 percent compared to the Suez Canal, it offers significant commercial potential. For the Kremlin, the NSR is not only a trade artery but also a potent symbol of sovereignty. Russia envisions it as a key channel for energy exports to Asia, strengthening its role as a dominant Arctic power.

Yet the NSR remains underdeveloped and operationally difficult. Ice conditions require year-round icebreaker escorts, and the lack of robust ports, refueling hubs, and search-and-rescue facilities hampers reliable shipping (Todorov, 2023). Existing ports such as Pevek and Tiksi are tiny, isolated, and poorly connected to national transport networks. Pevek has fewer than 5,000 residents, limited air service, and minimal road access; Tiksi faces similar constraints (Wikivoyage, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). These shortcomings restrict the NSR's capacity to scale into a global commercial corridor.

China has shown strong interest in supporting NSR development, offering investment and Arctic-capable shipping technology (Marine Insight, 2025). Such cooperation could accelerate progress, but Russia remains protective. While Beijing is invited to contribute, Moscow resists ceding any measure of control, making clear that sovereignty over the NSR is non-negotiable (Reeves, 2025). The Arctic is not only an economic resource but a core element of Russian strategic identity. Putin has welcomed Chinese participation but has also set boundaries, preferring targeted cooperation over joint ownership.

In sum, Russia's Arctic economic ambitions are vast but constrained. The region's hydrocarbons, minerals, and shipping routes promise wealth and influence, yet they require infrastructure, technology, and international partnerships that sanctions and geopolitical isolation make difficult to secure. China provides critical support but also introduces strategic dilemmas, as Moscow seeks to balance dependence with autonomy.

Meanwhile, environmental challenges, high costs, and underdeveloped infrastructure complicate long-term plans. Russia's ability to turn Arctic potential into reality will depend on how well it manages these obstacles while guarding sovereignty over one of its most sensitive regions.

EU

The European Union's (EU) economic interests in the Arctic are primarily driven by its commitment to addressing climate change and bolstering innovation. This focus is evident in initiatives such as the European Green Deal, Horizon 2020, and its successor Horizon Europe, which fund Arctic-related research and innovation projects aimed at promoting sustainable development and environmental protection. The European Green Deal is the European Union's (EU) flagship initiative aimed at achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, with a significant focus on transforming energy systems and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (European Council, n.d.). Notably, the EU has invested approximately €200 million in Arctic research through these programs (German Arctic Office, 2022).The European Union's (EU) economic interests in the Arctic are influenced by its commitment to environmental sustainability, particularly through initiatives like the European Green Deal. However, these interactions often intersect with the oil sector, highlighting a complex relationship between environmental goals and economic interests. While the EU aims to reduce carbon emissions and promote renewable energy, certain projects under the Green Deal have faced challenges due to economic constraints, environmental concerns, and national priorities.

To meet these goals under the Green New Deal, the EU is investing in renewable energy sources, including wind and hydroelectric power, and securing critical raw materials essential for the green transition. The Arctic region presents vast potential for renewable energy and critical mineral resources. Sweden, for instance, has identified significant deposits of rare earth elements in the Kiruna area, which are vital for manufacturing electric vehicles and wind turbines (LKAB, 2023). Similarly, Norway is advancing offshore wind energy projects and exploring seabed mineral resources to support the EU's renewable energy objectives (Videmšek, 2024; Urdal, 2024).

In terms of funding, the European Union (EU) has utilized its Horizon 2020 program and its successor, Horizon Europe, to support sustainable development in the Arctic. Between 2014 and 2020, Horizon 2020 invested approximately €200 million in Arctic-related research, encompassing areas such as environmental studies, digitization, healthcare, and innovative technologies (German Arctic Office, 2022). Horizon Europe, the EU's current research and innovation program, continues to provide substantial funding (200 million Euros) to strengthen the EU's involvement in the Arctic, aligning with objectives like climate change adaptation and sustainable development (European Commission, n.d.).

Despite the EU's commitment to environmental protection in its 2021 Arctic policy, which advocates for leaving Arctic hydrocarbon resources untapped, individual member states have not always aligned with this guidance, particularly when operating in non-EU parts of the Arctic. This divergence underscores the complexity of implementing cohesive environmental policies across different jurisdictions, especially when national economic interests and energy security concerns are at stake. Major economies like France and Italy have expanded their presence in the Arctic through investments in non-EU territories. For instance, France's energy company TotalEnergies held a 10% stake in Russia's Arctic LNG 2 project. However, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and subsequent international pressure, TotalEnergies announced its withdrawal from the project, resulting in a $4.1 billion financial write-off. (Humpert, 2022).

Italy's Eni has been active in Arctic oil exploration and production. In Norway, Eni

operates through its subsidiary Vår Energi, focusing on hydrocarbon exploration and production (Eni, 2018). In Alaska, Eni began production at the Nikaitchuq field in 2011, marking its first operated Arctic project (Eni, 2011). However, in 2024, Eni agreed to sell its Nikaitchuq and Oooguruk upstream offshore assets in Alaska to U.S.-based Hilcorp as part of its strategy to rebalance its upstream portfolio (Eni, 2024). Additionally, Italian engineering firm Saipem was involved in constructing infrastructure for Russia's Arctic LNG 2 project (Dempsey, 2019).

USA

American policies toward the Arctic economy can largely be divided into two phases: the pre-Trump 2.0 era and the Trump 2.0 era. The 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) emphasized sustainable development as a cornerstone of U.S. Arctic policy. The federal government supported initiatives focusing on the digital economy, green energy, and the blue economy, alongside related loan programs. The 2022 strategy acknowledged the rapid warming of the Arctic and advocated for the region's newly accessible resources to be developed sustainably. Infrastructure development played a key role in this vision, exemplified by the planned construction of a deepwater port in Nome, Alaska, to support economic activity and resilience (The White House, 2022, 2025a).

Another central component of the pre-Trump Arctic policy was a focus on Alaska Native communities. These Indigenous groups, among the earliest peoples in North America, have historically experienced significantly lower standards of living compared to non-Native Alaskans. Federal efforts sought to improve conditions for these communities by relocating villages rendered uninhabitable by climate change. For instance, the village of Newtok faced severe challenges due to erosion and melting permafrost, leading to a relocation effort to Mertarvik (Bowmer and Thiessen,

2024). Additionally, the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) emphasized the importance of supporting Alaska Native communities in adapting to climate change impacts (The White House, 2023). Additionally, transferring federal assets, such as the only tribal college in Alaska located in Utqiaġvik (formerly Barrow), to Native ownership has also been a way to promote sustainable development among the Alaska Native peoples.

Before the escalation of the war in Ukraine, American oil companies were actively involved in Russian Arctic energy projects. ExxonMobil, for instance, had significant investments in the Sakhalin-I project, a major oil and gas development in Russia's Far East. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, ExxonMobil announced its withdrawal from the project (ExxonMobil, 2022). This move marked a significant shift in US involvement in Russian Arctic energy ventures. The Arctic LNG 2 project, led by Russia's Novatek, relied heavily on international investment and Western technology, with US companies like Baker Hughes contributing essential technology, such as turbines. However, after the imposition of US sanctions in November 2023, foreign shareholders suspended their participation, leading to significant challenges for the project's financing and implementation (Gardus and Savytskyi, 2024).

Under President Donald Trump's second term, US Arctic economic policy has undergone a significant transformation, marked by a pronounced shift toward fossil fuel development and a departure from previous climate-focused initiatives. In January 2025, the Trump administration rescinded prior protections and authorized oil and gas drilling across 1.56 million acres of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), reversing a moratorium implemented during the Biden administration (The White House, 2025b). This decision aligns with a broader agenda to expand domestic energy production, including plans to offer oil and gas leases on 82% of the 23 million-acre

National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Spring, 2025). Concurrently, the administration has revitalized efforts to construct a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline intended to transport gas from Alaska's North Slope to southern ports for export, primarily targeting Asian markets. The proposed 800-mile pipeline, estimated to cost $44 billion, has garnered interest from countries like Japan and South Korea (Gardner, 2025).

China

Chinese investment in the Arctic has been heavily concentrated in extractive industries, particularly in Russia. The most significant Chinese stakes are in Russia's Arctic natural gas projects, notably Novatek's Yamal LNG in 2014 and Arctic LNG 2 in 2019. Chinese entities hold a combined 29.9% stake in Yamal LNG and 20% in Arctic LNG 2, with investments from China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and the Silk Road Fund (Rao and Gruenig, 2024). Yamal LNG primarily supplies gas to Europe, with limited exports to China. In contrast, Arctic LNG 2 has seen deeper Chinese involvement. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Western companies withdrew from the project, creating a vacuum that Chinese firms, including Wison Engineering and several shipping companies, stepped in to fill—despite U.S. sanctions (Humpert, 2025a). China has also invested in other Russian mining ventures, such as the 2024 Polar Lithium project. This joint venture between Russia's Rosatom and Nornickel, with technical backing from China's MCC International, aims to develop the Kolmozerskoye lithium deposit in Murmansk (Staalesen , 2024). However, the project faces obstacles, including 2025 US sanctions and potential Chinese withdrawal, which could impact Russia's goal of becoming a significant player in the global lithium market (Staalesen, 2024). Outside of Russia, Chinese investment success in the Arctic has been more limited and has often encountered resistance.

In Canada, Chinese firm Shandong Gold Mining has attempted to acquire stakes in a mine containing gold. However, in 2020 the deal faced a national security review and outright rejection from Canadian authorities due to strategic concerns (Daly and Lewis, 2020). In Alaska, from 2009, China's state-owned China Investment Corporation has held a stake in the Red Dog Mine, although this project has committed environmental violations (Pezard et. al, 2022; Hagen, 2024). Additionally, China has expressed interest in Alaska's liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector, including a 2017 framework agreement with Alaska Gasline Development Corporation (AGDC), though the project was cancelled by a later governor (Downing, 2025). In Greenland, Chinese companies such as Shenghe Resources and China National Nuclear Corporation have pursued investments in rare earth and uranium-rich sites, including the Kvanefjeld project. However, in 2021, local and Danish political resistance, especially over uranium extraction, has led to major setbacks or bans (Hall, 2021; Reuters, 2021). As a result, by value and scale, Russia remains China's primary Arctic investment destination, particularly in the energy and mining sectors, due to both resource availability and the two countries' growing strategic alignment in the face of Western sanctions (The Belfer Center, 2024).

China's trade with Arctic countries remains modest in scale and largely follows a pattern of importing raw materials and exporting manufactured goods. China imports natural gas from Russia, particularly from the Yamal LNG project, where Chinese companies hold substantial stakes (Humpert, 2025b). From Norway, China imports large quantities of seafood, especially salmon, making it one of Norway's key seafood markets (Godfrey, 2024). In turn, China supplies manufactured goods to Arctic states—most notably to Russia, where consumer goods exports have surged following the exit of Western firms due to sanctions related to the Ukraine war (The Moscow Times, 2022). This pattern underscores China's traditional

global trade role even within the relatively narrow Arctic trade network.

China has also undertaken infrastructure projects in the Arctic, notably under its Polar Silk Road framework, first articulated in 2017. This initiative envisions integrating Russia's Northern Sea Route (NSR) with maritime routes extending from Norway through the North Sea to Northern Europe (Weisko, 2025). Most Chinese infrastructure investments have focused on the Russian-controlled segment of this route. These include stakes in the port of Arkhangelsk taken in 2025, and the construction of a rail link to Arkhangelsk in 2024, aimed at improving access to the Arctic through the Arctic Express No. 1 stopping in Arkhangelsk (Daly, 2024; Russia's Pivot to Asia, 2025). China has also been involved in port infrastructure development along the NSR, such as proposed projects in Tiksi (Bischoff, 2023). In addition, in 2023, China's New Shipping Line started sailing the Northern Sea Route, creating a direct shipping route between Shanghai and Europe via the NSR (Humpert, 2023). Chinese investment has been courted in northern Norway, including infrastructure such as a bridge built in 2017 and the port of Kirkenes (Bochove, 2020 News in English, 2017). Additionally, the Chinese-linked ship Istanbul Bridge just sailed the NSR on a liner route, which is a big step for the commercialization of the NSR.

Many Chinese investments in the Arctic have failed, often due to shifting economic conditions or national security concerns. Some failures stemmed from commodity price declines—for instance, during the 2010s, falling global iron and copper prices rendered several Chinese-backed mining projects in Greenland economically unviable (Jiang, 2021). However, a number of failures have resulted from national security apprehensions about Chinese involvement in strategic sectors and locations. In Canada during the year 2020, authorities blocked the acquisition of TMAC Resources' Hope Bay gold mine by Chinese state-owned Shandong Gold, citing national security concerns (BLG, 2020). In

Finland during 2021, a Chinese-backed plan to buy an airport near a military training area was rejected, partly due to strategic reasons (Nilsen, 2021). In 2013 Iceland, a controversial proposal by Chinese businessman Huang Nubo to develop a large golf resort on unsuitable terrain raised public and political alarm, ultimately leading to its rejection (Higgins, 2013). In 2018 Greenland, Chinese investors were blocked by the Danish government from purchasing the decommissioned Grønnedal naval base, previously used by the Danish navy. Denmark intervened to prevent the sale on national security grounds (Breum, 2018). Additionally, in 2019, Chinese construction firms were denied contracts for an airport renovation projects in Greenland after security concerns were raised by both Danish and American officials (Hinshaw and Page, 2019).

Comparison

The economic strategies of China, the European Union (EU), Russia, and the United States in the Arctic reveal competing visions for the region's future. While the divergence among them is less immediately destabilizing than their differences on security matters, these varied approaches reflect deeper tensions around environmental governance, sustainable development, and economic power in a rapidly changing Arctic.

China's Arctic economic strategy is centered on securing access to resources, expanding trade routes, and embedding the region into its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the development of the Polar Silk Road. Beijing views the Arctic as a new frontier for economic integration, where it can extract critical raw materials, invest in energy infrastructure, and facilitate the northward flow of goods along newly navigable shipping lanes. The melting of Arctic sea ice has opened the door for these ambitions, allowing China to forge investment partnerships—most notably with Russia—to establish a long-term economic presence in the region. While China publicly emphasizes cooperation and peaceful development, its

approach is largely extractive and strategically transactional, designed to advance Beijing's global economic influence.

Russia's economic orientation in the Arctic closely aligns with China's, particularly in the wake of growing international isolation following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. With Western sanctions cutting off traditional avenues for investment and trade, Russia has doubled down on Arctic resource extraction as a cornerstone of its wartime economy. Energy exports from the Arctic—particularly liquefied natural gas (LNG) and oil—remain vital to funding the Russian state. Russia's development of the Northern Sea Route also complements China's Polar Silk Road, creating a shared interest in turning Arctic waterways into commercially viable alternatives to traditional global shipping routes. For Moscow, the Arctic is not only an economic asset but also a geopolitical tool for strengthening ties with non-Western powers and maintaining economic resilience in the face of sanctions.

In contrast, the European Union has articulated a vision for Arctic economic engagement rooted in environmental sustainability, innovation, and responsible governance. The EU's flagship programs, including the European Green Deal, Horizon 2020, and Horizon Europe, support research and development that addresses climate challenges while promoting green growth. These initiatives encourage sustainable practices in Arctic development and seek to balance economic activity with long-term ecological protection. Brussels has consistently advocated for leaving Arctic fossil fuels untapped and prioritizing Indigenous rights and local community welfare. However, the EU's internal cohesion is not absolute. Member states with Arctic territories, such as Denmark and Finland, may at times pursue national policies that emphasize resource development or industrial activity in ways that diverge from the EU's broader environmental goals, creating a degree of strategic ambiguity within the bloc.

The United States has oscillated between different Arctic economic strategies, shaped largely by shifting domestic political leadership. Under previous administrations, the U.S. emphasized climate adaptation, scientific research, and sustainable economic development, with a focus on supporting Alaska Native communities affected by permafrost thaw and sea-level rise. The federal government also invested in renewable energy and Arctic resilience initiatives. However, the second Trump administration has marked a clear departure from this approach. U.S. Arctic policy now places increased emphasis on energy exploration, resource extraction, and strategic competition. There have even been signals of potential cooperation with Russia in Arctic energy ventures, highlighting a more opportunistic posture. This shift brings the US approach closer to that of China and Russia, prioritizing economic utility over environmental stewardship.

The absence of a shared vision for the Arctic's future limits the potential for coordinated action in a region that is becoming increasingly central to global economic and environmental dynamics

These diverging Arctic economic strategies underscore conflicting global priorities. While these economic differences may not provoke immediate conflict, they pose long-term risks to Arctic governance, environmental stability, and climate mitigation efforts. The absence of a shared vision for the Arctic's future limits the potential for coordinated action in a region that is becoming increasingly central to global economic and environmental dynamics.

Security

The security landscape of the Arctic is increasingly fragile. The region is effectively divided between the A7—comprising the like-minded Arctic states—and Russia. Among all Arctic actors, Russia stands out as the dominant military power. It possesses more

icebreakers, military installations, Arctic coastline, and territory in the region than all other Arctic states combined (Gronholt-Pedersen and Fouche, 2022; Conley, Melino and Alterman, 2020). This imbalance underscores the need for the A7 to enhance their collective capabilities to deter and respond to a more assertive and militarized Russia. Meanwhile, China has been gradually positioning itself in the Arctic, largely by aligning with Russia to gain access. However, Moscow has been hesitant to fully integrate Beijing into Arctic affairs, limiting China's involvement despite their growing strategic partnership. China's support for Russia amid the war in Ukraine has further deepened suspicion among the A7, many of whom now view Beijing as a potential security threat in the Arctic. As a result, China's Arctic ambitions remain heavily dependent on Russia's willingness to grant it a foothold in the region. The USA seems to treat the Arctic as a theater for security competition. This has been demonstrated by the Biden Administration's numerous policy papers put out by armed services. Trump's push to acquire Greenland under the guise of national security concerns further shows that the Arctic remains important to the current administration. It seems like the EU's Arctic security strategy is to keep Russia out; the Americans want to keep China out; the Russians want to preserve their security hegemony; while the Chinese simply want more security access.

Russia

Russia maintains a formidable military presence in the Arctic, combining new facilities with the modernization of Soviet-era sites. The Nagurskoye base on Franz Josef Land has been upgraded with advanced radar and anti-drone systems, while Rogachevo on Novaya Zemlya has been modernized to strengthen Russia's strategic posture (Conley, Melino and Alterman, 2020). These upgrades are part of a broader air and coastal defense network stretching 4,800 km from Franz Josef Land to the Chukchi Peninsula (Busch, 2017). Russia has also deployed S-400 missile systems along its Arctic coastline (Bermudez, Conley, and Melino, 2020a, 2020b), and Tu-95MS bombers based there have participated in long-range strikes on Ukraine (Nikolov, 2025).

The Northern Fleet, stationed in the Barents Sea, is Russia's premier naval force and its most significant Arctic military asset. Equipped with ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) capable of striking the United States, the fleet benefits from defensive positioning in home waters. The fleet also operates Russia's only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, which launched strikes in Syria in 2016–17 but is now undergoing troubled repairs (Meduza, 2025; International Relations and Defence Committee, 2023). Despite setbacks, the fleet underscores the Arctic's role in Russia's broader power projection. Russia's Arctic-trained ground forces add another dimension. The 200th and 80th Separate Arctic Motor Rifle Brigades, along with the 61st Guards Naval Infantry Brigade, all operate under the Northern Fleet's Coastal Troops within the 14th Army Corps and are specifically trained and equipped for Arctic warfare; all have seen combat in Ukraine (Edvardsen, 2024).

Before its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's Arctic strategy had three priorities: protecting its second-strike nuclear deterrent in the Kola Bay region, projecting power into the North Atlantic via the GIUK gap, and safeguarding economic development through hydrocarbons, minerals, and new shipping lanes (Rumer, Sokolsky, & Stronski, 2021). The invasion shifted this calculus. The Arctic now functions as a secure rear base from which Russia can deploy high-value bombers and missile systems largely shielded from Ukrainian strikes. While Operation Spider Web demonstrated Ukraine's ability to target facilities deep in Russia, Arctic bases remain relatively safe from persistent attack (Philp, 2025).

The war has also drawn heavily on Arctic manpower. The three Arctic brigades have

been redeployed to Ukraine, suffering heavy losses (Humpert, 2023a). The 76th Guards Airborne Division, once stationed near Finland, also endured catastrophic casualties (UAWire, 2025). These losses have weakened Russia's conventional ground presence in the Arctic, though analysts note its naval and air strength remains largely intact (Gordon, 2023). Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples such as the Nenets and Yakuts have been disproportionately conscripted, bearing high per capita death rates that highlight deep inequalities and raise human rights concerns (Vyushkova, 2025).

Economically, the Arctic is central to Russia's wartime resilience. Despite sweeping Western sanctions, resource revenues, especially oil and LNG, have sustained the economy and supported the war (Shevchenko, 2025; Darvas & Martins, 2022). A key factor is the rise of a "shadow fleet" of LNG tankers operating from Yamal and other Arctic facilities. These vessels conceal ownership through shell companies, sail under flags of convenience, and use deceptive practices like turning off transponders and covert ship-to-ship transfers (Katinas, 2024). Many are poorly maintained and underinsured, posing risks to the fragile Arctic environment. A major spill or collision would leave coastal states to bear the cleanup costs, as responsibility would be difficult to assign (Caprile & Leclerc, 2024).

In sum, the Arctic has become both a sanctuary and a lifeline for Russia. Militarily, it shields strategic assets and sustains long-range operations; economically, it finances the war through energy exports despite sanctions. Yet vulnerabilities are mounting: depleted ground forces, the exploitation of minority populations, and environmental risks from unregulated shipping threaten to undermine Russia's Arctic strategy. The transformation of the region into a hub for both military and economic survival highlights its critical role in the Ukraine conflict, but also its fragility in the face of overextension and systemic strain.

EU

The European Union's (EU) security interests in the Arctic are primarily shaped by concerns over Russia's escalating militarization, the strategic role of NATO, and growing apprehensions about the reliability of the United States as a security partner. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU had identified Russia as a principal security threat in the Arctic, driven by Moscow's increasing military buildup in the region, signaling a shift from economic ambitions to military dominance in the region.

The EU addresses the Arctic military threat primarily through its participation in NATO, which remains the cornerstone of defense for nearly all EU countries (NATO, 2025a). The accession of Finland and Sweden—both EU members partially located in the Arctic—to NATO has significantly bolstered regional defense (Van Loon and Zandee, 2024). Finland contributes a large, well-trained army with deep expertise in Arctic warfare and strong artillery capabilities, while Sweden brings a highly capable air force (Black, Kleberg and Silfversten, 2024). Both countries were motivated to join NATO in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (BBC, 2022). Their membership has strengthened not only the EU defense posture but also NATO's collective capabilities in the region (Moyer, 2024).

EU support for NATO operations in the Arctic also extends to joint military exercises. EU countries that are NATO members have actively participated in exercises such as Cold Response, which has seen Germany's Sea Battalion conducting winter warfare training in Norway (Federal Foreign Office, 2024). French aircraft, naval vessels, and troops have also participated in NATO exercises above the Arctic Circle (Renaudin, 2024). Since Sweden and Finland joined NATO, their territories have been used for hosting exercises and as tripwire deployments (AFP, 2024; NATO, 2025b). Recently, for example, U.S. bombers flew over Finland in a demonstration of NATO air power, escorted by Finnish jets (Nilsen, 2024).

USA

Historically, the U.S. has relied on a layered network of northern defenses, including the Cold War-era Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line and its modern successor, the North Warning System, which is jointly operated with Canada. These systems serve to monitor potential incursions into North American airspace through the Arctic (Regehr, 2018). Close cooperation with Canada through NORAD remains a cornerstone of US defense posture in the region.

Under President Donald Trump's second term, US security interests in the Arctic have remained largely consistent with that of previous administrations, with a continued focus on countering Russian and Chinese influence. Despite renewed questions about the United States' commitment to NATO, particularly under Trump's leadership, NATO officers stationed in the Arctic report that operational cooperation remains steady. For example, the U.S. continues to participate in Arctic-focused military exercises, such as Formidable Shield 2025, which involved over 2,500 troops from ten NATO countries and was designed to test integrated air and missile defense systems in the High North (Nilsen, 2025). Additionally, Trump has decided that America has security interests in the Arctic. The American near-Arctic has been in the news as part of the efforts to stop the war in Ukraine, where Putin and Russia met at the largest U.S. military base in Alaska in order to help negotiate an end to the Ukraine War.

Alaska continues to serve as a central hub for American Arctic strategy. The U.S. Army's 11th Airborne Division, reactivated in 2022, focuses on Arctic operations and cold-weather readiness. Meanwhile, advanced air assets like the F-22 and F-35 remain stationed under Pacific Air Forces in Alaska. Plans to expand the Port of Nome into the United States' first deepwater Arctic port—capable of supporting both military and commercial traffic—remain underway, although the project has faced delays and budget challenges (Humpert, 2024). There is also discussion about reopening the Adak Naval Base.

In recent years, Chinese activity in the Arctic has drawn increasing U.S. attention. While China is not a formal Arctic state, it has declared itself a "near-Arctic" power and has invested heavily in Arctic research, infrastructure, and shipping routes. In response, the U.S., Canada, and Finland signed the 2024 ICE Pact—a trilateral agreement to rapidly produce modern icebreakers using the assistance of Finnish experience, thereby addressing critical capability gaps in the U.S. and Canadian fleets (Homeland Security, 2024). This move aims to mitigate China's growing capabilities in icebreaking capabilities, as China now possesses more than twice as many operational icebreakers as the U.S.

European reactions to Trump's return have ranged from guarded optimism to outright skepticism; one Norwegian minister reportedly began a countdown to the end of Trump's second term shortly after his inauguration (Thorsson, 2025). Nonetheless, Trump's goal of weakening the Russia-China strategic axis may have the unintended effect of sustaining NATO's relevance in Arctic strategy.

It is worth noting that under the second Trump administration, the United States has taken a markedly expansionist view of its Arctic-related interests, including the controversial idea of acquiring Greenland and even Canada. Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, has drawn particular attention due to its strategic location and abundant natural resources. The justifications for the acquisition of Greenland are mostly security related, such as the presence of Russian and Chinese interests, with the economic reasoning often having some spillover to security reasons, such as rare earth elements and other critical raw materials.

The Trump administration has asserted that U.S. security interests would be advanced by bringing Greenland under American control. President Trump has repeatedly declined to rule out the use of force for such a move and has instructed the intelligence community to spy

on Denmark and Greenland to assess various aspects of the process, such as on the ground support, to acquire Greenland. The Trump Administration, according to the New York Times decided to use an information operation to try to convince Greenland to either become part of US territory or form a Compact of Free Association with America, which is when a more powerful country gives a very weak country money in exchange for control over certain parts of the weaker countries policy, usually foreign and defense policy.

More provocatively, President Trump has previously also expressed a desire for Canada to become part of the United States, though the strategic rationale behind this claim remains unclear and largely rhetorical. It should also be known that Trump has a much more friendly relationship with the new Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney than he did with the former Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, who was the Prime Minister of Canada when Trump first voiced his designs on Canada. These assertions reflect a shift toward a more unilateral and aggressive posture in US Arctic policy under Trump 2.0.

China

China's security interests in the Arctic are strongly tied with Russia. These interests are demonstrated through joint exercises, training programs, and defense equipment cooperation, which are primarily driven by China's strategic interests in the region, which it identifies as a "Strategic New Frontier" (Van Loon and Zandee, 2024).

China and Russia have conducted joint military operations in the Arctic region, serving as interoperability training and geopolitical signaling. Notably, in July 2024, the two nations carried out their first joint strategic bomber patrol near Alaska, involving Chinese H-6K bombers and Russian Tu-95MS aircraft, escorted by Russian Su-30 and Su-35 fighters. This patrol marked the furthest north Chinese bombers have operated, entering the Alaska

Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) but remaining in international airspace (Reuters, 2024). Russo-China joint patrols are designed to enhance the operational coordination between the Chinese and Russian air forces, allowing them to operate seamlessly in various scenarios. Additionally, they demonstrate the deepening strategic partnership between the two countries, signaling to Western powers that Russia and China have powerful friends in each other (Williams, Bingen and MacKenzie, 2024; Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2023). The operations also provide China with valuable experience in long-range missions, including testing bomber routes from Russian airfields that could bring Alaska within striking distance. (Williams, Bingen and MacKenzie, 2024).

China and Russia have conducted joint coast guard exercises in the Arctic, which, while largely symbolic, provide practical training opportunities for Chinese forces operating north of the Arctic Circle. In October 2024, the Chinese Coast Guard participated in its first Arctic patrol alongside Russian counterparts, marking a significant expansion of China's regional operational range. Beyond these exercises, China has supplied Russia with anti-drone systems deployed in Arctic regions, and dual-use and mostly non-lethal military equipment (Staalesen, 2025). These transfers have enabled Russia to sustain its war in Ukraine by compensating for the loss of Western military and technological inputs, particularly in explosives, drones, drone parts, semiconductors and advanced electronics.

China's increased military interest in the Arctic is rooted in its strategic concept of "Strategic New Frontiers," which encompasses areas such as the deep sea, polar regions, cyberspace, and outer space—domains perceived as rich in resources and lacking robust governance (Hybrid CoE, 2021). Additionally, China has used space related industries, such as the satellite station it rented from Sweden from 2016 until 2020 as a ground station for its BeiDou navigation system. This framework

reflects China's ambition to expand its influence and access to the global commons, aligning with its goal of becoming a leading global power.

Internally, Chinese military publications such as *The Science of Military Strategy* emphasize the importance of preparing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for potential conflicts in these frontier domains, including the Arctic (Doshi, Dale-Huang and Zhang, 2021). Additionally, Chinese commentators say that China, home to 20% of the global population, deserves 20% of the resources in the global commons. However, it is worth noting that the Arctic is generally agreed to be an area of spillover, not an area where the first shots will be fired. Externally, China's 2018 Arctic White Paper articulates a commitment to peaceful cooperation and explicitly opposes the region's militarization. The document outlines China's intention to participate in Arctic affairs through scientific research, environmental protection, and sustainable development, positioning itself as a responsible regional stakeholder (State Council, 2018).

Additionally, Russia's dependency on China for fueling its Ukraine war machine and filling the hole left by the exodus of Western consumer goods has made Russia vulnerable to Chinese demands to open up the Arctic to China. However, the Russians also do not trust the Chinese, and it could very well be that the Chinese are trying not to overstay their welcome in the Arctic, which would lead to greater resistance than the subtle hesitance that already exists. (Judah, Sonne & Troianovski, 2025)

Comparison

The security strategies of China, the European Union (EU), Russia, and the United States in the Arctic reveal a growing divergence in priorities, tactics, and visions for the region's future. While less immediately explosive than disputes over climate change, these differences pose serious long-term risks to Arctic stability and cooperation. Each power brings its own security agenda to the region, shaped by broader geopolitical trends and domestic political dynamics, resulting in a complex and increasingly contested Arctic landscape.

China's approach to Arctic security is marked by subtle ambition and strategic positioning. While not an Arctic state, Beijing seeks to establish itself as a legitimate stakeholder through diplomatic engagement, scientific cooperation, and economic investment. Security, for China, is linked to securing access to Arctic sea lanes and resources, ensuring that no hostile bloc can deny its interests. Though China presents itself as a neutral actor focused on "win-win" cooperation, its growing alignment with Russia has clear security implications. By deepening economic ties with an increasingly isolated Moscow, China has gained access to infrastructure and influence in the region that would have been politically unthinkable a decade ago. However, this alignment is more opportunistic than ideological—Russia remains cautious of Chinese motives and reluctant to fully open the Arctic to Beijing's influence, despite its current dependence on Chinese support.

Russia's Arctic security posture is shaped by both strategic legacy and wartime necessity. The region hosts some of Russia's most critical military assets, including second-strike nuclear capabilities based in the Kola Peninsula. Protecting these assets has long been a top priority, and the modernization of the Northern Fleet and Arctic airbases has continued even amid Russia's war in Ukraine. Since 2022, the Kremlin has also used the Arctic as a relatively secure base from which to support operations in Ukraine, relocating high-value military systems away from areas vulnerable to Ukrainian strikes. Additionally, the redeployment of Arctic-based ground units to the Ukrainian front—where they have suffered heavy losses—has diminished Russia's conventional military threat to NATO in the High North. Still, Russia views the Arctic as a vital domain for asserting sovereignty, ensuring strategic depth, and safeguarding the economic lifelines that help sustain its war effort.

The European Union, while not a military alliance, views Arctic security primarily through the lens of deterring Russian aggression and upholding regional stability. The EU has no unified military posture in the Arctic but relies heavily on NATO, and particularly on member states like France and the Nordic countries, to represent its security interests. Russian militarization and the potential fallout of a successful Russian campaign in Ukraine remain central concerns for European policymakers. At the same time, a growing unease about the reliability of the United States under the Trump 2.0 administration is reshaping EU thinking. Recent American rhetoric questioning the value of NATO and signaling potential disengagement has raised alarms across European capitals. As a result, the EU is increasingly exploring options for greater strategic autonomy in Arctic affairs, even as it continues to depend on transatlantic defense structures.

The United States, historically the bedrock of Arctic and transatlantic security, has adopted a more unpredictable and unilateral stance under the current administration. While U.S. Arctic Command and military presence in Alaska remain strong, recent policy shifts have undermined longstanding alliances and introduced uncertainty into regional security planning. Instead of serving as a stabilizing force, the U.S. now appears to prioritize short-term national interests and power projection in the Arctic. This includes renewed emphasis on Arctic energy exploitation and dominance in the region's strategic chokepoints. These moves have strained relations with European allies and raised questions about the future of NATO cohesion in the High North.

Together, the diverging security interests of China, the EU, Russia, and the United States point to a more fragmented and contested Arctic future. All four actors are nuclear powers, and any miscalculation or escalation in the region carries catastrophic potential. The Arctic, once considered a zone of exceptional cooperation, now risks becoming a stage for great power rivalry. Without renewed diplomatic efforts and clear mechanisms for deconfliction, the Arctic's strategic calm may give way to increasing militarization and confrontation in the years ahead.

The increasing viability of the Northern Sea Route presents a potential alternative—or at least a complement—to the Suez Canal. For ships traveling between Europe and East Asia, especially those coming from Japan, northern China, or central China, the NSR can offer a significantly shorter journey.

Middle East Implications

The strategic developments taking place in the Arctic region are beginning to have implications that extend beyond the polar north, including into the Middle East. One of the most immediate areas of spillover is economic competition, particularly in regard to global shipping routes. The increasing viability of the Northern Sea Route presents a potential alternative—or at least a complement—to the Suez Canal. For ships traveling between Europe and East Asia, especially those coming from Japan, northern China, or central China, the NSR can offer a significantly shorter journey (Humpert, 2011). As Arctic ice continues to melt due to climate change, this route is becoming increasingly accessible for longer parts of the year.

The strategic value of the NSR is further enhanced by vulnerabilities associated with the Suez Canal. Periodic disruptions—such as the high-profile blockage of the canal by the Ever Given vessel in 2021, or threats of blockades stemming from instability in the Red Sea and surrounding regions—highlight the fragility of relying solely on the Suez route. For Egypt, which earns substantial annual revenue from canal traffic, even a modest diversion of global shipping to Arctic waters could have significant economic consequences. More broadly, the Middle East's traditional role as a geographic and logistical chokepoint may gradually be

challenged by Arctic alternatives, prompting regional actors to reassess their strategic economic positioning.

Beyond trade, the Arctic has also introduced new complexities into how U S defense commitments are perceived by its allies, including those in the Middle East. Both Saudi Arabia and Israel have pursued formal defense agreements with the United States (Fontenrose, 2025) in recent years, especially amid rising regional tensions and concerns about Iranian influence. However, recent developments in the Arctic have cast doubt, in some quarters, on the reliability of American security guarantees. A notable example is the Trump administration's widely reported interest in "purchasing" Greenland—a territory governed by Denmark, a NATO ally with a formal defense relationship with the United States. This raises questions about the extent to which US obligations toward its treaty partners are consistently respected.

For Middle Eastern nations contemplating their own defense arrangements with Washington, this precedent is not trivial. If a close US ally such as Denmark can be subjected to expansionist rhetoric or perceived disregard for sovereignty, it begs the question of how firmly the United States would stand by newer or more politically sensitive security commitments in a crisis. This concern is reinforced by broader trends in US foreign policy, including growing isolationist sentiment, shifts in strategic focus toward China and Russia, and the often divergent approaches taken by different presidential administrations. In this environment, the credibility of US defense treaties is no longer taken for granted, and Middle Eastern governments are becoming increasingly cautious in evaluating the long-term reliability of American support.

In summary, developments in the Arctic are beginning to influence strategic thinking in the Middle East. Whether through the emergence of alternative shipping corridors that may challenge the region's economic role, or through the indirect impact on perceptions of US strategic reliability, the Arctic is no longer a distant or irrelevant theater. Its evolving role in global politics is likely to remain a point of interest—and concern—for Middle Eastern policymakers in the years ahead.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intersecting interests of the European Union, China, Russia, and the United States in the Arctic, focusing on three key domains: climate, security, and economics. While all four powers are actively engaged in the region, their approaches differ significantly in both priorities and underlying strategic philosophies. These differences not only complicate regional cooperation but also risk exacerbating geopolitical tensions and accelerating environmental decline in a region already under immense ecological pressure.

The European Union consistently prioritizes climate action in its Arctic engagement. Environmental protection is deeply integrated into EU policy through instruments like the European Green Deal and Horizon research frameworks, reflecting a commitment to sustainability over resource exploitation. The EU's security interests center on deterring Russian aggression and preserving territorial stability, particularly in light of the war in Ukraine and growing uncertainty about American reliability under the Trump 2.0 administration. Economically, the EU supports innovation and sustainable development in the Arctic, often placing environmental stewardship ahead of commercial or extractive interests.

The United States presents a more variable Arctic profile, with priorities shifting substantially depending on the political administration in power. Prior to the Trump 2.0 administration, U.S. Arctic policy was broadly aligned with the EU—emphasizing climate adaptation, Indigenous rights, and alliance-based security through NATO. However, current policies have largely reversed that course. Climate change is now deprioritized, and economic exploitation of Arctic resources—

including potential collaboration with Russia—is increasingly emphasized. Security policy has also taken on a more unilateral character, with less emphasis on transatlantic cooperation and more on asserting U.S. strategic dominance, even as bipartisan opposition to Chinese Arctic ambitions persists.

China, by contrast, treats the Arctic primarily as a space of economic and strategic opportunity. Climate concerns are largely instrumental, engaged with mainly through scientific diplomacy or multilateral forums where environmental discourse supports broader political objectives. Security-wise, China seeks to legitimize its presence as a non-Arctic state through partnerships—particularly with Russia—and by establishing a long-term presence in Arctic governance institutions. Economically, China is the most aggressive of the four powers, using initiatives like the Polar Silk Road to invest in infrastructure, secure resource access, and expand trade routes. This reflects a strategy that treats the Arctic as an extension of China's global economic ambitions, often at odds with environmental sustainability.

Russia views the Arctic as both a strategic buffer and an economic lifeline. The region plays a central role in its military posture, housing second-strike nuclear capabilities and serving as a relatively secure base for sustaining operations in Ukraine. Economically, the Arctic is key to maintaining Russia's wartime economy, particularly through oil, gas, and mineral extraction. Russia also sees climate change not as a crisis but as an opportunity to access and exploit newly available resources. Its engagement in the Arctic is therefore driven by sovereignty, security, and economic necessity, often with little regard for environmental consequences or multilateral governance norms.

In conclusion, the Arctic strategies of these four powers differ not only in policy emphasis but also in the values and long-term goals that underpin them. The EU prioritizes sustainability, China emphasizes economic expansion, Russia seeks strategic survival and profit, and the

United States oscillates between multilateralism and unilateralism based on domestic political shifts. These divergent approaches complicate collective Arctic governance at a time when cooperation is urgently needed to manage ecological risks and prevent geopolitical escalation. Without a shared framework or sustained dialogue, the Arctic risks becoming not a space for cooperation and science, but one of growing fragmentation, exploitation, and strategic rivalry.

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Misunderstanding or Misinformation: Competing Narratives of Negotiations Over the Release of Jonathan Pollard at the 1998 Wye River Summit

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This article seeks to confirm the veracity of Binyamin Netanyahu's claim that Jonathan Pollard's release was promised by President Bill Clinton in exchange for agreeing to the Wye River Memorandum, an agreement between Israel and Palestinian Authority (PA) that, among other things, offered the withdrawal of Israel from 13% of the West Bank and the release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the PA's increased cooperation with Israel in security matters and renunciation of all political violence. While no definitive answer can be found, as no transcript of the meetings exist, the lack of supporting evidence and strong counterclaims from other participants at the conference points towards Netanyahu either misunderstanding the President or intentionally spreading misinformation about the meeting. Part One discusses the events that led up to the Wye River summit to provide context for the negotiations. Part Two compares the autobiographies of Clinton and Netanyahu, as well as contemporary news coverage and government press releases, with the goal of determining whether Clinton did or did not promise to release Pollard. Part Three discusses Netanyahu's testimony in the context of his domestic political situation and fact-checks his claims regarding American interference in the 1996 Israeli General Election and the impact of CIA Director George Tenet's threatened resignation. Part Four discusses the testimonies of three members of the American delegation which, alongside the lack of similar testimonies from any members of the Israeli delegation, further strengthen Clinton's claim. Finally, Part Five discusses the differing perceptions of Pollard between the American and Israeli delegations, as well as potential confusion over the sentencing requirements for the Espionage Act, and discusses broader issues of poor communication in Israel-American diplomatic dealings.

Introduction

In October 1998, delegations from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the United States convened in Wye River, Maryland to negotiate the implementation of the Oslo Accords. While the Wye River Memorandum would be signed by the three nations' leaders and enacted by the Knesset, this was not a foregone conclusion. On the night before the signing of the Memorandum, the deal was nearly scuppered over the issue of Jonathan Pollard, an American-born naval intelligence analyst who had been sentenced to life in prison for committing acts of espionage against the United States on behalf of Israel. The release of Pollard, whose commitment to Israeli interests and harsh sentencing made him popular among Netanyahu's domestic base, was raised by the Prime Minister as a condition for signing the Memorandum. However, what happened next is a matter of historical debate. The Prime Minister would allege that Pollard's release was promised by President Clinton, but the promise was broken at the eleventh hour using the excuse of CIA director George Tenet's threatened resignation, to force Netanyahu into signing the Memorandum without any concessions to Israel. Clinton, for his part, would deny that any such promise was made, instead arguing that any agreement to release Pollard was conditional on the agreement of his foreign policy team, which included Tenet. Following the threat of Tenet's resignation, as well as the disapproval of Secretary of State Madeline Albright and National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, this condition was not met, voiding any potential promise. He would also allege that far from being an excuse, the resignation of Tenet would have severely impacted the implementation of the Oslo accords and Yasser Arafat's willingness to sign the Memorandum.

Unfortunately, no transcripts of the negotiations in Wye River have been made available to the public, making it impossible to know for certain which of Clinton's or Netanyahu's contradictory descriptions was accurate. To determine the likelihood of each

of the alternatives, this article analyzes the autobiographies of Clinton and Netanyahu, both of which cover the events of Wye River from their perspectives. This is by no means a perfect substitute for a true primary source, as autobiographies are inherently biased and self-motivated. However, by placing each leader's narrative in the context of his respective country's contemporary political circumstances and factoring in each leader's motivations for presenting the story in the manner they did, a picture begins to form.

It would appear that Netanyahu's claim of a broken promise was either the result of a misunderstanding of Clinton's position, or an intentional attempt to mislead the Israeli public and bolster a larger narrative of betrayal by foreign and domestic allies. This, paired with untrue statements from Netanyahu regarding the severity of Pollard's punishment compared to Soviet spies and an inability or unwillingness to understand the geopolitical ramifications of Tenet's resignation, points to Clinton's insistence that no promise was made or broken being the more likely claim.

Beyond debating the merits of Clinton and Netanyahu's respective narratives regarding the negotiations, this article also seeks to explore how the fundamentally different American and Israeli conceptions of Pollard, both in regard to his motivations and the extent of the damage caused by his actions, made conflict over the issue inevitable. Therefore, the debate over Pollard's release can be seen as a case study in how opposing narratives can derail negotiations even between close allies, and demonstrates the importance of mutual understanding to the continuation of America-Israel relations.

Part One: Context for Wye River

In 1993, Israel recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of Palestine following its renunciation of terrorism and its recognition of Israel's right to exist. This allowed Israel to enter into direct negotiations with the PLO,

which was previously illegal under Israeli Law, ultimately resulting in the signing of the first Oslo Accord (Oslo I) and the Gaza-Jericho Agreement one year later. These agreements created the Palestinian Authority which, alongside Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the city of Jericho, made a two-state solution appear possible for the first time since Israel's founding. This sense of optimism was reflected in polling. Sixty-four percent of Jewish Israelis either strongly or somewhat agreed with negotiating with the PLO (Roper Center, 1993) and 57% of Israelis supported the territorial withdrawals (Waxman, 2008).

Unfortunately, rather than being the prelude to a successful two-state solution, 1995 would be remembered as the beginning of the end. On November 4, Labor Prime Minister and leading proponent of the Oslo Accords, Yitzhak Rabin, would be assassinated at a campaign rally by a right-wing Israeli. While Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, would attempt to carry out the late Prime Minister's vision, allowing the newly formed Palestinian Authority to hold its first ever elections, a series of suicide bombings by the Islamist terrorist group Hamas and the general feeling that Peres' invocation of Rabin was a cynical political stunt, would result in Binyamin Netanyahu being elected for the first time in 1996 on a staunchly anti-Oslo platform. Indeed, throughout the early to mid-1990s, Netanyahu had emerged as the chief critic of the peace movement, penning a New York Times op-ed opposing Oslo I (Netanyahu, 1993) and participating in rallies that called for Rabin's death, causing his political opponents, including Rabin's widow, to accuse him of inciting the assassination (Public Broadcasting Service, 2024).

However, while Netanyahu opposed the peace movement, he could not fully abandon it. 80% of Israelis still supported the implementation of Oslo (United Nations, 1998), and while Netanyahu was able to beat the Labor candidate to the post of Prime Minister, it is worth providing context to explain this result.

Firstly, Netanyahu's election was held in the brief period of time between 1992 and 1998 in which the Prime Minister was elected directly, rather than being chosen by the party with the most seats in the Knesset. While Netanyahu was allowed to form a government, his rightist Likud party would actually receive less of the popular vote and fewer seats in the Knesset than Labor (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1996). Rather than simply representing a rejection of Labor's policy towards the Palestinians, many attribute Peres' loss to a boycott of the vote led by Arab Israelis, who opposed the Prime Minister's military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon Operation Grapes of Wrath (Rekhess, 1996). Low turnout among Arab voters, most of whom were expected to support Peres over Netanyahu, all but guaranteed the latter's victory in the 1996 general election.

However, while support for the peace process forced Netanyahu to continue aspects of it, such as withdrawing troops from 80% of Hebron in 1997, his first term in office would represent a massive departure from his immediate predecessors. On September 29, 1996, Netanyahu began excavation work near the Al Aqsa Mosque Compound, causing riots and a subsequent IDF crackdown. The Western Wall Tunnel Riots, as they would be called, would result in the deaths of 70 Palestinians and 16 IDF soldiers (Eldar, 2009). In 1997, Netanyahu would begin construction of the Har Homa settlement in East Jerusalem, greatly angering the Palestinian Authority and stalling peace talks.

To prevent the peace process from losing momentum, President Clinton proposed a summit between himself, Netanyahu, and Yasser Arafat at Wye River, in which further implementation of the Oslo accords could be discussed. While Netanyahu was opposed to this summit, and often cited the promise of Pollard's release as the reason for agreeing to attend, the reality is more complicated. Firstly, Netanyahu faced domestic pressure to join, with 82% of Israelis supporting his attendance (United Nations, 1998). Secondly, Netanyahu

was allegedly strong-armed into attending by the Clinton administration. While Clinton would never condition US aid to Israel, it would reach its lowest point in 1998, and the administration would reject a 1.2 billion-dollar construction grant requested by Netanyahu (Lasensky 2004). Furthermore, in a contemporary article by the Washington Post, Clinton's national security advisor Sandy Berger confirmed that he, alongside Albright, would publicly blame Netanyahu for the failure of the peace process in the event he failed to attend (Gellman, 1998).

For Clinton and Arafat, Wye River represented a last-ditch effort to save the faltering peace talks in the wake of Rabin's murder and the resurgence of Likud. For Netanyahu, it represented an opportunity to placate the majority of Israelis who supported negotiations with the PA while simultaneously pushing for terms that were most favorable to Israeli security interests and, in the case of Jonathan Pollard's release, his domestic political base. With this in mind, the use of heavy-handed negotiation tactics, such as Berger and Albright's ultimatum, Tenet's threat of resignation, and Netanyahu's threat to abandon the negotiations should Pollard not be released, can be easily understood. In the context of Israel-Palestine in the mid to late 1990s, the summit was viewed by all parties as an urgent last-ditch effort to salvage the stalling peace talks (or at least to gain the best possible terms before they fell apart completely), and all parties acted accordingly.

Part Two: Clinton's Alleged Promise

Before exploring the differing accounts of the Pollard negotiations, it is worth establishing the facts that are included in both versions. Neither Clinton nor Netanyahu deny that Pollard's release was put forward as a condition for the signing of the Wye River Memorandum, nor do they deny that this condition was withdrawn following the threatened resignation of CIA Director Tenet. Rather, the disagreement comes in the form of whether or not Pollard's release was promised by Clinton, and therefore

whether the President acted dishonestly to gain Netanyahu's signature. In his autobiography, *Bibi: My Story,* Netanyahu emphatically advances this claim, writing,

> Clinton agreed to release Pollard in the days leading up to Wye. This was designed to be an added incentive for me to do the deal. Now, in the concluding hours of the conference, as the final communique was being drafted, he asked to see me. "Bibi,' he said, 'I'm sorry to drop this on you. But I can't release Pollard. I'm getting enormous pushback from the Pentagon and CIA. George Tenet threatened to resign. I just can't do it." I was stunned. Here was the president of the United States, whose officials constantly berated me for not having the courage to make difficult decisions that involved the security of my country and that could topple my government, backing away from a solemn commitment because of a bureaucratic hurdle that in no way threatened his presidency (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 306).

The repeated use of promissory language such as "agreed" and "solemn commitment" make Netanyahu's message clear: Clinton had promised to release Pollard in order to get the Prime Minister to sign a deal that was disadvantageous to Israel, before withdrawing that promise. This allegedly forced Netanyahu to sign a deal without concessions to Israel, or leave and be blamed for the deal's failure.

Clinton's portrayal of the discussions over Pollard in *My Life,* however, is more nuanced. While Clinton acknowledges that he did not dismiss the Israeli request out of hand, writing "In fact, I had told the prime minister that if that's what it took to make peace, I was inclined to do it," he directly follows this statement with "but I would have to check with our people." This is the

closest thing to a promise Clinton made regarding Pollard, and it is exceptionally noncommittal. The wording implies that should "his people" reject the release, Clinton would be unable to make the promise. This pattern of agreeing, but conditioning his agreement on the approval of staffers and agency heads is continued in the same chapter, with Clinton writing:

> I told Netanyahu that I would review the case seriously and try to work through it with Tenet and the national security team, but that Netanyahu was better off with a security agreement that he could count on than he would be with the release of Pollard (Clinton, 2004, chap. 49).

While perhaps not inspiring confidence in the President's willingness to commit to agreements, it is also categorically not a promise. Clinton, in line with the previous discussion between himself and Netanyahu, implies that the promise would only be made on the condition that his staff agrees. This condition was not fulfilled, due to dissenting opinions from Berger and Albright and the threatened resignation of Tenet. Therefore, the decision not to release Pollard was entirely consistent with Clinton's previous statements and cannot be characterized as a broken promise.

The President concludes the section on Wye River by discussing the concessions Netanyahu demanded in lieu of Pollard's release, writing:

> Finally, after we talked again at length, Bibi agreed to stay with the agreement, but only on the condition that he could change the mix of prisoners to be released, so that he would free more ordinary criminals and fewer who had committed security offenses (Clinton, 2004, chap. 49).

While initially opposed to this change, Arafat was willing to acquiesce following a meeting with Albright and Middle East coordinator Dennis Ross (Clinton, 2004, chap. 49). This seemingly implies that Netanyahu understood the highly conditional nature of the agreement over Pollard and pivoted to a new demand (i.e. a change in the type of prisoners released), and was willing to agree to the deal following that concession being granted. It also cuts against Netanyahu's portrayal of the Memorandum as having been signed while he "gritted his teeth" due to a lack of concessions from the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, in his autobiography, Netanyahu specifically mentions Arafat's demand that Israel release prisoners who participated in terror attacks as a major sticking point in negotiations (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 306). Rather than being forced into a corner by Clinton and Arafat, as Netanyahu sought to portray the situation, he was able to extract a valuable security concession in exchange for the dropping a demand that offered little tangible benefit to Israel.

It is also worth noting that Clinton's claim that he had not promised to release Pollard was not merely an attempt to rewrite history in the self-promotional medium of autobiography, but the official stance of the United States at the time. In a Washington Post article published eighteen days after the Memorandum was signed, White House officials reiterated that, while Netanyahu may have believed or hoped otherwise, no formal commitment to release Pollard was made by the president (Pincus & Gellman, 1998). The article quotes an anonymous official involved in the negotiations, who said, "I know some Israelis claim vehemently that he promised, but I don't have any evidence from any discussion that I had with the President that he told the Israelis he would release Pollard." Furthermore, in a series of letters of assurance written by American ambassador to Israel, Edward Walker Jr. and Dennis Ross, which have been made available by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pollard's release is never mentioned nor promised (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

2023), This implies that even if Clinton had personally guaranteed Pollard's release, which the President vehemently denies to this day, it was not the official position of the United States Government, nor was it expected or requested by the Israeli foreign service.

Part Three: Netanyahu's Narrative of Betrayal

To accuse the President of the United States of lying to force Israel into a disadvantageous deal, especially if the accusation is false, would be a risky action for the Prime Minister of Israel to take. Therefore, it is necessary to explain what motive Netanyahu had in portraying the negotiations over Pollard in this way. The descriptions of the Wye River Conference in Netanyahu's autobiography appear to be part of a larger media strategy, designed to portray the Prime Minister as the victim of conspiracy between Labor Party leader Ehud Barak and President Clinton, to remove him from power.

In the chapter on Wye River, directly following his descriptions of the negotiations, Netanyahu describes the political turmoil he faced at home, seemingly in an attempt to link the two events. By signing the Wye River Memorandum, Netanyahu risked provoking a revolt by religious parties in his coalition. Netanyahu's government, therefore, was dependent on Ehud Barak's Labor Party, which promised allegiance in exchange for signing the Memorandum. However, following the approval of the Memorandum, the Labor party withdrew their support, forcing Likud to preemptively call for elections. This decision by Barak, Netanyahu claims, was done at the behest of the Clinton administration, and his autobiography attempts to prove both means and motive.

Netanyahu claims that the Clinton administration, believing that Netanyahu's unwillingness to make concessions was the chief obstacle to a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, sought to oust the sitting Prime Minister in favor of one more amenable to compromise. He writes:

When I failed to deliver the far-reaching concessions that he thought were necessary for a final peace settlement, he put all his chips on Barak and helped him defeat me. Soon after Barak's victory, Clinton invited him to a gala dinner at the White House. They embraced ecstatically before the cameras. A guest swears he heard them say, "We did it." (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 311).

The Prime Minister's allegation of American intervention in Israeli elections is further evidenced by Netanyahu's claim that the Clinton administration admitted to aiding the Peres campaign (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 310). While all of Netanyahu's evidence is anecdotal, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Clinton administration would have rather conducted negotiations with an Israeli Prime Minister who shared similar foreign policy positions to those of Washington, and thus Netanyahu arguably succeeds in establishing motive.

However, when attempting to prove the means by which Clinton ousted Netanyahu from power, his case as laid out in the autobiography is significantly weaker. The Prime Minister cites the fact that the Barak campaign hired key Clinton allies James Carville, Stan Greenberg, and Bob Shrum as consultants, a move Netanyahu describes as Clinton "putting his thumb on the scale of an Israeli election." Furthermore, the Prime Minister alleges that the hiring of Carville, Greenberg, and Shrum was done at the President's request, with Netanyahu describing the trio as "sent" by the President (2024, p. 309).

While the impact of Carville, Greenberg, and Shrum on the Barak campaign has been widely reported and accepted, Netanyahu fails to provide evidence that Clinton was involved in their appointment or to disprove the considerable evidence that he was not. Firstly, while Carville and Greenberg were close Clinton allies, by the 1999 Israeli elections the

men had already established themselves as political consultants independent of the Clinton administration, having pivoted to international politics. Carville had been involved in successful election campaigns in Latin America, while Greenberg had helped elect Nelson Mandela in South Africa (Greenberg, 2013), and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom (Kolbert, 1999). Indeed, insofar as any head of state can be accused of having "sent" the consultants, there is more evidence that such an order came from Blair than Clinton, with a contemporary report by the Washington Post describing Greenberg's hiring by the Barak campaign as having been done, "On the advice of British Prime Minister Tony Blair" (Hockstader, 1999). Moreover, Carville, during an interview with the Jewish Telegram Agency, denies that his involvement with the Barak campaign was even known by Clinton until being informed of it by Netanyahu during negotiations (Stein, 1999). While Carville has a motivation to protect his former client by downplaying Clinton's involvement, no evidence to the contrary has been produced, and therefore the onus is on Netanyahu to prove Clinton's involvement, not on Carville to prove his lack thereof.

Secondly, while Carville and Greenberg can both accurately be described as Clinton allies, Bob Shrum had never worked for the President in any capacity. Thirdly, both Greenberg and Shrum had reasons to involve themselves in Israeli politics beyond loyalty to President Clinton. Shrum had reportedly visited the country approximately twelve times to conduct amateur archeological and historical research, while Greenberg had lived in Israel during the 1970s, working as a political science professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In light of Greenberg and Shrum's considerable interest in the State of Israel, the implication that their work in Israeli politics was wholly or primarily motivated by a desire to aid the Clinton administration appears weak.

Finally, Netanyahu's argument that the hiring of Democratic-party aligned campaign consultants constituted foreign intervention is further weakened by the fact that Netanyahu had hired an American political consultant of his own, Republican strategist and Reagan-ally Arthur Finklestein, during the 1999 Israeli election, as well as in his successful 1996 campaign (Sontag, 1998). The Prime Minister neglects to mention these in his autobiography, likely to avoid allegations of hypocrisy.

Whether or not Netanyahu sincerely believed that his loss in the 1999 Israeli general elections was caused by Clinton's intervention is beyond the scope of this article. However, if the Prime Minister is taken at his word, it appears that his preoccupation with domestic political issues negatively influenced his ability to understand Clinton's motivations. Consider the quote referenced in Part One of this article, in which the Prime Minister emphasizes the fact that his signing of the Memorandum had the potential to topple his governing coalition, while Tenet's resignation did not similarly threaten Clinton's presidency. While this is technically accurate, it ignores any motivations, other than losing control of government, that might justify the President's decision to keep Tenet at the expense of Pollard's release. Clinton explains these motivations himself in his autobiography, writing:

> Security and commitments by the Israelis and Palestinians to work together against terror were at the heart of the agreement we had reached. Tenet had helped the sides to work out the details and had agreed that the CIA would support their implementation. If he left, there was a real chance Arafat would not go forward. I also needed George in the fight against al Qaeda and terrorism (Clinton, 2004 chap. 49).

In other words, the focus on maintaining political power inherent in Netanyahu's narrative of betrayal, precludes him from acknowledging

other factors that did not conform to this narrative. While it is possible, or even probable, that this narrative represented an attempt to reframe his concessions regarding Pollard rather than a sincerely held belief, the Prime Minister—intentionally or unintentionally—misleads the reader and the Israeli public on the nature of the deal.

Furthermore, Netanyahu minimizes the level of pushback the Clinton administration faced in releasing Pollard. Besides internal opposition in the form of Sandy Berger, Madeline Albright, and Ross, the entire security apparatus of the United States had closed ranks behind CIA Director Tenant. Both FBI spokesman Peter Scafidi and Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon issued statements indicating their respective organizations' opposition to Pollard's release, as did the Senate Intelligence Committee in the form of ranking member Senator Richard Shelby and his vice-chair Senator Bob Kerrey (CBS Interactive, 2003). Both Ross and Tenet also claim that speaker of the House and de-facto leader of the Republican Party, Newt Gingrich, was outraged that Pollard's release was even discussed, let alone promised (Ross, 2008, p.457). Had Pollard been released, the President's ability to pass legislation would likely have been seriously stymied. Therefore, Netanyahu's claim that Clinton's presidency would not be threatened had he released Pollard, ignores the very real political pressure applied to the President.

Part Four: Other Relevant Testimonies

Of course, the Wye River conference was not merely a meeting between Clinton and Netanyahu, but between the American and Israeli negotiating teams. While much of the discussions regarding clemency for Pollard were held in private between the President and Prime Minister, their delegations were regularly briefed on the details of these private meetings and can thus corroborate or refute their respective leader's narratives.

Two members of Clinton's delegation, Dennis Ross and George Tenet discuss the negotiations over Pollard in their respective memoirs. Both men write that Clinton denied making the promise to Netanyahu, although Tenet claims that he "had all but walked up to that point" (Tenet & Harlow, 2008, p. 69), and interestingly, both claim that if Clinton had made such a promise, they would be reluctantly willing to release the spy. Ross writes

> The President asked what I should do. I asked him, "Dd you make a commitment to release Pollard. If you did, you have to release him." The President swore he had made no promises, he'd said he would see what he could do, but he made no promises. I then said, "If you did not make a promise to him, you should not give in to this. This is Bibi's problem and it is not tenable. Is he going to forego a deal that enhances Israel's security, breaks the stalemate on peace, and gives the process a major push so he can have Pollard? That is not sustainable in Israel. He can't do it and you can't give in to this kind of bullshit" (Ross, 2004, p. 455).

While not providing definitive proof of Clinton's claim that he made no promises regarding Pollard, it at least confirms that the American delegation was operating under the assumption that Pollard's release was not promised. Clinton's assertion that no promise was made is further supported by his notetaker Aaron David Miller, who, in an op-ed in Time Magazine, wrote:

> Clinton gave it serious consideration and was inclined to agree. CIA director George Tenet, also at Wye and immersed in the Israeli-Palestinian security part of the talks, threatened to resign if Clinton agreed to spring Pollard. The President was lobbied

hard also by Secretary Albright to reject the Pollard release. He backed off, and we got the deal without Pollard (Miller, 2014).

Miller's use of the phrase "serious consideration," followed by the President "backing off" in response to negative feedback from Tenet and Albright implies that the promise was never made, which is consistent with Clinton's claim. As notetaker, Miller's testimony carries additional weight, as he was likely privy to information which the rest of the delegation, excluding Clinton, were not. The article's explicit anti-Pollard stance likely precludes it from use as an unbiased source, but when considering the corroborating evidence from Clinton, Ross, and Tenet, his claim is likely accurate.

Interestingly, Ross's conclusion is that Netanyahu was largely acting in good faith, genuinely believing that Pollard's release was promised to him by Clinton due to a miscommunication. In a meeting with Netanyahu's delegation, Ross claims he said,

> It is clear to me there is a misunderstanding: the President is adamant that he made no promise to release Pollard; it is clear that Bibi believes he had such an assurance. We can't settle that, but let's be honest with ourselves what you are going to face. Whatever the immediate political gains of holding out for Pollard now, where will Bibi be next week when it is clear he has sacrificed an agreement that served Israel's security interests; that he can now go only backward with the Palestinians; and that he will have destroyed his relationship with the President? (Ross, 2004, p. 457).

Notably, no members of the Israeli delegation have publicly claimed that President Clinton promised to release Pollard. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the fact that

Netanyahu was the only person directly involved with the negotiations to claim that Clinton had promised Pollard's release is noteworthy.

Indeed, the main proponent of Netanyahu's claim was Pollard himself, who claimed in a blog post responding to Ross's memoir that Clinton had reneged on the deal to release him, implying a promise (Pollard, 2005). However, Pollard's claim cannot reasonably be used to argue for the Prime Minister's account of events, even before one considers the spy's inherent bias and incentive to do so. Firstly, Pollard was obviously not present for the negotiations, instead receiving updates from Netanyahu. Secondly, while Pollard may support Netanyahu's claim that Clinton made and broke a promise, the rest of his testimony goes against Netanyahu's narrative, as it implies that the Israeli government had no actual intention of negotiating for his release. Instead, Pollard claimed that he was used as a bargaining chip to bolster support for deals viewed as deleterious to Israeli interests, such as withdrawing from Hebron or dividing Jerusalem, without losing public support, writing,

> Over the years…the Government publicly raised the hope that I would be released as a reward for making these terrible concessions. Each time the Nation comforted itself, thinking, well at least we will get Pollard… But it was a lie. Even at Wye, the bid for my release was simply to be the fig leaf to sell a bad deal to the Israeli public. As Dennis Ross puts it (page 455): "[The Prime Minister] said he couldn't do the deal without it. He said that he'd made concessions on the prisoners based on the assumption that he would have Pollard and on that basis he could sell the prisoners [release], indeed, could sell the whole deal." But like anything expendable, I was dropped from the agenda when the Americans reneged on their commitment to free me. And

Israel released the Arab murderers and terrorists all the same (Pollard, 2005).

This implies that while Pollard believed Clinton had lied, he also believed that Netanyahu and his delegation was not sincere in their attempts to release him, contradicting the Prime Minister's claims.

Part Five: Differing Conceptions of Pollard between America and Israel

Regardless of whether Clinton or Netanyahu's recollection of events is correct, it is worth asking why negotiations over the release of Pollard were viewed as having high enough stakes to justify both Tenet and Netanyahu risking the failure of a major foreign policy achievement such as the implementation of the Oslo accords. This points to a fundamentally different conception of Pollard among the Israeli and American delegations, as well as their respective publics.

The Israeli position towards Pollard was one of sympathy, if not approval. While Netanyahu disavowed Pollard's actions, he also criticized the American government for sentencing Pollard to life, writing, "His thirty year prison sentence was much longer than those meted out to soviet spies who had actually spied against America and damaged US security" (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 306). This claim is false, as in the same year that Pollard was arrested, two soviet spies would receive the same sentence after being charged with the same crime (FBI, 2016). However, it represented the mainstream pro-Pollard position that spying on an ally is less damaging than spying on behalf of an enemy nation, and should result in a more lenient sentence. However, the American perception of Pollard was far less favorable, especially within the intelligence community, as illustrated in the CIA's 1987 damage assessment report, which lays out two major factors that justified his continued imprisonment.

Firstly, the American government and public viewed Pollard's actions as heavily motivated by financial gain. This is not to say that the spy's motivations were entirely monetary. Indeed, the damage report includes numerous examples that contradict Pollard's mercenary reputation. According to testimony collected by the CIA, Pollard's commitment to Israel was longstanding, beginning at age twelve after being inspired by Israel's victory in the Six-Day War and further strengthened after attending a science-based summer camp in Israel that featured heavy encouragement to make aliyah (National Security Archive, 1987). However, the report also demonstrates the lucrative nature of Pollard's arrangement. According to the report, in February of 1985, the wages paid to Pollard by Israel were raised to 2,500 USD per month (National Security Archive, 1987). While accepting payment whatsoever undercuts the claim that Pollard was primarily motivated by support for Israel, it is especially damning when one adjusts for inflation. The 2025 equivalent of what Pollard earned reaches a total of 74,300 USD, not including the eight months of espionage he conducted at an unknown pre-raise rate. A cursory glance at current wages for Naval Intelligence Analysts suggests a yearly salary of between 65,000 and 100,000 USD (Glassdoor, 2025). Assuming Pollard was paid somewhere within this range as an analyst, his espionage work would represent a significant boost in income.

Secondly, the CIA did not agree with the Israeli position that, due to Israel's status as an ally, American information falling into Israeli hands did not constitute a major security issue. Rather, the CIA claimed that the information provided to Israel would not necessarily stay in Israel, but could instead be provided to third party countries (National Security Archive, 1987). The report states:

> The unauthorized disclosure to the Israelis of such a large and varied body of classified material poses risks of severe kinds to US intelligence sources and methods, analytical capabilities

and intelligence exchanges, and foreign-policy interests, including the possibility of extended compromise of some of Pollard's material to third countries (National Security Archive, 1987).

This goes a long way to explaining the disconnect between American and Israeli perceptions of Pollard. To the American intelligence community, Israel was the first, not final, stop for the information he provided.

Moreover, even if the information provided by Pollard was not seen or utilized by any country other than the US-allied State of Israel, Pollard would still have been in breach of the 1917 Espionage Act, with which he was charged. Specifically, 18 US Code § 794 - Gathering or Delivering Defense Information to Aid Foreign Government, makes no distinction between providing to an allied or enemy nation:

> Whoever, with intent or reason to believe that it is to be used to the injury of the United States or to the advantage of a foreign nation, communicates, delivers, or transmits, or attempts to communicate, deliver, or transmit, to any foreign government, or to any faction or party or military or naval force within a foreign country, whether recognized or unrecognized by the United States, or to any representative, officer, agent, employee, subject, or citizen thereof, either directly or indirectly, any document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blueprint, plan, map, model, note, instrument, appliance, or information relating to the national defense, shall be punished by death or by imprisonment for any term of years or for life (Cornell Law School, n.d).

Netanyahu's claim that Israel's status as an American ally should result in a more lenient sentence for Pollard does not comport with the law as written, as "to any foreign government" implies that the law does not consider whether a spy acts on behalf of a friendly or hostile nation. This reading of the law was all but confirmed in 2010, when the Terrorism and Homeland Security subcommittee of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, stated that Pollard's motive of aiding an ally rather than intentionally hurting the United States did not factor into his sentencing. In the transcript, Senator Jon Kyl (R-Arizona) says:

> And with regard to the question of motive…[Pollard] had a very good motive. He did not want to hurt the United States at all, but he did want to help his country of Israel. He is serving life in prison because motive in that case did not matter. It was the effect of the leak of the secrets to another government that was the problem (US Government Publishing Office, 2010).

While it is unclear whether Netanyahu was unaware of the Espionage Act's lack of differentiation between spies working on behalf of enemy or allied nations, his self-portrayal in *Bibi*, as well as the widespread sympathy for Pollard among Israelis, points to this conclusion. If this was the case, it points to a wider issue in diplomatic dealings between Israel and Washington, namely an inability or unwillingness to clarify the beliefs and narratives of each party and work towards a common understanding of the facts before beginning negotiations. In this sense, both Clinton and Netanyahu share blame. While Netanyahu likely should have understood the broad nature of the Espionage Act and communicated it to the Israeli public, Clinton should have clarified this to ensure negotiations over Pollard's release would not

be hindered by such misunderstandings. For an alternative example that demonstrates how diverging narratives and understandings can be bridged in diplomatic dealings with Israel, consider the conversation between US President George Bush Sr. and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir during the first Gulf War, in which Israel was asked to refrain from retaliating against Iraqi SCUD attacks (Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, 1989). This request flew in the face of traditional concepts of deterrence and risked undermining Israel's reputation as a country that would defend itself when threatened. However, in their discussion, the President effectively communicated his reasoning, namely that Israeli retaliation could create the impression that the Gulf War was a war between "the West" and "the Arab World," rather than a war against Iraq specifically, which may cause other Arab states to not cooperate in fighting Saddam Hussein. The American led coalition would successfully repel the Iraqi army from Kuwait, in part due to the cooperation of Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and Iraq's threat to Israel would be significantly reduced. Had Washington been less effective in explaining their position to Israel, or not attempted to whatsoever, it is possible that Arab cooperation against Iraq would have been withdrawn and Israeli security would be further imperiled. Overall, the successful talks between Shamir and Bush Sr. demonstrate the value of communication and shared understanding to diplomatic negotiations.

Conclusion

As a tool for historical research, autobiographies are inherently flawed. However, in cases where true primary sources such as meeting transcripts are unavailable, they can provide otherwise unknowable information that, when checked against the autobiographies of other involved parties and relevant documents such as contemporary news coverage, can help clarify the historical record. The negotiations over Pollard's release at the 1998

Wye River Conference is one such example. When presented with two mutually exclusive narratives, Netanyahu's claim and Clinton's denial of a broken promise, comparing the two accounts of events is essential in understanding the true nature of the negotiations.

With this in mind, it would appear that Netanyahu's claim that Clinton promised to release Pollard before abruptly reneging, to force the hand of the Prime Minister, either represented a misunderstanding on Netanyahu's part, or was presented in an intentionally misleading way to strengthen a wider narrative that was politically beneficial to the Prime Minister. His account of negotiations is contradicted by Clinton's autobiography, official statements by the White House, and contemporary reports, all of which support the premise that the Clinton administration, while not immediately dismissing Pollard's release, had not promised it either.

It is impossible to truly know whether Netanyahu sincerely believed the claims made in his autobiography, but certain facts point to the contrary. Firstly, the framing of negotiations within the larger context of the Prime Minister's perceived betrayal by the Labor Party and Clinton himself create the impression that Netanyahu's telling of the Pollard negotiations were intended to fit a narrative of being hampered by disloyal allies. Secondly, the omission of key details from said narrative, such as Arafat's concession over prisoner releases, signal a pattern of intentional deception. While other omissions and errors can be chalked up to misunderstanding, ignorance, or even a difference of opinion—such as the lack of differentiation between allies and enemies in the Espionage Act, or Bob Shrum's lack of connection to Clinton—, the omissions of the concession and consultant can both reasonably assumed to be intentional. If this is the case, it casts significant doubt on the trustworthiness of Netanyahu's account.

Even if the statements made in the autobiography were indeed the Prime Minister's genuine understanding of the events as they

transpired, this points to a perhaps equally unfavorable charge for Netanyahu of paranoia induced by a desire to maintain power. Statements regarding the departure of the CIA director not hurting Clinton's presidency, if sincerely believed, demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to consider factors outside of political longevity, which blinded Netanyahu to the strategic ramifications of such an event coming to pass. Meanwhile, allegations that Clinton colluded with the Labor Party to oust the Likud from power, despite lacking material evidence of such collusion beyond two of Barak's consultants previously working for Clinton and a second-hand rumor from an unnamed White House Gala attendee, create the impression that Netanyahu viewed Clinton not as a fellow leader with differing beliefs, but as an active opponent, further undermining the Prime Minister's ability to view the negotiations as held in anything but bad faith.

However, while Netanyahu's version of events is worthy of criticism and should not be relied upon as a wholly accurate retelling, two caveats remain. First, while lacking the clear errors and omissions found in Netanyahu's biography, Clinton's autobiography, as is inherent to the medium, is predisposed to excuse or smooth over facts inconvenient to the President, and should be read with close scrutiny. Likewise, statements to the press issued by the White House and quotes from former employees share this incentive to protect Clinton and the office of the Presidency more generally. They are included in this paper simply for their negative claims regarding the existence of a promise to release Pollard and Clinton's involvement in the Ehud Barak campaign of 1999, but their accuracy should be questioned in the event that evidence supporting the contrary positive claims comes to light.

Secondly and finally, the belief that Pollard was treated unfairly due to his espionage being conducted on behalf of a United States ally is not unique to Netanyahu, nor did it originate with him. Even if we assume that Netanyahu's

claims were made in bad faith, this does not change the fact that the Israeli public and government viewed Pollard in a very different way to their American counterparts. With this in mind, the failure of the American delegation to communicate the facts of the matter, such as the wording of the Espionage Act and the CIA's risk assessment, demonstrates a larger issue in Israeli-American diplomacy in which differing narratives are not addressed before negotiations begin. Bridging such gaps in understanding will be essential to the continuation of Israeli-American relations, and, by extension, Israeli security.

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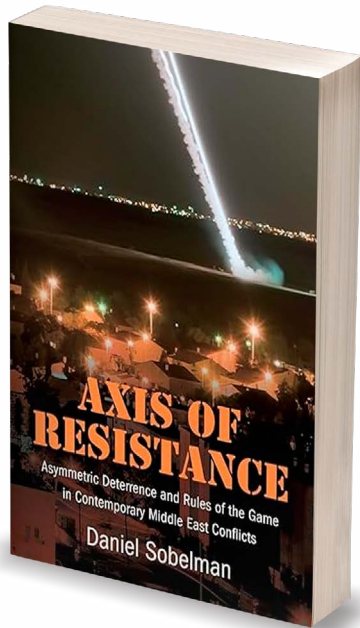
Asymmetric Deterrence Between Israel and the Shiite Axis Led by Iran

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Name of the book: *Axis of Resistance – Asymmetric Deterrence and Rules of the Game in Contemporary Middle East Conflicts*
Author: Daniel Sobelman
Publisher: State University of New York
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No. of pages: 280

The decision by Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' leader in the Gaza Strip, to launch the deadly surprise attack of October 7, 2023, caught not only Israel off guard, but also Hamas' partners in the Shiite axis, foremost among them Iran and Hezbollah. Nearly two years later, it is clear that members of the so-called Axis of Resistance were unaware of the precise timing of the attack and were dragged into a direct war with Israel at a moment determined by Sinwar, without either the desire or the readiness to do so, and in which they paid a very heavy price.[1] Daniel Sobelman's book, which analyses the joint strategy of the Axis of Resistance as it has evolved over the years, provides an answer to anyone asking why these actors nevertheless chose to join the war, and what drove them to do so in a limited manner, rather than to launch a broad, coordinated offensive against Israel as Sinwar had hoped.

Dr. Daniel Sobelman, a senior lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University, has for many years studied the strategic conception of the Shiite Axis and its various components, foremost among them Hezbollah. His book constitutes an important and current academic study of the evolution of the Axis and the strategy of its members, at the center of which stands the concept of "resistance" that serves as the compass guiding all Axis activity. The book makes a significant contribution to understanding the developments that led to the October 7 attack and to the subsequent war waged by Axis actors against Israel. His study serves a dual purpose: It presents the conceptual framework for the Axis of Resistance through analytical tools drawn from the field of international relations, and it also serves as a historical document that brings together—in detail—all of the major events in the evolution of the confrontation between Axis actors and Israel from 2000 until the date of publication.

There is a need to address the timing of the book's publication, which—like any work dealing with very recent events—faces the risk that rapid developments may render it less relevant. This book was actually written before October 2023 and was about to be published when the war broke out. Sobelman was therefore compelled to update it while the war was still unfolding. The result is that the protracted war in Gaza receives preliminary analysis in the book's epilogue and concluding

chapter; and the most recent update concerning the war with Hezbollah was added in September 2024, following Nasrallah's assassination though preceding the ceasefire with Lebanon.

Although some of the book's topics will now be regarded as historical description, it nonetheless retains substantial value and serves as an important resource for understanding the region's shifting landscape, as well as a useful point of reference for continued research on these issues (p. 3). Indeed—as one would expect when dealing with actors driven by a radical religious ideology, and as is evident today—Iran and its regional proxies continue to adhere to the concept of resistance.[2] The central question now facing analysts is what strategy they will adopt going forward, in comparison to the previous strategy described in detail in this book.

Sobelman presents the consolidation of the Axis of Resistance as a cross-sectarian strategic network of state and non-state actors that, on the eve of the war, included Iran and its proxies: Hezbollah, the Assad regime in Syria, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Gaza. Iran–seeking strategic depth and credible deterrence vis-à-vis Israel–plays a central role in the Axis and provides military support to its various components. All Axis actors seek to shape a new regional reality that enhances their standing and advances their interests, particularly in opposition to the competing alliance composed of Israel, the United States, and their regional partners. At the same time, the analysis in the book makes clear that despite this shared vision, the Axis is not monolithic. Each of its members is driven by distinct interests and calculations, an insight that was exposed during the war in Gaza.

According to the author's approach, the concept of resistance pursued by the Iran-led Shiite axis in contemporary Middle Eastern politics is the strategy of weak actors who seek to avoid choosing between full-scale war and peace. Instead, they work to create asymmetric deterrence by imposing rules of engagement on

the stronger side, while managing a protracted, low-intensity confrontation designed to weaken it, while remaining below the threshold of all-out war. In this strategy, active *and* asymmetric deterrence plays a central role. Unlike classical deterrence, whose purpose is to prevent violence, the deterrence employed by the resistance aims to weaken the stronger actor and restrain it from employing its full capabilities by imposing rules of the game and highlighting the costs it would incur were it to choose war. Consequently, the strategy developed by the resistance seeks to confine active confrontation to within certain parameters—an approach reflected in the varying degrees of involvement displayed by the Axis partners during the war. This logic underpinned Nasrallah's decision to engage in a limited war along the northern border during the first eleven months of the Gaza war—a decision that ultimately resulted in his own assassination and severe damage to Hezbollah once Israel broke the established rules of the game. The same applies to Iran, which hoped to conduct the war outside of its borders but was eventually pushed into direct conflict with Israel.

> **Unlike classical deterrence, whose purpose is to prevent violence, the deterrence employed by the resistance aims to weaken the stronger actor and restrain it from employing its full capabilities by imposing rules of the game and highlighting the costs it would incur were it to choose war.**

A central principle in the Axis strategy to which Sobelman refers is the effort to alter the balance of vulnerability. The weaker actor's success in changing this balance vis-à-vis a stronger rival depends on its ability to render its opponent vulnerable while simultaneously enhancing its own resilience against the stronger side's advantages, thereby increasing its prospects for long-term strategic gains.[3] This approach took shape among the components of the Shiite Axis in parallel with major

developments in which they were involved since 2000: Israel's withdrawal from the security zone in Lebanon, perceived as a tremendous achievement for Hezbollah (2000); the outbreak of the Second Intifada as an expression of the failure of the Oslo Accords (2000); the rise of Bashar al-Assad, which enabled the expansion of Iran's involvement in Syria; the US invasion of Iraq (2003); the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza (2005); the Second Lebanon War (2006); Hamas' takeover of Gaza (2007); the weakening of states in the region following the "Arab Spring" (2010 onward); and the rise of ISIS (Da'esh), which created opportunities to consolidate the Axis' components and to advance the resistance strategy.

Sobelman assigns great importance to Hezbollah's contribution, and particularly that of its leader, Nasrallah, to the crystallization of the resistance strategy, arguing that Hezbollah functioned as the "primary laboratory of resistance"

Sobelman assigns great importance to Hezbollah's contribution, and particularly that of its leader, Nasrallah, to the crystallization of the resistance strategy, arguing that Hezbollah functioned as the "primary laboratory of resistance" (p. 20). In his view, while Iran is the keystone of the Axis and notwithstanding its central role in supporting resistance groups across the region, it does not surpass Hezbollah in terms of direct strategic experience. Indeed the latter's very significant achievements in the eyes of the Axis—the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and the outcomes of the Second Lebanon War in 2006—serve as a model and as a basis for sharing operational knowledge among all actors in the resistance axis. The main lessons from the 2006 war that were adopted by the Axis' member organizations included: the dispersal of military assets and extensive use of the underground domain (the tunnels in Gaza and southern Lebanon, and the concealment of Iranian nuclear sites

underground); the development of the rocket and missile threat as a means of altering the "balance of vulnerability" vis-à-vis Israel and of generating deterrence through the threat to the home front; the sustained and calibrated use of force to establish a "balance of deterrence" and rules of the game; and the active coordination and sharing of knowledge among all members of the Axis. This new strategy threatened Israel's military superiority and led to changes and adaptations within the IDF.

The book includes an empirical analysis of the Axis' actors and is based on academic studies, interviews with Israeli officials, public statements, and media reports in Hebrew and Arabic. The second chapter describes the sources of the resistance model and its historical development, followed by a detailed historical analysis of four case studies:

1. **The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah** from 1992 to the present, in which rules of the game were established and Hezbollah, over the years, succeeded in deterring Israel and constraining its freedom of action in a manner that enabled its continued build-up without interference.

2. **The conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip**, during which Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad adopted the resistance model developed by Hezbollah. Hamas expanded the rules of the game and consistently raised the escalation threshold while deterring Israel through attrition, in parallel to its continued force build-up. In the epilogue, Sobelman also adds an analysis of the circumstances surrounding Hamas' shift from defensive deterrence to offensive resistance on October 7, 2023.

3. **The war between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Yemen**—a chapter of historical value due to its detailed and unprecedented presentation in contemporary scholarship of the Houthi movement's (Ansar Allah) development in Yemen and of its ongoing war against the Saudi-led coalition since March 2015. Sobelman shows that the

resistance model was also adopted by the Houthis, although they were unable to bring about a change in Saudi Arabia's balance of vulnerability due to its strategic depth and economic resilience.

4. **The war between Iran and Israel in the Syrian arena**. Here, too, the case is one of failure, this time on Iran's part. Iran exploited the Syrian civil war from 2011 onward, yet it did not succeed in its efforts to establish deterrence equations and rules of the game in this arena, given Israel's zero-tolerance policy (the "campaign between wars" strategy) and the vulnerability of Iran's presence in Syria.

The book was finalized (August–September 2024) before the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah (November 2024), the collapse of the Assad regime (December 2024), and the Twelve-Day War between Israel and Iran (June 2025). At that point, the extent of the resistance Axis' failure in its decision to join Hamas was still unclear. Accordingly, Sobelman concludes by underscoring the threat posed by the Axis' actors—foremost among them Iran and Hezbollah—and in particular their success in implementing the concept of a "convergence of arenas," which amplified the threat to Israel. One year later, the picture looks quite different. The Axis has unravelled and its weaknesses have been exposed for all to see: Iran emerged battered from a war with Israel that was imposed upon it; Hezbollah suffered a severe defeat, was significantly weakened, and did not fulfill its role in assisting Iran and Hamas; Syria is no longer a link in the axis; and the Gaza Strip lies in ruins following the war.

Nevertheless, looking ahead, Sobelman is right to conclude that "the struggle between the Axis of Resistance and its adversaries will remain a central feature of Middle Eastern geopolitics" (p. 192). Indeed, at this stage the Axis' components still adhere to the ideology of resistance and focus on rebuilding their capabilities. At the same time, the postwar regional configuration appears likely to undergo changes (including the rise of a Sunni Muslim Brotherhood axis and new regional alliances), and strategic adjustments will be required on the part of all those involved. From Israel's perspective, the most important lesson—already emerging in its conduct in the Lebanese arena and one that the IDF must incorporate into Israel's security doctrine—is not to allow terrorist actors to rebuild along its borders, even at the cost of quiet and stability. In particular vis-à-vis the Shiite axis, Israel must no longer permit the imposition of rules of the game that tie the IDF's hands and prevent it from fully leveraging its military superiority against weaker adversaries.

In sum, Sobelman's book is of considerable importance. It offers an unparalleled and in-depth analysis of the evolution of the Axis of Resistance and its strategy to date. It is recommended reading for anyone engaged in intelligence, military, diplomatic, or political work in the Middle East.

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Notes

1 The surprise lay in the timing chosen by Sinwar—he did not forewarn either Iran or Nasrallah—but not in the intentions or the shared plans to advance a coordinated move against Israel. For the surprise regarding the timing, see, for example, the Iranian Supreme Leader's remarks on the matter in October 2023: https://tinyurl.com/44fk7krt; as well as the statement by the commander of Iran's Quds Force, who said this explicitly in a recent interview: https://www.iranintl.com/en/202510033187.

2 The continued adherence to the resistance doctrine is demonstrated by all components of the Axis, and particularly by Hezbollah, as evident in the speeches of Nasrallah's successor, Naim Qassem. See, for instance, his address marking the anniversary of the assassination of the organization's chief of staff, Fuad Shukr: (2025, 5 August). Terror Perspective: Hezbollah and Lebanon (28 July–5 August 2025). *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre*, p. 7. https://tinyurl.com/4sea66ta [Hebrew].

3 An article analysing the vulnerability of strong actors, to which Sobelman also refers: Goldsmith, J., & Russell, S. (2018). *Strengths Become Vulnerabilities.* Hoover Institute Essay, Aegis Series Paper No. 1806. https://tinyurl.com/4dpdccwu.

The UAE as a Leading Force in the Arab World

Yoel Guzansky

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Name of the book: *The United Arab Emirates: The Unique Story of an Arab Federation*
Author: Uzi Rabi
Publisher: Resling Publishing
Year: 2025
No. of pages: 319

I was delighted to hear that Prof. Uzi Rabi's book about the United Arab Emirates (hereinafter – UAE) had been published. I consider Uzi Rabi a leading scholar on the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The publication of this book is extremely timely—on the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 (joined first by Bahrain and later also by Morocco and Sudan). The Israeli public's interest in the Arab Gulf states, which differ in many ways from the rest of the Arab world, has naturally grown since these accords were signed. Rabi's book is designed precisely for this purpose—to satisfy the curiosity of Israeli readers and fill in the gaps in their knowledge about a unique country like UAE.

Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE Crown Prince until 2022 and now the country's President, surprised many in August 2020 when he announced his intention to institute diplomatic relations between his country and Israel. He thereby leapt ahead of other Arab leaders who had refrained from taking this step for over 25 years. This is not the only sphere in which UAE took the lead. Despite being quite a young country—having achieved independence in 1971 when Britain relinquished its hold on the Gulf—it has many extraordinary achievements to its credit, not only in comparison with other Arab countries, but also as a global leader in environmentally friendly energy, civilian nuclear power, defense industries, and cyber and space technologies. UAE is also the sole example in the Arab world of a prosperous federation. It is a union of seven emirates (Abu-Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah, and Ras Al Khaimah), each of which is led by a different ruler but at the same time is subordinate to a federal superstructure.

The ratio between its population (about 1.5 million citizens) and the oil reserves on its territory (approximately 100 billion proven barrels of oil) make UAE one of the world's richest countries in per capital GDP. This wealth, together with its leadership ambitions, has helped UAE establish itself as a leading force. While previously showing restraint in managing its foreign relations and remaining in the shadow of its neighbor Saudi Arabia, following the "Arab Spring," the UAE now strives to act as a central player in several regional arenas. Its small army, the best trained and equipped army in the Arab world, has been directly and indirectly involved in conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, Libya, and Afghanistan, as well as in the campaign against the Islamic State. The goal

of the government in Abu Dhabi is to influence the regional order through the construction of military bases and ports, financial support, support for proxies, and the establishment of alliances, even if informal ones. One of the main tools at UAE's disposal is diplomatic involvement. The Abraham Accords and the détente in UAE's relations with Iran and Turkey in recent years demonstrate that its leadership is ruled by pragmatism and realistic thinking.

> With his typical care and attention to detail, Rabi discusses the questions that have engaged the Arab Gulf states since their founding, especially the appropriate use of their enormous oil profits to maintain their legitimacy at home and as a strategic tool in foreign policy and a means of enhancing foreign support for them—formerly by the UK and now by the US.

Israeli readers interested in the history and cultural milieu of UAE will find what they are seeking, and more, in Rabi's book. It delves deeply into UAE's history and the underlying tribal roots behind the founding of what is today a modern prosperous country. With his typical care and attention to detail, Rabi discusses the questions that have engaged the Arab Gulf states since their founding, especially the appropriate use of their enormous oil profits to maintain their legitimacy at home and as a strategic tool in foreign policy and a means of enhancing foreign support for them—formerly by the UK and now by the US. The Arab Gulf states, UAE among them, have thus far achieved outstanding success in these efforts, even in the shadow of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War (the occupation of Kuwait), the Arab Spring upheaval, and the tension now pervading the Gulf region in their relations with each other and with Iran.

UAE is also unique within the Gulf region itself, despite the tendency, even among scholars, to lump the six Arab Persian Gulf monarchies together in analysis and commentary. Although

these countries have a good deal in common—they are all absolute monarchies, Sunni Arab, pro-Western, and oil producers—they are not homogenous. Each of them has chosen its own unique path, depending, inter alia, on the natural resources available to it, its territory, its demographic composition, and its ability to defend itself against internal and external threats.

Uzi Rabi has a reputation as a good storyteller; readers will find it difficult to put this book down. He treats them to a wealth of information about UAE history, with great historical and cultural depth. In the first two chapters, Rabi discusses the tribal origins of contemporary UAE society and the beginnings of the federation that was founded as soon as the British withdrew from "East of Suez." The third and fourth chapters describe how the new federal state was shaped by the upheavals in the Persian Gulf, from the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War to the September 11, 2001 attack in the U.S. I found the fifth and sixth chapters extremely interesting because they deal with the background to the Abraham Accords and UAE's current strategy in the Middle East.

The book is mostly historical and is therefore suitable for readers wishing to enhance their understanding of the tribal foundations underlying the societies in the Arab peninsula, which are the basis of the modern Gulf state. He writes, "We have dealt with the complexity and unique patterns characterizing the process of founding countries in places where tribes were extraordinarily influential" (p. 13). Understanding UAE's unique features and analyzing how it has behaved in responding to its challenges is no less important, however, and possibly more so. Furthermore, understanding the political direction in which UAE is headed is important to Israel because of UAE's political, economic, and military importance in the Middle East and because it is blazing a trail for others to follow. Over the years, UAE has consistently been one step ahead of its large western neighbor, Saudi Arabia, in many respects, including in its

political maneuvers. The hope is that Riyadh will follow Abu Dhabi's example by instituting full diplomatic ties with Israel.

The October 7, 2023 tragedy was a wakeup call for Israel with respect to its misreading of the region in which it is located. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding was that Israel usually tends to analyze situations from a *realpolitik* perspective, while ignoring the cultural dimension of agents—whether countries or entities—in the region, even if some of them are currently inclined towards peace. The analysis that Rabi presents to Israeli readers is of great importance and stands out because of the scarcity of studies on the Gulf countries in Hebrew and by Israeli scholars. Despite the great significance of the Gulf theater and its unique features, certainly in comparison with the rest of the Arab world, few Israeli scholars have researched the salient countries—a field pioneered in Israel by the late Prof. Joseph Kostiner, who Uzi Rabi and I were privileged to have as a teacher and colleague. The Gulf theater is currently playing a crucial role in determining the Arab agenda. It is the most stable and most wealthy region in the Arab world; these countries have the means to exert influence not only on their poorer Arab neighbors, but also in the global arena and on the world's leading powers.

UAE cooled its relations with Israel following the war in Gaza due to negative public sentiment in the Gulf and in the Arab world in general during the war. Also prompting this change is the Israeli government's policy in Judea and Samaria, especially its statements about annexation there. At the time of writing, however, UAE was maintaining its relations with Israel—a considerable achievement in itself. Furthermore, some of the damage caused to relations between Israel and UAE is reversible and dependent on when and how the war in Gaza really ends.

> **Understanding the political direction in which UAE is headed is important to Israel because of UAE's political, economic, and military importance in the Middle East and because it is blazing a trail for others to follow.**

The public aspect of relations between Israel and UAE, i.e. the normalization process, will continue to be sensitive to developments in both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli-Iranian conflict; inter alia, it will be substantially affected by Arab public opinion. In contrast, the clandestine security aspect of the relations between the two countries is based primarily on the long-term strategic interests of UAE and Israel and is therefore more durable. For Israel, the Arab Gulf in general is a source of strategic opportunities—security and technological cooperation and an economic presence in a blossoming region—but also a source of challenges. Understanding the differing interests of each country in the Gulf and the ability to adjust Israeli policy to rapid changes in this region are an essential condition for preserving and strengthening these relations.

> **The Gulf theater is currently playing a crucial role in determining the Arab agenda. It is the most stable and most wealthy region in the Arab world; these countries have the means to exert influence not only on their poorer Arab neighbors, but also in the global arena and on the world's leading powers.**

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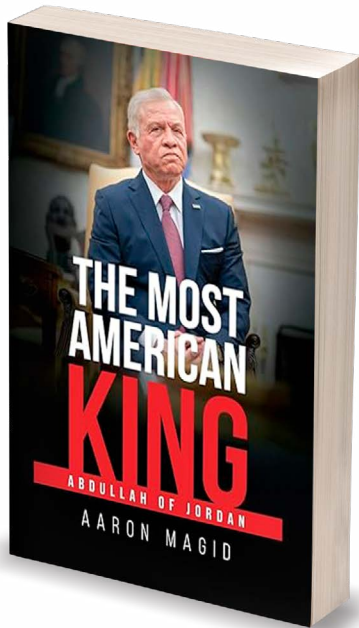
New Biography of King Abdullah II Reveals What Israel has Missed

Ofir Winter

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Name of the book: *The Most
American King: Abdullah of Jordan*
Author: Aaron Magid
Publisher: Universal Publishers
Year: 2025
No. of pages: 243

Jordanian King Abdullah II has been in power longer than any other Arab ruler in the Middle East, yet the first English-language biography of him is being published only now, more than 25 years after he became king. The book, "The Most American King: Abdullah of Jordan," fills a vacuum in the literature by offering a thorough, informative, and fair analysis of its subject's life. The biographer is Aaron Magid, an American journalist who worked in Jordan from 2015-2016 and who has hosted the "On Jordan" podcast devoted to the kingdom's affairs since 2021.

Indeed Abdullah's success as King may be the very reason why no other biography of him has been published. The King has managed to maintain his kingdom as an island of stability in a stormy sea, while avoiding the kind of drama that inspires books. Jordan's relative tranquility has stood out in a violent region afflicted by upheavals: the Second Gulf War, the Arab Spring, Israeli-Palestinian clashes, and global economic and health crises. Despite its limited resources, Jordan has averted disaster while sheltering multiple waves of refugees in its territory.

The book is based on over one hundred interviews with Abdullah's acquaintances, including the king's school friends, former Jordanian government ministers, and international figures who have worked with him over the years. The book does not specifically mention the challenges and restrictions that encumbered the author in the course of his research. It is clear, however, that the king and his royal family did not provide the author with access to archives and did not grant him interviews.

The book comprises 17 chapters. Four are devoted to formative events in Abdullah's life: his childhood and adolescence in England and the US, his British military training and enlistment in the Jordanian army, and his coronation as King of Jordan. Six chapters discuss the King's foreign policy, including his relations with the US, Syria, Israel, Iran, and Iraq and his struggle against terrorism. Five chapters deal with his domestic challenges, among them the Muslim Brotherhood, economic and political reforms, the 2011-2012 protests, and his rivalry with his brother, Hamzah, whom he deposed as Jordanian Crown Prince in 2004. The two final chapters compare Abdullah to his father, King Hussein, and assess his legacy.

The first part of the book includes quite a few fascinating anecdotes that may seem of marginal importance, but which contribute to a deeper understanding of Abdullah's character.

The first son of Muna, King Hussein's second wife of British origin, Abdullah was born in 1962 and named Crown Prince of Jordan when he was a toddler. He retained this position until 1965, when he was replaced by Hassan, his uncle. Abdullah spent most of his childhood and youth abroad, where his parents hoped that he would receive an excellent education and be safer than in Jordan, which was then engaged in conflict with the PLO. He moved from Jordan to the UK in 1968, where he acquired an English accent. He moved at age 10 to the US, which guaranteed his safety as a gesture to his father.

Abdullah was a good student, albeit not an outstanding one, and did not use his lineage to obtain any favors. He invited his friends and bodyguards to vacations in Jordan, where they were offered entertainment such as hunting. Abdullah's favorite sport was wrestling. His youthful escapades embroiled him in some violent incidents. Misadventures with friends included pranks, such as removing toilet seats from a women's bathroom at school and skipping his Arabic lessons, which would limit his rhetorical prowess when he became king. He integrated well in American society and took pride in his "Americanization" (pp. 5-13).

Upon completing his high school studies, Abdullah, like Hussein, his father, was sent to the British Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. While serving in the Jordanian army, he took courses in Middle Eastern affairs and international relations at Oxford University and Georgetown University. As Commander of the Jordanian Special Forces, he developed good working relations with his colleagues in the US and acquired the reputation of being attentive and professional in his duties. In the 1980s and 1990s, he began taking King Hussein's place when his father and uncle were abroad. At the same time, he enjoyed pursuits popular among people his age—he liked partying and motorcycles and even took a guest role in an episode of the "Star Trek: Voyager" television program. He also attracted many female admirers.

Abdullah met his future wife, Rania, a Jordanian of Palestinian origin born in Kuwait, in 1992. On their first date, Abdullah took her home and cooked her a traditional Japanese meal with shrimp, chicken, and beef. They became engaged and were married in 1993; their son, Hussein II, the current Crown Prince, was born a year later. Abdullah regards his son's half-Palestinian origins as a symbol of his kingdom's inclusive character (pp. 15-24).

> **One intriguing question discussed in the book is just when King Hussein decided to depose his brother, Crown Prince Hassan, and appoint Abdullah in his place.**

One intriguing question discussed in the book is just when King Hussein decided to depose his brother, Crown Prince Hassan, and appoint Abdullah in his place. Hussein announced this change when he was on his deathbed. In contrast to the prevailing opinion that Hussein made this decision shortly before his death because of Hassan's elitist public image and Hussein's anger at Hassan's behavior behind the King's back during his illness, the book cites evidence that the decision to replace Hassan with Abdullah was actually taken in the 1980s. In any case, Abdullah's preparation for the monarchy was rather inadequate. He did not give his first speech to the Jordanian public until he was crowned in February 1999. Abdullah himself admitted that he had initially refused the monarchy, adding that this was the actual reason why his father had chosen him as his successor (pp. 25-35).

> **The book cites evidence that the decision to replace Hassan with Abdullah was actually taken in the 1980s.**

Reading the chapters that discuss Abdullah's rollercoaster relations with Israel sadly only highlights the gap between Abdullah's basically positive attitude when he became king and the current state of relations between Israel and Jordan. Abdullah's first contacts with Jews and Israelis occurred in the U.S., where some of his school friends were Jews. One of his papers at Georgetown University was written under the guidance of Alon Pinkas, later Israel's Consul General in New York. In this paper, Abdullah went so far as to express understanding for Israel's military actions against armed Palestinians in Jordan in 1968. Pinkas gave Abdullah an "A" on the paper (pp. 9-10,20).

> Relations between the two countries and their leaders have faced additional challenges since the October 7, 2023 massacre. According to evidence cited in the book, Abdullah expressed support for defeating Hamas in a talk with the American Secretary of State but also criticized Israel for allowing Qatar to transfer millions of dollars to Hamas, saying that Israel "should never have been in bed with them [Hamas] in the first place."

Even before being crowned king, Abdullah met secretly with Israeli army officers, who made a good impression on him. At the beginning of his reign, Abdullah spoke publicly about his personal trust in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and praised Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon and its commitment to the peace process. When CNN's Larry King asked Abdullah if his children might marry an Israeli one day, Abdullah replied: "Anything is possible. Yes. You know, you look at our part of [the] world now, and when we talk about peace and stability, we're talking about people breaking down barriers." Around that time, Abdullah's wife, Raina, expressed empathy for the security threats facing both Israelis and Palestinians (p. 84).

But the warm peace between Israel and Jordan gradually chilled. The King's friendly tone towards Israel became more critical—a process that began with the Second Intifada and accelerated with the collapse of the Oslo Agreements and the prolonged deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Jordanian disappointment with the economic benefits of the peace agreement with Israel also had a negative impact on relations, but the book hardly discusses this factor. At the same time, covert security coordination between the two countries in countering terror organizations such as Hamas, ISIS, and pro-Iranian militias on Jordan's borders with Syria and Iraq, remained close. In an interview with the author, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that cooperation with Jordan on security "was greater than [what] Israel had with any country in the world" (pp. 86-91).

The book indicates that another major factor in the deterioration of Jordanian-Israeli relations was personal distrust between Abdullah and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who have been in power simultaneously for over 15 years. The Jordanian antipathy for Netanyahu began during Hussein's reign with the attempted assassination of Khaled Mashal in Amman in September 1997. Other events subsequently added to these hard feelings. One of these was the official reception held by Netanyahu in 2017 for the former security guard of the Israeli embassy in Amman, who had killed two Jordanians on the embassy grounds after being attacked and wounded by one of them. Hussein took this reception as a personal affront after having agreed to allow the security guard to return to Israel. In response, Jordan expelled the Israeli Ambassador to Jordan. In 2019, Abdullah decided not to extend Israel's lease for the Naharayim and Tzofar enclaves granted under the Israeli-Jordanian 1994 peace treaty, stating that the "Jordanian-Israeli relationship had deteriorated to an all-time low" (pp. 95-98).

Relations between the two countries and their leaders have faced additional challenges since the October 7, 2023 massacre. According to evidence cited in the book, Abdullah expressed support for defeating Hamas in a talk with the

American Secretary of State but also criticized Israel for allowing Qatar to transfer millions of dollars to Hamas, saying that Israel "should never have been in bed with them [Hamas] in the first place." While Jerusalem and Amman maintained the peace treaty and cooperated in repelling Iranian missile and drone attacks against Israel, many people in Jordan identified with Hamas and the suffering of Gazans, and the Jordanian government had to take this into consideration. Queen Raina took the lead in opposing Israel and even denied the murder of Israeli children in communities bordering the Gaza Strip (pp. 98-100).

A dominant theme in the book concerns Abdullah's affinity with America. Its title, however, "The Most American King," is open to misinterpretation. He was educated in the U.S., where his adult identity was formed, and he regards relations with America as an important anchor in Jordan's foreign policy and defensive and economic capabilities. Nevertheless, he has never been an obedient American puppet. The strained relations between "the most American" king and the "most American" Israeli prime minister are another proof that Abdullah's American orientation should not be exaggerated or treated as the key to deciphering the entirety of Abdullah's character and policies.

The book itself demonstrates effectively that Abdullah's strategic alliance with Washington has always been subject to limits and reservations—and still is. The King has never flinched from confronting American presidents when their policy conflicted with Jordan's agenda. For example, Abdullah opposed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and warned of its consequences. He later criticized the Bush administration's decision to dismantle Saddam Hussein's army in Iraq, which induced its soldiers to join terrorist groups, likening it to firing policemen, firefighters, and ambulance drivers in New York because of dissatisfaction with the city's mayor (pp. 52-54, 110-117).

The book further describes Abdullah as nearly having a heart attack when President Trump offered him a "great deal" in 2018—the return of parts of the West Bank to Jordanian rule. In addition to rejecting the offer, in the same year Abdullah also condemned the relocation of the American Embassy to Jerusalem and the decision to cut off US funding to UNRWA (p. 64). At the start of Trump's second term, Abdullah was the first Arab ruler invited to the White House, but he politely rejected the American president's request to allow a large number of Gazans to take refuge in his kingdom (p. 68).

The author lists the achievements of King Abdullah, who achieved for his country security, peace, and freedom of worship at a time when its neighbors were undergoing wars, revolutions, waves of immigration, and terrorism. Magid writes that the secrets of Abdullah and Jordan's ability to cope with external and internal challenges have always been (and still are) solid international and regional support, loyal security forces supported by Transjordanian tribes, avoidance of violent repression liable to encourage insurgency against the regime, and a homogeneous Sunni majority immune to religious and ethnic tension (pp. 128-132).

At the same time, the author cites at least two factors that may jeopardize the kingdom's stability. The first is the Muslim Brotherhood, whose commitment to its pan-Islamic ideology takes precedence over its loyalty to the Jordanian nation state. The book was written before Jordan outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood in April 2025, but it does discuss the measures taken by Jordan since the Arab Spring to weaken and divide the movement (pp. 133-143). Another destabilizing factor is the economic distress prevalent in Jordan despite the King's privatization and reform policies. Magid asserts that Jordan's high poverty and unemployment rates are causing social unrest and detracting from the monarchy's popularity. In a 2022 survey, 63% of young Jordanians expressed a wish to immigrate from the kingdom (pp. 145-156).

Although the 63-year-old king is likely to remain on his throne for many years, he is

already engaged in training his son, Hussein II, to take his place. The 31-year-old Crown Prince accompanies his father to meetings with dignitaries and sometimes also meets with them alone. He is granted royal authority when his father is abroad and utilizes popular social media accounts to appeal to young people.

The Crown Prince exercises caution in his media interviews; he has yet to clarify his views on fundamental issues such as relations with the US and Israel. Like his father and grandfather, he completed his academic studies in Great Britain and the U.S. and his outlook likely corresponds to the home in which he was raised (pp. 210-211).

To conclude, the biography written by Magid is essential reading for anyone interested in Jordanian foreign policy and internal politics during Abdullah's 25-year reign. For Israeli readers, the book provides not only a more thorough understanding of the Jordanian king, but also a perspective on relations between Israel and Jordan during his reign, which began with open friendship and are now in deep crisis, but which still can and should be healed.

Dr. Ofir Winter is a senior researcher at INSS and a lecturer at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of "**Peace in the Name of Allah: Islamic Discourses on Treaties with Israel**" (De Gruyter, 2022; Institute for National Security Studies, 2024). His research focuses on Egypt and Jordan and their relations with Israel. ofirw@inss.org.il
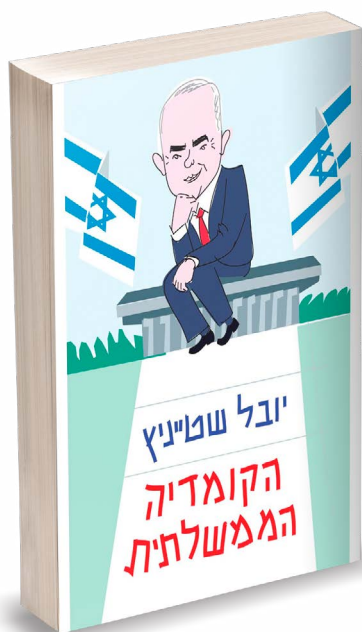
The Man Who Argued with Spinoza

Ofer Shelah

The Institute for National Security Studies – Tel Aviv University

Name of the book: *The Government Comedy*
Author: Yuval Steinitz
Publisher: Yediot Acharonot, Sifrei Hemed
Year: 2025
Number of pages: 205

In the early 1980s Yuval Steinitz was an undergraduate philosophy student at the Hebrew University. I know something about those years, since one of the students in the department was my older brother, whose stories from that era are very familiar to me. The teachers included such giants as Professors Nathan Rotenstreich, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Yirmiyahu Yovel. But as my brother used to tell us, Steinitz did not come to Jerusalem to discuss philosophy with *them,* but rather with the person whose writings they taught. Prof.

Yovel in particular, according to my brother, would sometimes lose his patience and remind the enthusiastic student Steinitz that the debate in the classroom was over the interpretation of Spinoza, and not with Spinoza himself.

I recalled this old story as soon as I read the blurb on the cover of Steinitz's latest book, *The Government Comedy*. The author, it states, is "the only philosopher in history who has served as the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Energy, a member of the Cabinet, and chairman of the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee of any country [… He is] the person who was responsible for the invention of the two-year budget, our acceptance by the OECD, the exposure of the nuclear reactor in Syria, the investigation of the intelligence failures in Iraq and Libya, and 'the Russo-American plan' to dismantle chemical weapons in Syria."

On the front cover, next to the title that of course echoes Dante Alighieri, there is a drawing of Steinitz sitting on top of the Knesset building in the pose of Auguste Rodin's statue, *The Thinker*. Steinitz, whose book is replete with quotes of media headlines that complimented him and disagreements with those that were less complimentary, apparently remains in his own eyes someone whose proper place is among the giants of the human spirit, as befitting one who over forty years ago was already arguing with Spinoza.

This article is not a literary critique and suffice it to say that the slightly obsessional need of the thinker Yuval Steinitz to assert his own value rather casts a shadow over the quality of the writing. Steinitz knows how to write, as anyone who has read his works on philosophical matters will testify: Not only *The Invitation to Philosophy,* which the author constantly reminds us is "the top-selling book on philosophy in the history of Israel," and about which he naturally tells us that "many of the journalists who could be found in the corridors of the Knesset at that time complimented me on" (since as we know there is nothing that

parliamentary correspondents spend more time reading than books of popular philosophy), but also his excellent foreword to the Israeli edition of *The Open Society* by Karl Popper. Apparently this trait of his finds expression mainly when he writes about others.

Nor will I engage with the glories that Steinitz ascribes to the two-year budget, which is remembered by many as a largely political exercise from the Benjamin Netanyahu school of thinking rather than a groundbreaking macroeconomic innovation, or "my part in the amazing rescue of Israel from the global economic crisis that struck the whole world in the years 2009-2012" (p. 10). It will suffice to mention that the crisis began in 2007, reached its peak in September 2008, and if we can believe Wikipedia, "from the middle of 2009 the first signs of global economic recovery could be perceived." For most of that time the government of Israel was led by Ehud Olmert; in my opinion, the then Finance Minister Roni Bar-On and senior members of his Ministry, as well as the solid foundations of the Israeli economy, can certainly claim much of the credit for the way Israel weathered the crisis.

Our interest lies in matters of national security, and therefore the emphasis here will be on the events that Steinitz describes from his days as chairman of the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee in the years 2003-2006 and as a member of the cabinet. According to the picture painted by Steinetz, during his tenure the Committee was never afraid to confront the security establishment, and he himself never hesitated to clash with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, with Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, and above all, with Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon. A number of points that require clarification arise from his account.

Firstly, his main accomplice was Haim Ramon, at that time a member of the opposition. This is an important point with respect to the functioning of the Committee, in contrast to most of the Knesset committees: At its best, the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee and its sub-committees are the only places in the Knesset where independent positions are taken, irrespective of alignment to a particular side of the House. This is very rare in the Knesset, which is one of the weakest parliaments in the democratic world, and is dominated to an extreme and doubtfully constitutional extent by the government. During Steinitz's years as chairman this characteristic was indeed noticeable, as in the six years when I had the privilege of serving on the Committee (Omer Bar-Lev and I, both members of the opposition, headed two of the main sub-committees, with the full support and backing of the chairman Avi Dichter).

Since 2019 this feature has disappeared completely, and with it the function of the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee in general, which today is a circus empty of content, like the Knesset as a whole. Benjamin Netanyahu's attitude towards it is the same as his attitude to other organs of government: Contempt for any trace of separation of powers, absolute disdain for anything done by the Committee (or any other committees for that matter, or the IDF or the GSS), which can be seen in the reckless trading of senior positions for short-term political and personal needs, the parachuting in of candidates lacking any abilities, and satisfaction with the resulting situation—absolute inability to function.

From experience I can testify that Netanyahu, in times far better than today, failed to recognize the work of the Committee, was repeatedly surprised by its members' knowledge (which is far broader and deeper than that of any member of the government, including the Minister of Defense, because of the wide range of areas covered by the Committee and because they have time to learn), and showed unwillingness to reveal to it things that were almost trivial in comparison to the material frequently presented to the sub-committees. In general, the Prime Minister met mostly with the Intelligence Sub-Committee; and at these meetings, from which not even a shred of intelligence ever leaked,

Netanyahu had the habit of saying that he would present certain things "at the sub-committee." All we could do was remind him that this was the sub-committee and there was no other below it.

Steinitz, who had no political power of his own and was in fact appointed to each of his senior jobs precisely because he was no political threat to Netanyahu, does not mention or even hint at any of this or other dubious actions of the Prime Minister in his book. Perhaps this represents a proper degree of gratitude to the man who enabled him to occupy these and other positions; yet given the time and context in which this book is being published, it is hard to find in it the type of courage of which he boasts.

Contrary to other important committees in the Knesset (and again, this refers to a "normal" Knesset, and not what we've had here for the past six years), the main responsibility of the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee is supervision. It rarely legislates, and when it does legislate it is subject to the same constraints of coalition-opposition, as is apparent from the twists and turns of the conscription legislation over the past two years. This was also the situation in days gone by: Most of the practical and forward-looking recommendations of Steinitz's investigation into intelligence failures have not yet been implemented. These include transforming Unit 8200 into a SIGINT authority outside the IDF; appointing a Secretary of Intelligence with the same status as the Military Secretary to the Prime Minister; establishing a ministerial committee for intelligence; passing the intelligence law; and reforming the intelligence community structure.

The central event of Steinitz's time on the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee was indeed his decision to set up an inquiry, in the framework of the intelligence sub-committee, to investigate a "reverse intelligence failure"; not the absence of a warning of an enemy attack, as happened in October 1973 and October 2023, but the inflated warning of Iraq's unconventional weapons capabilities,

which led to rash decisions such as calling up the reserves and the purchase of unnecessary vaccinations against biological weapons, which the Iraqis did not have. Another failure of the intelligence system was that it knew nothing of the nuclear project (and the plan to make weapons of mass destruction in general) in Libya, which had reached an advanced stage, and was discovered by foreign intelligence services and dismantled in agreement with the United States and Britain in 2003.

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The inquiry was an unprecedented step, and the response of the system—particularly Ya'alon—was Pavlovian: Opposition, refusal to cooperate, and defamation of the sub-committee report after its publication. Steinitz, who throughout the book enjoys describing himself as the child who angers everyone by stubbornly declaring that the king is naked, describes this whole episode with undisguised glee.

This inquiry led to what he is especially proud of: According to his version, during the sub-committee's investigation of intelligence failures in Iraq, the suggestion arose that the Assad regime in Syria was setting up a secret nuclear project. The Committee was not content with merely raising this possibility, which was rejected and mocked by senior members of the intelligence community, but also issued a warning letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon,

stating that "there is a high probability that Syria has a military nuclear project" (p.80), and even held further discussions on the matter.

The reactor in Deir ez-Zor, whose existence was finally confirmed in early 2007, was attacked and destroyed by the IAF in September of that year. Steinitz rightly takes the credit for himself and the sub-committee for their initial warning of its possible existence, which he claims also made Mossad head Meir Dagan divert efforts to this matter. This was contrary to the confident assurances by the heads of Intelligence Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash and Amos Yadlin, that Israel's intelligence coverage of Syria was optimal, and therefore there was no possibility that such a strategic project could exist without Israel's knowledge.

This was indeed an important contribution, but to express it in the words "the sub-committee understood what the intelligence community did not understand" is in my opinion the wrong way to frame the role of parliamentary supervision in general. The point is not that Steinitz was right and Intelligence was wrong; the point is that the sub-committee, which had been given no facts indicating the existence of a Syrian nuclear project, did what a civilian and external body ought to do: it brought a different perspective.

Steinitz describes the thinking that prompted this alternative perspective. Apparently it was based on an analysis of Syria's situation, on its declared objective since the days of Assad senior to reach a "strategic balance" with Israel, and on the fact that, as he puts it, "in serious intelligence work it is permitted and even necessary to raise hypotheses – just as in the natural sciences" (p. 77).

This is an important statement in relation to the allegation that in Iraq the situation was reversed—the intelligence system was convinced of the existence of a nuclear project and supported the CIA's false claim in this respect (a claim that derived, as we now know, from pressure exerted by President Bush and even more so by Vice President Richard Cheney), and the justification for the disastrous American invasion of Iraq. In Syria too, by the way, the statements from Hafez al-Assad on the need for strategic balance were first heard back in 1982, after the defeat of the Syrian Air Force and its array of ground-to-air missiles by the Israeli Air Force in June of that year, while the Deir ez-Zor project was launched no less than 18 years later. Had Steinitz insisted on his hypothesis in 1995, for example, and had similar efforts been made to examine it at that time, the Committee would have been accused of baseless alarmism and wasting the limited resources of the intelligence community. Yet still, in my view, the Committee would have been doing its job properly, since its function is not to know what the intelligence system does not know, but to identify options that have a conceptual basis requiring examination.

At the same time, there is a delicate balance between alarmism—repeatedly mentioning possible threats, when the purpose in many cases is to say "I told you so" when one of them materializes—and the essential indication of failures in readiness that must be rectified. Thus an article that Steinitz wrote in 1998 with the title "When the Palestinian army invades central Israel" becomes a concrete warning of what happened 25 years later. The problem with alarmism is that it makes any concrete discussion of priorities irrelevant: We have to be ready for every threat, at all times. That may sound reasonable to an Israeli who lived through October 7, 2023, but it's not a way to administer life, a country, an economy and a society.

"Supervision," contrary perhaps to what is implied in Steinitz's book, is not necessarily and certainly not only about arguing with the system. At their best, sub-committees have an essential and unique role precisely because their discussions, unlike cabinet discussions, do not culminate in executive decisions, and just as importantly, because there are no leaks from them. They thereby provide a forum for military personnel and other organizations to

engage with civilian thinking in a safe space, and this influences their thinking much more than the wrangling in the cabinet.

The confrontational position that Steinitz describes is far preferable to what he himself calls a "passive House of Lords" in the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee, when former members of the system meet to hear gossip from their successors and to encourage them, but this attitude could also lead to a situation in which the function of the sub-committees appears to be limited to complaining and quarreling with senior officials. It is important to allow justified criticism to coexist with constructive debate. From my experience, I can say that when Dichter was chairman of the Committee in the 20ᵗʰ Knesset (the last time Israel had a functioning Knesset), this balance was maintained. Today of course none of this is relevant.

Elsewhere in the "Government Comedy" Steinitz relates to his time as a member of the cabinet. Many reports from the State Comptroller and other bodies have documented the weakness of the cabinet, which in the Israeli system is the nearest thing to the "supreme commander" of the military, but which almost by definition consists of people whose knowledge is scant, who spend little time on learning, and whose positions are largely dictated by political considerations. Similar things have been said about the function of the National Security Council, which was set up to optimize the process of discussion and decision making on political and defense matters, and about the structural weakness of the Defense Minister's staff, to which the army is legally subordinate.

Steinitz's narrative of his time in the cabinet is evidence of this, although he is in fact principally engaged with the story of how he himself, as "Don Quixote, about to storm the windmills of the Air Force completely alone" (p. 298), blocked the Air Force's intention to acquire a second fleet of F-35 planes and brought about the decision to limit the procurement of additional aircraft to only 14. Here I won't go into the actual discussion, which is very

familiar to me. Suffice to say that ultimately the Air Force received what it wanted, down to the last plane, and more.

The real story that Steinitz is telling here is not about his legitimate position, but about the fact that the cabinet discussions are, in the words of Avigdor Lieberman to the State Comptroller, "no more than ministers letting off steam." Prime ministers and army officers treat them as a political ritual they have to get through—and in recent years, mainly as a public "hazing" for the heads of security organizations, which is immediately leaked to the media.

The Government Comedy is not a complete memoir and only purports to deal with selected episodes from Steinitz's political biography. He himself was never questioned under caution on the submarine affair, but I think that someone who writes 300 pages and boasts of "historical achievements whose record will continue to accompany us in the future" (p. 9), and even takes the trouble to insert a rather irrelevant story about relations between Arnon Milchan and Yossi Cohen, could have covered such a critical matter slightly more extensively.

Finally a word on what Steinitz refers to in just a few sentences: The submarine affair, in which "to my astonishment, I discovered that some of the dedicated people who had previously worked alongside me were being investigated" (p. 10). He is referring to Avriel Bar-Yosef, who Steinitz appointed as manager of the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee, and David Sharan, who was head of his office, who were both indicted. Others who were investigated on this matter included Steinitz's brother-in-law, his former adviser, head of his General Staff and his political adviser.

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