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Digital Access and Youth in Mexico: Challenges and Opportunities

Adriana Lorena Avitia Palma

Executive Summary

Over the past 15 years, Mexico has expanded internet access through state-supported initiatives, leading to continuous growth in national data traffic and the initial rollout of 5G in regions such as Baja California, Chihuahua, and Mexico City. Nevertheless, a significant digital divide persists, especially between urban and rural areas. States with larger urban populations, like Mexico City, have high connectivity, while states such as Chiapas lag behind. The divide severely impacts education, with rural and Indigenous communities particularly affected, and students in these communities experiencing major educational disadvantages that contribute to low school completion rates. Existing initiatives—including private sector efforts to provide free internet—attempt to bridge the gap. Still, significant challenges such as affordability and limited digital skills remain. Closing this divide requires investment in infrastructure, digital literacy programs, and targeted inclusion policies for vulnerable groups, ensuring device and technology access for all students.

National Overview of Digital Access

One of the biggest challenges countries face when trying to grow and modernize is ensuring their citizens have access to information technology. In the last several decades, internet access has continuously expanded in Mexico.¹ Most people still rely on 4G, a mobile network that allows users to do everyday activities such as messaging, watching videos, and using apps, but 5G is starting to become more common, especially in places like Baja California, Chihuahua, and Mexico City.² 5G is a newer mobile network that provides higher speeds, less delay, and support for many more devices, helping make advanced digital services possible.

¹ Fundación Carlos Slim. “Inclusión digital, el gran reto para el desarrollo nacional.” April 20, 2016. <https://fundacioncarlosslim.org/inclusion-digital-gran-reto-desarrollo-nacional/>.

² “Comportamiento de los Mercados Regulados y la Economía Digital.” Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, 2024.

These shifts are not just about faster speeds; they are signs that the country's digital infrastructure is improving, and more people are benefiting.³ Still, while internet access has increased, a digital divide remains, particularly between technological infrastructure in remote and rural areas.⁴

The Urban-Rural and Geographical Divide

Rural and remote areas are often at a disadvantage in terms of access to technology⁵; In urban areas, internet access is more common and faster than in rural areas, where connectivity can be slow or nonexistent.⁶ In 2023, 85.5 percent of people aged six and older in urban areas used the internet. In rural areas, the percentage was 66.0%. The states with the highest rate of households with internet access were Mexico City at 89.5%, Baja California at 86.4%, and Quintana Roo at 83.6% which all have significant urban centers. On the lower end were Guerrero at 53.9%, Oaxaca at 53.0%, and Chiapas at 44.3%, which are much more rural.⁷ Importantly, in some geographic areas, the market itself is responsible for increasing coverage, while in others, state intervention may be required.⁸ In these cases, governmental digital inclusion efforts play a key role by promoting access to information and communication technologies for people in rural areas.⁹

Education and the Impact on Students

Education is a repeatedly proven pathway out of poverty because it increases students' employment opportunities, promotes economic growth, reduces economic inequality, and provides individual earnings. However, the digital divide affects students' ability to succeed in school.¹⁰ Lack of access does not just hurt them in the present; it also limits their abilities to build the digital skills they will need in the job market, an effect that can follow them for years.¹¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these impacts were further multiplied, as millions of students without access to technology were excluded from learning and other educational opportunities. According to the 2023 Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información en los Hogares, a national survey on technology use, 43.8% of households in Mexico (16.9 million households) had a computer, which shows how over half of Mexico's households could not have accessed online schoolwork when schools were closed. Still, only 20.0% of households had devices connected to the internet or a local area network.¹²

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rodríguez, Hugo Augusto. "Brecha digital y desigualdad en la educación." Universidad Loyola de América, August 12, 2024. <https://universidadloyola.edu.mx/brecha-digital-y-desigualdad-en-la-educacion/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gómez Navarro, Dulce Angélica, Raúl Arturo Alvarado López, Marlen Martínez Domínguez, and Christian Díaz De León Castañeda. "La Brecha Digital: Una Revisión Conceptual y Aportaciones Metodológicas Para Su Estudio de México." *Entreciencias: Diálogos En La Sociedad Del Conocimiento* 6, no. 16 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.22201/encsl.20078064e.2018.16.62611>.

⁷ Jesus, "Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información en los Hogares (ENDUTIH) 2023."

⁸ Estrategia IFT 2020-2024. Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, 2020. Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rodríguez, "Brecha digital." 2024.

¹² Jesus, "Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información en los Hogares (ENDUTIH) 2023."

Current Efforts to Expand Digital Connectivity

Some non-governmental organizations and government programs, like the Federal Electricity Commission, are already implementing initiatives, like grants and financial aid programs, which promote access to information technology and provide devices to low-income students.¹³

Some companies provide free internet access in public spaces like schools and health centers, such as CFE Telecommunications' initiative Internet for All.¹⁴ Additionally, while there are various ongoing collaborations among nonprofits, foundations, and local governments aimed at developing an action plan to close the universal internet coverage gap, the availability of information is essential for decision-making and public policy design. However, there is a notable lack of programs dedicated to data collection in this area.¹⁵

Impact of Digital Gap on Children and Youth

Access to digital technology has become essential for education, opportunity, and participation in modern life. However, unequal access to these tools deepens existing social and economic divides, especially for children and youth.

Barriers to Digital Access in Rural and Indigenous Communities

The digital gap has significantly impacted the ability of children and youth to access technology for educational purposes, specifically in rural and Indigenous communities. Private enterprises are often discouraged from investing in technological infrastructures in low-density populations.¹⁶ As a result, in rural Mexico in 2017, only 66.1% of users had mobile phones, and just 26.7% of households had mobile or fixed internet access.¹⁷ In especially rural states like Chiapas, the current percentage of the rural population who use the internet at all is 47.7%, with 18% of households having computers and 19% having internet connection.¹⁸ According to the study "Determinants of Internet use by school-age children: The challenges for Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic," children from households in rural areas with low educational levels had a lower probability of accessing or using the Internet productively, demonstrating that even when they do have access to internet, they do not necessarily have the skills or knowledge to use it effectively.¹⁹

This digital gap is even more pronounced among Indigenous communities where, according to a study during COVID-19 on students in Mexico, only 64% of Indigenous communities have access to the internet and about 40% have access to a 4G network, necessary for downloading materials beyond entertainment.²⁰ Additionally, many Indigenous communities lack access to basic means of communication, such as phones (which are available to only 44% of Indigenous communities), post offices, and radio stations.²¹

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Estrategia IFT 2020-2024, 2020.

¹⁵ Jesus, "Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información en los Hogares (ENDUTIH) 2023."

¹⁶ Martínez-Domínguez and Mora-Rivera, "Internet Adoption and Usage Patterns in Rural Mexico."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sanchez. "Lack of Access to Quality Education," 2023.

¹⁹ Martínez-Domínguez and Fierros-González, "Determinants of Internet Use by School-Age Children."

²⁰ Powell, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students in Mexico - World Education Blog."

²¹ Sanchez. "Lack of Access to Quality Education," 2023.

Data from the 2018 National Household Survey (ENIGH) shows that there was a considerable digital divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, with one in five Indigenous children aged 3 to 17 years lacking either access to electricity, television, or internet at home.²² According to a Ballard Brief, only 43% of rural Indigenous people will complete primary school, 5% will complete secondary school, and 0.7% will attend university.²³

The Role of Digital Skills in Deepening the Divide

Digital skills refer to a user's capability to effectively find content online, significantly improving the likelihood of using the internet and benefiting from it.²⁴ ²⁵ Users with higher digital skills practice a wider range of online activities; for example, users with post-primary education use the web for information searches, while young adults without these skills tend to use it for entertainment only.²⁶ The digital divide also exacerbate disparities between rural and Indigenous communities in digital skills development, not only in access to technology.²⁷

Evidence shows that knowledge acquisition is improved by integrating information and communication technologies in education, reducing socioeconomic disparities, promoting learning autonomously, and fostering problem-solving and collaboration skills in individuals.²⁸ Therefore, digital inclusion involves not only improving access to the internet but also developing the skills and knowledge needed to use digital devices meaningfully. For this reason, digital literacy must be treated as a priority.²⁹

Broader Social Impacts

Children and youth who lack digital access or skills experience increased exclusion in education, employment, and civic engagement.³⁰ Poor educational outcomes reduce opportunities in the job market, lower career progression, and decrease political engagement.³¹ ³² ³³ Digital inclusion increases civic participation and makes it easier to access government services, healthcare, and social support. It helps build a connected and informed population, which is important for reducing inequality and improving opportunities.

²² Powell, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students in Mexico - World Education Blog."

²³ Sanchez, Elizabeth. "Lack of Access to Quality Education for Rural Indigenous Communities in Chiapas, Mexico," Ballard Brief, 2023, <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/lack-of-access-to-quality-education-for-rural-indigenous-communities-in-chiapas-mxico>.

²⁴ Martínez-Domínguez and Fierros-González, "Determinants of Internet Use by School-Age Children."

²⁵ Martínez-Domínguez and Mora-Rivera, "Internet Adoption and Usage Patterns in Rural Mexico." *Technology in Society* 60, 2020.

²⁶ Martínez-Domínguez and Mora-Rivera.

²⁷ Powell, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students in Mexico - World Education Blog."

²⁸ Rocha-Castillo, Pasquel-López, and Heredia-Escorza, "Technology Integration in Indigenous Schools without Internet Access."

²⁹ Del-Valle-Soto et al., "Bridging the Digital Divide in Mexico."

³⁰ Martínez-Domínguez and Fierros-González, "Determinants of Internet Use by School-Age Children."

³¹ Sanchez. "Lack of Access to Quality Education," 2023.

³² Mexico and Central America: Children on the Move and Other Crises. UNICEF, 2023. [https://www.unicef.org/media/144526/file/LACRO-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No.1-\(Children-on-the-move-and-other-crises-Mexico-and-Central-America\)-30-June-2023.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/144526/file/LACRO-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No.1-(Children-on-the-move-and-other-crises-Mexico-and-Central-America)-30-June-2023.pdf).

³³ Martínez-Domínguez and Fierros-González, "Determinants of Internet Use by School-Age Children."

In places with poor connectivity, people are often excluded from these benefits, exacerbating existing problems, such as lack of access to public services, and continuing cycles of poverty. In Mexico, digital inclusion supports fair economic growth and helps open access to education, civic life, and basic services. Expanding digital access is necessary so that everyone has the chance to take part in and contribute to the country's development.³⁴

Recommendations

Local governments in Mexico should collaborate with telecommunications companies and international organizations to finance technological infrastructure and device access.

A fundamental strategy to close the digital divide is to expand technological infrastructure in rural and remote areas. Investment in this infrastructure, especially in marginalized communities, involves the installation of broadband networks and the provision of affordable internet access to all communities, along with regulations to promote infrastructure deployment. Governments must contribute to ensuring that all citizens have equal access to technology. A good example of this strategy in action is the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) in the United States, which has invested approximately \$1.7 billion since 2021 to fund 132 projects aimed at expanding broadband infrastructure and digital access in underserved Native American communities.³⁵ Initiatives like these improve equitable digital access by expanding the availability of quality internet across regions.

Expand digital literacy programs in schools and communities.

Improving education and access to information must be a governmental priority, as the digital divide not only involves physical access to technology, but also the ability to use it meaningfully. Therefore, digital inclusion programs should aim to promote the effective and meaningful use of technology in everyday life. Promoting digital literacy by teaching students and their families the skills needed to use technology effectively is crucial. Digital literacy programs can range from teaching basic skills, such as using web browsers and communication applications, to more advanced skills, such as programming and cybersecurity. Government programs should encourage schools to integrate digital literacy into the curriculum by offering dedicated Information and Communication Technology (ICT) courses and providing ongoing training for teachers. A good example is the DigiMENTE program, implemented across Latin America, which trains youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible digital engagement through a structured curriculum. This program has successfully reached thousands of students and educators, demonstrating the impact of regionally adapted digital education initiatives.³⁶

Continuing education in digital skills must be accessible, adapted to local needs, and regularly updated to reflect the latest trends and developments in educational technology.

³⁴ Del-Valle-Soto et al., "Bridging the Digital Divide in Mexico."

³⁵ Killham, Evan. "Bridging the Digital Divide: The Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program," *Lifewire*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.lifewire.com/tribal-broadband-connectivity-program-7093239?>

³⁶ Movilizatorio, Alianzas. "DigiMENTE: Media Education for Latin America." MIT Solve, May 9, 2023. <https://solve.mit.edu/solutions/74361>.

For a comprehensive curriculum, it is necessary to implement various types of literacy: technological, academic, informational, and multimedia. This curriculum should also emphasize the acquisition of flexible learning mechanisms, educating individuals to learn how to learn, reflect, and adapt to constant social changes. Additionally, the Mexican government should actively support the design, promotion, generation, and research of resources and programs to increase the use of the internet and ICTs. Ideal digital literacy programs are based on the unique characteristics of each school or community context and aimed at encouraging creative use of ICTs.

It is essential to prioritize vulnerable populations and design tailored strategies to address their specific needs.

The digital divide is exacerbated among vulnerable groups such as indigenous people, women, people with disabilities, and rural residents. The Mexican government must promote the inclusion of minority, vulnerable, or marginalized groups, indigenous populations, people with disabilities, and linguistic and cultural minorities in digital access and digital literacy programs. The government should collaborate with international, state, and local entities to promote inclusive policies and equitable digital development. These policies must ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location, have access to the same educational opportunities. Inclusive policies must also address gender inequalities in access to technology and education. Specific programs must empower girls and young women, encouraging their participation in fields such as science and technology. It is necessary to generate training spaces considering gender, educational level, or ethnicity gaps. A good example to follow is Laboratoria, a program operating in several Latin American countries that offers intensive training in web development and UX design for women from low-income backgrounds. Laboratoria has successfully graduated over 4,000 women, with 77% finding employment in the tech sector, showing the potential impact of targeted digital inclusion strategies.³⁷ The government must recognize that digital illiteracy is associated with poverty and the denial of quality education for all.

Conclusion

The digital divide among Mexican youth remains a persistent and complex issue, despite notable progress in expanding internet access over the past several years. Urban areas have benefited most from technological advancements, while rural and Indigenous communities continue to face significant barriers in connectivity, affordability, and digital literacy. These disparities have profound consequences for education, limiting students' opportunities to succeed academically and later in the workforce. While initiatives such as free public internet programs and device distribution efforts are important steps forward, they are not sufficient. True digital inclusion requires comprehensive strategies that address infrastructure gaps, promote digital skills, and prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations. Bridging the divide is essential not only for educational equity but also for fostering broader social, economic, and civic participation across all sectors of Mexican society.

³⁷ "Sobre Laboratoria." Laboratoria, Accessed November 26, 2025, <https://laboratoria.la/en/quienes-somos/sobre-laboratoria>.

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Human Rights in Russia: An Analysis of Domestic and International Humanitarian Law Violations

Sri Bhamidipati, Zarina Davletova, Afifa Iqbal, Abdul Hadi Qureshi

Introduction:

Russia's human rights record has been a subject of significant international concern for decades, from the Soviet era to the present day. This paper explores the domestic and international human rights situation in Russia, focusing on the treatment of minorities, women's rights, freedom of speech, and political freedom, while also analyzing Russia's violations of the Geneva Conventions within the context of its foreign relations, historical actions, and current political climate. Additionally, the paper addresses the war in Ukraine and its profound impact on human rights, comparing Russia's human rights violations to past and current global crises.

This analysis is structured into seven main sections: First, we establish a foundation by defining human rights and their importance in the international order. Second, we go through a political history of Russia, discussing how we arrived at the current state of affairs. Third, we examine domestic issues, such as women's rights, the treatment of minorities, and xenophobia. Fourth, we discuss media suppression and the freedom of speech, specifically through the use of legal frameworks and governmental control. Fifth, we take a look at the Geneva Conventions as the cornerstone of international humanitarian law. Sixth, we document Russia's specific violations of these conventions across multiple conflicts and provide context by comparing Russia's actions to other major historical and contemporary crises, highlighting patterns and distinctions that characterize Russia's approach to international humanitarian law. Finally, we address the war in Ukraine, the current political landscape, and the various human rights implications.

Through this comprehensive examination, this paper demonstrates how Russia's pattern of human rights violations represents not just isolated incidents but a systematic challenge to the post-World War II international legal framework designed to protect human dignity and preserve peace.

Section 1

Human Rights - Definition and Importance

Human rights are universally recognized moral principles or norms that establish standards of human behavior and are protected by both national and international laws.¹ These rights are considered inherent and inalienable, belonging to every individual simply by virtue of being human.² The modern concept of human rights gained prominence after World War II with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, which established universal legal guarantees protecting individuals and groups against actions that interfere with fundamental freedoms and human dignity.³

Human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other status. They include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.⁴ The importance of human rights cannot be overstated, as they ensure basic needs such as access to medicine, food, water, clothes, and shelter. They also protect vulnerable groups from abuse, promote freedom of speech and expression, and provide a universal standard that holds governments accountable for their actions.⁵

Core human rights principles include universality (applying equally to everyone, everywhere), inalienability (cannot be taken away except in specific situations following due process), indivisibility (all rights are equally important and cannot be separated), and interdependence (fulfillment of one right often depends on fulfillment of others).⁶ Establishing human rights is crucial since they create the foundation for freedom, justice, and peace in the world; serve as benchmarks for accountability for governments and state actors; protect the dignity and worth of every person; provide a common standard for international relations and diplomacy; and establish mechanisms for redress when violations occur.⁷

Section 2

From Tsars to Revolution - Russia's Road to the Soviet Era

Russia's geopolitical identity did not emerge overnight; it was built over centuries through expansion, invasions, and political transformation. The foundation goes back to the establishment of Kievan Rus in 862, which laid early cultural and religious roots still significant today. The Mongol invasion in the 13th century brought more than two hundred years of foreign control until Ivan III pushed back in 1480, unifying and centralizing what would become the Russian state. When Ivan IV declared himself the first Tsar in 1547, he expanded Russia's territory while ruling with fear. The Romanov Dynasty took over in 1613, providing relative stability.

¹ "Human Rights." United Nations. Accessed November 10, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights>

² Facing History, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/universal-declaration-human-rights>

³ Amnesty International, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/>

⁴ United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁵ Human Rights Careers, "10 Reasons Why Human Rights Are Important," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/10-reasons-why-human-rights-are-important/>

⁶ United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

⁷ Human Rights Careers, "10 Reasons Why Human Rights Are Important."

Peter the Great and, later, Catherine the Great, modernized Russia's military and cultural standing, bringing it closer to European powers. Reforms like the 1861 abolition of serfdom under Alexander II aimed to modernize the state but could not overcome entrenched inequalities. By the early 1900s, military failure in World War I and social unrest at home set the stage for collapse. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 dismantled the Romanov dynasty, and in 1922 the USSR was born under Lenin's leadership.⁸

USSR to Putin- Power, Collapse, and Conflict

After Lenin died in 1924, Stalin stepped in and began reshaping the Soviet Union through purges, forced labor, and intense industrialization. During World War II, the USSR suffered huge losses but emerged as one of the victors against Nazi Germany. In the decades that followed, the Cold War unfolded with a fierce arms race, space race, and growing Soviet influence across the globe. In 1986, the Chernobyl disaster shocked the world and exposed deep flaws in the Soviet system. Just a few years later, in 1991, the USSR collapsed, and Gorbachev resigned; Russia became an independent country. In 2000, Vladimir Putin took office and began concentrating power over time. His annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point, showing Russia's intent to reassert dominance in the post-Soviet region. In 2022, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine sparked a major international crisis. Despite war and growing unrest, Putin secured a fifth term in 2024 after the death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.⁹

Section 3

Overview of Domestic Human Rights Issues

Many countries and organizations have criticized Russia for systematic human rights violations. Some of the most common violations include deaths in custody, torture by security in jails and the army, children's and women's rights violations, prejudice against ethnic minorities, and killings of journalists. These issues have worsened over time, especially under Putin's reign. Russia redefined its approach to international human rights compliance and later withdrew from the Council of Europe, and, subsequently, the European Human Rights system. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been significant changes in human rights violations, as mentioned by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the European Council. Despite the accusations, Russia responded that these violations and new policies are necessary for national stability.¹⁰

Women's Rights Issues

The Russian constitution adopted in 1993 states that it guarantees equal rights for women and men.¹¹ However, systematic disparities still persist in practice, which affects women in several ways: economic hardship, domestic violence, and restrictive cultural norms. According to reports, women earn, on average, 30% less than men, which is one of the most significant wage gaps in developed countries.

⁸ "Russia: Timeline." History.com, February 27, 2025. <https://www.history.com/articles/russia-timeline>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Human Rights in Russia." Wikiwand. Accessed April 20, 2025. https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Human_rights_in_Russia

¹¹ Muravyeva, Marianna. "Women's Rights and the Russian Constitution." Verfassungsblog, February 9, 2024. <https://verfassungsblog.de/womens-rights-and-the-russian-constitution/>

The poverty rates faced by women affect not only them but also their children, which limits their upward economic stability.¹²

Domestic violence remains a severe crisis when it comes to human rights in Russia, especially for women. In 2017, Russia decriminalized domestic violence that does not cause serious injury. This effectively places women in a very dangerous position, as domestic violence is very common in Russia.¹³

Feminism has also been developing in Russia, and there have been many protests, especially against domestic violence. NGOs and women's support networks offer legal aid, shelter, and advocacy for women in Russia. However, authorities label feminist groups as foreign agents in order to suppress the protests' influence. Despite threats and their consequences, Russian activists are assisting in getting the message out to the public.¹⁴

In the survey conducted by the Levada Center, every Russian man who participated responded that a woman's best quality is to be a good homemaker. This attitude does not only come from men; it is passed down from generation to generation as older women teach their daughters that this is the best quality they can possess, and they teach their sons that they should look for a woman who is a good homemaker as their wives. Gender inequality in Russia is rooted in long-standing cultural norms, with these generational beliefs reinforcing a broader tradition that promotes women's roles in the home.¹⁵

Legislative Measures Affecting Women's Rights

Another legislative technique that is affecting women's rights is to ban "propaganda" promoting child-free lifestyles. This proposal is to boost declining birth rates in the country. A recent Health Ministry decree restricted sales of abortion pills, which will affect the availability of emergency contraceptives. Women will require a special prescription, and not all pharmacies will stock the supply. In some other regions in Russia, the Health Ministry is considering using pilot projects that will require gynecologists to try to get women to reconsider abortion. These pilots also instruct doctors to use emotionally positive language about pregnancy—presenting it as "beautiful" and natural—while describing abortion in negative, discouraging terms. These measures are aimed at increasing the birth rate while people in Russia avoid having children due to war and economic instability.¹⁶

Treatment of Minorities

Russia is a multiethnic society, with ethnic Russians making up about 80% of the population. Significant minority groups include Tatars and Ukrainian Chechens. Many immigrants, mainly from the former Soviet Republic, came to Russia for better opportunities, yet many of these communities—especially migrants from Central Asia—face hate crimes and rising xenophobia.¹⁷

¹² Philipp, Jennifer. "5 Facts about Women's Rights in Russia." The Borgen Project, October 30, 2020. <https://borgenproject.org/womens-rights-in-russia/#:~:text=5%20Facts%20About%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Rights%20in%20Russia%201,movement%20in%20Russia%20is%20growing%20every%20year.%20>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Litvinova, Dasha. "Abortion Restrictions in Russia Spark Outrage as the Country Takes a Conservative Turn." AP News, October 27, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/abortion-russia-women-rights-feminism-fc5cab75b5c3d028acb1f70ec8a9a2b1>.

¹⁷ "World Report 2024: Rights Trends in Russia." Human Rights Watch, January 11, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/russia>.

According to reports, Non-Slavic people often face severe and brutal incidents, including murders, stabbings, and extremist attacks, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The government fails to effectively protect ethnic minorities from these attacks, violence, and extremist groups.^{18 19}

Xenophobic Attacks on Central Asian Migrants

After a deadly attack at Crocus City Hall in 2024, there was a rise in xenophobic attacks and violence against Central Asian people in Russia. The Russian government used this incident to justify increased police raids, deportations of immigrants, and restrictive policies against migrants.²⁰ Central Asian people, especially from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, face identity checks, forced deportations, arrests, and targeted attacks. Reports indicate that Russian authorities subjected them to arbitrary detentions and harsh conditions.²¹

As to the war in Ukraine, ethnic minorities have been disproportionately mobilized, leading to higher casualty rates among immigrants. The Russian government has used the country's diverse and multiethnic composition in propaganda and portrayed soldiers from diverse backgrounds as united against Ukraine and external threats; yet, at the same time, the government simultaneously enforces policies that suppress minorities' cultures and fails to protect them against violence.²²

Section 4

Domestic Perspective - Media Suppression & Freedom of Speech:

Suppression and freedom of speech have always been a concerning issue in Russia. Since the Tsarist Era, freedom of speech has been kept under control in the name of "state security," which was even followed into the Soviet era.²³ The restrictions were relaxed only in the 1980s, however, it coincided with a decline in the economy, leading people to believe that freedom of speech was not good for the country.²⁴ Now that Russia and Ukraine are making headlines in every global media outlet, Russia has again started censorship to control the flow of information, particularly within its borders.

¹⁸ Correspondence, ABN. "Russia Denounces the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. What Does It Mean?" Anti-imperial Block of Nations, September 27, 2023. <https://abn.org.ua/en/interviews/russia-denounces-the-framework-convention-for-the-protection-of-national-minorities-what-does-it-mean/>.

¹⁹ "Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - Russian Federation." Refworld, February 22, 2018. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/amnesty/2018/en/120468>.

²⁰ Shukla, Sebastian. "Central Asian Migrants Face Xenophobic Backlash in Russia after Moscow Terror Attack." CNN, March 30, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/29/world/migrants-xenophobia-moscow-attack-intl/index.html>.

²¹ Darina Boykova | U. Ottawa Faculty of Law, CA. "Human Rights Group Says Central Asian Migrants Facing Xenophobia in Russia." Jurist, March 18, 2025, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/03/human-rights-groups-says-central-asian-migrants-facing-xenophobic-in-russia/>

²² Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien. "Russia's Ethnic Minorities in the Struggle against Cultural Imperialism." Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOIS), May 4, 2023. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/russias-ethnic-minorities-in-the-struggle-against-cultural-imperialism>.

²³ Wilson Center, "Freedom and Restriction of Speech in the Context of Counter-Terrorism in Russia.", January 22, 2008, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/freedom-and-restriction-speech-the-context-counter-terrorism-russia>

²⁴ Ibid.

Legal Framework and Government Control

As people raise their voices regarding the Ukraine war, Russia has introduced new laws to implement its restrictions. The laws, articles 207.3 and 208.3, have been criticized for violating human rights and the freedom of laws focusing on Russian armed forces and the spread of any “false information” about them; includes any statement contradicting the official government narrative.²⁵ Under article 207.3, referring to Russia’s military actions in Ukraine as “war” or “invasion” will be considered a crime. Similarly, the well-known case of Aleksei Gorinov has gained media attention. He has been charged with spreading false information and sentenced to seven years in prison for calling Russia’s actions in Ukraine “an aggression and a war.”²⁶ The wording in these laws have remained vague, providing flexibility and power to the authorities to charge the citizens under the actions they deem violations.²⁷ Their reach also extends beyond Russian borders, as individuals publishing critical content about the Russian government from other countries can face legal consequences as well.²⁸ The broad interpretation of these laws ultimately creates an environment where any criticism or statement against the military and government could be considered a criminal offense.

Censorship and Media Suppression

Russia expanded its authority over the independent media as well, ensuring control of the narrative around the current Ukraine situation. According to the OONI data, in 2023, 139 news media domains were blocked, highlighting the power of Russia over media outlets in the country and in 2024, the blocked new media domains almost doubled to 279, worsening the situation.²⁹ Additionally, the concept of “knowingly false information” plays a crucial role in censorship. Any information not officially reported by the Russian government can be classified as false and subjected to restrictions.³⁰ This rise reflects the government’s consistent and widespread efforts to control information and eliminate access to alternative viewpoints.

Freedom in the World Index

The continuous restrictions on the freedom of speech are also evident in the decline of Russia’s freedom score. The Freedom in the World Index, calculated by Freedom House, aims to calculate the freedom score for countries based on two major categories: Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Political rights are scored out of 40, and civil liberties out of 60, totaling 100. Russia scored 13/100 in 2024, bringing its repressive environment to attention.³¹ The calculation is made using 25 core questions, covering the details about elections, media independence, freedom to protest, among others.

²⁵ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Guide to Understanding the Laws Relating to ‘Fake News’ in Russia.”, July 2022, <https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Guide-to-Understanding-the-Laws-Relating-to-Fake-News-in-Russia.pdf>

²⁶ Amnesty International, “Solidarity for Russian Activist Aleksei Gorinov.”, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/petition/solidarity-for-russian-activist-aleksei-gorinov/>.

²⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, Guide to Understanding the laws.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ RKS Global, Elizaveta Yachmeneva, Maria Xynou, Mehul Gulati, and Arturo Filastò. “Censorship Chronicles: The Systematic Suppression of Independent Media in Russia.” Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), December 9, 2024, <https://ooni.org/post/2024-russia-report/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Freedom House, “Russia: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report.”, 2024, <https://freedom-house.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2024>.

Russia's score is low because elections are heavily controlled, opposition figures are jailed or exiled, and the media is almost entirely state-controlled. The laws discussed above also highlight the manipulation of power to silence any disagreement. This quantitative score helps to measure freedom globally and understand the changes in conditions year by year.³²

Persecution of Journalists

The loss of human life is another alarming situation in Russia. Since Putin came to power in 1999, it has been reported that 43 journalists (including media workers) have been killed.³³ It is a direct violation of human rights, leading to self-censorship in order for journalists to protect themselves. Moreover, Russian authorities have taken other measures, such as imprisonment and torture of journalists, to limit their free speech. Ivan Safronov was punished with 22 years in prison for leaking confidential state information that was already available online. Vladislav Yesipenko, another journalist, was tormented for 2 days before being sent to the detention center.³⁴

Russia's strict control over media and freedom of speech is not just a domestic issue, as it raises serious concerns at an international level as well. The persecution of journalists, censorship of independent media, and harsh laws restricting freedom of expression all go against fundamental human rights. These actions do not just impact people within Russia; they also violate international agreements that protect freedom of speech.

Implications

The Russian government's use of ambiguous laws, censorship, and power to control the flow of information restricts the freedom of media and speech. These actions have created an atmosphere where speaking out comes with its consequences. It can also be seen in its low Freedom score ranking, bringing attention to the seriousness of these issues. On an international level, these measures violate human rights agreements like the Geneva Conventions. Additionally, with the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia has increased its censorship, attempting to control not only its narrative, but how the world views the conflict.

The suppression of political rights, free speech, and independent media goes beyond a domestic issue, as it affects global politics, democracy, and human rights. As the world watches, it raises important questions about how much further these restrictions can go and what role the international community should play in addressing them.

Section 5

Geneva Conventions: Foundation of International Humanitarian Law

The Geneva Conventions are a set of international treaties that establish the rules for conducting war and protecting civilians and prisoners of war. They serve as a global legal framework to promote accountability and preserve human dignity during conflict.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Kaela Malig, "How Russia's Press Freedom Has Deteriorated Over the Decades Since Putin Came to Power," PBS Frontline, September 26, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/russia-putin-press-freedom-independent-news/>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols," 2021.

The first convention was adopted in 1864 and initiated by Henry Dunant after witnessing the Battle of Solferino. However, they were significantly expanded in 1949 as a direct response to the atrocities committed during World War II.³⁶ Protocols were added in 1977 to expand protections in response to the changing nature of warfare.³⁷

The four primary Geneva Conventions of 1949 focus on different aspects of protection during armed conflict: wounded and sick armed forces (First Convention), shipwrecked members of armed forces (Second Convention), prisoners of war (Third Convention), and civilian persons in time of war (Fourth Convention). Protocol II specifically addresses victims of non-international armed conflicts.³⁸ According to the ICRC, 195 States are party to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, making them universally applicable.³⁹

The Geneva Conventions have been crucial in maintaining international order and peace by setting standards for the treatment of combatants and non-combatants. They have established the concept of war crimes and mechanisms for accountability, created a legal basis for humanitarian intervention, influenced the development of the International Criminal Court (ICC), set standards for the treatment of civilians that have saved countless lives, and provided a framework for post-conflict reconciliation. Furthermore, they ensure humane treatment during armed conflicts, as they were primarily designed to protect people who are not taking part in hostilities and those who are no longer participating in hostilities.⁴⁰

Russia's Historical Violations of the Geneva Conventions

Russia has historically been criticized for its actions in various conflicts, including the use of force against civilians. The USSR signed the 1949 Geneva Conventions and ratified them in 1954. However, with the Russian Federation as the successor state to these obligations, there has been a pattern of violations dating back to Soviet era interventions, such as in Afghanistan (1979-1989).⁴¹

In Chechnya (1999-2009), there were documented cases of indiscriminate bombings and attacks, torture of detainees, and disappearances.⁴² Human Rights Watch documented over 300 cases of enforced disappearances between 2000 and 2005. In Georgia (2008), there were accusations of targeting civilians in South Ossetia.⁴³

³⁶ IASGYAN, "War Crime Laws," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.iasgyan.in/daily-current-affairs/war-crime-laws>

³⁷ United Nations, "Security Council Press Release," 2019, <https://press.un.org/en/2019/sc13917.doc.htm>.

³⁸ Geneva Academy, "The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries," 2022.

³⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross. (2024). States party to the Geneva Conventions (Annex, ICRC Annual Report).

⁴⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols."

⁴¹ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law in Ukraine," 2022.

⁴² Human Rights Watch, "War Crimes in Chechnya and the Response of the West," February 29, 2000, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2000/02/29/war-crimes-chechnya-and-response-west>.

⁴³ Human Rights Watch. (2009). Up in flames: Humanitarian law violations in the conflict over South Ossetia. Human Rights Watch. Up In Flames: Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia | HRW

More recently, in Syria (2015-present), the UN Commission of Inquiry found that Russian forces conducted indiscriminate airstrikes on civilian areas. Physicians for Human Rights documented attacks on 32 medical facilities in 2019 alone, and there has been evidence of cluster munitions use in populated areas, blocking humanitarian aid to besieged areas.⁴⁴

Figure 1: Comparison of Russian Violations Across Conflicts



Figure 1: Systematic patterns in Russia’s violations of international humanitarian law across conflicts. Sources: Human Rights Watch, UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, OHCHR

This diagram illustrates the recurring patterns that characterize Russia’s approach to armed conflict, including denial of responsibility despite evidence, information warfare to create alternative narratives, humanitarian corridors used tactically rather than for genuine civilian protection, targeting critical infrastructure to pressure civilian populations, and protective intervention justification used across multiple conflicts.⁴⁵ Democratic states often face internal investigations or external pressure when violations occur. Russia, however, actively suppresses dissent, blocks international inquiries, and justifies actions as “anti-Nazi” campaigns or national security measures.⁴⁶

These patterns represent a systematic approach that has been documented across different conflicts involving Russian forces from Chechnya to Syria to Ukraine. The consistency of these patterns suggests a deliberate strategy rather than isolated violations by individual military units or personnel. Understanding these violations in their historical and comparative context is essential for developing effective responses and strengthening the global commitment to human rights and humanitarian principles.

⁴⁴ UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, “Report on Russian Federation’s Role in Syria,” 2020.

⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, “What’s Behind Russia’s Soft Power Moves on Israel-Palestine,” August 13, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/13/whats-behind-russias-soft-power-moves-on-israel-palestine>.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, “We Had No Choice: ‘Filtration’ and the Crime of Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Civilians to Russia,” 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/09/01/we-had-no-choice/filtration-and-crime-forcibly-transferring-ukrainian-civilians>

Section 6

From Kyivan Rus to the Kremlin - A Shared and Contested Past

The shared history of Russia and Ukraine begins with Kyivan Rus, a powerful federation from which both nations trace their roots.⁴⁷ This shared origin, however, became contested over centuries. When the Mongols invaded in the 1200s, the unity of Rus collapsed.⁴⁸ By the 17th century, Ukrainian leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky led a major uprising against Polish rule and formed a semi-autonomous Cossack state.⁴⁹ His alliance with Muscovy in 1654, intended as a form of protection, led to a long-term entanglement with Russian power.⁵⁰ In the late 1700s, Russia controlled eastern Ukraine, and the Habsburgs ruled the western part.⁵¹ The 19th century saw a rise in Ukrainian nationalism, but the Russian Empire responded with repression, banning the Ukrainian language and culture.⁵² In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Ukraine briefly declared independence as the Ukrainian People's Republic, but this was crushed within a few years, setting the tone for a century of struggle over sovereignty and identity.^{53 54 55}

Horrors of Soviet Rule - Ukraine

Under Soviet rule, Ukraine was deeply exploited and repressed. As one of the USSR's founding republics, Ukraine played a vital role in the Soviet Union's economy and military strength, although this came at a significant cost.⁵⁶ Stalin's forced collectivization policies caused the Holodomor, a man-made famine that killed around four million Ukrainians.⁵⁷ Collectivization meant that Ukrainian farmers were forced to give up their land, livestock, and harvests to state-controlled collective farms, losing the ability to decide what to grow or keep for their families.⁵⁸ The state seized grain even during shortages, leaving villages without food and making starvation inevitable.⁵⁹

⁴⁷ Conant, Eve. "Russia and Ukraine: The Tangled History That Connects and Divides Them." National Geographic. February 25, 2022. Accessed December 3, 2025. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/follow-ukraine-independence-struggle-visual-timeline>

⁴⁸ "Timeline of Ukrainian History." In Ukraine's, Many Faces: Land, People, and Culture Revisited, edited by Olena Palko and Manuel Férez Gil, 17–19. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2023.

⁴⁹ Cowie, Andrew. "Pereiaslav Agreement: The Treaty That Made Ukraine a Vassal of Russia." *WorldAtlas*. February 26, 2024. Accessed December 3, 2025. <https://www.worldatlas.com/early-modern-era/pereiaslav-agreement-the-treaty-that-made-ukraine-a-vassal-of-russia.html>.

⁵⁰ Davies, Brian L. "The Road to Pereiaslav." *Cahiers du Monde russe* 50, no. 2–3 (2009): 447–74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "The Ems Ukaz as an Attempt to Destroy the Ukrainian Culture and Language." *Ukrinform*, May 18, 2020, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/basics/linguicide-ukrainian-russia>

⁵³ "History of Ukraine: Events, Timeline, Books - Reporting Ukraine Guide." History of Ukraine: events, timeline, books - Reporting Ukraine Guide. Accessed April 20, 2025. https://www.reportingukraine.guide/history-of-ukraine-key-events?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwhr6_BhD4ARIsAH1Yd-jC8-YtHomqbB1Hnu0xkatywIMG7YrHsNZBSVF_HA2dYkIw603lCuMaAsLFEALw_wcB.

⁵⁴ Origins & history of Ukraine. Accessed April 20, 2025. <https://ukraine.ua/explore/origins-history-of-ukraine/>.

⁵⁵ "Kyivan Rus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 19, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kyivan-Rus>.

⁵⁶ Nazar Gorin, "Soviet Economic Integration or Industrial Colonialism? Ukraine's Economy in the USSR," Heinrich Böll Stiftung, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://ua.boell.org/en>.

⁵⁷ "Holodomor: Basic Facts," Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC), Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://holodomor.ca>.

⁵⁸ "Dekulakisation and Collectivization," Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, Holodomor Education, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.holodomoreducation.org.uk>.

⁵⁹ "Holodomor: Basic Facts," Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC), Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://holodomor.ca>.

In World War II, Ukraine suffered massive civilian casualties, with eight million people dying, including 1.5 million Jews during the Holocaust.⁶⁰ After the war, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army resisted Soviet reoccupation but was ultimately defeated.⁶¹ In 1986, the Chernobyl disaster—made worse by the secrecy, negligence, and mismanagement typical of Soviet rule—caused long-term environmental and health crises.⁶² ⁶³ When the USSR fell apart in 1991, Ukraine declared its independence and began building a democratic state, but the transition was not easy.⁶⁴ Ultimately, political corruption, economic instability, and the unresolved struggle to define national identity left a lasting imprint on Ukraine’s trajectory.⁶⁵ ⁶⁶

The Price of Independence - Ukraine After the USSR

Pro-European and pro-Russian forces shaped Ukraine’s trajectory in the years after independence.⁶⁷ The Orange Revolution in 2004 overturned fraudulent⁶⁸ elections, installing a pro-Western government. However, when pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovich returned to power in 2010, he pulled Ukraine away from the EU under pressure from Moscow.⁶⁹ This triggered the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013, a popular uprising that turned deadly and eventually forced Yanukovich to flee to Russia.⁷⁰ ⁷¹ The movement was about more than just corruption; it was about Ukraine’s future. Ukraine saw itself as a European democracy. Russia, on the other hand, viewed Ukraine as part of its historical and strategic sphere, rather than as a separate nation.⁷² ⁷³

⁶⁰ “Origins & History of Ukraine,” Ukraine.ua (official site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine), accessed December 3, 2025, <https://ukraine.ua/explore/origins-history-of-ukraine/>.

⁶¹ “Ukrainian Insurgent Army,” Wikipedia, accessed December 3, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_Insurgent_Army.

⁶² Chernobyl Accident 1986,” World Nuclear Association, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/chernobyl-accident>.

⁶³ Anna Shandra, “Hiding Truth at All Costs: Revisiting the Chernobyl Disaster,” NATO Association of Canada, September 8, 2021, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://natoassociation.ca/hiding-truth-at-all-costs-revisiting-the-chernobyl-disaster/>

⁶⁴ “Ukraine Since Independence (1991–Present),” War in Ukraine: Historical Background research guide, University of Connecticut Libraries, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://guides.lib.uconn.edu/war-in-ukraine>.

⁶⁵ Ukraine Since Independence (1991–Present),” War in Ukraine: Historical Background research guide, University of Connecticut Libraries, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://guides.lib.uconn.edu/war-in-ukraine>.

⁶⁶ Anders Åslund, “Ukraine’s Oligarchs and the Transition to a Market Economy,” in *How Ukraine Became a Market Economy and Democracy* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009), accessed via summary at Carnegie Endowment, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution,” Council on Foreign Relations, n.d., accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraines-orange-revolution>.

⁶⁹ Yanukovich, V. (2010–2014). Under Yanukovich, Ukraine extended Russia’s lease on the Black Sea Fleet base at Sevastopol and, in 2013, rejected an EU Association Agreement — marking a shift away from closer European integration.

⁷⁰ “Revolution of Dignity,” Wikipedia, accessed December 5, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolution_of_Dignity. Wikipedia+1

⁷¹ “Euromaidan,” Wikipedia, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euromaidan>. Wikipedia+1

⁷² Brand Ukraine NGO, “How Euromaidan Cemented the European Path: All about Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity in 2014,” Ukraine.ua / war.ukraine.ua, n.d., accessed December 5, 2025, <https://war.ukraine.ua/faq/revolution-of-dignity-ukraine/>.

⁷³ Peter Dickinson, “Putin’s New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions,” Atlantic Council, July 15, 2021, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/>.

Putin's refusal to accept Ukraine's independence and his desire to restore Russian influence set the stage for open conflict.^{74 75 76}

Full - Spectrum Warfare - Ukraine Becomes the Battlefield

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point, shifting the conflict into a full, nationwide war. What began as Russian troop buildups in early 2021 turned into a large-scale mobilization by the end of the year.⁷⁷ On February 21, 2022, Putin announced that Russia would recognize the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic—Russian-backed separatist entities in Eastern Ukraine—as independent states, providing a pretext for the subsequent invasion.⁷⁸ Three days later, Russian forces invaded from multiple directions. The attack came from the north via Belarus, targeting Kyiv; from the east through Donbas; and from the south through Crimea.⁷⁹ The human cost has been staggering. But this war is not just about territory; it is about national survival.⁸⁰

Children of War - Abductions

One of the most horrifying aspects of this war has been the treatment of children. A UN report from March 2025 described widespread human rights violations in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, including detention, torture, and sexual violence against minors.⁸¹ Over 200 children have been forcibly taken to Russia or Russian-controlled areas between February 2022 and December 2024, with no way for families to trace or recover them. These abductions, alongside other documented abuses, may qualify as war crimes under international law. Overall, 50,000 Ukrainians are missing, and over 1.7 million children have been displaced from their homes.⁸²

⁷⁴ AlJazeera. "Putin Recognizes Independence of Ukraine Breakaway Regions." AlJazeera, February 21, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/21/russia-to-recognise-ukraine-breakaway-region-kremlin-confirms?utm>.

⁷⁵ Dickinson, Peter. "Escape from Empire: Ukraine's Post-Soviet National Awakening." Atlantic Council, July 7, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/escape-from-empire-ukraines-post-soviet-national-awakening>.

⁷⁶ The Maidan Martyrs: A Decade on from Kyiv's Bloody Revolution." The Guardian, February 20, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/20/maidan-kyiv-protests-10-years-ukraine>.

⁷⁷ Congressional Research Service. (2021, November 19). Russian Troop Movements and Tensions Along the Ukrainian Border. CRS Insight IN11806. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN11806/IN11806.1.pdf

⁷⁸ Adomeit, H., Baev, P., Dunay, P., Gorenburg, D., & Herd, G. P. (2022, February 22). Russia Recognizes the Independent Statehood of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic' and 'Luhansk People's Republic': Implications. George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-security-series/russia-seminar-series/russia-recognizes-independent-statehood-so-called-donetsk-peoples-republic-and-luhansk>

⁷⁹ Why is Russia amassing troops at its border with Ukraine? Accessed April 20, 2025. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/12/why-is-russia-amassing-troops-at-its-border-with-ukraine/>.

⁸⁰ Associated Press. (2025). 'Kill everyone': Russian violence in Ukraine was strategic. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-europe-middle-east-government-and-politics-c3756976cf33cf5de29aa62d61ea7eb6>

⁸¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2025, March 21). The impact of the armed conflict and occupation on children's rights in Ukraine, 24 February 2022–31 December 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/form/2025-03-21-ohchr-report-childrens-rights-in-ukraine.pdf>

⁸² UN Condemns Unimaginable Suffering of Ukrainian Children at Hands of Russia | Reuters. Accessed April 20, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/un-condemns-unimaginable-suffering-ukrainian-children-hands-russia-2025-03-21/>.

No Safe Haven - The Weaponization of Homes, Heat, and Hope

At the same time, Russia has deliberately targeted Ukraine's civilian infrastructure. In 2024 alone, over 1,600 civilians were killed. More than 70% of airstrikes targeted cities such as Kyiv and Kharkiv. Both are large, dense urban hubs with critical energy, transport, and administrative infrastructure—Kyiv as the capital and largest city, and Kharkiv as the second largest, located near the Russian border. This makes strikes both militarily disruptive and psychologically coercive. Since the invasion began, over 1,000 attacks have struck power stations, heating systems, and other vital services. These assaults aim not only to destroy but also to demoralize. Using Shahed drones and cruise missiles, Russia has tried to plunge Ukrainian cities into darkness and cold during the winter months. In 2024, Russia targeted Kyiv more than 100 times.⁸³ The message was clear – no place is safe, and resistance will be met with punishment. Yet despite all of this, Ukraine continues to fight.⁸⁴

Section 7

Legal Responses

Legal responses to Russia's violations include the ICC issuing an arrest warrant for President Putin in March 2023 for unlawful deportation of children⁸⁵, multiple cases at the International Court of Justice regarding Russian actions in Ukraine⁸⁶, UN General Assembly resolutions condemning violations—supported by 143 countries in 2022⁸⁷—and sanctions imposed by multiple countries targeting individuals responsible for violations.⁸⁸ To bolster accountability for the crime of aggression, the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine (ICPA) began operating at Eurojust in July 2023, serving as a coordination hub to secure evidence and support national investigations.⁸⁹ On reparations, the Council of Europe's Register of Damage for Ukraine (RD4U) opened to individual claims in 2024 and is expanding claim categories, building the record needed for a future compensation mechanism.⁹⁰

⁸³ RBC-Ukraine. (2024, December 30). 1,600+ weapons, 200 attacks: How Russia targeted Kyiv in 2024. <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/1-600-weapons-200-attacks-how-russia-targeted-1735577960.html>

⁸⁴ Olha Polishchuk, Nichita Gurcov. "Bombing into Submission: Russian Targeting of Civilians and Infrastructure in Ukraine." ACLED, February 21, 2025. <https://acleddata.com/2025/02/21/bombing-into-submission-russian-targeting-of-civilians-and-infrastructure-in-ukraine/>.

⁸⁵ International Criminal Court. (2023, March 17). Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

⁸⁶ International Court of Justice. (2022). Ukraine v. Russian Federation — Case documents.

⁸⁷ United Nations General Assembly. (2022). Resolution ES-11/1: Aggression against Ukraine. Adoption vote: 141–5–35.

⁸⁸ UK Government, "UK Urges Russia to Respect the Geneva Conventions and Ensure the Humane Treatment of Prisoners of War," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-urges-russia-to-respect-the-geneva-conventions-and-ensure-the-humane-treatment-of-prisoners-of-war-uk-statement-to-the-osce>.

⁸⁹ Eurojust. "History in the Making – The International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine Starts Operations at Eurojust," July 3, 2023, accessed November 10, 2025, <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/international-centre-for-the-prosecution-of-the-crime-of-aggression-against-ukraine>

⁹⁰ Associated Press. "Ukrainians File Online Compensation Claims as Register Opens of Damage to Homes Caused by War," April 2, 2024. <https://apnews.com>; Council of Europe, RD4U – General FAQ, accessed November 10, 2025, <https://rd4u.coe.int/en/faq/general>.

Comparisons to Other Crises: World War II & Israel-Palestine

There are several similarities between current Russian actions and World War II violations, including indiscriminate bombings, mass civilian displacement, and ethnic targeting. However, the scale of current violations lacks the massive scale of the Holocaust, though they show similar patterns of targeting civilians.⁹¹

A key difference is that modern violations occur in the context of established humanitarian law, which did not exist during World War II. Today, there is also more immediate documentation and condemnation of violations, with more robust international response mechanisms.⁹² The Nuremberg Trials set an important precedent that “following orders” is not a defense for war crimes, a principle that remains relevant to current conflicts.⁹³

Human rights organizations have accused both Russia and Israel of using excessive force and causing civilian harm in their respective conflicts.⁹⁴ Similar concerns about civilian protection and humanitarian law have been raised in both the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts, highlighting the importance of adhering to international humanitarian standards.⁹⁵

However, there are important differences between these conflicts. The legal contexts differ (occupation vs. invasion)⁹⁶, and Russia has a pattern of violating international treaties (e.g., Budapest Memorandum 1994, Geneva Conventions)⁹⁷ that distinguishes its actions.⁹⁸ Similarities-wise, both conflicts feature asymmetric warfare and disputed narratives, with debates over proportionality and the distinction between civilian and military targets. A key takeaway is that the divergent international responses to both these conflicts, with respect to the international aid given and action taken by countries, highlight selectivity in applying international law.⁹⁹

Russian Leaders' Sentiment on International Law

Russian leaders have consistently demonstrated a complex stance toward international law and human rights obligations. From the Soviet era to the present day, there has been a pattern of prioritizing national interests over international commitments. This sentiment has been particularly evident in Russia's approach to the Geneva Conventions and other international humanitarian frameworks.

President Vladimir Putin has framed Russia's actions in terms of protecting Russian sovereignty and security interests, often portraying international criticisms as Western hypocrisy or attempts to undermine Russia's influence.

⁹¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.). Introduction to the Holocaust. [HTTPS](https://www.ushmm.org/)

⁹² UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, “Update on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine,” 2023.

⁹³ National WWII Museum, “Crimes Against Humanity and International Law.” <https://www.national-ww2museum.org/war/articles/crimes-against-humanity-international-law>

⁹⁴ BBC News. (2025, November 29). Russia must ‘kill everyone’: Ukraine reports mass violence in liberated Kyiv suburb. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8el72ldpr4o>

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “How Does International Humanitarian Law Apply to Israel and Gaza,” October 27, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/27/how-does-international-humanitarian-law-apply-israel-and-gaza>.

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of the Army. (n.d.). The law of war workshop deskbook.

⁹⁷ Zamora, C. (2025, January 19). Russia's Violation of International Law: What, Why, and How? LawShun. <https://lawshun.com/article/how-did-russia-break-international-law>

⁹⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, “How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Violates International Law,” accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-russias-invasion-ukraine-violates-international-law>.

⁹⁹ Alternatives Humanitaires, “Threats to International Humanitarian Law in Ukraine and Gaza,” November 27, 2024, <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2024/11/27/threats-to-international-humanitarian-law-in-ukraine-and-gaza/>.

Putin articulated this position in his famous 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, where he criticized the “unipolar world” and what he described as the imposition of Western standards on sovereign nations.¹⁰⁰

The Russian government’s official position maintains that it respects international law while simultaneously reinterpreting its obligations.¹⁰¹ Russia exemplified this shift by withdrawing from Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions in 2019, signaling a deliberate change in its stance on international humanitarian law.¹⁰² Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has repeatedly denied allegations of humanitarian violations, dismissing documented evidence as fabrications and politicized attacks.¹⁰³

Conclusion

This paper examined Russia’s human rights record from both domestic and international perspectives, revealing a systematic pattern of violations that transcends isolated incidents. Our analysis documented serious domestic and international humanitarian law violations in conflicts from Chechnya to Syria to Ukraine. We identified consistent patterns in Russia’s approach to warfare, including targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure, indiscriminate bombing of populated areas, and the forcible deportation of civilians. By comparing these violations with other conflicts and examining Russian leadership’s stance toward international obligations, we demonstrated that Russia’s actions constitute a deliberate challenge to the post-World War II international legal framework designed to protect human dignity. Russia’s violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, particularly the Geneva Conventions, represent a serious challenge to the post-World War II international order. The international community has responded with legal actions, sanctions, and diplomatic pressure; however, enforcement of international humanitarian law remains challenging. As the conflict in Ukraine continues, documentation of violations and maintenance of international pressure remain crucial for eventual accountability. The analysis indicates that as long as Russian leadership continues to prioritize perceived national interests over international humanitarian standards, these violations will likely persist, requiring sustained global vigilance and coordination to uphold fundamental human rights principles.

¹⁰⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” February 12, 2007.

¹⁰¹ Kahn, J. (2022, March 9). Consistency and Change in Russian Approaches to International Law. Lieber Institute at West Point. <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/consistency-change-russian-approaches-international-law/>

¹⁰² International Committee of the Red Cross. (n.d.). State Parties – Protocol Additional I (1977): Russian Federation.IHL Treaties - Russian Federation Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions, 1977 Declaration

¹⁰³ USUS Department of State, “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Russia,” accessed April 22, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/russia/>.

Navigating Geopolitical Shifts: BRI's Impact on China, Pakistan, India, and the US

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Introduction:

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is profoundly reshaping geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, intensifying strategic competition among China, Pakistan, India, and the United States. This paper examines how the BRI—and, more specifically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—transforms regional alliances and rivalries, with particular focus on Pakistan's economic and security shifts, India's counterstrategies, and the evolving India–U.S. partnership as a counterbalance to Beijing's expanding influence. We situate these developments against the backdrop of China's "Malacca Dilemma," a critical driver of its port investments and maritime policies.

Guided by the central question—How does the BRI reorder power relations among China, Pakistan, India, and the U.S., and what policy options could mitigate rising tensions?—the paper is organized into five main sections. Section 2 explores the origins, scope, and strategic underpinnings of the BRI-- including an in-depth discussion of the Malacca Dilemma. Section 3 shifts to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), tracing its historical background, infrastructure gains, and security implications. Section 4 analyzes India's strategic posture and the recalibration of India–China–U.S. relations in the wake of the BRI. Next, Section 5 examines how India's growing ties with the United States reshape defense cooperation and economic alignments amid China's regional ascent. Finally, Section 6 offers conclusions and policy recommendations, emphasizing the need for balanced debt management, enhanced security collaboration, and broader partnerships to sustain stability in an increasingly contentious geopolitical landscape.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) & the Malacca Dilemma

Overview of BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also called One Belt One Road (OBOR), is a global infrastructure strategy launched by China in 2013.^{1,2} Envisioned as both a geopolitical and geoeconomic project, it involves investments in more than 150 countries highlighted Figure 1.³ The BRI aims to stimulate economic growth and inter-regional connectivity through roads, railways, ports, and digital infrastructure.^{1,4}



Figure 1: Countries participating in BRI as of March 2022³

Building on earlier policies such as Jiang Zemin’s Go Out policy and China’s Western Development plan, the BRI was formally announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013.^{4,5} He first introduced the “Silk Road Economic Belt” in a speech at Nazarbayev University and then proposed a “21st century Maritime Silk Road,” which emphasizes cooperation in Southeast Asia and beyond.^{6,7} Figure 2⁸ depicts the extent of the infrastructure spanning across various countries for potential dual use connectivity. While Figure 3⁹ represents the extent of Chinese control either directly to the Chinese government or through various Chinese firms (e.g., CK Hutchison Holdings). While the BRI features massive infrastructure development, analysts note it is central to Xi Jinping’s “Major Country Diplomacy,” highlighting China’s intention to assume a more active global role.^{10,11}

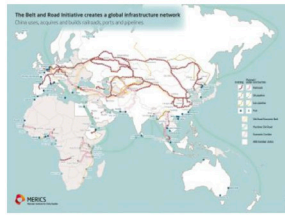


Figure 2: BRI Infrastructure network⁸ Figure 3: Port control by Chinese entities⁹

The Initiative’s objectives include unifying markets, attracting capital inflows, and promoting cultural exchange, while also supporting China’s strategic interests by creating new markets and reducing reliance on vulnerable chokepoints.^{4,12} As of early 2024, over 140 countries participated in the BRI, representing nearly 75% of the world’s population and over half of global GDP.^{12,13} Flagship projects range from the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor to the Khorgos gateway on the Kazakhstan–China border, with maritime investments continuing to expand.^{6,12} In terms of economic impact, one estimate suggests the BRI could increase global GDP by \$7.1 trillion annually by 2040, largely through improved infrastructure and lower trade costs.¹⁴ The World Bank likewise highlights the Initiative’s potential to boost trade flows and accelerate development, particularly in East Asia and the Pacific.²

Importance of the Malacca Dilemma

Any blockade would threaten China’s economy, epitomizing the Malacca Dilemma.^{20,21} The Malacca Dilemma underscores China’s vulnerability due to its reliance on the Strait of Malacca, through which about 80% of its Middle Eastern oil passes.^{15,16} Figure 4¹⁷ maps the existing route through the Strait of Malacca (in black) highlighting the potential chokepoint for Chinese trade and the alternate routes through Gwadar, Pakistan (in blue) and Kyaukpyu, Myanmar (in red). As the shortest maritime route linking China to Europe and Africa, it is patrolled by the U.S. Navy, raising concerns over potential disruptions.^{18,19}



Figure 4: Existing Chinese trade route, and alternate routes through Pakistan and Myanmar¹⁷

In response, the BRI invests in alternative corridors, most notably the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), linking Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea to Xinjiang via roads and rail.^{22,23} By bypassing the strait, CPEC shortens routes for energy imports from the Middle East and mitigates the risk of hostile intervention.^{24,25} Gwadar’s deep-water facilities further enhance China’s strategic posture, offering a direct maritime outlet and new commercial opportunities.^{26,27} Through such projects, China diversifies supply lines, reducing reliance on a single chokepoint and bolstering overall energy security.^{18,19} Consequently, the Malacca Dilemma remains a key driver of China’s maritime ambitions under the BRI, influencing port development and policy planning.^{20,21}

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Origins and Strategic Rationale of CPEC

The CPEC is a 3,000 km infrastructure network under construction in Pakistan.^{15,16} Initially valued at \$46 billion at its April 2015 launch^{28,29}, the total investment rose to \$62 billion by 2020^{30,31} and later reached \$65 billion. It is regarded as the most advanced land corridor of the BRI, contributing to China’s energy security while modernizing Pakistan’s infrastructure^{32,33}. Figure 5 below shows the extensive road infrastructure network planned to increase and improve connectivity from the Gwadar and Bin Qasim Port (Karachi) to the Western provinces of China.³⁴

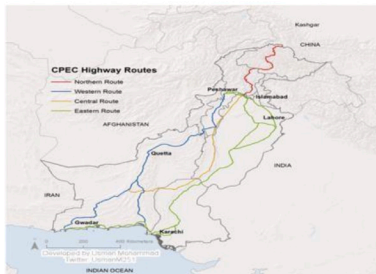


Figure 5: Proposed infrastructure networks for CPEC³⁴

Plans for a Sino-Pakistani emerged in the 1950s, culminating in the construction of the Karakoram Highway in 1959. These deep ties underpin the phrase “iron brothers,” frequently invoked by both countries. During his 2015 visit to Pakistan, President Xi Jinping declared he felt as if he were “visiting the home of [his] own brother,” underscoring the close bilateral bond that enabled such a large-scale undertaking.^{28,29} CPEC is widely viewed as a “flagship” of the BRI, which China adopted in 2013 as a global infrastructure development framework.^{35,36} While Gwadar Port began partial operations in November 2016, several CPEC projects are now operational, including improved transport networks and Special Economic Zones.^{32,33} For China, the corridor offers a shorter, more reliable route for Middle Eastern oil imports, bypassing the Strait of Malacca and cutting a 12,000 km trip down to roughly 2,395 km—potentially saving \$2 billion annually. For Pakistan, CPEC represents the largest direct investment since independence and is often hailed as a “game and fate changer.” By overhauling its outdated transportation network, which incurs a loss of about 3.55% of annual GDP, the project could significantly boost economic growth.³⁵ Thus, CPEC’s historic roots, strategic benefits, and crucial role within the BRI underscore its importance to both nations’ long-term interests.

Before the advent of the CPEC, Pakistan’s economic trajectory was marred by structural vulnerabilities and compounded geopolitical isolation. Figure 6^{37,38} illustrates a sharp deceleration in GDP growth from 5.5% in 2006-07 to a meager 0.4% in 2008-09, underscoring the economy’s fragility in the face of global shocks, compounded by the strategic fallout from the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the 2011 Abbottabad incident.

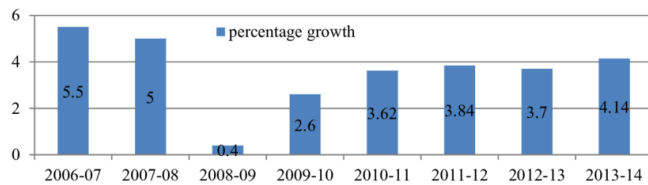


Figure 6: Pakistan’s GDP growth (fiscal year 2006-2014)^{37,38}

Simultaneously, Figure 7^{37,38} captures the collapse in foreign direct investment after 2008, reflecting investor wariness toward a state increasingly perceived as both politically volatile and diplomatically isolated.

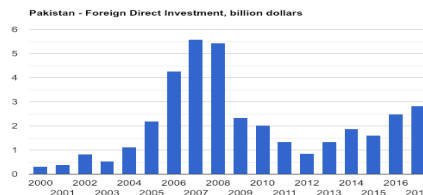


Figure 7: Pakistan’s FDI (fiscal year 200-2017)^{37,38}

The electricity generation and demand disparity in Figure 8^{37,38} further encapsulates the macroeconomic malaise. Despite incremental generation capabilities, the demand-supply gap persisted because of chronic circular debt, unsustainable capacity payments, and reliance on costly oil and coal imports.

Thus, prior to CPEC, Pakistan’s economic woes were not merely cyclical downturns, but symptoms of deep-seated structural deficiencies exacerbated by geopolitical marginalization and fiscal mismanagement. CPEC, in this context, emerged not as a choice but as a strategic compulsion—an external intervention aimed at recalibrating a state teetering on the brink of economic stagnation and strategic irrelevance.

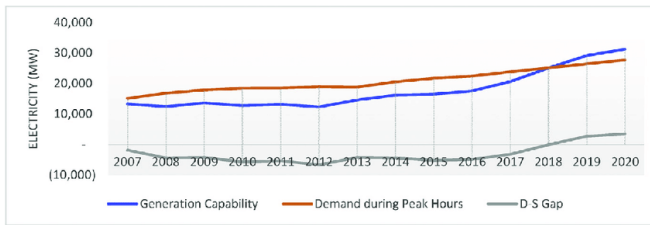


Figure 8: Pakistan’s Electricity Demand-Supply Gap (fiscal year 2007-2020) ^{37,38}

Energy and Infrastructure Projects

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) encompasses extensive energy and infrastructure developments aimed at modernizing Pakistan’s economy and enhancing connectivity.^{15,16} Over \$33 billion is devoted to power projects addressing chronic electricity shortages that once cut annual GDP by an estimated 2–2.5%.^{39,40} Under “Early Harvest” initiatives, more than 10,400 MW of capacity is set to be added, including the 1,320 MW Port Qasim and Sahiwal coal power plants, as well as the Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park, which aspires to be among the world’s largest solar farms.^{39,41} A 711 km pipeline from Gwadar to Nawabshah is also planned to transport liquefied natural gas and oil.^{39,40} Transport infrastructure is similarly vital as indicated by \$10.63 billion allocated for highways, railways, and transit upgrades.^{42,43} Projects include the Karachi–Lahore Motorway and the Hoshab–Gwadar M8 Highway, both seen as crucial for bolstering national connectivity. In urban development, the Orange Line in Lahore introduces a new mass-transit model under CPEC.⁴¹ Gwadar Port serves as a linchpin – linking CPEC to the Arabian Sea.^{44,45}

By December 2017, over \$1 billion in initiatives surrounded the port, among them a \$4 million Smart Port City Master Plan and the \$300 million Gwadar Free Zone Phase-1.^{44,45} The Pak-China Technical and Vocational Institute was also established to train locals, though multiple projects—particularly those addressing water and electricity—remain unfinished.^{44,45} CPEC financing combines concessionary loans and joint ventures, creating thousands of jobs according to initial estimates.^{46,47} Moody’s has deemed these developments a “credit positive” for Pakistan, yet protests and debt concerns endure.^{46,48} Local demonstrations in Gwadar over illegal fishing and potential socio-economic impacts underscore the challenges, despite CPEC’s pivotal role in driving Pakistan’s economic growth.^{15,16}

Economic and Security Implications

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has far-reaching economic and security effects for both Pakistan and the broader region.¹⁵ As the largest foreign investment in Pakistan’s history, its value had climbed from \$62 billion in 2020 to \$65 billion by 2022.^{27,49}

Moody's Investors Service deems CPEC a "credit positive," and the Asian Development Bank highlights its potential to link markets by connecting supply and demand.^{46,47,48} Early estimates suggested the initial \$46 billion in projects was equivalent to 17% of Pakistan's 2015 GDP, with transport upgrades expected to alleviate heavy annual losses from dilapidated infrastructure.^{27,50} The Pakistani government also anticipates collecting sizable transit fees on Chinese goods, boosting revenues over the long term.^{27,49} Despite these benefits, there are persistent worries about debt sustainability. By 2022, Pakistan owed China nearly \$30 billion, representing almost 30% of its external debt.⁵¹

Interest-rate disclosures have been inconsistent, with some sources alleging potentially high rates, while official accounts assert a 2% rate over two decades.⁵² Some observers draw parallels to Sri Lanka's debt crisis, warning of a potential "debt trap".⁵¹ Protests have arisen in Gwadar over alleged illegal fishing and local livelihoods, underscoring social tensions amid economic development.^{53,54} CPEC also faces significant security challenges, as the corridor traverses restive areas where militant and separatist groups operate.^{15,55} Baloch nationalists fear loss of control over resources, and extremists have targeted Chinese personnel. In response, Pakistan's military has created specialized security divisions to protect key sites, while the navy established "Task Force 88" to secure maritime approaches.^{52,55} Though such measures have curtailed certain threats, ongoing tensions, including India's objections over Kashmir, underscore the project's geopolitical sensitivity.⁵²

India-China-US Relations Post-BRI

Indo-China Land Dispute: Border Skirmishes

China's territorial assertiveness extends beyond maritime boundaries, with frequent skirmishes along its land border with India. The border conflicts between India and China have a long history, dating back to the 1962 Sino-Indian War when China captured Aksai Chin and established control over disputed territory. Subsequent clashes, such as the 1967 Nathu La and Cho La conflicts, saw India successfully repelling Chinese incursions in Sikkim. More recently⁵⁶, the 2017 Doklam standoff emerged following Chinese road construction near Bhutan, leading to a 73-day diplomatic standoff. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash underscored the volatility of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), where both nations have long-standing disputes. It resulted in the first deadly confrontation in decades, with twenty Indian soldiers and four confirmed Chinese soldiers losing their lives and many others injured. Beijing's infrastructure developments along the border, including roads and airstrips, further exacerbated tensions, prompting India to bolster its border defense and enhance military readiness.⁵⁷ These conflicts are a result of China's broader strategic goal of expanding its influence in South Asia while testing India's military and diplomatic resolve.

China's Grand Strategy

China's long-term strategy is aimed at governance, economic prosperity, and military expansion by 2050. It follows a multi-pronged approach involving Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) tactics. The strategy also emphasizes enforcing the One China Policy, ensuring regional sovereignty, and securing energy resources through diversified supply chains.

Robert Kaplan in his book titled “Monsoon – The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power”, states succinctly that: “The Greater Indian Ocean region stretching eastward from the Horn of Africa past the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian Plateau and the Indian subcontinent, all the way to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, will be the center of global conflicts, because most international business supply will be conducted through this route.” Although in the present context, China’s strategic focus continues to be on the Pacific, it has slowly started making inroads into the Indian Ocean region. The focus of China on creation of a Blue Water capability along with friendly basing facilities around the Indian peninsula is likely to overlap the maritime security interests of India. By leveraging economic influence, military advancements, and strategic partnerships, Beijing aims to assert its dominance in the Indo-Pacific. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and military modernization serve as key instruments in this strategy, allowing China to extend its reach into crucial geopolitical regions. The South China Sea disputes, where China has unilaterally imposed its claims despite international arbitration rulings, serve as a precedent for its broader ambitions in territorial expansion.

India’s Concerns with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The BRI has raised alarms in India due to its geopolitical and economic ramifications. Projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, directly challenge India’s sovereignty and security. Furthermore, China’s influence in Aksai Chin remains a point of contention. Additionally, China’s debt-trap diplomacy has led to increased dependence of smaller nations on Beijing, providing China with strategic leverage.⁵⁸ India has refused to participate in the BRI, citing concerns over sovereignty and transparency, and shifting the narrative toward alternative regional connectivity initiatives such as the Chabahar port in Iran. Military objectives disguised as economic investments pose a direct threat to India’s security, particularly with Chinese naval bases in Gwadar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Indian response to China’s BRI strategy is manifesting in improving bilateral ties with the Indian Ocean littorals as well as a renewing and invigorating focus towards modernization of its navy.

China’s String of Pearls Strategy and India’s Response

China’s maritime encirclement of India through the String of Pearls strategy involves investments in key strategic locations. Figure 9 depicts China’s “String of Pearls” strategy — establishing a network of ports across the Indian Ocean (yellow markers in Figure 9) — which poses a significant challenge for India. Ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) provide China with potential naval footholds near Indian waters. In response, India has strengthened its maritime posture by enhancing naval capabilities, forged military agreements with key allies, and expanded its presence in key locations (blue markers in Figure 9) such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Strategic naval investments included but limited to, partnerships with Singapore’s Changi Naval Base and Iran’s Chabahar Port, provide India with critical maritime advantages. These measures aim to counterbalance China’s growing influence in the region. India’s engagements with ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) reinforce its commitment to regional security.⁵⁹



Figure 9: China's String of Pearls Strategy and India's response through Strategic Port Network

Understanding China's Maritime Strategy

The maritime strategy of a country can be defined as the overall approach of a nation to the oceans around it, with the aim of synergizing all aspects related to maritime activities and maximizing national gains.⁶⁰ Chinese strategists consider that a well-designed maritime strategy with a strong naval force is the guarantee of China's economic development, security and interests. China has historically viewed the sea as a potential invasion route for foreign aggressors rather than as a medium for achieving national goals.⁶¹ China's maritime strategy revolves around securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and expanding naval capabilities.

China has been pursuing its maritime strategy to protect its offshore sovereignty and economic and other resources available there, to secure its vital SLOCs and to check the presence of the United States in its periphery. China's naval strategy has evolved from "Near Seas Control" to a "Far Ocean Strategy." Towards this strategy, China is trying to project its image in that direction through its handling of the South China Sea and Taiwan issue. More specifically, the South China Sea serves as a crucial testing ground for China's military expansion, with artificial islands and military installations reinforcing its control.⁶² This approach allows China to continue to reform its economy while acquiring a comprehensive national power without dealing with impediments.⁶³



Figure 10: China's First and Second Island Chain Strategy

PLA Navy Modernization

China's maritime ambitions have driven a sweeping transformation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy from a coastal defense force into a blue-water fleet and navies of a nation play a major role in shaping its maritime strategy. Modern carriers, stealth destroyers, nuclear submarines, and anti-ship ballistic missiles now enable sustained power projection, reshaping regional security dynamics.

The PLA Navy has undergone rapid modernization, making it the world's largest navy with over 355 warships – in the process transforming China into a formidable maritime power. The commissioning of aircraft carriers, stealth destroyers, and nuclear-powered submarines has bolstered its ability to project power far beyond its shores. The deployment of anti-ship ballistic missiles, such as the DF-21D, challenges traditional naval superiority, particularly that of the United States. The first PRC Navy was composed of the officers and sailors of the former KMT (Kuomintang) Second Coastal Defense Fleet.⁶⁴ Expansion of PLAN and its modernization were accelerated during the 1980s by the coastal concentration of China's leapfrogging economy. As China's coastal cities boomed, the government realized it needed a stronger navy to protect its growing trade and sea lanes. This period marked the beginning of China's shift from a coastal defense mindset to a more outward, ocean-going naval vision.

Three factors are understood to have contributed to the development of PLAN during 1980-90. The first was Deng's evaluation of the military at the expanded CMC meeting in 1975 as “overstaffed, lazy, arrogant and ill-prepared to conduct modern warfare”, an opinion strengthened by the PLA's poor performance during the 1979 conflict with Vietnam.⁶⁵ Second was China's decision that the Soviet Union no longer posed a major threat to China.⁶⁶ The third is China's ability to resolve land border disputes with most of the neighbors. So, the focus has shifted to the resolution of its actual or perceived maritime disputes.



Figure 11: China's Far Ocean Strategy

Hence, in light of the aforementioned factors, PLAN was given more attention and became something more than subordinate to the land forces. The PLAN has a total strength of 235,000 officers and men, and commands three fleets, namely, the Beihai Fleet, the Donghai Fleet and the Nanhai Fleet.⁶⁷ Each fleet has fleet aviation headquarters, support bases, flotillas and maritime garrison commands, as well as aviation divisions and marine brigades. According to military analysts, China is likely to reach U.S. technical-proficiency levels by 2030.⁶⁸ Further by 2049, coinciding with the centenary of the People's Republic of China, it aspires to rise as a global superpower with capability to exert influence in their region of choice.

India's Counter Strategy

In response to China's maritime expansion, India has pursued a multi-faceted counterstrategy. Strengthening naval capabilities through internal shipbuilding, expanding blue-water operations, and engaging in joint military exercises with allies are key components of this approach.

India's participation in multilateral naval drills and defense agreements with France, the United States, and Australia demonstrates its commitment to regional security. Additionally, initiatives such as the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine reflect India's vision for a stable and rules-based maritime order. India's involvement in the Indo-Pacific serves as a proactive step in countering China's influence. Strengthening indigenous defense production and reducing economic dependence on China are key elements of India's response.

QUAD: Strategic Partnership for Indo-Pacific Security

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) – comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia – has emerged as a crucial alliance to counterbalance China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. Through joint military exercises, intelligence-sharing, and strategic coordination, the QUAD aims to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific. India's active participation in QUAD initiatives underscores its commitment to regional stability and multilateral security cooperation against China's expansionist ambitions.

Since 2021, the QUAD has strengthened its coordination in response to China's growing assertiveness. In November 2020, all four navies conducted a joint exercise, and in March 2021, all four nations formed working groups on COVID-19 vaccine distribution, climate change, and technological innovation.⁶⁹ For the U.S., the QUAD aligns with its strategic interests, as Australia and Japan are treaty allies, and India is a key partner. The Indo-Pacific is vital to U.S. trade, with \$1.9 trillion worth of goods passing through in 2019. Concerns over China's increasing regional influence, economic coercion, and suppression of democratic values have united the Quad members. China has reacted negatively, criticizing the QUAD as an outdated "Cold War mentality" and imposing economic sanctions on Australia. Meanwhile, tensions with India and Japan have grown due to territorial disputes. However, Quad leaders emphasize cooperation over direct military confrontation, focusing on strengthening democratic governance and economic resilience. As China's assertiveness continues, the QUAD is expected to expand its role in regional security and global challenges.

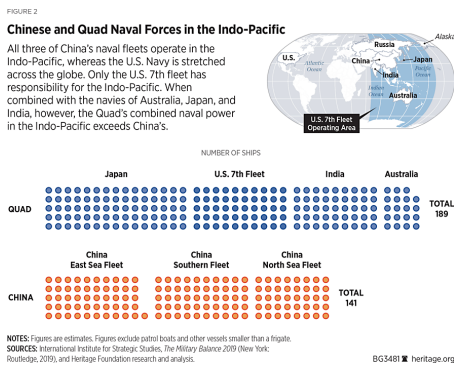


Figure 12: Chinese vs Quad Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific

Indo-US Military Ties

India and the United States have significantly strengthened their military partnership through key defense agreements and high-level engagements, deepening their strategic cooperation across multiple domains.

The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in 2016 facilitates mutual military access for logistics and refueling, enhancing operational coordination. The 2020 Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) further advanced defense collaboration by improving geospatial intelligence-sharing, bolstering India's situational awareness and precision targeting capabilities. Additionally, major defense acquisitions, including advanced fighter jets, drones, and naval artillery, reinforce India's strategic deterrence posture and its ability to counter regional threats effectively. Joint naval exercises like Malabar highlight the increasing interoperability between the Indian and U.S. navies.

During Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to the United States, both nations reaffirmed the strength of the India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. A key outcome of the visit was the announcement of the U.S.-India COMPACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) for the 21st Century: a framework designed to drive transformative progress in bilateral cooperation. To solidify military collaboration, both nations announced plans to finalize a new 10-year Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership.⁷⁰ This framework will deepen joint military exercises, technology transfers, and co-development initiatives, ensuring long-term defense cooperation. Additionally, the Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA) was established to scale up industry partnerships and advance autonomous military technologies in the Indo-Pacific region. Both nations took a firm stance against terrorism, with the U.S. approving the extradition of Tahawwur Rana, a key figure linked to the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, underscoring their shared commitment to counterterrorism efforts.

Broader India-US Relations in the context of China

India-US Relations Timeline

India-US relations have historically been marked by ideological differences and strategic divergences, particularly during the Cold War era. India's policy of non-alignment, which sought to maintain independence from both Western and Soviet blocs⁷¹, often conflicted with the United States' efforts to build alliances against communism. Despite these differences, functional collaborations emerged across various domains⁷² – notably in space exploration and technological development. Early partnerships, such as the US support for India's initial space initiatives, laid the groundwork for scientific cooperation. Additionally, cultural exchanges and talent migration played a pivotal role in fostering ties between the two nations. The migration of Indian professionals to the US during this period not only contributed to American industries but also established a foundation for future collaboration in technology and innovation.

A significant catalytic shift in bilateral relations occurred following India's nuclear tests in May 1998, known as "Shakti 1998." These tests marked a critical juncture, as they challenged global non-proliferation norms and drew widespread criticism from Western countries, including the United States. The imposition of sanctions initially strained relations; however, the tests also compelled the US to reassess its policies towards India and recognize its growing strategic importance as an emerging global power. This reassessment eventually led to dialogues aimed at bridging differences on nuclear issues and fostering mutual understanding.

The landmark US-India Civilian Nuclear Agreement further exemplified this strategic realignment.⁷³ Signed in 2005, the agreement represented a paradigm shift in bilateral relations by granting India access to civilian nuclear technology despite its status as a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This partnership was instrumental in promoting India's economic growth and energy security while positioning it as a responsible nuclear power on the global stage. The agreement also paves the way for an eventual inclusion of India into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

The emergence of a strategic partnership between India and the United States has been characterized by substantial evolution in political, economic, and technological cooperation. This maturation was symbolically reflected in President Barack Obama's historic visit to India as the chief guest for India's Republic Day in 2015—a first for any US president. The visit underscored the deepening ties between the two nations and highlighted shared values of democracy, mutual respect, and collaboration across diverse sectors. Today, India-US relations stand as a testament to how two nations with differing historical trajectories can overcome ideological divides and forge a partnership rooted in shared aspirations for global stability and prosperity.

One of the earliest and most notable instances of cooperation occurred in 1963 when the United States supported India's first rocket launch, marking a pivotal moment in India's nascent space program. This collaboration extended to innovative projects such as the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), which utilized NASA's ATS-6 satellites to broadcast educational programs to rural India, demonstrating how technology could address developmental challenges. This partnership expanded into more advanced areas of space exploration, including lunar and interplanetary missions. A key milestone was NASA's contribution of the Moon Mineralogy Mapper aboard ISRO's Chandrayaan-1 mission in 2008, which led to the groundbreaking discovery of water molecules on the lunar surface. This finding revolutionized scientific understanding of the Moon's composition and its potential for future exploration. Similarly, during India's Mars Orbiter Mission (Mangalyaan) in 2013, NASA provided critical deep-space communication technology, further solidifying the collaborative spirit between the two agencies.

India-US Current Strategic Alignment in Science and Technology

- **ISRO-NASA Partnership:** The collaboration between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) represents a cornerstone of India-US scientific alignment, particularly through the landmark NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) mission. The NISAR mission, launching in early 2024, combines NASA's L-band and ISRO's S-band radar systems for Earth observation, from cryosphere monitoring to disaster response.⁷⁵ Beyond its technical achievements, NISAR symbolizes a paradigm shift in international space collaboration, merging distinct engineering philosophies and operational frameworks to create a model for future partnerships.⁷⁶

- NSF-ANRF: The strategic alignment between the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) and India's Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) represents a transformative institutional mechanism for addressing shared scientific priorities while fostering innovation ecosystems in critical technologies. This partnership, formalized through joint funding agreements and researcher mobility programs, bridges NSF's expertise in large-scale interdisciplinary research with ANRF's mandate to democratize India's R&D landscape under the 2023 Anusandhan Act.

This partnership is built upon some key synergies that align the strengths of both organizations. Funding reciprocity serves as a cornerstone of the collaboration, combining NSF's well-established model of peer-reviewed grants⁷⁷ with ANRF's emphasis on outcome-based research impact assessment⁷⁸ creating hybrid evaluation frameworks that prioritize both scientific merit and societal relevance. For instance, NSF's Engineering Research Centers (EEC) model, exemplified by programs like EEC-1460183, integrates seamlessly with ANRF's focus on measurable outcomes, enabling a balanced approach to funding allocation. Second, the partnership fosters talent circulation through initiatives such as the NSF S-STEM-ANRF Scholars Program, which provides Indian STEM students access to U.S. research infrastructure while facilitating the exchange of NSF-funded researchers to India's emerging technology hubs.⁷⁹

Cross-institutional capacity building has been a key focus of this partnership. Programs like embedded reviewer exchanges allow NSF program officers to participate in ANRF grant panels, facilitating the transfer of best practices in merit review while adapting them to India's socio-economic research priorities.⁸⁰ Technology readiness pathways integrate NSF's I-Corps model with ANRF's Rural Technology Commercialization Fund, resulting in tangible innovations such as 17 joint patents in agricultural robotics since 2023.⁷⁹

The outcomes and impact metrics of this collaboration highlight its transformative influence on research output optimization and human capital development. An analysis of 23,647 ANRF-acknowledged publications between 2023 and 2025 reveals a 42% increase in India-U.S. co-authored papers in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) compared to pre-partnership baselines.⁸⁰ Shared investments in quantum communication projects have demonstrated a 5.3-time return on investment (ROI) for NSF compared to domestic-only initiatives.⁸¹ On the human capital front, the partnership has made significant strides in strengthening the STEM workforce pipeline through programs such as the 2024 NSF-ANRF Accelerated PhD Program. This initiative placed 78 Indian researchers in U.S. national laboratories while embedding 45 NSF postdoctoral fellows within Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs)⁷⁷, fostering bilateral knowledge exchange and capacity building.

- TRUST - Technological Alignment: The Technology, Resilience, and Ubiquitous Secure Transactions (TRUST) Initiative represents a paradigm shift in Indo-US technological cooperation, particularly in semiconductors, space systems, and critical infrastructure. Established under the 2024 Critical and Emerging Technology Agreement (CETA), this framework combines India's manufacturing ambitions under the Modified Make in India 2.0 program with America's CHIPS and Science Act provisions to reconfigure global technology supply chains away from Chinese dominance.^{82,83,84}

Under TRUST, the Semiconductor Supply Chain Initiative established three Indo-US fabrication hubs: The Hyderabad Advanced Packaging Facility, jointly operated by Micron and Tata Electronics, exemplifies this effort. With a \$2.8 billion investment, this facility specializes in innovative 2.5D/3D chip stacking technologies using American lithography tools adapted for India's tropical operating environments. This adaptation ensures operational efficiency⁸⁵ while addressing environmental challenges such as weather and related water-scarcity in India. Another critical hub is the Dholera MEMS Foundry—a Qualcomm-ISRO collaboration focused on producing radiation-hardened inertial sensors for satellite constellations. Through AI-driven process optimization, this facility has achieved an impressive 94% yield rate.⁸⁶

This initiative has empowered convergence in space technology, particularly through frameworks that enable dual-use components and quantum-secured communication systems. The Satellite Manufacturing Resilience Pact empowers Indian firms such as Larsen & Toubro to produce advanced components like radiation-tolerant field-programmable gate arrays (FPGAs). These chips meet NASA's stringent Class 1E radiation standards while achieving a remarkable 60% cost reduction compared to traditional manufacturing processes. In quantum-secured communication, the partnership has leveraged India's Quantum Encryption Demonstration Satellite (QEDSAT-1) alongside US-developed quantum key distribution (QKD) protocols to achieve groundbreaking advancements. One notable achievement is the establishment of secure cross-Pacific data links at speeds of 12.5 Gbps between ISRO's Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SHAR) and NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) Goldstone complex. These links have reduced vulnerabilities in military command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) systems by an impressive 92% compared to conventional AES-256 encryption methods.^{86,88}

There exists significant focus on the resilience of supply chain mechanisms, particularly through partnerships that ensure materials security and trusted manufacturing networks. The Rare Earths Alliance combines U.S. geological survey AI models with India's solvent extraction refiners to secure critical mineral supplies essential for high-tech industries. This collaboration has identified 17 critical mineral deposits across Jharkhand and Odisha while achieving neodymium purity levels of 99.999% at a cost of \$45/kg—significantly lower than China's \$62/kg.^{82,83} This underscores the economic viability of diversifying rare earths supply chains while reducing dependency on Chinese sources, a motivation amongst both the United States, and India. Additionally, the Trusted Foundry Network has certified eight Indian foundries under the Dual-Use Technology Assurance Framework to supply high-performance components for defense and automotive applications. These include automotive-grade silicon carbide (SiC) MOSFETs supplied to General Motors' electric vehicle plants and gallium nitride (GaN) radio frequency components used in Lockheed Martin's F-35 radar upgrades.^{84,87}

Economic integration

The economic integration between India and the United States has evolved significantly over the decades, transitioning from a period of mutual distance to a robust partnership marked by trade expansion and collaborative investments. During the early years following India's independence in 1947, bilateral trade remained minimal, averaging just \$1.6 billion annually in the 1980s. Divergent priorities fostered mutual distrust and limited economic engagement between the two nations. This dynamic began to shift in 1991 when India implemented economic reforms aimed at liberalizing its economy and attracting foreign investment. Bilateral trade grew tenfold to \$16 billion by 2000.⁸⁹ The current trade composition between India and the United States reflects the complementary strengths of their economies. As of 2024, India's exports in IT and IT-enabled services (IT/ITeS) to the U.S. have reached an impressive \$105 billion⁹⁰, fueled by advancements in cloud computing and artificial intelligence solutions. On the other hand, machinery and electrical equipment dominate U.S. exports to India, amounting to \$12 billion annually, while India supplies pharmaceuticals worth \$9.1 billion and textiles valued at \$7.4 billion to American markets.⁹¹ India maintains a significant trade surplus with the U.S., standing at \$32 billion as of 2024.⁹¹ Beyond traditional trade, economic integration between the two nations is increasingly driven by collaborative initiatives that address shared priorities such as technology innovation and clean energy transition. The India-US AI Acceleration Initiative, launched in 2023, has co-funded 45 startups specializing in healthcare diagnostics and precision agriculture.⁹⁰ The Global Clean Energy Partnership aim to mobilize \$150 billion in joint investments by 2030⁹², focusing on transformative projects such as hybrid nuclear-solar grids and carbon capture systems.

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

China's (BRI) has accelerated the transformation of South Asia's strategic landscape, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) acting as the pivotal mechanism of change. While Pakistan benefits from new infrastructure and enhanced energy capacity, it shoulders substantial debts and security concerns, magnified by militant threats and local grievances. India, wary of growing Chinese influence, has tightened alliances with the United States—a trend evident in expanded maritime cooperation and defense procurement—thereby reshaping regional security equations. Together, these developments illustrate an increasingly competitive environment that calls for balanced debt management, proactive security measures, and sustained economic dialogue.

Below are two targeted recommendations designed to mitigate key geopolitical and economic pressures:

- Recommendation #1 (for Pakistan)

Proactively renegotiate CPEC debts (~\$30bn, ~30% of external debt), targeting lower interest rates (from current 5–6% down to 2%) and extended repayment timelines (5–10 years).^{93,94} Convert at least \$5bn of debt into equity stakes or joint ventures for current CPEC projects.⁹⁵ Convert further \$1.5bn of debt into mineral exploration in Baluchistan (Reko-Diq copper & gold project).⁹⁶ Cap future sovereign guarantees to under 10% of GDP (\$38bn) to protect national assets.⁹⁷

- Recommendation #2 (for India–U.S.)

Finalize a Comprehensive India–U.S. Economic and Technology Partnership Agreement (ETPA) to expand bilateral trade beyond \$200bn and strengthen critical supply chains in semiconductors, AI, and defense technology.^{98,99,100,101} Reduce dependency on China by shifting at least \$50bn worth of imports (mainly electronics and telecom) to alternative suppliers (U.S., Japan, Taiwan) via PLI (Production-Linked Incentive) schemes.^{102,103,104} Expand the U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) pipeline for India beyond \$22bn, increase QUAD defense interoperability, and formalize an India–U.S. AI & Cybersecurity Defense Accord.^{105,106,107} Maintain limited but strategic economic engagement with China in pharmaceuticals and raw materials while diversifying manufacturing and tech partnerships.

In sum, while the BRI intensifies China's regional reach, it also galvanizes responses aimed at more balanced and sustainable growth. Implementing the above recommendations can help Pakistan alleviate debt burdens and promote investment-driven development, while India and the U.S. can anchor alternative supply chains and defense alliances. Such synchronized strategies—anchored in equitable financial arrangements, collaborative security measures, and diversified trade networks—represent the best path forward to harmonize economic gains with geopolitical stability across South Asia.

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Russo-North Korean Relations

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Introduction

On June 19th, 2024, Pyongyang and Moscow signed a new defense agreement that reaffirmed a mutual respect of territorial integrity, established channels of aid reinforcement, and most importantly, in the wake of the Ukraine-Russia War, obliged each other to offer military aid when either was “put in a state of war by an armed invasion”.¹ The treaty codified the complex, precarious, and evolving nature of Russo-North Korean relations that trace back to 1884, when the Korean and Russian Empires first established formal diplomatic relations. Just as it did in 1884, this formalization of mutuality was spurred by the advent of war, with Russia intent on expanding the reach of its global influence, and N. Korea seeking to temper the size and potential threats of its much larger neighbors. Therefore, we postulate that Russo-N. Korean relations can be understood as a precarious byproduct of decades-long attempts to counterbalance Japanese, Chinese, and American geostrategic influence, sustaining North Korean isolationism and enabling Russian soft-power projection. To expound upon this thesis, we bifurcate our analysis into two sections: historical context and contemporary relations. Within the former, we analyze the emergence of Russo-Korean relations before and during the World Wars, their shift during the Korean War, and their erratic progression during the Cold War. Within the latter, we analyze the post-Cold War relations between the two nations through military, nuclear, economic, technological, and cultural dimensions.

Historical Context

Pre-World Wars

The emergence and development of Russo-N. Korean relations trace back to the Age of Imperialism in the mid to late 19th century. As Figure 1 highlights, the Korean Empire during the mid-19th century was situated amidst larger empires, all with imperial ambitions whose fortunes intersected with control over the peninsula. From the north, Tsarist Russia sought southern expansion in search of warmer sea ports, as well as a buffer zone between itself and the Qing Empire, the Japanese Empire, and the expanding influence of Western nations.²

¹ Du Hyeogn, Cha. “Implications of the DPRK-Russia “Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep63955>.

² Ahn, Byung-Joon. “The Soviet Union and the Korean Peninsula.” *Asian Affairs* 11, no. 4 (1985): 1–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30171975>.

From the west, its suzerain, the Qing Empire, was already extracting tributes and trade concessions since the dawn of the century and presented no indicators of abating.³ From the east, a bellicose imperial Japan with ambitions to conquer the Qing sought to extract iron and coal from the rich Korean mountains to fuel its modernization campaigns, as well as use the peninsula as a launching point for its military operations. From the south, Western nations including France, Germany, Britain, and the U.S. were eager to employ gunboat diplomacy to gain an Eastern foothold, with Korea no less spared.⁴ Thus, the Korean Empire found itself wedged between “a conclave of empires, none of which was terribly interested in asserting or protecting the sovereign status of Korea.”⁵

To secure its perilous circumstances, Korea established formal diplomatic relations with Tsarist Russia in 1884, hoping to counterbalance the threatening advances of its neighbors. This treaty of friendship and commerce concerned the Qing, whose attentions were already distracted by increasingly militaristic incursions by the Japanese around the Yellow Sea and the Korean Peninsula. Tensions erupted in 1894 when the Qing Dynasty clashed with Japanese imperial forces over influence in Korea. The Japanese victory resulted in a secession of territory and an abdication of suzerainty over Korea by the Qing, and a liberal access to Korean trade markets for the Japanese.⁶ Following the war, rapprochement efforts by the Japanese and Russians to maintain

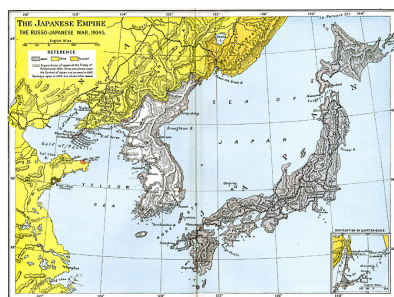


Figure 2: The Japanese Empire, 1904-1905. Source: The Cambridge Modern History Atlas. etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/7600/7645/7645.htm

Manchuria as a buffer zone were riddled with distrust, as each saw the other as eager to utilize Korea’s geostrategic location to limit the expansion of the other.⁷

By the start of 1904, Japan had coerced Korea into becoming its protectorate, submitting its governance decisions to Japanese oversight.⁸



Figure 1: Map of Russian expansion in Asia, 1533-1894. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/event/Russo-Japanese-War#/media/1/514017/3392>

³ Battistini, Lawrence H. “The Korean Problem in the Nineteenth Century.” *Monumenta Nipponica* 8, no. 1/2 (1952): 47–66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2383005>.

⁴ Krishnan, R. R. “Early History of U.S. Imperialism in Korea.” *Social Scientist* 12, no. 11 (1984): 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3516875>.

⁵ Larsen, Kirk W. “Comforting Fictions: The Tribute System, the Westphalian Order, and Sino-Korean Relations.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 233–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23418776>.

⁶ Ahn, “The Soviet Union and the Korean Peninsula.” 3-4.

⁷ Katō, Yōko. “What Caused the Russo-Japanese War: Korea or Manchuria?” *Social Science Japan Journal* 10, no. 1 (2007): 95–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30209685>.

⁸ Dijk, Kees van. “The Russo-Japanese War.” In *Pacific Strife*, 417–38. Amsterdam University Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15nmjw8.24>.

Russian attempts to intercede on Korea's behalf resulted only in diplomatic failures and the eruption of the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. As the victor, Japan won recognition of its interests in Korea, acquired part of Russian southern territory (namely the southern half of Sakhalin Island), and expelled Russian presence from the Liaodong Peninsula (see Figure 2).⁹ For Russia, the humiliating defeat not only strained its Korean relations but also contributed to social unrest, including the 1905 Revolution and subsequent reforms; the monarchy ultimately collapsed in 1917. In 1907, the crippled Korean monarch attempted to garner international sympathy at the Hague by urging the Great Powers to protest Japanese occupation, a move that backfired and resulted in the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910.

World Wars

The Japanese annexation and colonization of the peninsula was characterized as harsh and oppressive, creating a legacy that “haunts relations” with the colonial power and influences the culture even to this day.¹⁰ Assimilation techniques such as forbidding the Korean language and de-emphasizing Korean history were instituted to weaken Korean culture and supplant it with Japanese.¹¹ At the same time, militarization efforts resulted in rapid economic developments along Korea, including rapid urban growth, expansion of commerce, and industrial development; these transformations made Korea the second-most industrialized nation in Asia (after Japan) following WWII.¹² Although Japan's surrender in August 1945 to the Allied Forces marked the end of Japanese colonialism in Korea, it did not usher in autonomy for Koreans, but rather a transition of colonial administration. Seeking to temper ideological differences and apathetic to Korean wishes and voices, the USSR and the U.S. agreed to bifurcate the peninsula along the 38th parallel, with the Soviets influencing the North and the Americans the South.¹³

Recognizing the strategic importance of the Korean Peninsula, the Soviets sought to install a government amenable to their interests.¹⁴ In December 1945, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, appointed Kim Il-sung, just 33 years old, as the figurehead leader of the North.¹⁵ Kim's upbringing and politics appealed to Stalin; not only was he educated in Manchuria after his parents fled Korea to escape Japanese rule, but he was active in community youth organizations and a member of the Korean guerrilla resistance in the early 1930s.¹⁶

⁹ Dijk, “The Russo-Japanese War,” 434-438.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rotondi, Jessica Pearce. “What Caused the Korean War and Why Did the U.S. Get Involved?” History. 2021. <https://www.history.com/articles/korean-war-causes-us-involvement>

¹² Asia for Educators, Columbia University. “Key Points | Asia for Educators | Columbia University,” n.d. https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_1900-1950.htm.

¹³ “These Are the Stories the North Korean Regime Doesn't Want the World to Hear. Learn More About What Life Is Like Inside North Korea and What You Can Do to Help North Korean Refugees.” <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/blog/north-korea-history>

¹⁴ Dyachkov, Ilya, Leonid Kozlov, Andrey Gubin, Artyom Lukin, Liudmila Zakharova, Tamara Troyakova, Igor Tolstokulakov, Georgy Toloraya, Andrei Lankov, and Foreign Policy Research Institute. Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations. Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2017.

¹⁵ “The Surge of Activity in Relations Between North Korea and Russia.” IISS 29 (November 2023). <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2023/the-surge-of-activity-in-relations-between-north-korea-and-russia/>.

¹⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Kim Il-Sung | Biography, Facts, Leadership of North Korea, Significance, & Death.” Encyclopedia Britannica, February 12, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kim-Il-Sung>.

In addition, he had received military and political training in the U.S.S.R., joining the local communist party and exhibiting “strongly nationalistic” views.¹⁷ Following his service as captain in the Soviet Army during WWII, Kim, with Stalin’s support, returned to Korea and established the communist provisional government.¹⁸ The Soviets had successfully installed a pro-Soviet, pro-communist leader through whom they sought to export their governing model.¹⁹

Following failed negotiations between the United States and the Soviets, the 38th parallel hardened into a border with two separate states, each claiming to be the legitimate government and representative of the entire Korean people.²⁰ On September 8, 1948, Kim Il-sung declared the formation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.) in Pyongyang. Just one month later, the U.S.S.R. became the first country to recognize North Korea as the sole legitimate authority.

Korean War

As defeat in WWII became inevitable, Japan sought to install a temporary governing structure in Korea.²¹ The largely conservative Japanese government proposed a popular leftist, Yo Un-hyong, to oversee a temporary administration, predicting that his leftist leanings would gain the support of the Soviets.²² This strategy seemed to work as many Koreans approved of Yo Un-Hyong, and his popularity only grew. During his short tenure, he established guidelines for land redistribution and labor reforms and set up a Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI). By September, the CPKI had formed the Korean People’s Republic (KPR) and within three months had established offices countrywide, from the township level on up.²³

Despite these advances, the expulsion of Japanese forces from Korea revealed Russo-American distrust that once more implicated Korean sovereignty. Most Koreans held hopes of reunification and state independence, and held great anticipation as Japanese imperialism concluded.²⁴ However, on September 2nd, 1945, at the suggestion of the U.N. & U.S., the Soviet Union and the United States occupied all Korean land north and south of the 38th parallel, respectively. With no formalized end date of the occupation, the outcome devastated Korean aspirations of reunification. Furthermore, the demarcation boundary arbitrarily tore apart residential communities and families, militarizing interactions and necessitating state intervention to oversee familial reunifications. For instance, since 1985, “there have been 21 state-organized family reunion meetings for citizens of North and South Korea, bringing together more than 44,000 families.”²⁵

¹⁷ Britannica Editors, “Kim Il-Sung | Biography, Facts, Leadership of North Korea, Significance, & Death.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Dyachkov et al., Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations.

²⁰ “These Are the Stories the North Korean Regime Doesn’t Want the World to Hear: Learn More About What Life Is Like Inside North Korea and What You Can Do to Help North Korean Refugees.”

²¹ Lee, Jung Ha. “Division of Korea.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea/Division-of-Korea>

²² Lee, “Korea | History, Peninsula, Rulers, & Facts.”

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “U.S.-North Korea Divided Families.” NCNK. Accessed April 5, 2025.

The Americans justified such occupation with their containment doctrine aimed at curtailing the expansion of communist ideology.²⁶ Under its administration, the U.S. severed KPR networks²⁷ and reinstated former Korean officials who had administered the peninsula under Japanese rule.²⁸ The legacies of Japanese colonialism that the KPR sought to undo were consequently stymied by the new form of governance, undermining expectations of land redistribution and labor reforms and introducing suspicions among the Korean public of American intentions in the region. Widespread scrutiny over the reinstated officials remained as South Koreans cautioned against external political influence over an increasingly divided Korea.²⁹ Ironically, American presence within the southern peninsula encouraged many Koreans to consider Soviet influence instead. Nonetheless, in 1948, the United Nations and the U.S. formally acknowledged the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South, while the USSR formally acknowledged the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North.

Concurrent with the changes under American-controlled South Korea were USSR military sponsorships of North Korea. North Korea accumulated a larger military arsenal compared to its southern counterpart and was able to train a larger volume of troops. Their troops also held greater numbers of veterans from the Chinese Civil War, adding to their comparative military dominance. In addition, this militarization period stimulated the industrial capacity of the North, adding to the number of Koreans in the south who admired their northern brethren. Among Korean leadership, both the ROK and the DPRK perceived the other as illegitimate and sought ways to invade the other and unify the continent.

On June 25, 1950, North Korea, backed by Mao Zedong's Chinese troops, invaded and quickly began to overwhelm South Korea.³⁰ Spurred by the inability to cement democratic capitalism in the region, the U.S. retaliated by sending its own troops to supplement the enfeebled South Korean army. The resulting Korean War was not without deplorable atrocities, among them the No Gun Ri massacre, where American soldiers opened fire and killed over 250 South Korean refugees.³¹ The U.S. army justified its actions by claiming that North Korean fighters had disguised themselves as civilians to gain an advantage over the American troops, a claim whose evidence the American government withheld under a classified designation.³² The conflict, which resulted in over 2.5 million deaths, concluded on July 27th 1953 when an armistice was drawn by both sides³³. No formal declaration of peace was ever signed, and the resulting border was largely indistinguishable from before the war.

²⁶ "The Korean War: The First Year." DVIDS. Accessed April 5, 2025.

²⁷ The Korean War: Everything you need to know | wilson center digital archive. Accessed April 5, 2025.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rotondi, Jessica Pearce. "What Caused the Korean War and Why Did the U.S. Get Involved?"

³¹ Forgotten war, forgotten massacres—the Korean War (1950–1953) as licensed mass killings. DONG CHOON KIM, *Journal of Genocide Research*. December 5, 2003

³² "AP: U.S. Allowed Korean Massacre in 1950." CBS News. Accessed April 5, 2025.; "July 26, 1950: No Gun Ri Massacre." Zinn Education Project, October 14, 2024.; Massacre at Nogun-Ri." *Asia Society*, July 25, 2017.

³³ Rotondi, Jessica Pearce. "What Caused the Korean War and Why Did the U.S. Get Involved?"

Cold War

Following the Korean War, North Korea relied on Soviet funding and support for its quick recovery and growth.³⁴ From the Soviet Union's perspective, this support was intended to keep North Korea under the Soviet sphere of influence.³⁵ For instance, the USSR's initial contributions to the North Korean economy and military ensured that the economic system met Soviet standards and the military relied on imported Soviet arms and military equipment.³⁶ Meanwhile, North Korea emerged from the Korean War eager to break away from Soviet control, seeking political autonomy and self-reliance.³⁷ These clashing interests created a mutual distrust and brought about a volatile relationship between the two nations in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

The volatility of the Soviet-North Korean relationship at this time was evident in several key events from the period. In 1956, North Korea launched its "Five-Year Plan" aimed at achieving economic independence and self-sufficiency.³⁸ Then, five years later, in 1961, the Soviet Union and North Korea signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, establishing strong military and economic ties between the countries and promising a more friendly step forward in their relationship.³⁹ However, in 1963, when North Korea established its "Seven-Year Plan," which aimed to further its economic independence, the USSR revoked all economic and military aid in response.⁴⁰ Soviet aid resumed in 1965 under Khrushchev, but the tense relationship persisted.⁴¹

The Sino-Soviet split of the Cold War era was a key driver for North Korea's disengagement from USSR influence. North Korea leveraged this competition between China and the USSR to garner support from both nations.⁴² By the 1970s, North Korea consistently favored China for economic and military aid, with China serving as North Korea's top trading partner and accounting for most of North Korea's military imports throughout the decade.⁴³ At this time, North Korean media was also reprinting Chinese media to spread anti-Soviet sentiments.⁴⁴

After decades of tumult, the 1980s proved to be a time of warmer relations between the USSR and North Korea. The early 1980s marked reduced tensions between the Soviet Union and China and strengthened military ties between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea.⁴⁵ In response to these shifts, the Soviet Union reinvigorated relations with North Korea for greater security in the North-east Asia region.⁴⁶ The Soviet Union became North Korea's top trading partner

³⁴ "The surge of activity in relations between North Korea and Russia," Strategic Comments 29, no. 8 (September 14, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2023.2275420>.

³⁵ "The surge of activity in relations."

³⁶ Joseph M Ha, "SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF NORTH KOREA" *Asian Perspective* 6, no. 2 (1982): 105–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737990>.

³⁷ Ha, "SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF NORTH KOREA."

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Directorate of Intelligence, *Soviet-North Korean Relations in the 1980s: An Intelligence Assessment*, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00313R000100150007-0.pdf>.

⁴³ Directorate of Intelligence, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*.

⁴⁴ Alexander Zhebin, "Russia and North Korea: An Emerging, Uneasy Partnership" *Asian Survey* 35, no. 8 (1995): 726–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645732>.

⁴⁵ Directorate of Intelligence, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

again, accounting for over one-third of North Korea's total foreign trade.⁴⁷ The USSR also increased its military support for North Korea, providing the nation with defense equipment and welcoming North Korean military officers to study at Soviet military academies.⁴⁸ During this time, the Soviet Union also convinced North Korea to join the nonproliferation treaty in return for Soviet support in building an atomic power station.⁴⁹ Despite the more cooperative dynamics between the countries, the Soviets remained wary of North Korean ties to China and refused to supply the country with advanced military systems for fear that their technology would find its way to China.⁵⁰

These positive economic and military relations also brought about greater cultural exchange between the two countries. Throughout the 1980s, the USSR and North Korea released joint feature films, published each other's literary works, and engaged with each other's news media.⁵¹ During this time, North Korean media showed a preference for the Soviet Union over China, printing Soviet greetings in prominent columns.⁵² This time was seen as a partial opening of North Korean society, though the opening was limited to relations with socialist nations.⁵³

The progress in the countries' relations came to an abrupt halt during the time of the Soviet Union's collapse. Tensions rose as the USSR attended and publicly supported the 1988 Olympics hosted in Seoul.⁵⁴ This marked a shift away from USSR ties with North Korea and toward ties with South Korea, made official in 1990 when the Soviet Union and South Korea formally established diplomatic relations.⁵⁵ While these moves put Soviet-North Korean relations on shaky ground, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Russia's subsequent disengagement with North Korea truly unraveled the previous decade of warmer relations.⁵⁶

With the Soviet collapse, bilateral trade between the two countries fell from USD 2.5 billion in 1989 to only 364 million USD in 1991.⁵⁷ In 1992, Russia revised the military agreement with North Korea, offering to help only in unprovoked attacks.⁵⁸ In response, North Korea refused any Russian military support and instead focused its attention on building out its nuclear capability.⁵⁹ Without the support of its top trading partner, North Korea faced a time of terrible famine in the 1990s.⁶⁰ While millions of people died from hunger and environmental disasters, the country sought assistance from other nations. Many nations, including those opposed to North Korean communist principles, sent emergency aid, but Russia did not.⁶¹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Zhebin, "An Emerging, Uneasy Partnership."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Directorate of Intelligence, *Soviet-North Korean Relations*.

⁵¹ Zhebin, "An Emerging, Uneasy Partnership."

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Jane Zacek Shapiro, "Soviet and Russian Relations With the Two Koreas" *International Journal of Korean Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 5, 1997): 215–29, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/ijoks/v1i1/f_0013377_10874.pdf.

⁵⁵ Shapiro, "Soviet and Russian Relations With the Two Koreas"

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Contemporary Relations

The aforementioned historical context section lays the foundation for 21st Century Russo-N. Korean relations. As in the previous century, the motif of war shapes the evolution of bilateral relations. The following sections explore this dynamic process across military, nuclear, economic, technological, and cultural dimensions.

Military

The rise of Vladimir Putin in 2000 was a welcomed departure from the policies adopted by his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, under whom a suspension of military cooperation had resulted.⁶² Dire domestic economic conditions and a faltering military industry had pressured Yeltsin to withdraw its subsidized military hardware support from Nikora, demanding payment in the form of hard currency from all potential buyers instead, and severely weakening the Russo-dependent N. Korean regime.⁶³ Recognizing the greater Chinese and American influence over S. Korea, Putin re-established diplomatic relations with N. Korea, presenting himself as a conduit to minimize N. Korea's isolation and reduce dependence on China.⁶⁴

In 2000, the two nations entered a friendship treaty reminiscent of the 1961 version, promising diplomatic amity, economic cooperation, and military-technical knowledge exchange.⁶⁵ This renewal in part inspired the 2003-2007 Six-Party talks, where China and Russia mediated conversations between Japan, S. Korea, N. Korea, and the U.S. regarding security and nuclear concerns along the Peninsula. The contents of the multi-year negotiations centered around N. Korean security guarantees against aggression from its neighbors, the deconstruction of N. Korea's nuclear power plants, the normalization of trade and diplomatic relations, and a formalized verification process on nuclear disarmament.⁶⁶ The initially auspicious talks, featuring major concessions on either side of the aisle, unfortunately fell apart in the end after N. Korea and the U.S. disagreed on the verification process to ensure North Korea's nuclear disarmament. Consequently, N. Korea entrenched itself further into its partnership with Russia.

The Russo-N. Korean relationship following the talks remained cautious and strained, primarily due to Russian apprehension over N. Korean nuclear missile tests. The lack of proper safeguards in N. Korean weaponry not only alarmed Putin as it pertained to failed tests, but the very notion of nuclear proximity, particularly as a consequence of Russian aid, did not bode well with Moscow.⁶⁷ As it pertained to international sanctions against N. Korea, Russia cosigned on the various resolutions passed between 2006-2017, but enfeebled most of the enforcement provisions due to its veto power, while neglecting to abide entirely by their contents.⁶⁸

⁶² Joo, Sung-Ho, Seung-Ho Joo, and Tae-Hwan Kwak. "Military Relations Between Russia and North Korea." *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2001): 297-323. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23255911>.

⁶³ Joo et al., "Military Relations Between Russia and North Korea," 301-305.

⁶⁴ Buszynski, Leszek. "Russia and North Korea: Dilemmas and Interests." *Asian Survey* 49, no. 5 (2009): 809-30. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.5.809>.

⁶⁵ Joo et al., "Military Relations between Russia and North Korea," 305-309.

⁶⁶ Buszynski, "Russia and North Korea: Dilemmas and Interests," 818-821.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 821

⁶⁸ "What to Know about Sanctions on North Korea." Council on Foreign Relations, July 27, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-korea-sanctions-un-nuclear-weapons>.

Such posturing allowed for Russia to both demonstrate a willingness to cooperate at the international stage and sustain its relationship with North Korea. This balancing act proved especially opportune in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine.

Since its inception, the protracted war has exposed Russian vulnerabilities in its military strategies and strained its inventory in every regard. To supplement its shortages, Moscow has expanded its relationship with N. Korea, importing artillery shells, ammunition, and ballistic shells, troops, and signing a bilateral mutual defense treaty in 2024.⁶⁹ For Pyongyang, the war has cemented relations with its closest ally and offered an avenue for the nation to upgrade its military hardware and software through Russian support. The war has also revealed the extent of N. Korean weapons procurement resourcefulness; its impressive industrial mobilization towards the war effort was rapidly achieved, but more shockingly, its missile systems are replete with the latest foreign military technology, including electronic parts manufactured in Europe and the U.S..⁷⁰ Not only is this evidence of the difficulty of sanction enforcement, but with the elimination of the U.N.'s sanction-enforcement watchdog courtesy of Russia, these procurement channels will only widen.⁷¹ Regardless of the war's outcome, it will undeniably strengthen and integrate Russo-N. Korean relations

Nuclear

For North Korea, which had recently established its independence, nuclear tech was a formidable goal. While many goals and aspirations could be attributed to nuclear tech, three key factors drove North Korea's nuclear pursuit: Competition with South Korea, Self-Reliance & Deterrence, and lastly, the Desire for Prestige.

Opening with South Korea, it is evident early on that a significant driving force in North Korea's pursuit of nuclear technology. North Korea's efforts to begin nuclear research in the mid-1950s were almost simultaneous with those of the South. The North Korean leadership feared being overtaken by South Korea in this field, especially as South Korea completed its experimental reactor earlier than North Korea was able to.⁷² This competition between Seoul and Pyongyang helps explain why Soviet leaders, who disapproved of Kim Il Sung's domestic despotism and militant diplomacy, nonetheless provided the DPRK with vital assistance at the initial stage of the North Korean nuclear program. Thus, the history of Soviet-North Korean nuclear cooperation can only be understood in the context of the Cold War. Even the potential for South Korea to develop nuclear weapons was a challenge that the DPRK could not ignore.⁷³

⁶⁹ Aoki, Naoko. "Dealing with North Korea as It Deepens Military Cooperation with Russia | Rand." RAND, March 4, 2025. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/03/dealing-with-north-korea-as-it-deepens-military-cooperation.html>; Cha, Victor. "A Threat like No Other: Russia-North Korea Military Cooperation." CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/threat-no-other-russia-north-korea-military-cooperation>; Du Hyeogn, Cha. "Implications of the DPRK-Russia 'Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.'"

⁷⁰ Mackenzie, Jean. "North Korean Weapons Are Killing Ukrainians. The Implications Are Far Bigger." BBC News, May 4, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68933778>.

⁷¹ Cha, Victor, and Ellen Kim. "Russia's Veto: Dismembering the UN Sanctions Regime on North Korea." CSIS, March 29, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-veto-dismembering-un-sanctions-regime-north-korea>.

⁷² Radchenko, Sergey, Filip Kovacevic, and Guy Laron. "The History of North Korean Attitudes toward Nuclear Weapons." Wilson Center, March 10, 2025.

⁷³ Radchenko et al., "The History of North Korean Attitudes Toward Nuclear Weapons."

An analysis of Self-Reliance & Deterrence shows that North Korea was trying to distance itself from the USSR and China. Although North Korea initially emphasized the peaceful application of nuclear research, there were indications of a desire to develop a military capability. The pursuit of an independent nuclear weapons capability was seen as a way to secure self-reliance in the political and military realms and provide greater flexibility in foreign policy, moving away from dependence on the Soviets or the Chinese.⁷⁴

Some North Korean officials even alluded to possessing nuclear warheads and delivery systems by the mid-1970s. The fear of American nuclear weapons stationed in South Korea was also a factor, driving North Koreans towards acquiring their own.⁷⁵

One of the driving factors for a country to obtain nuclear tech, and even nuclear weapons, is to deter the threat of a nuclear attack from other countries that possess those capabilities.⁷⁶

Finally, prestige was crucial to North Korea. The infantile country was being led by Kim Il Sung, who at the time, insisted that North Korea needed to pursue and utilize its nuclear technology for “reasons of prestige”.⁷⁷ Moreover, the ability to be taken seriously is incredibly important to nubile countries.

Prestige is a gateway to global legitimacy, opening all sorts of new doors. The most important of which might be the reunification narrative. For North Koreans, the idea that North Korea is a powerful state that commands respect and will one day reunify Korea is central to its national identity. Whether or not this is something that is actually understood to be a feasible goal by North Korean higher-ups remains a mystery.⁷⁸ Regardless of whether this goal is realistic, nuclear tech ensures that North Korea remains in the public and cultural zeitgeist and is relevant in global discourse.⁷⁹

Economics

Over the past decade, the North Korean and Russian economies have largely reintegrated in response to UN Security Council sanctions. Since the start of the 21st century, the UN Security Council has imposed sanctions against North Korea following each of its six nuclear tests and other aggressive proliferation activities.⁸⁰ In 2006, 2009, and 2013, Russia supported and adhered to sanctions against North Korea, cooperating with Western powers and improving Russia’s standing on the international stage.⁸¹ However, in 2014, after annexing Crimea and facing its own set of punitive sanctions, Russia changed course.⁸² The recent pledge to enhance bilateral economic relations stemmed directly from Russia’s 2014 decision to pardon 90% of North Korea’s 11 billion USD Soviet-era debt and to reinvest the remaining funds into North Korean energy, education, and health projects.⁸³

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “North Korea and the Prestige Dilemma.” – The Diplomat. Accessed April 5, 2025.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea”

⁸¹ “What to Know About Sanctions.”

⁸² Samuel Ramani, “From Reluctant Enforcer to Outright Saboteur: Russia’s Crusade Against North Korea Sanctions” 38 North, June 24, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/06/from-reluctant-enforcer-to-outright-saboteur-russias-crusade-against-north-korea-sanctions/>.

⁸³ Ramani, “From Reluctant Enforcer to Outright Saboteur.”

Throughout 2014 and 2015, North Korean and Russian officials began meeting to discuss joint economic projects and establish the Russia-North Korea business council.⁸⁴ At this time, during which the renewed Russian-North Korean relationship was seen as a “union of outcasts,” Russia began quietly evading sanctions against North Korea.⁸⁵ Then in 2022, the year Russia invaded Ukraine, both China and Russia vetoed UN sanctions against North Korea, and Russia’s previously quiet sanction violations turned overt.⁸⁶

With Russia’s newly overt sanction violations, bilateral trade between Russia and North Korea grew from about 3.8 million USD in 2022 to about 53 million USD in the first half of 2024 alone, suggesting a trend toward pre-sanction levels of trade (see figure 3).⁸⁷ In recent years, the two countries have also established various economic agreements across government and business sectors.⁸⁸



Figure 3: Trade Trends Between Russia and North Korea, 2001-2024.⁸⁹

Most notably, North Korea relies on Russia for oil and petroleum products while Russia relies on North Korea for labor, especially during the war in Ukraine.⁹⁰ Throughout their history, much of North Korea’s energy supply has come from Russia.⁹¹ The North Korean economy depends on trade with Russia and China for crude oil, gasoline, diesel fuel, and coal, despite North Korean efforts to become self-sufficient in energy.⁹² In exchange, North Korea has served as a reliable source of labor for Russia. Following the precedent set during the Cold War—when up to 20,000 North Korean laborers worked in Russia’s Far East—by 2017, over 32,000 North Koreans were sent to Russia to work in construction, fishing, agriculture, logging, and restaurant services throughout the Far East and across major Russian cities.⁹³

⁸⁴ Georgy Toloraya and Alexander Vorontsov, “Russia’s ‘Turn to the East’ Policy: Role of Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 31–66, <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8909/3/0001477397.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Toloraya and Vorontsov, “Russia’s ‘Turn to the East’ Policy.”

⁸⁶ Ramani, “From Reluctant Enforcer to Outright Saboteur.”

⁸⁷ Olena Guseinova, “Putin’s Partner: North Korea’s Cooperation With Russia Amid the War Against Ukraine” *Friedrich Naumann Stiftung for Freedom Korea*, October 2024, Accessed March 16, 2025, <https://shop.freiheit.org/#!/Publikation/1807>.

⁸⁸ Toloraya and Vorontsov, “Russia’s ‘Turn to the East’ Policy.”

⁸⁹ Guseinova, “Putin’s Partner.”

⁹⁰ Artyom Lukin, “Russia and North Korea: Moving Toward Alliance 2.0?” *38 North*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.38north.org/2022/09/russia-and-north-korea-moving-toward-alliance-2-0/>.

⁹¹ Artyom Lukin and Liudmila Zakharova, “Russia-North Korea Economic Ties: Is There More Than Meets the Eye?” *Orbis* 62, no. 2 (January 1, 2018): 244–61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2018.02.005>.

⁹² Lukin and Zakharova, “Russia-North Korea Economic Ties.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*

According to multiple accounts, North Koreans highly covet these jobs in Russia because of their relatively high pay and access to outsider information about the world.⁹⁴ Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, additional North Korean workers have traveled to Russia to fill workforce gaps created as Russian civilians join the war effort.⁹⁵

Despite the growing economic resurgence between North Korea and Russia, many challenges, both historical and new, create friction in their economic cooperation. Throughout their history, trade between the two countries has been significantly imbalanced, with Russia comparatively exporting more goods and services to North Korea (see figure 4).⁹⁶ This imbalance results from incompatible markets in the two countries. For instance, North Korea mainly exports raw materials, which are common in Russia and would be redundant in the Russian market.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, the countries' main trade interests clash. While Russia seeks hard currency and advanced technology—neither of which is available from North Korea—North Korea seeks Russian investment in mutually beneficial projects, investments in which Russians are hesitant to engage.⁹⁸ Russian caution stems from North Korea's history of unresolved debts and unclear business dealings.⁹⁹ Wary of this history, Russia does not provide North Korea with the friendly prices and preferential long-term loans that their Soviet counterparts once did.¹⁰⁰ Even in the face of these concerns, Russia relies on strong economic ties to North Korea to stay relevant and counteract China's dominance in the region, referred to as an “engine of the global economy.”¹⁰¹

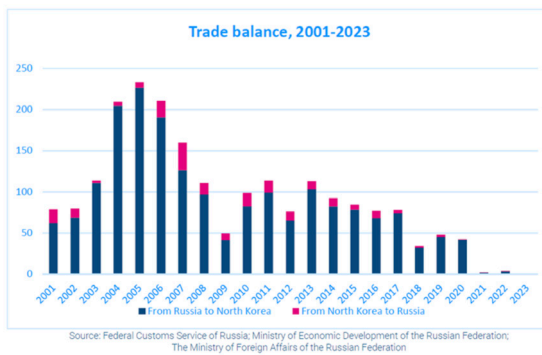


Figure 4: Trade Balance Between Russia and North Korea, 2001-2023.¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Seulkee Jang, “N. Korea Sent Workers to Russia Before Putin-KJU Summit” Daily NK English, July 15, 2024, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-sent-workers-russia-before-putin-kim-jong-un-summit/>.

⁹⁵ Guseinova, “Putin’s Partner.”

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lukin and Zakharova, “Russia-North Korea Economic Ties.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Toloraya and Vorontsov, “Russia’s ‘Turn to the East’ Policy.”

¹⁰² Guseinova, “Putin’s Partner.”

Technological and Cultural

Cooperation between North Korea and Russia in science and technology can serve as a barometer of the relative strength of their relations. While the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the U.S.S.R. marked a period of weakened ties between North Korea and the Russian Federation, the states resumed agreements in science in 2001.¹⁰³ From 2006 to 2017, Moscow supported the adoption of ten U.N.S.C. sanctions resolutions that targeted North Korea over its illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs.¹⁰⁴ These sanctions, which prohibit any assistance to ballistic missile programs, include space and satellite launch activities.¹⁰⁵ Russia's attempts in 2022 to block the U.S.-led efforts – efforts which aimed to adopt stricter sanctions against Pyongyang – is a signal of the expanding partnership in recent years.¹⁰⁶

The September 2023 Putin-Kim Summit in the Far East did not result in any official agreements; however, the leaders did reportedly agree to a deal wherein Russia would share technological know-how to assist with North Korea's space program.¹⁰⁷ Presumably, this was in return for the munitions and weapons North Korea provided Russia for their stake in the Ukraine War. In November 2023, just two months following the summit, North Korea was successful in placing its first spy satellite into orbit. While neither nation is transparent about such knowledge transfers, it is likely that Pyongyang has and continues to receive help from Russia for the building and launching of military reconnaissance satellites. As the technologies for lofting satellites are similar to the technologies required for lofting missiles, Russia is, in essence, providing intelligence for North Korea's ballistic missile program.¹⁰⁸

Relations appeared to be strengthened once more following the second Putin-Kim Summit in June 2024 in Pyongyang, wherein Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un signed a Comprehensive Partnership Treaty. Specifically, Article 10 of the treaty stipulates advancing cooperation and exchange in the fields of “science and technology, including space, biology, and peaceful nuclear energy.”¹⁰⁹ This cooperation and exchange also includes satellites, missiles, and nuclear weapons. Moscow's willingness to share sensitive technologies with Pyongyang is expected to increase, provided a continuation of the Ukraine War, as Putin would be more dependent on North Korea for munitions and troops.¹¹⁰

In addition to their technological exchanges, North Korea and Russia also cooperate in the transportation sector. The two countries share a 19 km border, which currently supports a railway; a joint motorway is expected to be completed by the end of 2026.

¹⁰³ Dyachkov et al., Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations.

¹⁰⁴ Kirby, John and Congressional Research Service. “Russia-North Korea Relations.” Report. <https://crsreports.congress.gov>, September 30, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

¹⁰⁵ Kirby, “Russia-North Korea Relations.”

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ McCurry, Justin. “Russia and North Korea: What Can They Do for Each Other?” *The Guardian*, June 18, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/18/russia-and-north-korea-what-can-they-do-for-each-other>.

¹⁰⁸ Terry, Sue Mi. “The Significance of the Putin-Kim Summit.” Council on Foreign Relations, June 18, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/significance-putin-kim-summit>.

¹⁰⁹ Town, Jenny, Yun Sun, Rachel Minyoung Lee, and Yuki Tatsumi. “Takeaways From the Putin-Kim Summit.” Stimson Center, July 5, 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/takeaways-from-the-putin-kim-summit/>.

¹¹⁰ Terry, “The Significance of the Putin-Kim Summit.”

Other than China, Russia is the only country that maintains a permanent scheduled air service and overland transportation with North Korea.¹¹¹ North Korea relies on Moscow for both its airplanes and pilots, as spare parts, maintenance services, and aviation training all come from Russia.¹¹² The only regular ferry line North Korea maintains with another country is the one linking Vladivostok and Rajin.¹¹³ North Korea has been dependent on Russia for support via transportation infrastructure over the past few decades; however, the transactional relationship is beginning to balance out due to Russia's continued commitments in Ukraine. Another leverage point Pyongyang currently holds over Moscow is the Port of Rajin, as it is an important port for Russia.

The ramp-up of activity at the shared border in the last year demonstrates the current codependence between the nations, which is exacerbated by their relative isolation from the rest of the global community. The Tumpang-Khasan Railroad, which connects the Tumanhang Rail Facility in North Korea and the Khasan Rail Facility in Russia, spans the Tumen River and supports both cargo and passenger trains. Though train travel was cut between the countries at the railroad crossing during the COVID-19 pandemic, regular train travel resumed in 2022.¹¹⁴ Beginning in February 2024, satellite images detected an increased volume of ore and tank cars along the rail line, which analysts suspect are transporting coal and petroleum products from Russia as payment for North Korea's munitions.¹¹⁵

Another recent development resulting from Russia's imminent war needs is the joint motorway bridge construction over the Tumen River, which accelerated starting in March 2025. As part of their broader mutual defense treaty, the leaders signed an agreement in June 2024 to build a bridge over the Tumen River. A Russian company is responsible for designing and completing the bridge by the end of 2026.¹¹⁶ North Korea may need to send troop deployments or artillery supplies to Russia if significant casualties are seen in the Ukraine War.¹¹⁷

"North Korea has historically sought to build its relationship with Russia as a means of balancing China."¹¹⁸ Another sign of the strength between the two nations is North Korea's shift away from China toward Russia. Most of North Korea's internet traffic had been routed through China until October 2017, when TransTeleCom broke China's monopoly on external digital traffic.¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ Dyachkov et al., Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Dyachkov et al., Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations.

¹¹⁵ Bermudez, Joseph S., Jr. "Changes at Tumpang-Khasan Rail Crossing as DPRK-Russia Alliance Evolves - Beyond Parallel." *Beyond Parallel*, December 6, 2024. <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/changes-at-tumpang-khasan-rail-crossing-as-dprk-russia-alliance-evolves/>.

¹¹⁶ Min-Kyung, Jung. "Signs Detected of North Korea, Russia Ramping up Joint Bridge Construction - the Korea Herald." *The Korea Herald*, March 12, 2025. <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10439913>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Lee, Rensselaer, William Severe, and Foreign Policy Research Institute. "Russian and Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula." Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Dyachkov et al., Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations.

TransTeleCom, a subsidiary of state-owned Russian Railways, provides North Korea with internet access via fiber optic lines that run alongside the Khasan-Raijin railway.¹²⁰ Additionally, the Russian company SatGate offers Pyongyang a backup connection to the world's cyberspace via satellite links.¹²¹

Though they are not considered “true” allies, diplomatic relations between North Korea and Russia are generally stable, which is likely a byproduct of their intertwined histories. Diplomacy has grown steadily since the early 2000s, with an abrupt increase detected in 2017. The Russian Embassy in Pyongyang is the largest in North Korea and regularly hosts delegations, diplomats, and politicians; their meetings include official receptions, informal dinners, and joint trips that pay homage to Korean traditions.¹²² Though these types of diplomatic events are not uncommon at most embassies worldwide, they are certainly uncommon for North Korea, which is another sign of the strength of their relations with Moscow. The Russian Embassy has even taken to “social media diplomacy,” where the Embassy’s X and other social media accounts attempt to humanize North Koreans to the world and simultaneously improve Russia’s image on the international stage.¹²³

Despite the regimes of both countries making resources scarce and forcing a low standard of living on their citizens, the Russian Federation appears extravagant relative to the D.P.R.K. Russia is described as the legally permitted “window to the world” for North Koreans; due to the Kim Dynasty’s isolationist ideology, the only opportunity for North Koreans to explore the outside world is through a Russian lens.¹²⁴ While North Korea has little to no influence on the Russian general public, Russia remains a significant cultural influence on the people of North Korea (though it is more popular with the older generation).¹²⁵ Russian athletes attend major competitions, Russian filmmakers are invited to film festivals, Russian popular music is played at local restaurants and bars, and Russian-made movies are even shown on North Korean TV.¹²⁶

Russia lost some of its soft power in North Korea following the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. in the early 1990s; however, it has since been re-established. Russian is the most widely spoken foreign language in North Korea. After being removed in the 1990s, Russian language education was renewed at schools in 2000-2001 as the relationship between the countries was renewed.¹²⁷ Most high-ranking party cadres and technical specialists even receive their education in the Soviet Union and through Russian textbooks.¹²⁸ Interestingly, we see that the Russian political and social influence that had been established in North Korea following World War II remains intact – even 80 years later.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Lovegrove, Nicky. “Russia’s North Korea Social Media Diplomacy - Policy Forum.” Policy Forum, November 2, 2017. <https://www.policyforum.net/russias-north-korea-social-media-diplomacy/>.

¹²³ Lovegrove, “Russia’s North Korea Social Media Diplomacy.”

¹²⁴ Dyachkov et al., Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that Russian and North Korean relations are fundamentally shaped by their mutual desire to counterbalance regional powers and maintain strategic autonomy. Both nations have consistently leveraged their relationship to offset the influence of Japan, China, and the United States. This dynamic has proven particularly evident in the wake of the Ukraine-Russia War, where their partnership has evolved from one where it seemed Russia was in a position of authority, to one where it now seems that North Korea is in an increasingly powerful position.

The historical progression of their relationship reveals several key patterns. First, their cooperation intensifies during periods of international isolation or conflict, as demonstrated during the Korean War, portions of the Cold War, and most recently, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Second, their relationship is characterized by pragmatic cooperation rather than ideological alignment, with both nations willing to compromise their stated principles when strategic interests align. Third, while their economic and cultural ties fluctuate, their military and technological cooperation has remained relatively consistent, particularly in areas that help maintain North Korea's isolation and Russia's regional influence. As North Korean military technology procurement channels expand and exposure to modern combat enhances its military might, the geostrategic dynamic of Russo-N. Korea might begin to shift, the extent of which remains to be seen.

The State of Chinese Human Rights: The Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Censorship, and Protests

Alexandra Garay Sandoval, Ana Rowley, Emily Kern,
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Introduction

China's centralized government exerts tight controls over its citizens, aimed at protecting and further strengthening the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule by expanding both the economy and the military, while restricting citizens' freedoms through censorship.

In recent years, the Chinese government has permitted some forms of citizen expression and engagement. However, these freedoms remain tightly constrained within the CCP's ideological boundaries and are often driven by political, economic, social, and security motives.

This paper aims to provide insight into various human rights restrictions that guide the CCP's ideals and result in conformity of Chinese citizens. Section 1 analyzes the history and current situation of the Uyghurs within Xinjiang and their role in global supply chains. Section 2 outlines various international responses to the CCP's human rights violations. Section 3 examines how the CCP's censorship and surveillance practices monitor internet and media consumption for appropriate content and flag presumed political opposition, raising human rights concerns. Finally, Section 4 analyzes different case studies of protests within China, outlining some outlets and topics for free speech.

Section 1: Uyghurs in Xinjiang

Islam in China and Xinjiang

The Uyghurs are one of 55 ethnic minority groups in China, and are Turkic-speaking Sunni Muslims, and according to the 2020 Chinese census, have a population of 11.5 million. Most Uyghurs in China live within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR or Xinjiang). Xinjiang is strategically positioned, bordering eight other Central and South Asian countries and providing a gateway to the West.

It covers 1/6th of China's total land mass and contains the country's largest oil and mineral reserves.¹ During the 60s to the 90s, Chinese policies incentivized Han Chinese citizens to move to Xinjiang and homogenize the region. In 1945, 6.2% of the population was Han Chinese, and Uyghurs made up the majority with 82%. By 2017, Han Chinese made up 36%, and the Uyghur share had declined to 48%.² Not only did population distributions change, but economic growth and opportunities disproportionately benefited Han Chinese, further isolating Uyghurs. This resulted in ethnic tensions that would peak in 2009 when the peaceful protest ended in deadly violence, causing citizens to be arrested unlawfully and disappear.³

After 9/11, Beijing took the opportunity to target domestic terrorism and confront the spread of Islamist extremism, specifically targeting separatist groups, as unification is a major goal of the CCP regime.⁴ The ethnic unrest in 2009 created a turning point where the CCP would begin to suspect all Uyghurs as potential radical Islamists. In May of 2014, the "Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism" was launched to crack down on domestic terrorism, and the CCP bombed the capital city, Urumqi, in Xinjiang.⁵ By 2017, the CCP had established a network of reeducation camps, forced labor camps, and prison camps that detained over one million Uyghurs. By 2020, the PRC published a report that outlined the "placement" of 2.6 million Uyghur citizens in factories and farms within the XUAR as "labor transfers".⁶ This encompassed nearly one-fifth of the Uyghur population.

Repression is Cheaper than Reform

When considering the scale and aggressiveness of this national policy, it is imperative to analyze the possible motivations. As Xinjiang covers such a large area, is rich in natural resources, and borders other Asian countries, it is China's direct interest to capitalize on and control the area. Scholars point out that "repression is cheaper than reform."⁷ It is more efficient to invest in oppressing a group of people to capitalize on their labor and resources, rather than providing public goods to uplift a population. Further, the development of advanced technology lowers the cost and barriers of surveillance and repression.⁸ Within Uyghur communities, citizens are heavily monitored with CCTV cameras, digital ID cards, facial recognition, mass DNA collections, voice samples, and iris scans.⁹ Uyghurs are being constantly watched, listened to, and questioned, leading to the erosion of Uyghur culture and silencing any opposition to the CCP's homogenous ideology.

¹ Caskey, Gregory W., and Iliia Murtazashvili. "The Predatory State and Coercive Assimilation: The Case of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang." *Public Choice* 191, no. 1-2 (2022): 217-235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-022-00963-9>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Blanchette, Jude. "Xi Jinping's Vision for Xinjiang." CSIS, September 30, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/xi-jinpings-vision-xinjiang>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Caskey, Murtazashvili. "The Predatory State", 222

⁷ Caskey, Murtazashvili. "The Predatory State", 222

⁸ *Ibid.*, 219

⁹ *Ibid.*, 221-2

The suppression of the Uyghurs is thorough and radical. Since 2013, over 300 prisons and re-education camps have been created to build out the network of oppression.¹⁰ From 2014 to 2016, 300,000 CCP members were sent to Xinjiang to monitor citizens to ensure adherence to CCP ideology.¹¹ Uyghurs were subjected to over 50 infractions that allow for indefinite detention without due process, including consuming alcohol, having WhatsApp downloaded, owning multiple knives, and attending a traditional Islamic funeral. From 2015 to 2018, Uyghur birth rates dropped by 60% as a result of forced sterilizations, abortions, and IUD insertions in internment camps.¹² Following this, the Relatives Policy allowed the CCP to intimate monitoring and indoctrination by requiring cadres to live, work, and at times, share a bed with Uyghur families for weeks to enforce anti-terrorism and anti-Islam rhetoric.¹³ Further, cadres separated children from their parents to question them about their parents' activities. Any unaligned answers with CCP ideals resulted in them being sent to internment camps for reeducation.¹⁴

Supply Chain Networks

The network of labor and reeducation camps ends with manufacturing facilities for global distributors. Over 135 camps are co-located or in the proximity of major factories, providing forced labor training that feeds directly into factories.¹⁵ Work assignments are not voluntary as the CCP threatens further time at reeducation camps if workers refuse their assignments.¹⁶ Major industries that benefit from these forced labor assignments range from automotive to solar to agriculture.¹⁷

Another consideration is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which coincided with the increased policing and the detention of the Uyghur people. A large portion of BRI investment is in or adjacent to Xinjiang, emphasizing the importance of a stabilized XUAR.¹⁸ Xinjiang opens China to Pakistan, most notably through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor BRI infrastructure project, and to Europe, through the New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor BRI project.¹⁹ These are key pieces and allies that drive BRI's success, and Xi must secure this region for China's global ambitions. The opportunity to transform this "backward" religious minority culture into modern "useful" citizens with "higher value" skills like assembly lines for cheap labor to fuel these projects provided more reason for oppression.²⁰

¹⁰ Ibid, 218

¹¹ Ibid, 222

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Watson, Ivan, and Rebecca Wright. "The Chinese Policy That Makes Uyghurs Feel like Hostages in Their Own Homes." CNN, May 9, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/08/asia/china-xinjiang-ethnic-unity-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Murphy, Laura T., and Nyrola Elima. In *Broad Daylight: Uyghur Forced Labour and Global Solar Supply Chains*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Hallam University, Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice (May 2021).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Caskey, Murtazashvili. "The Predatory State", 228-9

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 230

Aside from BRI projects, these forced labor networks feed largely into global market supply chains. For example, the automotive industry within China exports 10% of the world's car parts to global markets and is the world's largest steel producer.²¹ Forced labor is involved in almost every step from ore mining, refining, steel manufacturing, and parts manufacturing for major companies such as Toyota, General Motors, Mitsubishi, BMW, and Volkswagen.²² The saturation of forced labor into each step of manufacturing makes it difficult for companies to assess and disclose whether the labor used is forced or voluntary.²³

Section 2: Between Principles and Power: The International Response to Xinjiang

As the human rights abuses in Xinjiang exposed the vulnerabilities of global supply chains, governments around the world were forced to confront not only the economic implications but also the diplomatic and legal questions of how to respond. The international reaction to the crisis has revealed a stark geopolitical divide, not simply between the West and the Global South, but between those prioritizing strategic and economic alignment and those seeking to uphold human rights norms.

While some states have issued public condemnations and introduced legal frameworks targeting Chinese officials and imports linked to forced labor, many of China's strategic partners have continued to support Beijing.²⁴ This divergence reflects more than just ideological alignment; it underscores the extent to which economic considerations often outweigh ethical imperatives in global diplomacy. By examining the responses of countries aligned with China, many of which are participants in the Belt and Road Initiative, it becomes clear that trade, investment, and political ties frequently take precedence over human rights concerns. Even among Western democracies, where responses appear more values-driven, the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the economic cost of full divestment from Xinjiang-linked supply chains have limited the effectiveness of these actions. In this way, both sides of the divide demonstrate how the will to act on human rights is often constrained by more pragmatic, self-focused interests.

Strategic Silence and Economic Alignment

The international response among China's strategic partners can be understood along a scale ranging from notable silence to explicit support. For many of these states, the motivation behind withholding condemnation reflects the view that Xinjiang constitutes "China's internal affairs" and that external criticisms politicize human rights rather than genuine concern for human rights protections.²⁵

²¹ Salcito, Kendyl. "Automotive Supply Chain Links to the Uyghur Genocide: Reversing a Growing Crisis." *Business and Human Rights Journal* 8, no. 2 (2023): 265–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2023.15>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Maizland, Lindsay, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated September 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

This framing was most clearly expressed in the joint statement delivered by China at the 50th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in June 2022. The statement, endorsed by nearly seventy signatories, many of whom are active participants in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasized the principle of sovereignty and non-interference as fundamental to international relations.²⁶ The geographic and economic profile of the signatories demonstrates how economic incentives play a critical role in shaping global diplomatic alignments, consistent with realist theories of international relations. Participation in the BRI often translates into strategic support for China in multi-lateral forums, revealing how material self-interest can supersede commitments to human rights standards.

This dynamic is further highlighted by several Muslim-majority countries' support for China's position, including Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.²⁷ The alignment of these states with China, despite credible allegations of the mass repression of a Muslim ethnic minority, has drawn sharp criticism from human rights organizations.²⁸ These developments illustrate the limits of appeals to religious or moral solidarity in geopolitics increasingly governed by strategic and economic interests.

The United States and the Emergence of Legal Tools

The United States provides some of the most notable dissent to China's actions. Marked by a long and often adversarial history with China, the U.S. government is no stranger to deploying countermeasures against Chinese policies perceived as threats to international norms or American interests. However, restructuring the 2012 Magnitsky Act into the 2016 Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act provided a crucial new tool: a legal framework enabling the U.S. to sanction foreign individuals and entities responsible for human rights violations globally.²⁹ This expansion played an instrumental role in shaping the global response to human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

The U.S. became the first country to operationalize the Global Magnitsky framework against Chinese officials, sanctioning senior figures such as Chen Quanguo, the Communist Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, along with other high-ranking officials.³⁰ Announced in July 2020, these sanctions imposed some of the first tangible governmental actions to address the human rights crisis in Xinjiang.³¹ Beyond freezing assets and prohibiting transactions, the sanctions signaled a willingness to challenge human rights violations at the highest levels of China's regional governance, sharply escalating U.S.-China relations.

²⁶ Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, "Joint Statement Delivered by China at the 50th Session of the Human Rights Council," June 16, 2022, <http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dbdt/202206/t2022061610703983.htm>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang", 2022.

²⁹ Ruys, Tom, "Reflections on the Global Magnitsky Act and the Use of Targeted Sanctions in the Fight against Grand Corruption," *Revue Belge de Droit International / Belgian Review of International Law* 50, no. 2 (2017): 492-512, <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8580727>

³⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury,

"Treasury Sanctions Chinese Entity and Officials Pursuant to Global Magnitsky Human Rights Executive Order," July 9, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1055>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The Global Magnitsky sanctions laid the groundwork for broader policy developments between the two countries.³² In January 2021, outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared China's actions in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity.³³ Although this declaration carried enormous symbolic weight, particularly under international law, it did not trigger mandatory actions. Nonetheless, the statement provided political cover for the passage of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) later that year.³⁴

The UFLPA marked a shift from symbolic condemnation to tangible economic action. The law is a tool for the U.S. government to “prevent goods made with forced labor in the XUAR from entering U.S. markets,” and is one of the most aggressive attempts to sever supply chains linked to human rights abuses.³⁵ While the UFLPA faced little public opposition, perceived corporate resistance from China linked manufacturers hindered enforcement and highlighted the broader political challenges of enforcement.³⁶ Thus, while the United States leads some of the most ambitious efforts to address the Uyghur crisis, the disparity between symbolic action and real accountability remains considerable.

Following the Lead: The EU's Mirrored Response to Xinjiang

U.S. diplomatic actions signaled to allied nations the existence of a legal and political framework for targeted human rights interventions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Much of the European Union's response mirrors these efforts, albeit at a slower pace and with greater emphasis on multilateralism. In March 2021, shortly after the United States issued its sanctions against Chinese officials, the European Union, along with other allies, levied coordinated sanctions targeting senior Chinese officials implicated in the abuses in Xinjiang.³⁷ This effort symbolized growing international consensus on the need for accountability and willingness to use diplomatic tools to pressure Beijing.

Aligning with the U.S. model of integrating human rights considerations into trade regulation, the European Union began constructing similar legal frameworks: the Forced Labour Regulation (FLR), banning the sale, import, and export of products made with forced labor³⁸ and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), mandating that large companies identify, prevent, and mitigate human rights abuses within their supply chains.³⁹

³² Ruys, Tom Ruys, “Reflections on the Global Magnitsky Act and the Use of Targeted Sanctions in the Fight against Grand Corruption,” *Revue Belge de Droit International / Belgian Review of International Law* 50, no. 2 (2017): 492-512, <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8580727>

³³ Pompeo, Michael R., “Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang,” U.S. Department of State (2017–2021 Archive), January 19, 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/>.

³⁴ Associated Press, “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on China over Human Rights Abuses of Uighurs,” *PBS NewsHour*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-imposes-sanctions-on-china-over-human-rights-abuses-of-uighurs>.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, “Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) Fact Sheet,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons/releases/2025/01/uyghur-forced-labor-prevention-act-ufpla-fact-sheet/>.

³⁶ Associated Press, “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on China.”

³⁷ Rosa, Polaschek. “Responses to the Uyghur Crisis and the Implications for Business and Human Rights Legislation.” *Business and Human Rights Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 567–75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2021.44>.

³⁸ European Parliament, “Products Made with Forced Labour to Be Banned from EU Single Market,” *European Parliament News*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20551/products-made-with-forced-labour-to-be-banned-from-eu-single-market>.

³⁹ Temple-West, Patrick, “EU Moves Ahead with Landmark Law to Force Companies to Address Human Rights Risks,” *Financial Times*, July 5, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/fcc1157e-678d-4de4->

Neither law will be fully enforceable until 2027. This delay, along with challenges in regulatory implementation and corporate resistance, raises broader questions about the true efficacy of such measures. Are these frameworks substantive tools to dismantle complicity in forced labor, or are they symbolic gestures signaling opposition without disrupting global economic networks?

The 2022 UN OHCHR Report: A Culmination of Global Pressure

After years of advocacy and sustained pressure from non-governmental organizations, investigative journalists, and state actors, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report on the situation in Xinjiang in August 2022; a notable step from an international body often reluctant to condemn major powers.⁴⁰ Drawing upon survivor testimony, satellite imagery, leaked official documents, and expert analysis, the report concluded that China's actions in the region may constitute crimes against humanity.⁴¹ While the report did not fundamentally introduce new allegations and evidence, it represented the most formal international recognition of the scale and severity of abuses against Uyghur Muslims. The report added crucial credibility to longstanding claims of abuse; however, it lacked binding enforcement mechanisms, highlighting a broader pattern in which official recognition of abuses fails to create substantive international action.⁴²

Not long after the report was released, China issued a dissent of the report's findings. China's rejection of the 2022 UN OHCHR report fits into a broader strategy of ideological control that has characterized the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) governance in recent years. In its official response, Beijing dismissed the report as a politicized attack orchestrated by Western nations and reasserted that its actions in Xinjiang were legitimate counterterrorism and development efforts.⁴³ This framing is consistent with a broader pattern in which the Chinese government portrays international criticism as interference in its domestic affairs, reframing the human rights discourse through the lens of sovereignty and national stability. Further, the efforts to maintain narrative control are not merely external; the Chinese government also suppresses internal voices outside the CCP's ideological bounds.

Suppressing Advocacy: Domestic Repression and the Foundations of Censorship

Domestically, the Chinese government has increasingly dismantled rights-based civil society organizations, further restricting independent advocacy and alternative narratives. Between 2020 and 2022, more than seventy civil society groups, including unions, student organizations, and human rights advocacy groups, self-dissolved under threat of persecution.⁴⁴

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⁴⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China, August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ohchr-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Fu, Diana, *Is Rights Advocacy Civil Society in China Dead? How the United States Should Navigate People-to-People Exchange in a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2022).

Table 1. Civil Society Groups Closed in Hong Kong (July 2020–January 2022).

TABLE 1: Civil Society Groups Closed in Hong Kong (73)

Organization Type	Count
Unions (student/trade/professional associations)	27
Human rights advocacy	17
Pro-democracy political parties	15
Media Outlets	10
Religious organizations	4
Means of Closure	
Disbanded (self-announcement due to threat)	62
Shuttered (closed with force/coercion)	11

Source: Diana Fu, *Is Rights Advocacy Civil Society in China Dead?* (Wilson Center, 2022).⁴⁵

This domestic suppression mirrors China’s defense of its actions in Xinjiang, in which appeals to national security, sovereignty, and social stability are used to justify repression. In both cases, the CCP has sought to eliminate independent civic spaces that might challenge state narratives, whether on human rights abuses in Xinjiang or broader political rights within its territories.⁴⁶ While certain limited forms of citizen expression have expanded in recent years, they continue to exist only within rigid ideological boundaries enforced by the CCP. In this tightly constrained civic space, the Chinese government has increasingly extended its efforts to not only control public discourse but also digital platforms. The following section will examine how this broader project of censorship and information control continues to shape the landscape of expression within China.

Section 3: China’s Great Firewall - Surveillance and Censorship

Surveillance & Censorship

China’s “Great Firewall” refers to the country’s internet censorship infrastructure, which controls the flow of information.⁴⁷ The domestically developed filtering software comprises a multilayered censorship framework that begins at the router level.⁴⁸ Nine state-licensed Internet Access Providers (IAPs) act as proxies between foreign websites and the content accessible to internet users in China and enforce government restrictions.⁴⁹ Before internet users in China can access the web through domestically compliant Internet Service Providers (ISPs), which purchase internet access from Internet Access Providers (IAPs), another round of filtering is applied.⁵⁰ This filtering software helps control spam and viruses, and also other content in any desired category.⁵¹ At both the router and ISP levels, censoring forbidden content, such as URLs or keywords, is used to control the data that flows between the internet user and the IAP.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch. “Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship”, New York: Human Rights Watch, August 10, 2006, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/08/10/race-bottom/corporate-complicity-chinese-internet-censorship>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

While the PRC's Ministry of Information Industry (MII) monitors censorship, the State Council, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department, play a significant role in shaping the respective censorship policies.⁵² The purpose of this filtering is to censor the flow of information between the global internet and China, thereby maintaining nationalistic sentiment. This is done by blocking political dissent or rhetoric considered subversive by the People's Republic of China (PRC), which could potentially compromise state security and disrupt social stability.⁵³ The third and final layer of censorship is implemented at the Internet Content Provider (ICP) level, where to be allowed to provide their internet platform service (i.e., social media, chatrooms, news, entertainment, etc.) must acquire a business license and sign a pledge to agree to monitor and prevent the spread of content deemed harmful by the government.⁵⁴ Failure to comply results in negative consequences such as fines, forced shutdown of ICP service by authorities, and even lawsuits for non-compliance.⁵⁵

Preemptive Monitoring & Self-Censorship by ICPs

Out of fear of punishment for non-compliance with China's censorship laws, many ICPs over-block content, generating "block-lists" to self-censor and filter content before it reaches the user.⁵⁶ Given that the Chinese government does not directly provide companies with an explicit list of this flaggable content, companies create these "block-lists" through trial and error, guesswork, insights gained from meetings with Chinese officials, and feedback from authorities regarding questionable search results.⁵⁷ Furthermore, companies will run diagnostic tests at the router level to identify websites, phrases, and words blocked by Chinese authorities and include those in their lists.⁵⁸ Enforced by the Chinese government, this "Great Firewall" system infringes on the privacy rights of its people.⁵⁹ It requires ISPs to keep records of citizens' browser history and online communications, meaning that anyone is subject to scrutiny if their internet behavior is flagged.⁶⁰

"The Golden Shield Project" as a Tool for Mass Surveillance

The Ministry of Public Security requires ISPs to keep user records for at least sixty days.⁶¹ Additionally, these providers can participate in the nationwide surveillance network by sharing users' movement and tracking data, allowing authorities to identify and locate individuals during their everyday online activity.⁶² These procedures support the Chinese government's efforts to expand nationwide surveillance and violate users' privacy by investing billions of dollars in developing technological infrastructure within local governments.⁶³

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Guide to Obtaining an ICP License for Your Website in China," December 30, 2024, <https://fdi-china.com/blog/obtaining-an-icp-license/>.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Race to the Bottom," 2006.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Maya Wang, "China's Dystopian Push to Revolutionize Surveillance," *Human Rights Watch*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/18/chinas-dystopian-push-revolutionize-surveillance>.

This initiative, launched in 2000, is known as the ‘Golden Shield Project’.⁶⁴ In addition to these developments, this project is upgrading security cameras in public spaces for facial recognition, monitoring people’s economic and social credit, and creating a national DNA database, allegedly to support public safety.⁶⁵ This expansion, however, already raises significant concerns, as this infrastructure disproportionately surveils specific populations through the catchall term “focus personnel”.⁶⁶ This flags individuals who are deemed to be a threat to public safety, including those with a criminal record, political activists, ethnic minorities (such as the Uyghurs), and even individuals with a substance abuse record.⁶⁷ Furthermore, this internet sovereignty framework is being promoted abroad as well, where authorities use the centralization of the internet to monitor and control its citizens’ internet activity.⁶⁸ For this reason, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights condemn these regulations that violate the right to privacy of Chinese internet users, as all forms of online presence and personal data stored electronically are monitored and stored.⁶⁹

Censorship: Chinese Are Less Concerned Than Westerners Think

Although China’s censorship laws may seem severe, since the 2010s, modern surveillance and censorship controls are actually considered more lenient than in the past.⁷⁰ China has a long history of stringent censorship under authoritarian regimes.⁷¹ Going back as far as the censorship practices of the late imperial times, such as the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), regulations and laws were enacted to control the circulation of books and publications, protecting the ruler’s interests.⁷² It was not until the National Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen in 1912 that Chinese citizens were granted rights to free speech, authorship, and publication.⁷³ That period was short-lived, followed by the establishment of a one-party dictatorship by the Nationalist Party in 1928, which exerted absolute control over public expression.⁷⁴ This paved the way for Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, during which the concept of “socialist reconstruction” led to the destruction of books and culture, as well as the control of thought, education, and individual expression (1949-1978).⁷⁵ After Mao’s passing in 1976, Deng Xiaoping’s leadership in the 1980s, and economic reforms created greater freedom to discuss social, cultural, and occasionally political topics.⁷⁶ During this period, the Chinese population was hopeful about promoting more freedom of speech to advance democratic values; however, the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 intensified government control and further suppressed free expression.⁷⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Race to the Bottom.”

⁷⁰ Ying Jiang, *Cyber-Nationalism in China: Challenging Western Media Portrayals of Internet Censorship in China*, (University of Adelaide Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780987171894>.

⁷¹ Ibid, 64.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 65.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

This created caution and anxiety, prompting a culture of self-censorship.⁷⁸ Since then, the government has generally suppressed the references to the incident, and has officially banned public commemoration.⁷⁹

In modern times, the consumerist mindset of the 2000s in China prioritizes economic opportunity and stability over political expression, rather than focusing on concerns about censorship.⁸⁰ Economic liberalization delivered the cultural freedom, which Chinese consumers have long desired.⁸¹ Many people self-censor and moderate their actions independently, without direct government enforcement.⁸² Generation Y appreciates the freedoms they have compared to earlier generations.⁸³ Although the internet and social media are relatively quiet politically, they remain vibrant in commerce and culture, demonstrating the potential for innovation and economic opportunities to pursue personal goals.⁸⁴

Censorship: Also, a Democratic Tool

Democracies often view censorship as a threat to free speech and advocate for these values when threatened.⁸⁵ Censorship is generally seen as negative because it restricts individual rights and contradicts democratic values.⁸⁶ This perspective contributes to the Western view that freedom of expression in China is heavily suppressed.⁸⁷ However, censorship also exists in democracies, although it is less explicit than in state-controlled systems.⁸⁸ It typically occurs through post-publication regulation and voluntary self-censorship by institutions or individuals, often in response to societal norms, values, and ethics.⁸⁹ Research has shown that the Reagan and Bush administrations used censorship to advance the right-wing agenda, restricting certain liberties in aesthetic and ethical areas.⁹⁰ As a result, recent studies have examined how censorship affects ethnic minorities, political correctness, hate speech, feminism, and topics such as pornography and terrorism, as well as its role as a tool of power.⁹¹

2023 China Report on Human Rights Violations in the U.S.

In 2023, China released a report on human rights violations in the United States in direct response to the U.S. criticism of human rights violations in China.⁹² China contends that the U.S. must take accountability for its human rights challenges and that its actions speak louder than words.⁹³

⁷⁸ Ibid, 66.

⁷⁹ NPR Staff, "30 Years After Tiananmen Protests, 'The Fight Is Still Going On For China,'" NPR, May 31, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2019/05/31/727846940/30-years-after-tiananmen-protests-the-fight-is-still-going-on-for-china>; "Tiananmen Square Incident | Massacre, Summary, Details, & Tank Man | Britannica," March 6, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tiananmen-Square-incident>.

⁸⁰ Jiang, *Cyber-Nationalism in China*, 47, 64-65.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 47.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 63.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 68.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² "The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2023," accessed April 20, 2025, <http://ge.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202405/t2024052911313691.htm>.

⁹³ Ibid.

The report highlights issues such as political unrest caused by extreme polarization, persistent racism, systemic barriers for the Black community, targeted punishment of Chinese students via the “China Initiative,” violations of women’s reproductive health, and the U.S.-Mexico border humanitarian crisis.⁹⁴ This approach demonstrates how China seeks to counter international criticism by drawing attention to human rights concerns in other countries.

Section 4: Assembly and Protest in China

This section covers the state of protest in China. It analyzes how international rights organizations assess freedom of assembly in China, providing two major examples of large-scale protests, and summarizes key statistics.

International Consensus

International rights organizations largely give China low ratings on the freedom of assembly, public expression, and protest. The Cato Institute in 2022 rated China at 4.93/10 on human freedoms, a decline of 0.45 points since 2000.⁹⁵ In 2024, Freedom House ranked China 11/60 on Civil Liberties, noting that “the constitution protects the right of citizens to demonstrate, but in practice protesters seldom obtain approval and risk punishment for assembling without permission.”⁹⁶ The Human Rights Measurement Initiative, as seen in the chart below, rates China 1.9/10 on empowerment, including the right to protest and assemble, while also identifying human rights advocates and political protesters as the groups most at risk from government suppression.⁹⁷ The map below shows Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) ratings of human rights across the world, rating China 0.19/1, one of the lowest globally.⁹⁸ To understand these low ratings, the next two case studies discuss China’s freedom of assembly and illustrate the state’s suppression of protests.

Figure 1: China’s Empowerment Score

Source: Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI), “China: Empowerment – Civil and Political Rights (2024),”



<https://rightstracker.org/country/CHN>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

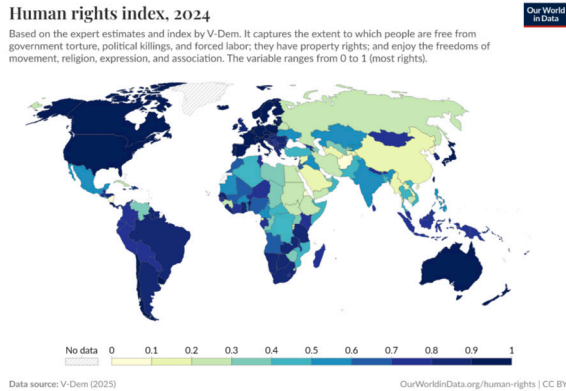
⁹⁵ Ian Vásquez, Matthew D. Mitchell, Ryan Murphy, and Guillermina Sutter Schneider, *Human Freedom Index 2024: A Global Measurement of Personal, Civil, and Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute/Fraser Institute, 2024), <https://www.cato.org/human-freedom-index/2024>.

⁹⁶ Freedom House, “China: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report,” 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2024>.

⁹⁷ Human Rights Measurement Initiative, “HRMI Rights Tracker, China,” <https://rightstracker.org/country/CHN>.

⁹⁸ Our World in Data, “Human rights index,” <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/human-rights-index-vdem?country=~CHN>.

Figure 2. Human Rights Index, 2024



Source: *Our World in Data*, “Human Rights Index (V-Dem),” 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/human-rights-index-vdem?country=~CHN>.

Case Study 1: Hong Kong Protests

Hong Kong has a long history of protest, from British colonial rule to more recent pushbacks against Chinese authority.⁹⁹ In 1997, China took control of Hong Kong and pledged to allow the region to maintain a free economic and political system. However, over the years, China has steadily infringed upon the rights that it originally promised. It has led to mass pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2003, 2012, and 2014.¹⁰⁰ In 2019, Hong Kong introduced a law that allows authorities to extradite residents to mainland China, sparking large-scale protests of up to 2 million people.¹⁰¹ These protests succeeded in repealing the policy, however, protesters suffered mass police suppression, including arrests, tear gas, and rubber bullets.¹⁰³

Following these mass protests in 2020, China reaffirmed its power over Hong Kong, imposing a national security law that “criminalizes any dissent and adopts extremely broad definitions for crimes such as terrorism, subversion, secession, and collusion with foreign powers.”¹⁰⁴ In 2010, the Cato Institute ranked Hong Kong as the third freest country in the world; however, in 2022, after the CCP passed the national security law, it dropped the region to 50th.¹⁰⁵ In 2024, China introduced another security law to further strengthen its authority over Hong Kong and silence public criticism of China within the region.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ Mike Ives and Elsie Chen, “In 1967, Hong Kong’s Protesters Were Communist Sympathizers,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/16/world/asia/hong-kong-1967-riots.html>

¹⁰⁰ Lindsay Maizland and Clara Fong, “Hong Kong’s Freedoms: What China Promised and How It’s Cracking Down,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 19, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/hong-kong-freedoms-democracy-protests-china-crackdown>.

¹⁰¹ Shibani Mahtani and Timothy McLaughlin, “The Evolution of Hong Kong’s Protests,” *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/09/27/evolution-hong-kongs-protests/>

¹⁰² Mainzlan and Fong, “Hong Kong’s Freedoms”

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

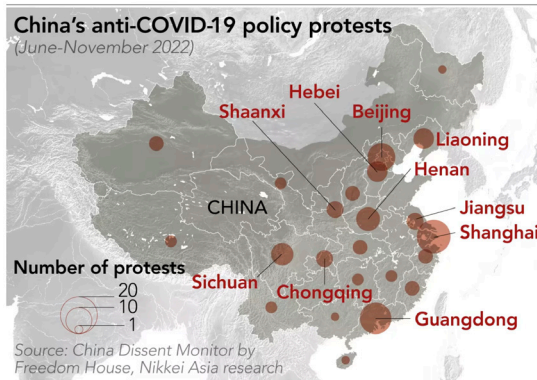
¹⁰⁵ Vásquez et al., *Human Freedom Index 2024*.

¹⁰⁶ Maizland and Fong, “Hong Kong’s Freedoms”.

Case Study 2: White Paper Protests

A second example of mass protest in China occurred in November 2022, when citizens protested the zero-COVID policy, known as the White Paper, protests.¹⁰⁷ Sparked by an apartment fire in Xinjiang that killed ten people who were confined during COVID lockdowns, protesters held up pieces of blank paper to signify voicelessness, mourning, and defiance of state policies. The blank papers symbolized defiance while strategically saying nothing to evade government suppression.¹⁰⁸ Unlike previous protests confined to specific regions, the White Paper protests occurred nationwide, as shown in the map below.¹⁰⁹

Figure 3. China's anti-COVID-19 Policy Protests



Source: Pak Yiu and Grace Li, "China COVID unrest shines light on history of dissent," *Nikkei Asia*, December 1, 2022 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-COVID-unrest-shines-light-on-history-of-dissent2>.

The protests succeeded in ending the government's restrictive COVID policy. However, months later, authorities arrested more than 100 protestors, including four journalists. Because the government had resorted to mass arrests in response to peaceful protests, "observers believe authorities want to send a signal with the arrests, or what rights activist Teng Biao calls killing the chicken to scare the monkeys."¹¹⁰ This reinforces the pattern of selective tolerance that is later met with punishment, evident from both case studies.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Chang Che and Amy Chang Chien, "Memes, Puns and Blank Sheets of Paper: China's Creative Acts of Protest," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/28/world/asia/china-protests-blank-sheets.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Pak Yiu and Grace Li, "China COVID unrest shines light on history of dissent," *Nikkei Asia*, December 1, 2022 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-COVID-unrest-shines-light-on-history-of-dissent2>.

¹¹⁰ Wong, Tessa, "The protesters who've gone missing as China deepens crackdown," *BBC*, February 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-64592333>.

¹¹¹ Yiu and Li, "China COVID unrest"

An Overview: Protest in China by the Numbers

These case studies might suggest that any citizen assembly in China is heavily discouraged; tens of thousands of public protests, primarily local, still occur in China each year.¹¹² People protest through public assembly, xinfang (petitioning), and creative expressions of dissent. Three-quarters of the protests are over economic issues, including labor making up 41% of protests, property management 28%, and land ownership 12%.¹¹³ Over one-third of protests in China, according to Dissent Monitor's database, involved state suppression. Smaller-scale protests tended to go largely unnoticed, while larger protests that threatened the balance of power, such as "rural riots against land grabs, evictions, or environmental pollution," were far more likely to attract state suppression.^{114 115} As a result of this dynamic, scholars believe China can "siphon off popular discontent without destabilizing the system as a whole," further cementing its central power.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

The complex dynamics of various freedoms within China are bound by the barriers of economic, political, social, and security interests that seek to perpetuate a set of CCP ideals. The government denied the Uyghurs human rights due to their conflicting interests in religion, ideology, and separatist "terrorist activities" that posed a threat to Chinese economic development within the area. The global response to the Uyghur crisis reflected these same dynamics, as strategic and economic interests often took precedence over human rights. Further, China's ability to dismiss international pressure and suppress domestic dissent illustrates how the CCP maintains control by limiting internal freedoms and external accountability. While China's "Great Firewall" infrastructure allows certain liberties in commercial, cultural, and economic areas, it effectively promotes a self-censorship status quo that "normalizes" heavy surveillance and control. The CCP uses this system to punish political opposition or perceived threats, frequently targeting specific populations and suppressing the freedom of expression in ways that raise serious human rights concerns. Similarly, with regard to protest, China allows a level of citizen assembly that maintains the status quo while heavily cracking down on protests that threaten CCP interests. In conclusion, China allows a range of freedoms to its people but limits them to those that support the CCP's political, economic, social, and security control.

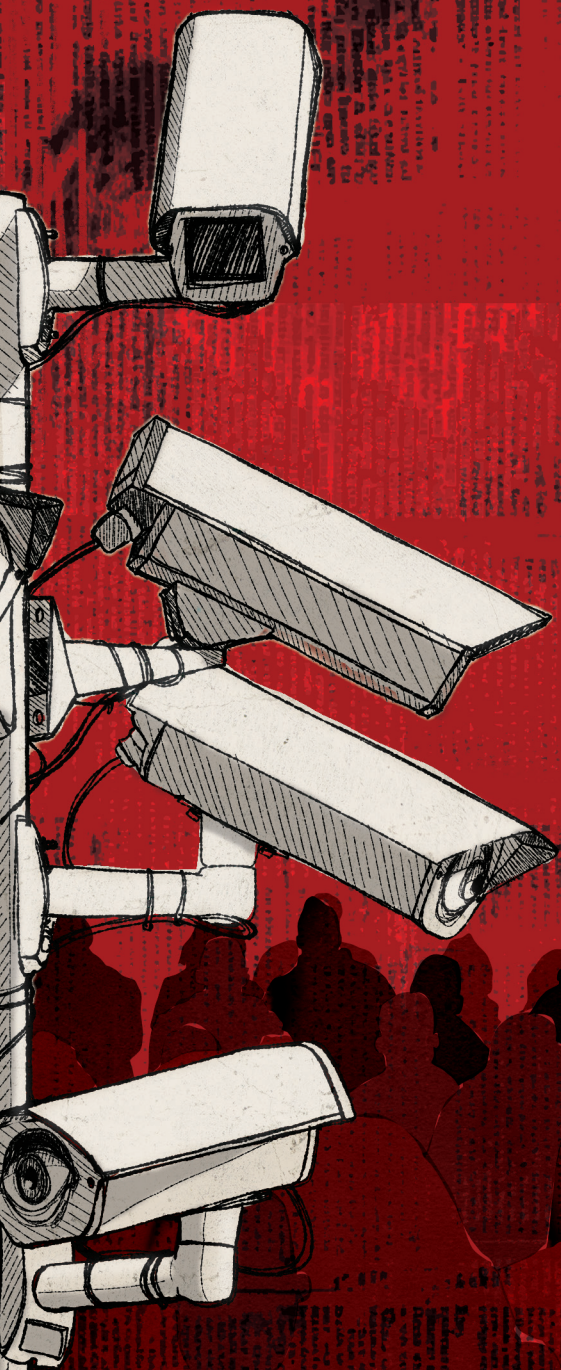
¹¹² Max Fisher, "The Long Odds Facing China's Protesters," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/world/asia/china-covid-protests-xi-jinping.html>.

¹¹³ Kevin Slaten, "Eight Things Freedom House Has Learned About Protests in China," *Freedom House*, September 4, 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/article/eight-things-freedom-house-has-learned-about-protests-china>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Christian Gobel, "The Political Logic of Protest Repression in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no.128 (2021): 169-185, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1790897>

¹¹⁶ Fisher, "The Long Odds Facing China's Protesters".



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