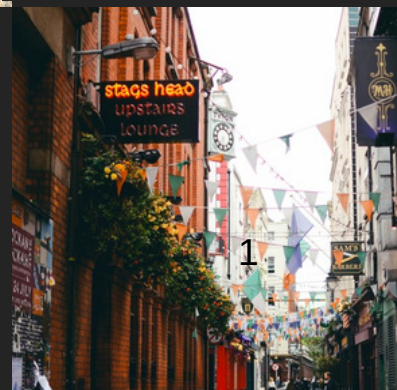




PIVOT

2025 JOURNAL COMPENDIUM





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MONASH INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS SOCIETY 2025



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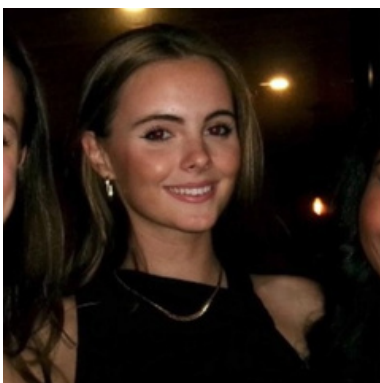
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The Rise of Regional Powers: Is Multipolarity the New Global Order?

MUHAMMAD FARREL NUGROHO | APRIL 15

The global order has faced a subtle yet significant shift in recent years. Traditional alliances are being reevaluated, regional actors are gaining confidence, and the once predictable rhythms of international order have become less consistent. At the core of this gradual change lies the realignment of US foreign policy; a series of moves that have provoked new debates about international cooperation, diplomacy, and the structure of global power. From changes in trade policy to a more selective approach towards military engagement and intervention, the United States has been signalling a new set of agendas and priorities. Some interpret this as a strategic realignment of their position, others think it is a step back from a cohesive global leadership. These issues remain controversial and polarising, demanding all actors involved, allies and rivals alike, to stand ready in anticipation, preparing for the most unconventional turn. However, regardless of their interpretation, one thing is irrefutable: regional powers responded with growth and influence expansion, new alliances are forming and new challenges are occurring against the long-held assumption of US-led global order.

A Shift in Strategy: The U.S. Repositions

During the second Trump administration, America's foreign policy has undergone its most dramatic shift in recent history. America's liberalist view of international relations and diplomacy have seemingly slowly morphed into a realist model as some of their recent policies have been reflecting a different, and often alien, set of priorities. President Trump's recent foreign policy tends to emphasize national interests and strategic pragmatic power dynamics over the promotion of the conventional liberalist view that the United States have long been known to uphold. The new tariff policy is a great example of this drastic shift in strategy.

Trump's administration has imposed the infamous flagship tariff policy upon nearly all of their trading partners. Supposedly, this move aims to rejuvenate the US' domestic manufacturing and reduce reliance on foreign trade by limiting import products from all of their trading partners in hopes that the American consumers may rely and support the domestic market.



This protectionist approach reflects that of the early 20th century economic policy, which highlights the importance of immediate national economic interest over the principles of free trade. A parallel can be drawn from a policy during the interwar period: the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which aims to achieve a similar goal. Regardless of the effectiveness of this approach, one thing that is certain is that the reaction of the international community is almost uniform: distasteful and cautious. The US, as one of the world's largest importers, buying approximately 3 trillion USD worth of products in 2023, plays a central role in the global economy. Such an abrupt change in policy is bound to cause tremendous implications on every actor in the economy, allies and rivals alike. Even if this disorder is well-anticipated by the United States government, which it should, the diplomatic strain this causes is still difficult to mitigate. This move by the United States government has risked triggering retaliatory tariffs, trade wars, and long-term disruptions in global supply chains. The administration has put out some signals for negotiations to compromise, but it is undeniable that the overarching goals of this policy is economic leverage of the domestic market over foreign cooperation, seemingly ignoring the international reaction by both allies and rivals.

The tariff policy is not the only example of the United States' sudden change in policy; in terms of defense and security, the United States has been taking drastic measures, especially regarding its role in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. In a surprising turn of events, in February of 2025, the United States rejected a UN resolution to condemn Russia's war against Ukraine and support Ukraine's territorial integrity. This clash was sparked by a disagreement over the wording of the resolutions marking the anniversary of the Russian invasion which explicitly stated Russia as an aggressor of the conflict. The US promoted a draft with a more neutral tone, seemingly refusing to explicitly acknowledge the aggressive and provocative nature of Russia. This move shocked the traditional allies of the United States and sparked widespread political confusion. Assumptions were made about what the intentions behind this drastic move were. Some popular speculations include the US attempt to test Russia's willingness for peace or an attempt to fracture Russia's relations with China, knowing that Trump's campaign puts a lot of emphasis on economic rivalry against China. But again, regardless of the reasoning of such actions and how effective they truly are, some political realities are undeniable, which is the tension arising between the US and its allies. Domestically, the administration framed the rejection as an effort to prioritize national interests and avoid further entanglement in foreign conflicts, but internationally, it has been perceived as a retreat from global leadership.

Rethinking the Global Equation:

From these shifts, a question arises: is the global order slowly morphing into multipolarity? Are we the witness of a global power decentralization, or is it simply a momentary realignment within an enduring structure? To explore this case, there are several crucial key areas where US influence is particularly visible for examination: economic influence, security dynamics, and their impacts.

Economic Autonomy and Regional Realignments:

The issues within the field of economics and trade have significantly warmed up as the US imposed its tariff policies. The US-China trade rivalries have long played a significant role in shaping the dynamic of the current global supply chain and prompted nations around the world to act accordingly. Regional communities have responded differently to these policies, but of course, as expected, their responses are predominantly in the realms of anticipation and insecurity. In East Asia, China, Japan, and South Korea are attempting to bolster economic cooperation through the revival of the long dormant trilateral dialogue in East Asia, in anticipation of new US policies. This is done with the intention to mitigate unpredictability stemming from the US repositioning its policy. These efforts at regional cooperation implies a strong collective desire to establish a certain degree of autonomy in managing trade flows and ensuring economic resilience. The move also reflects a growing recognition that dependency on a singular external market—especially one as volatile as the current U.S. — poses long-term strategic risks.

Southeast Asia has been hit acutely by tariff policy. Being one of the most export-reliant regions, the disruption within the global trade flows signals significant economic turbulence, knowing Southeast Asian countries' manufacturing sectors are deeply linked with global supply chains. Some manufacturing powerhouses such as Vietnam and Cambodia, were hit by a shocking 46% and 49% tariff respectively, stunting the economy of the textile industry. The sudden imposition of tariffs has undercut the predictability that exporters in the region rely on, prompting a strategic shift in how Southeast Asia approaches economic resilience. This turbulence prompted countries within the region to cooperate regionally. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim called upon the neighbouring countries to stand in solidarity in preparation of US tariffs. He called for ASEAN-wide action ahead of Trump's tariff challenge. This call to action was realized through his reported contact with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto. Meanwhile, Latin America has also been trying to renew their regional and intra-regional integration. MERCOSUR plays a crucial role in Latin America's effort to strengthen intra-regional diplomacy as tariff policy might speed up trade discussion with the EU. This trade deal has been a subject of opposition for decades by various members of the EU, but now that there is another threat of uncertainties posed by the tariff policy, countries such as Austria, who previously opposed the idea, are considering the trade deals with Latin America as a form of remedy.



Security: Regional Organizations Step Up:

Meanwhile, in the domain of security, unpredictable US maneuvers have prompted regional actors to act dynamically as the US took sharp turns. The traditional international security infrastructure and institutions such as NATO and bilateral security pacts in the Asia-Pacific, seemed to experience diplomatic strain after the aforementioned US unconventional security policies came into effect. US rejection of the UN resolution regarding Ukraine and Russia seems to be a departure from moral clarity where US allies, primarily the EU, have previously found comfort in. The EU has been emphasizing its plan regarding its own defence and security through the Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030. This plan is Europe's reaction to the increasing security threat posed by various conflicts and insecurity provoked by Russia's expansion in its military capacity, China's intransparency of its military spending, and potential spillover from conflicts in the Middle-East and North-Africa.

This notion of security independence and departure from the US is not confined to Europe. The idea of strategic security self-reliance and diversification of security alliances is getting more popular. South Korea has been actively trying to develop indigenous defense technologies to reduce foreign dependency, which include the development of new engines for the new KF-21 Boramae, a 4.5-generation multirole fighter developed by KAI (Korea Aerospace Industry).

India's response to the recent political realignment between the United States and Russia is the potential acceleration of the "Make in India" initiative to decrease security dependence, which includes native developments of military technologies. In the Middle-East, Saudi Arabia is advancing its diplomatic and security relations with China, seeking to develop their joint ventures in energy and infrastructure. The overarching theme is clear: the US-led global security architecture is undergoing a period of turmoil and fragmentation, the permanence of such fragmentation is debatable of course, but there is a causal relationship between this fragmentation and US' recent unconventional approach to security and defense.

The Structural Challenge of Moving Up the Ladder:

Yet, despite the growing regional growth and assertion, the structural barrier stayed seemingly impenetrable. The current international system is primarily shaped by institutions and norms of the post-WWII world. Various institutions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO) are examples of institutions still strongly upholding the older model of power distribution.

There have been repeated hindrances in efforts to revolutionise and reform the UNSC to better represent current geopolitical realities. Critics argued that the existing structure, where each of the five permanent members wield veto power, creates challenges in passing critical resolutions towards any of them. Similarly, governance reforms within the IMF have also been stalled, and attempts to redistribute voting rights to grant bigger influence to developing countries are being hindered. The United States unilaterally thwarted this attempt despite it being supported by the majority of member states. This resistance, which are facilitated by the inherent structures of institutions, reflects the obstacles of achieving equitable representations within the current global order.

The concept of world-system theory, first introduced by Immanuel Wallerstein, provides a framework of understanding the hierarchical nature of the global economy. This theory classifies countries into 3 groups: core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral, which emphasize how power is concentrated in the core while peripheral nations remain dependent. The idea of mobility from peripheral (or even semi-peripheral) roles into the core global power remains a feat not many could achieve.

Some have, such as China and South Korea, but the path of such a journey remains steep and full of obstacles. Some would argue that the current world order is deliberately designed not to establish "interdependence" among states, but "codependency" from peripheral countries to the core countries. As such, assumptions of "moving up the ladder" being impossible is not uncommon. A lot of people assume that this impossibility is entrenched or even inherent within the system – a seed planted within earth which has been watered and fed throughout its lifetime, growing firm and fertile.

Nonetheless, movements advocating for a more representative global order are gaining momentum. Economic struggles such as the revival of trilateral diplomacy of East Asia and recent calls for action to further economic integrity of ASEAN in the midst of tariff struggles are seen as a means to enhance regional economies. Security measures, such as the EU's growing concern for independent security and independent military programs held by countries such as South Korea and India to boost domestic military manufacturing, are also seen as an effort to promote self-sufficient security. These efforts can be seen as a means to advance regional influence and promote a multipolar world order.

These efforts signify a shift, or at least an attempt, towards a multipolar world. However, the fundamental nature of global order and power structures means that substantial change remains a complex, slow, and gradual process. Rather than a sharp turn towards multipolarity, the emergence of a layered global order is more likely to occur in the foreseeable future. This layered global order is where the US continues to play a significant and/or leading role, but regional actors are more confident in asserting their agenda upon their neighbours, allies and rivals. This does not mean it would be a shift into conflict, but simply that global governance may be more fairly distributed and less centered on few actors. The question evolves from whether US hegemony will endure, to how it would coexist with other autonomies.

This realignment of US policies across different fields of governance occur simultaneously with the rise of regional powers who are becoming more confident and assertive. A pessimistic view of this phenomenon is the fragmentation of the global landscape, as abrupt change in US policy might cause insecurity and uncertainties among its allies and rivals. A more optimistic view suggests that this may provoke a stable and gradual change of the current world order into a multipolaristic system, allowing for a more democratic environment. One thing is clear – the dynamic of the international order is becoming more fluid, new alliances are being tested, and international institutions are being contested and pressured to reform or risk irrelevance. Diplomatic agility and adaptability are becoming an increasingly important currency. The challenge forward is not just leadership, but also coordination—how every actor can share responsibility in global management, and collectively maintain stability, equity, and global cooperation in this fragmented, yet interconnected world.



Signal of Opportunity: What the EU-India Free Trade Agreement means for Australia

LAKMALIE WIJESINGHE | APRIL 29

After almost a decade of stalled talks, India and the European Union (EU) have pledged to establish a free trade agreement (FTA) by the end of this year. The new deal aims to remove domestic market barriers and encourage foreign domestic investment, while maintaining protections around geographical indications to ensure respective agricultural markets are not misused in the name of economic growth. The path to finalising this FTA has not been straightforward, and more roadblocks remain as leaders from both sides face diplomatic delays, increasing tariffs and protectionist challenges from other great powers.

Indian PM Narendra Modi has stated that the new agreement will be built on trust and shared belief in democratic values, foundations that will become increasingly crucial as the international community learns to navigate under an ever-changing global order. Australia will also need to keep a close eye on negotiations, as India – its fourth largest trading partner – seeks to increase its global economic influence.

How will this new deal contribute to current EU-India trade relations?

The EU is India's largest trading partner, accounting for 12.2% of total Indian trade. India also relies heavily on the EU, as its second largest destination for exports at 17.5% of total trade, narrowly behind the United States at 17.6%. These figures have grown remarkably over the last decade, due to increasing demand in the pharmaceutical, automotive and digital sectors. Digital technologies in particular will be at the forefront of trade negotiations, as the EU manages a labour shortage in its domestic market. The forthcoming pact will also consider the growing importance of artificial intelligence infrastructures, on the back of the establishment of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in 2022. Clean and green technology is another important, albeit contentious area, where both Indian PM Modi and EU President Ursula von der Leyen have pledged to advance progress through research and development, notably around electric vehicles and semiconductors.

The overarching goal of this agreement is to ensure a 'balanced, ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial' trade relationship now and into the future. While such a stance serves to benefit both economies, other nations such as Australia must proceed along similar lines as its own major trading partners apply pressure.

The epicentre of such pressure currently emanates from the United States, where President Donald Trump has adopted an America First Trade Policy, and imposed strict tariff measures on almost all US trading partners, with rates as high as 145% on US imports. The White House announced a brief respite for countries who have not outwardly retaliated against these measures, however this is set to expire in July. With this in mind, it is evident that the progress of EU-India negotiations is not only timely, but indicative of an important value shift within its governments towards effective long-term economic solutions.



Australia must learn from its allies, and strengthen its current ties with India if it hopes to establish a stronger presence in the Indo-Pacific region. While the two nations have benefitted from a comprehensive strategic partnership for the last four years, interest-driven discussions are yet to go far in cementing economic relations. Meanwhile, China's push in the region saw India sign a landmark deal with the PRC in 2024, the first bilateral agreement between the two countries in five years. This will see a reduction in troops at geographical friction points along their shared border – where tensions have often escalated in fatal clashes – and signals a thawing of once tense relations.

Australia has made some notable inroads into trade opportunities with India, establishing a New Roadmap for Economic Engagement earlier this year. Informed by public sector consultations, this framework aims to 'accelerate efforts' on sectors of key importance, including education, energy, agribusiness and tourism. Australia-India led talks have been slowly progressing, but actionable steps remain underdeveloped, with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stating that the countries' relationship is 'yet to be recognised'.

And while its status will remain unchanged until after Australia elects its next prime minister, the incoming federal government must maintain its view of India as an important economic ally – especially as US foreign policy evolves. Under the first Trump administration, Australia looked to Japan for regional economic engagement, creating a six year Strategic Plan with the objective of increasing trade and investment, as well as private-public partnerships. This time, it is imperative that Australian leaders regard India as an important counterpart when advancing its future economic policies.

Looking ahead:

"The EU and India have the potential to be one of the defining partnerships of this century" – European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Negotiations remain ongoing between the EU and India, as both sides lobby for reduced tariffs, softer legislative penalties and greater concessions for migration into EU states. As the United States and China continue to develop their own economic agendas with and against each other, Australia must utilise the opportunities it currently has as a major power within the Indo-Pacific if it hopes to advance its domestic and regional economic development.

EU-India trade in services

Total trade in services increased by more than 150% in the last decade



EU-India trade in goods

Built on mutual strengths with steady growth in overall trade



Living Through History: How the Middle East is Being Reshaped in 2025 Posted on

ELISA STEINBERG | MAY 6



'Peace in the Middle East,' the saying goes, often with a sigh or a scoff. For decades, it's been more of a punchline than a possibility. Can a region so often defined by conflict, foreign intervention, and deep-rooted tensions ever truly know peace?

The Middle East has long been a geopolitical hotbed – a land of shifting alliances, ancient rivalries, and religious divisions, where empires have risen and fallen, leaving behind a legacy of both culture and conflict. But in recent years, something remarkable has begun to unfold: historic changes that are quietly, yet significantly, reshaping the region and its alliances. Understanding these changes is critical, because the future of the Middle East could look very different from its past. On a grander level, this can impact the global landscape. Let's explore six key areas that help us understand the nature of this regional shift.

The Fall of Assad's Regime in Syria:

The Assad family's regime began in 1970 when Hafez al-Assad seized power through a military coup. His son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him in 2000 and maintained authoritarian control until his ouster in December 2024. After 54 years of authoritarian rule and a 14-year civil war that claimed over 600,000 lives and displaced much of the population, the Assad regime collapsed in December 2024 after a coup led by the armed coalition between the Sunni-Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). This marks one of the most significant regime changes in the modern Middle East. Led by interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa of HTS (an offshoot of al-Qaeda), HTS currently controls Syria, having signed a temporary constitution in March for a transitional five-year period. However, there are other fragmented forces in the country vying for control, such as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Islamic State forces, and regime supporters.



US forces have been repositioned strategically across the Gulf and Iraq, while Iranian-backed militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have faced strikes, and cyberattacks on Iran have escalated. Under current negotiations, Trump is pushing for a new agreement to halt Iran's nuclear development, seeking a fair deal that would prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons while allowing peaceful nuclear energy. However, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program and is currently nearing breakout capability. Iran is also deepening ties with Russia and China, though the partnerships remain primarily strategic rather than ideological. Economic, military, and trade cooperation are expanding – most recently demonstrated by the Security Belt 2025 joint naval exercises. Notably, Iran signed a 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China in March 2021, and in January 2025, concluded a similar Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with Russia.

Key question: Has the tide finally turned against Iran's regional strategy, or is this just a temporary setback in a longer game?

The Gulf States on the Rise:

The geopolitical center of gravity in the Gulf is steadily shifting eastward. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have been increasingly engaging with regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). This engagement reflects a strategic pivot towards Asia, aiming to diversify their economic and political partnerships beyond traditional Western alliances. In 2023, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE were invited to join BRICS, signalling their growing role in shaping global economic and political landscapes.

China has emerged as the fastest-growing source of foreign direct investment and business activity in Dubai, reflecting a broader reorientation toward Asia. Trade between the Middle East and Asia is projected to surpass Gulf-West trade by 2027, highlighting this deepening economic integration. Dubai's ambitious D33 economic agenda seeks to double the city's economy by 2033 and expand its foreign trade reach to 400 additional cities worldwide. At the same time, innovation hubs like the Dubai Silicon Oasis are drawing global tech firms and top talent.

India is also a major player. The UAE and India signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022, with bilateral trade expected to exceed \$100 billion by 2027.

This eastward pivot marks a fundamental transformation in the region. Gulf states are evolving beyond their traditional role as oil powers to become leading centers of innovation, investment, and international diplomacy.

Key question: Can the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor rival China's Belt and Road and reshape global trade routes?

The China-Russia Factor:

China and Russia are increasingly stepping into the Middle East. As explained, China and Russia have both increased trade with various regional powers. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has seen a significant uptick in the Middle East, with investments reaching \$39 billion in 2024, making the region the top recipient of BRI funds, and, notably, Saudi Arabia has secured \$19 billion in Chinese investments recently. Both China and Russia have also played roles in helping Iran evade Western sanctions. China, for instance, has developed methods to import Iranian oil while bypassing the Western financial system and shipping services. The U.S. has recently imposed sanctions on a network involving entities in Iran and China accused of supplying materials for Iran's ballistic missile program.

Key question: As China and Russia grow more involved in the Middle East, will their influence shift the balance of power and weaken the West's role in the region?

The IMEC Trade Corridor:

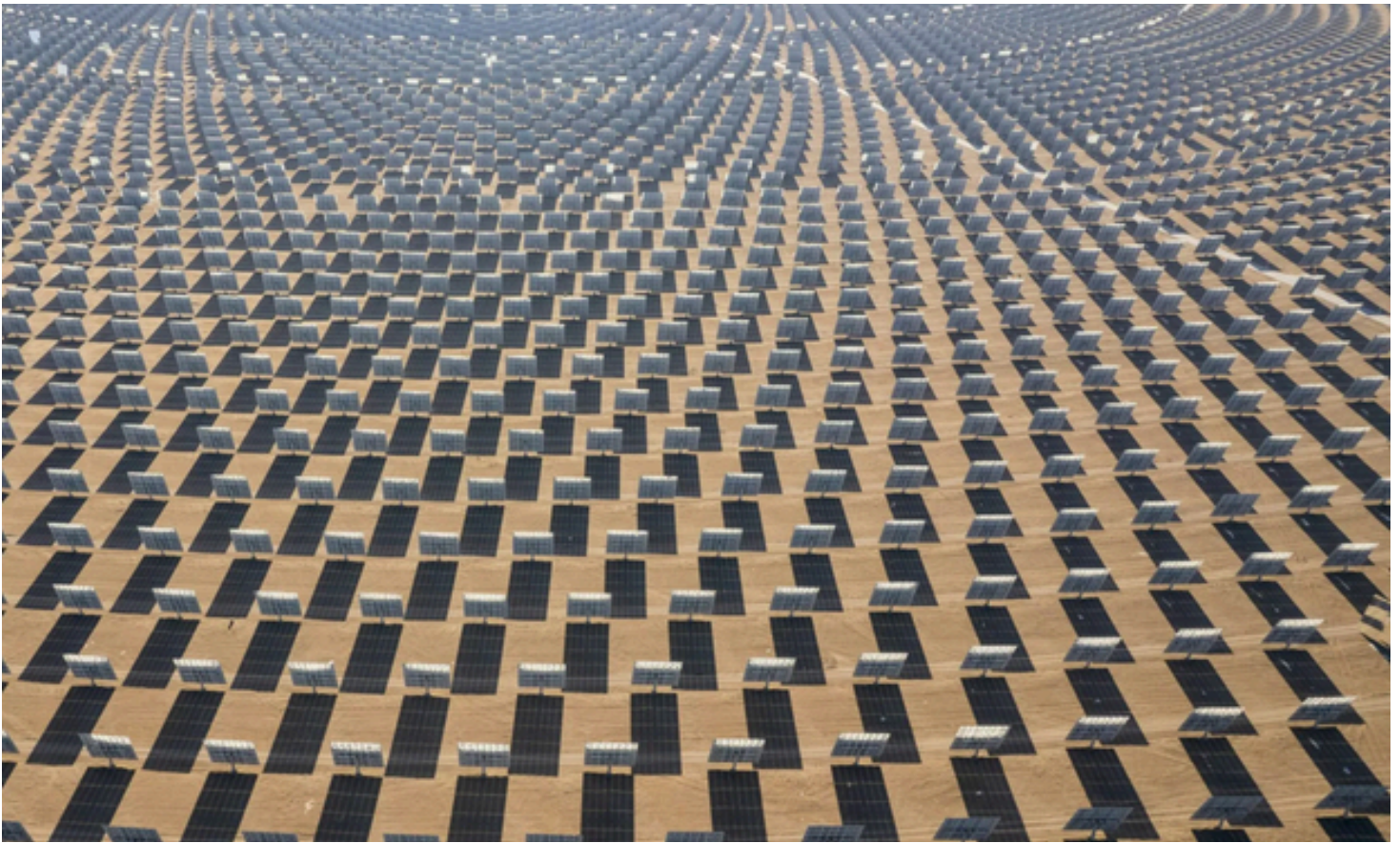
The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) is a transformative infrastructure and trade initiative aimed at linking India to Europe through the Middle East. Unveiled at the 2023 G20 Summit, the project envisions maritime routes from India to the UAE, followed by a rail network passing through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. It also includes plans for pipelines and undersea cables to boost energy and digital connectivity across continents. IMEC is widely seen as the West's strategic response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, designed to deepen economic integration while countering Beijing's growing influence. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the corridor represents a key component of their economic diversification agendas, aligning with long-term goals to become global trade and logistics hubs.

Key question: Can the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor rival China's Belt and Road and reshape global trade routes?

Why This Matters:

The fall of Assad, the weakening of Iran's regional grip, the normalisation between Israel and its neighbors, the emergence of powerful Gulf states, and increasing economic power all point to a dramatic reordering in the Middle East.

These changes don't guarantee peace – far from it. But they do suggest something we haven't seen for a long time: the possibility of a region led by its own people, defining its own future.



Authoritarianism, democracy and the climate: comparing the EU and China's climate governance

CALEB MURPHY | SEPTEMBER 2

In November, 198 nations will convene in Belém, Brazil, for the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP) to discuss one thing: climate change. Not only will it be the 30th anniversary since the first conference, but all states will release their new national determined contributions (NDCs) to limit global temperature warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

It will be a critical moment to determine if the world is on track to reach its collective targets. However, an emerging element of the climate debate is China and its achievements. China has become the largest producer of green technologies, outpacing democratic states, such as those within the European Union (EU).

This achievement gives credibility to the idea of eco-authoritarianism, which calls for authoritarian technocratic governance to push the necessary reforms that address the climate crisis.

Yet are authoritarian governments really better at tackling climate change?

Let's find out by comparing the strengths and weaknesses of autocratic and democratic regimes, focusing on the People's Republic of China and the European Union (EU), including its 27 member states.

The advantages of autocratic authority:

Eco-authoritarian advocates highlight advantages such as centralised decision making, long-term vision and the ability to act on climate policies without fear of public backlash.

Regarding central planning, there is little public input into climate initiatives in states like China. Instead, determining the state's climate agenda are two central bodies: the National Leading Group for Addressing Climate Change (NLGACC) and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC).

Both institutions are at the heart of decision-making in China and are led by the Premier of China. Outside of these bodies, external input is limited to advice from experts in the National Advisory Committee on Climate Change. As a result of this centralisation, scientific research underpins regulations. It enforces a top-down approach, unhindered by lobbying or popular opposition.

Due to this centralisation of power, top political leaders can also take decisive and quick actions to address the climate crisis. While some consideration of popular will is needed, the authoritarian regime can implement policies without much fear of backlash. Thus, authoritarian governments can direct private industries to act.



Within China, due to government subsidies, the private sector has been leading the world in the production of renewable technologies. According to Climate Action Tracker, 60% of wind turbines, 70% of electric vehicles, 75% of batteries and 80% of solar panels in the global supply chain are manufactured in China.

Through central decision-making without outside influence, authoritarian regimes can plan for the long term. This foresight is unlike democracies, which often prioritise short-term goals within an election cycle. Policies such as the five-year plans and the Made in China 2025 initiative set out both the immediate goals and long-term trajectory of the economic net-zero transition. These policies help secure the implementation of a long-term and consistent strategy that cuts carbon emissions over decades.

The ailments of authoritarian regimes

While autocratic regimes, such as the one in China, are effective in implementing renewable technology, there are some pitfalls to consider.

One consequential disadvantage is the lack of public input into policies, which has many subsequent consequences that limit China's climate policies. As detailed earlier, there are heavily centralised decision-making powers in the state. Since these policies are only underpinned by science and without civil society consultation, they become too narrow with unforeseen consequences. In northern China, there was a push to replace coal boilers in homes with cleaner gas alternatives. However, this left many residents without heating during the winter of 2017 as authorities failed to predict the surge in gas demand.

Alongside this narrow view, further muddying policy-making, is the lack of transparency. Transparency in all stages of climate projects is necessary to identify gaps and inform future improvements. One such policy initiative was China's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), which started in 2021. After facing criticism for its untransparent rules, the regime introduced new measures that made the ETS more transparent and efficient, highlighting this weakness for illiberal regimes.

However, a lack of transparency through popular accountability can also undermine carbon reduction efforts. This is because, without public engagement, these closed political systems can sometimes focus on other governmental priorities at the expense of climate action. Without elections, authoritarian governments gain legitimacy through the outcomes of their policies. So, especially for local governments, they focus on achieving economic growth targets set by Beijing over environmental outcomes. This inconsistency undermines emission reductions that authoritarian regimes such as China are known for.

Political corruption, which is more common in authoritarian governments, also corrodes decarbonisation efforts. Without public accountability, anti-corruption measures are enforced solely by the central government. However, in states such as China, local governments are relatively unsupervised. As a result, there is an emerging trend of local government officials being bribed by private firms to lower environmental standards for new projects or to secure state investment. While there have been crackdowns from the central government, corruption remains a challenge that reduces the effectiveness of Chinese climate policies.

Drivers of democratic governance:

After focusing on authoritarianism, let's switch to the strength of the democratic institutions in places such as the EU and its 27 member states.

It is easy to create an understanding of the crisis in the population by having transparency, freedom of speech and the uninterrupted flow of this scientific information. Populations become mobilised into bottom-up actors within the green transition. Through NGOs, protests, petitions, and elections, people can demand greater climate action and punish political leaders for inaction.

Through this popular mobilisation, the EU has established citizens' assemblies across Europe. This bottom-up approach empowers everyday people to directly express views on how to tackle climate change at a regional level. As a consequence of this popular mobilisation, citizens can push the climate agenda forward, while contributing to more holistic and practical policy solutions.

By including the opinions, perspectives and priorities of citizens, liberal governments can create more integrated and ambitious climate policies. As a result, while China has a categorisation of "highly insufficient" for its climate policy, all EU states in comparison are classified as slightly better at 'insufficient'. Yet, the EU also aims for an emissions reduction target of 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 and net zero by 2050. These goals are in contrast to China, which seeks to peak emissions by 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2060.



Compounding these positive climate effects of open inclusion of people are comparably lower levels of corruption in liberal regimes. The average score of the Corruption Perception Index is 60 across all EU member states, giving it an average ranking of 36 out of 180 countries. By having less corruption, these states can ensure effective resource distribution and implementation of climate solutions.

The limitations of liberal leadership

While there are efforts to strengthen democratic governance of climate change, this system still has its criticisms.

Lobbying plays a central role here, since profits afford access to public policy makers within democratic institutions such as the EU. From 2010 to 2018, the five biggest oil and gas companies in the bloc spent 251 million euros on costs directly employing 200 lobbyists in Brussels.

This money grants these corporations significant influence. As a result, in 2014, successful lobbying forced non-binding energy targets and inadequate emission reduction targets to limit warming to 1.5 degrees in the EU's 2030 climate targets.

Lobbying also contributes towards polarisation, which divides societies and inhibits climate action in liberal regimes. Despite knowing the consequences for the global environment, fossil fuel industries supported research, which fueled disinformation campaigns, to question the scientifically backed narrative. This false research, alongside strategic attacks on factual research, mirrors the Tobacco Industry's strategies to spread doubt. Consequently, there is a lessening of the public pressure on these industries to become more sustainable. Moreover, these disinformation campaigns embed themselves into people who are fearful of the cost to their livelihoods to decarbonise, leading to opposition and politicisation of the crisis. As an indirect result, right-wing populist parties across EU countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, advocate for anti-climate policies to appeal to these voters.

This polarised effect can destroy consistency in climate policy as well. A newly elected government can overturn its predecessor's climate policies. Polish President Andrzej Duda best demonstrated this flaw. In 2015, after his party won the parliamentary election, he reversed Poland's previous stance on the Kyoto Protocol and vetoed the EU's 8-year extension.

Is this a useful framing?

So, is eco-authoritarianism in nations such as China a good idea to follow? While there are weaknesses to the democratic approach, there are many strengths to mobilising a large population against this existential challenge. Furthermore, the effectiveness of authoritarianism is solely limited to the effectiveness of their leadership, which could lead to mixed results for a global adoption of eco-authoritarianism.

However, this may not be the most useful lens to explore climate governance. Both democracies and authoritarian regimes have the potential to decarbonise. At the same time, either system can also act as an anchor to the fossil fuel economy.

Instead of trying to understand the underlying dynamics and effectiveness of climate policies in a state, it is more important to consider other factors such as its developmental stage, as well as its large industries. For example, it is the fossil fuel industries from Australia, as well as Saudi Arabia and Russia, that have obstructed progress against climate change during COP negotiations.

Now, we will have to wait and see if these industries again hold back climate goals at the next COP Summit in Brazil, or see if the world can decarbonise and avoid the worst of the climate crisis.

ASEAN's dilemma in the Myanmar crisis: the diplomatic deadlock

JOAN LIM | SEPTEMBER 9

It has been over four years since the democratic administration of Aung San Suu was overthrown in a coup d'état, an act that caused a profound rupture in Myanmar's political and economic stability. Following February 2021, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar descended into a full-scale humanitarian crisis, drawing the attention of various regional and international actors. Among these, the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN) assumed a central role in diplomacy, in an attempt to de-escalate the conflict within their fellow member state.

What led to the coup d'état?

This is not the first time Myanmar has fallen victim to military rule. Since their independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar has seen their democratic freedom stolen once before, from 1962 to 2011.

A sole, definitive explanation outlining the motivations of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military junta) remains unclear. Addressing the question of 'why' requires an examination of intricate and intersecting factors.

The dominant view holds that the Tatmadaw's resistance stemmed from fears that democratic reforms and liberalisation would undermine its political dominance and long-standing network of business monopolies. This structure has traditionally served as a crucial source of wealth for its generals and affiliates.

The current situation

As of 2021, Myanmar has widely been described as being in a state of civil war. In response to the Tatmadaw's illegal and illegitimate acquisition of power, many civilians have taken to the streets in mass protests and joined people's defence forces. This has resulted in the emergence of multiple armed groups, each driven by distinct ideals, yet all unified in their opposition to the military.

As of 2021, Myanmar has widely been described as being in a state of civil war. In response to the Tatmadaw's illegal and illegitimate acquisition of power, many civilians have taken to the streets in mass protests and joined people's defence forces. This has resulted in the emergence of multiple armed groups, each driven by distinct ideals, yet all unified in their opposition to the military.



Though collectively united against a common enemy, armed conflict inevitably brings widespread destruction and devastation. UN Special Envoy to Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, has deemed the current state of Myanmar as, “a catastrophe in terms of human suffering”, having “regional and international implications”. Myanmar's ongoing civil war has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced virtually three million people. The nation now faces extreme inflation and severe economic instability.

The Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group, have been disproportionately impacted by this conflict. Described by the United Nations as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”, the atrocities against the Rohingya have led to the deaths of 30,000 people and the mass exodus of 1 million refugees. Aside from the persecution by the Tatmadaw, the Rohingya have faced attacks from all sides, receiving no protection from the deposed democratic government or any of the rival factions vying for power.

The democratic de-facto leader of Myanmar prior to the coup, Aung San Suu Kyi, rejected the existence of a genocide, and disregarded any international critiques on her management of the crisis. This human rights catastrophe has garnered the attention of the international community, and placed pressure on ASEAN to address the issue.

ASEAN's response

The immediate response of ASEAN following the shock of the coup d'état was to initiate an emergency meeting in Jakarta, where a Five-Point Consensus was adopted. ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus displayed proactiveness to protect the stability and peace in the region, upholding one of their primary objectives. Critics, however, argue that the agreement lacked practical value, with a heavily skewed reliance on Myanmar's military for implementation. The reasonings behind these criticisms were largely rooted in ASEAN's non-interference principle. Since ASEAN's founding in 1967, there has been a strict emphasis on the independence and sovereignty of all ten member states. Although non-interference is pivotal in avoiding unnecessary conflict and upholding basic diplomatic values, it is a barrier against the management of urgent humanitarian crises.

Over the past four years, the growing international attention on ASEAN's handling of Myanmar has repeatedly resulted in widespread disappointment. Rather than the spotlight on ASEAN serving as an opportunity to show regional potential on a global scale, it has inadvertently highlighted weaknesses in its organisational structure and an internal divide.

Within ASEAN, there appears to be a split between democratic and authoritarian nations. The United Nations General Assembly resolution to condemn the coup and demand the release of political prisoners in Myanmar received four abstentions from ASEAN member states, with only six voting in favour. To the international community, this appeared to be quite a stark exhibition of internal strife, further raising doubts about the commitment to resolve the crisis. Thailand has also held three informal talks with Myanmar military representatives, which have been met with disapproval by democratic nations like Malaysia, who have engaged openly with Myanmar's democratic administration. This clash has hindered the South East Asian region's ability to put aside their ideological differences and strive harmoniously towards this pressing concern.

Even after disregarding political ideology and system of government, each member state can still be seen undertaking and advocating for different approaches. At the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in January of this year, the Philippines continued insisting that a change in strategy was necessary, while Vietnam called for a comprehensive assessment of the Five-Point Consensus and political inclusion of more stakeholders. To logistically close this divide would be a complicated struggle.



Part of ASEAN's response is heavily attributed to the chairmanship of ASEAN. Since the emergence of this crisis, ASEAN has been chaired by Brunei (2021), Cambodia (2022), Indonesia (2023), Laos (2024) and Malaysia (2025). Each chair has brought to the table different strategies and approaches, respectively appointing a Special Envoy to Myanmar. As of 2025, consensus has been reached that ASEAN will now be actively exploring the idea of a permanent special envoy for Myanmar. This brings rise to new hopes, opening up the possibility for more consistent and transparent interactions with Myanmar.

Notably, Brunei played a key role accommodating member states' interests, and avoided confrontation with the Myanmar military without compromising ASEAN's fundamental principles. As the 2021 ASEAN chair, Brunei successfully cultivated consensus around the principle that safeguarding regional stability was paramount, especially in light of the increase in displaced persons along ASEAN's borders and cross-border illicit activity.

Despite ASEAN pursuing considerable efforts to mediate and facilitate discussion, there has been a deficiency in meaningful action necessary to combat the ongoing humanitarian emergencies in Myanmar. While some argue that a yearly rotation of the ASEAN chair leaves minimal time for proper plans to be formulated, others believe that it is a problem of unity.

The difficulty that ASEAN now faces is that time is running out. With nations like China heightening their influence in Myanmar, the opportunity for external actors to shape regional outcomes becomes a real risk.

Following the deferral of Myanmar's 2026 chairmanship and the Tatmadaw's plans to hold elections in late 2025, the world now waits to see whether ASEAN can maintain their centrality in Asia.



History v geography: understanding Australia's approach to national defence

LAKMALIE WIJESINGHE | SEPTEMBER 16

Our current geopolitical environment is ever evolving: conflict between Russia and Ukraine rages on, famine grips Gazan communities, war crimes are alleged in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Thailand-Cambodia border talks reopen old wounds over disputed territory.

The second Trump administration has further strained this already fragile system through a host of economic tariffs and domestic legal battles that have left many wondering what more is to come throughout President Trump's tenure. China has already responded with strength to the trade war incited by the US, cementing its position as an assertive actor within the Indo-Pacific.

Defensive has become offensive. Yet Australian defence policy remains entrenched in stagnant, myopic directives that do not consider long term challenges, like the ones we are experiencing today. It can be said that we are witnessing a polycrisis unfold: multiple global catastrophes playing out with such force that strategic shocks are now the new norm, leaving policymakers to answer the difficult question of how best to respond.

This question renews calls for a better directed national defence stratagem, if it is to withstand our current predicament. While our historical partnerships with countries like the US remain important, we must acknowledge our place in the world, and make the most of our regional potential.

'Might is right': US policy developments

With regard to US-Australia relations, the first measure that comes to mind is the AUKUS pact: a security partnership with the US and UK aimed at promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific" through investment in submarine propulsion technology. Four years since its inception, this deal has been marred by overlapping interests, bureaucratic stoushes and President Trump's signature erraticism.

Most recently, the Pentagon announced a review of the deal, signalling alarm bells in Canberra, and the belief that the US was pulling out to preserve its America First agenda. While this review remains unfinished, and the deal tentatively pushes forward, fractious cracks between Australia and its strategic cousin persist, citing "distinct economic endowments and geographic realities".

These fault lines originate within the America First Policy. Delivered at the beginning of the year, the 17 page document outlines Trump's key priorities, from the preservation of 'American' values and empowering of American businesses to the promise of dismantling the "administrative state": undoing past executive orders with the aim of starting over for the benefit of the people.

US foreign policy is similarly reframed, with plans to "advance American security abroad" and ensure national security serves its constituents first. This transactional retreat from ideational leadership has seen President Trump attempt to operate outside Constitutional constraints, and repackage American opportunities as commercial goods – so-called commercial diplomacy.



By advocating for the elimination and reduction of foreign threats to local businesses, US foreign policy is now inextricably linked with economic incentives, a tactic understood but never before attempted by an American leader.

The Trump administration is rewriting US global leadership, redefining trade and defence through economic statecraft, disinformation campaigns and hard power tactics. This leaves allies like Australia to consider its own standing and policy direction, irrespective of its longstanding partner.

With respect to the Indo-Pacific, where China has begun "muscling up" in influence, and the US appears determined to remain absent from consistent cooperation, Australia has a strong opportunity to reconcile national and economic security interests, and position its defence accordingly.

Keeping China in focus:

Chinese President Xi Jinping's remarkable diplomatic tour of neighbouring Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam in April was seen as a premeditated move by the leader to leverage US tensions and "pull Southeast Asia closer to Beijing's orbit". While the trip drew attention from surrounding countries, Canberra remained unconcerned – instead preoccupied by a fleet of Chinese naval forces stationed in the Tasman sea. The warships conducted a series of unexpected live-fire exercises before departing, their presence delivering an unambiguous message: China is present in local waters, and capable of force.

Their display is now also referenced by some as a genuine example of why investment in AUKUS remains relevant, again placing US-Australian relations at the centre of attention.

Increasing strategic competition between China and Australia, both directly and indirectly, is not new by any means. The federal government has been moving quietly on this front, bolstering ties with Papua New Guinea in a recent display of strategic strength.

But Australian defence overall remains uncoordinated, instead pieced together by broadly defined strategic frameworks, opaque investments and imbalanced diplomatic representation. A qualitative military advantage in tandem with a structured policy regime and supporting plenipotentiary power will allay concerns that Australia is unprepared for the threats that lie over the horizon.

Where does Australia stand at the moment?

Calls for a unified strategy have not fallen on deaf ears. In the last half of the decade, ASIO and the Australian Defence Force have conducted extensive reviews and assessments into the health of our national security, establishing a National Strategy in 2024.

Focusing on a 'Strategy of Denial', the approach rests on ensuring that our immediate region is protected from any potential adversaries through direct integrated investment in the Australian Naval and Defence over the next decade, totalling \$100 billion in growth by 2034. Meanwhile, AUKUS promises delivery of its nuclear powered submarine fleet by the 2040s, with the lifecycle likely to endure until 2053.

Geo-political developments playing out today are reminiscent of events experienced by governments past. The 2014 Abbott government imposed significant sanctions upon Russia in response to their invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, while remaining sober to Israeli settlement in the West Bank during the same period. A decade on, Australian sanctions against Russia have extended as the conflict in Ukraine passes into a twelfth year, and a shift in sentiment saw the Albanese government move to recognise a Palestinian state.

News of conflict flows steadily over time, however their foundations have been rebuilt by a now increasingly interconnected world. Rapid developments in technology and artificial intelligence bring with them new threats to comprehend, and while investing in future defence is appropriate, what about the present?

Australia: a land girt by sea:

When asked whether Xi Jinping or Donald Trump would be a more reliable partner to Australia, results showed an even split – evidence that even Australians are unsure of the appropriate answer. Policymakers remain unsure too, as priorities shift with each breaking news story, each executive order, and each trough of political pressure from beyond.

As the United States charts its own course, and Chinese foreign policy simmers in the background, our island continent feels somewhat lost at sea. In the face of this present uncertainty, we must learn to tread water, or risk sinking deeper. A robust national defence strategy is one such lifesaver, so long as it balances historical perspectives with contemporary geographical considerations.

Australia-Canada: the alliance growing in importance



RAHUL DEEPAK KUMAR | SEPTEMBER 30

At the start of 2025, the Liberal Party of Canada looked certain to lose the Canadian election and the Conservative Party, led by Pierre Poilievre, was destined to form government.

Come April, not only did the Liberal Party, led by new leader Mark Carney, complete a stunning turnaround and win re-election, but Poilievre lost his seat in parliament.

A very similar story unfolded across the Pacific in Australia. Labor was behind in the polls until as recently as April and the experts only predicted a narrow Labor victory. However, the Albanese Labor government not only won re-election with over a 2% swing, but Liberal Party leader, Peter Dutton also lost his seat.

The uncanny similarities between the two elections are not a mere coincidence. They are reflective of the political convergence between Australia and Canada in a world that is becoming increasingly uncertain under the second Donald Trump presidency. Indeed, the two countries share historical, political and cultural ties that date back to over a century ago. Both countries have fought wars together, are members of the British Commonwealth, have diverse multicultural populations and, at least until recently, been staunch allies of the United States.

So, what has changed now?

Both countries are experiencing an uncertain period in global politics following Trump's ascension to the presidency in January.

The Canada-US relationship has been soured by Trump's frequent calls to annex Canada as the 51st state and his tariffs. Given the volume of Canada-US trade, these tariffs will have a significant impact on key Canadian industries such as steel, oil and agriculture.

In Canberra, the Australian government appeared to have strengthened its partnership with the US over the last few years, driven by the AUKUS Security Pact, signed in 2021. However, while Australia's trade relationship has not suffered as badly as Canada's, they will still be significantly affected by Trump's tariffs.

It was largely these tariffs, as well as other controversial Trump policies that helped dictate the result of both the Australian and Canadian elections. Both Poilievre and Dutton were seen as too alike to the polarising US leader, leading voters to roundly reject both them and their parties. With both democracies dismissing Trump-style populism in their countries and instead favouring the 'safer' centre-left candidates, it begs the question as to how Canberra and Ottawa manage a rapidly shifting world order where their global interests are rapidly diverging from Washington's.

What is the current state of the Australia-Canada relationship?

Both Canada and Australia's government emphasise that their relationship is significant and deep. The Canadian government highlights that they share common interests with Australia regarding defence, migration and social issues.

Ottawa also stresses that Canada's defence relationship with Australia is the largest in the Indo-Pacific region. This was reflected earlier this year when Australia's leading radar technology, the Jindalee Over-the-Horizon Radar (JORN), was purchased by Canada for \$6.5 billion, the largest defence export in Australian history. Australia was initially predicted to sell this technology to the US but instead, it went to Washington's northerly neighbours, underlining the deepening ties between the two countries in the defence sector. The convergence of defence interests also shows the growing relationship between Prime Ministers Anthony Albanese and Mark Carney. The two leaders met ahead of the 2025 G7 summit, where Carney reiterated the need to deepen the bilateral relationship with Australia at a time of increasing global uncertainty. This can be interpreted as a veiled collective balancing against the coercion of the US and Trump. Both leaders have frequently sought to maintain their country's sovereignty and not be controlled by great powers. Upon winning re-election, Albanese reaffirmed that his government would govern the 'Australian way' and not have policy dictated by international forces, an indirect show of strength against the US. Carney was more open in his stand against Trump, denouncing the 'American betrayal' and promising to be defiant against Washington's power.

The affirmation of national sovereignty from both leaders signifies a change in both countries' foreign policy. While both nations were heavily aligned with US foreign policy, it seems that both countries have articulated their own independent path for themselves as they face an uncertain world. Further cooperation, therefore, may well assist both countries in reinforcing their newfound international autonomy.

Where are the divergences?

However, while the two countries seem to be getting ever closer, there are some differences that Ottawa and Canberra must address if they are to truly solidify a united alliance. These differences mainly arise from the most obvious distinction between the two countries: their distance. With Australia being central to the Indo-Pacific region, Canberra's utmost priority is strengthening relationships with the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia, all in a veiled attempt to counterbalance China's increasing power. By contrast, Ottawa is significantly focused on currently amending the strained relationship with their American neighbours as well as enhancing ties with its European allies through NATO. Therefore, their engagement with the Indo-Pacific is not as robust, explaining why they did not join Australia in the AUKUS relationship with Britain and the US, and why Canada is much more circumspect in their interactions with Beijing. Much like how Australia has a leading role in managing regional affairs in the Pacific, Canada's foreign policy is significantly focused on managing the Arctic and enhancing cooperations with the Arctic's Indigenous people.

This leads to another divergence to how the countries tackle an issue that is common to both countries: their Indigenous people. The Canadian government has taken on a more active role in reconciliation with Indigenous peoples through a special Truth and Reconciliation Commission and have expressed an explicit desire to best implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. By contrast, Australia is still yet to sign a national formal treaty with its Indigenous people and the failure of the Voice referendum suggests that they still have work to do in reconciliation. While this is ostensibly a domestic issue, the difference between the country's Indigenous policies limits their cooperation in meaningfully confronting their shared colonial past together.

How might the two countries further enhance their cooperation? Nonetheless, both countries are closing the distance that the Pacific wedges between them, taking united stances on some very key recent issues. Most notably, both countries have formally recognised the state of Palestine as part of a more active push to end hostilities in Gaza. This is a significant foreign policy milestone for both countries given how both Australia and Canada have historically exercised close ties with Israel. It also signifies the greater autonomy that both countries are exercising in that they are no longer simply following the US' lead in global politics and are instead focused on affirming key principles of the liberal order such as the respect for self-determination and the protection of human rights.

Furthermore, although Canada has been less active in the Indo-Pacific, they have recently increased their involvement in the region, in conjunction with Australia. The two countries have recently partnered with the Philippines in conducting joint naval exercises in the South China Sea, underlining how Ottawa is increasing their activity in the region where the balance of power is increasingly shifting towards Beijing.

The Australia-Canada military partnership is particularly interesting given they are now going to play a more central role in the maintaining of a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific, with Trump playing an active role in undermining liberal institutions and partnerships.

In all, while the Pacific may divide Australia and Canada, they are now experiencing increased unity in international outlook. With both countries rejecting Trump-style populism in their recent elections, the two countries have domestically pledged to pursue a future where they will stabilise and strengthen liberal institutions. In a world which is increasingly uncertain, Ottawa and Canberra are reorienting themselves away from American subordination and towards exercising greater foreign policy autonomy. It will therefore be fascinating to see how the two countries continue to cooperate in the coming years now that they both are playing a much more seminal role in shaping the international order.

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Korean Soft Power and the Hallyu Wave

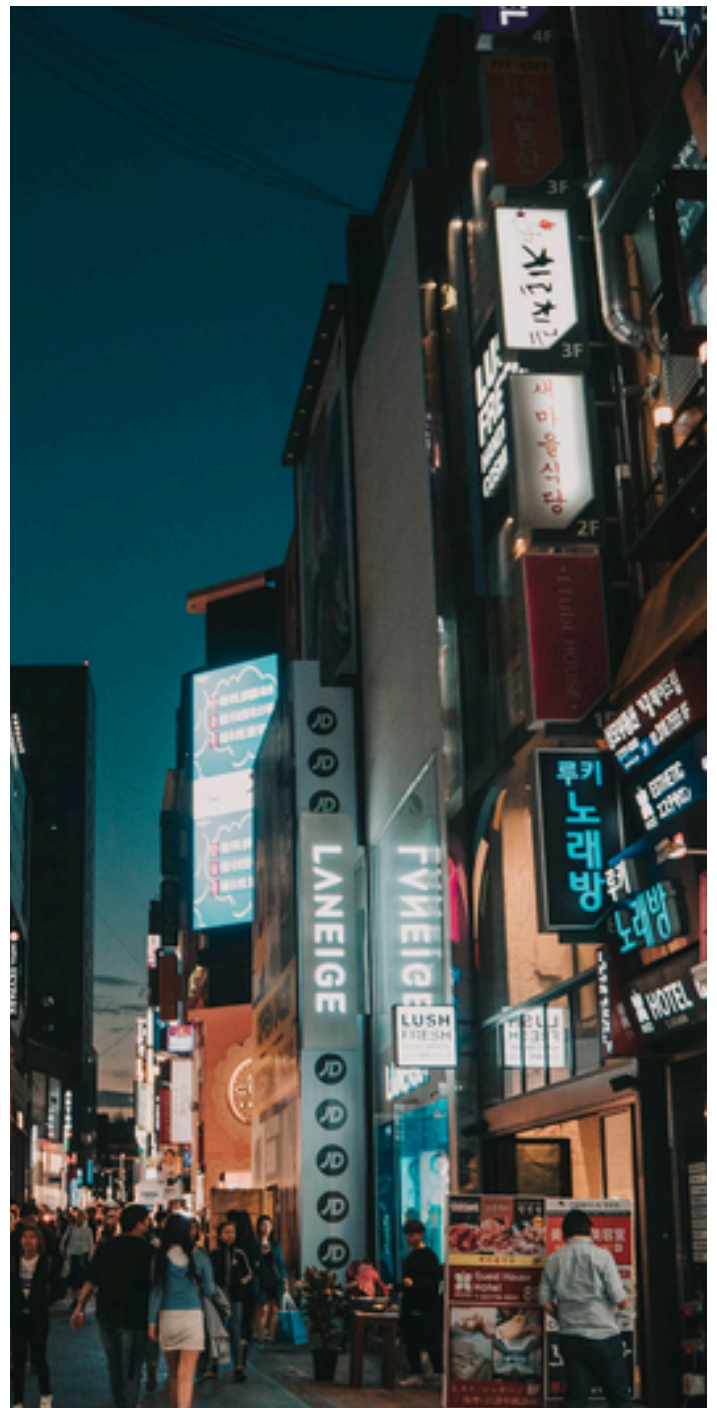
PARIS KARAKOUSIS | MARCH 25

Development of the Hallyu Wave:

The Hallyu Industry Support Development Plan was initially announced by South Korean Kim Dae-jung's government in 1998, with the aim of supporting the South Korean cultural industry. Ten years later, the Lee Myung-bak government altered the direction of the policies from economic-focused to branding and competitiveness-focused, with Part 5 of the 2010 Diplomatic White Paper citing the increasingly important value of soft power in the global environment. Cultural diplomacy was now crucial for the country, with the Hallyu Wave (aka Korean Wave) being seen as an opportunity to capitalise on exports and tourism. The Hallyu Wave has been developed in three distinct phases, all strategically centered around the prevalent media avenues of the time, in order to distribute Korean culture as widely as possible.

These waves are:

KOREAN WAVE 1.0 (1997 – mid-2000s) focused on visual content such as TV dramas, movies, and the first generation of K-pop. It mainly focused on Korea's standing in the Asian region, and used TV and the internet to distribute media. **KOREAN WAVE 2.0** (mid-2000s – early 2010s) focused on diffusing the Korean Wave and increasing the global reach of K-pop, as well as public and arts culture. It increased Korean soft power in Asia, parts of Europe, and the Americas, and distributed media via video websites such as YouTube, and social media. **KOREAN WAVE 3.0** (early 2010s-present) focused on expanding the Hallyu Wave to include more diverse exports such as online games, beauty products, and fashion. This increased the global popularity of K-culture, including lifestyle, traditional culture, arts and popular culture trends, distributed using all media types including OTT (over-the-top) entertainment such as Netflix. Korean culture is now highly popular worldwide. A potential fourth Korean Wave focused on 'K-ubiquity', including strategic partnerships with local governments and institutions particularly in China and Southeast Asia, in order to localise and increase consumption of diverse Hallyu content, is considered to be on the cards.



It is safe to say that Hallyu culture is still rising in prevalence. In 2019, Korean film and K-dramas became a global sensation, while the growth of the gaming industry appeared to be slowing. Korean literature, Webtoons, and OTT broadcasts are areas which Hallyu experts intended to push. However, exports of cultural content products decreased by 7.2% from 2020, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 2021, the content industry revenue had increased 6% on the previous year, with the total export value also increasing – seemingly, Hallyu culture is having a post-pandemic rebound.

Hallyu Today:

The rising popularity of Korean of the Korean culture has emboldened South Korea to attempt to further solidify its soft power. In 2022, K-Content (Hallyu) rose in popularity across the US, UK, Australia and South Africa, with these countries also seeing an increase in Hallyu content diversity.

According to the 2022 Overseas Hallyu Survey, perceptions of Korean culture changes when people experience Hallyu content. Positive rates are especially high in South and Southeast Asian countries, which indicates the strong influence South Korea has over its regional neighbours.

At present, South Korea is a middle-ranking power in global affairs. South Korea has had a difficult history solidifying its power, due to its geographical position between China, Japan, and Russia. In 1960, it matched Ghana's economic value, but over the next 50 years, it became the world's 11th largest economy, joining the OECD and G-20. By 2009, South Korea ranked 9th in hard power resources, but less strongly in soft power – it was believed that for the hard power components to ensure growth and prosperity, they needed to be backed by efficient, sophisticated soft power. Increased interest in South Korean culture improves its diplomatic capabilities, as it is able to attract and influence nations as a means of securing and maintaining a heightened status and role in the global community, as opposed to using military and economic power to force influence. Culture has become an indispensable asset in the global environment. Subsequently, The Hallyu Wave was quickly adopted as a crucial source of income through diverse exports and tourism. Korea currently ranks at number 7 globally in cultural influence, demonstrating its ability to shape international public opinion. The success of the Hallyu Wave can be credited to the overlap of politics, economics and culture. The country achieved stable democratisation and rapid economic growth, and its rapid modernisation allowed its culture to mix traditional, modern and global values, causing its creative content to appeal to a wide international audience. Advancements in digital technology also enable Hallyu content to spread rapidly across geographical boundaries.

Joseph Nye, one of the leading theorists on soft power, explained that South Korea broadening its foreign policy agenda beyond security to climate change, human rights, and a strong pandemic response, would allow it to become a more powerful global leader. This can help it to improve its bilateral relations, and combat challenges at the regional and global levels. For instance, the heightened global interest in South Korean soft power has led to public perspectives shifting in North Korea. Global public goods have strong value; for instance, when BTS delivered a speech on the SDGs at the UN General Assembly, with an online audience of over 1 million, and Blackpink spoke at the UN COP26 summit, this showed that Korean artists' voices are internationally influential. Overall, soft power can complement hard power, and improve its diplomatic and foreign policy standing, as these positions are driven by geopolitical factors and co-operation.

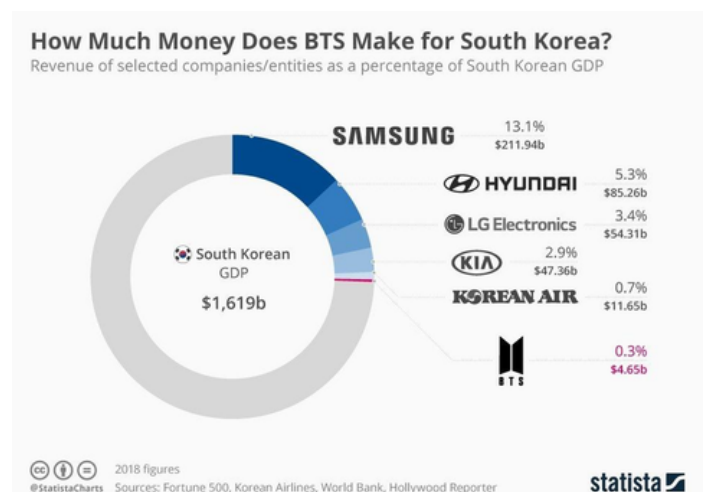
So, how exactly did one boy band come to have so much power over an entire economy? Why will this impact the development of the Hallyu Wave?

Case Study: BTS' Power in the Korean Economy

So, how exactly did one boy band come to have so much power over an entire economy? Why will this impact the development of the Hallyu Wave?

Since their debut in 2013, BTS have solidified their position as one of the most powerful bastions of Korean culture, and by extension, are key to their nation's economy. As stated by BTS' second-oldest member, rapper SUGA, "I didn't mean to make South Korea proud." The group's humble beginnings in nearly bankrupt Big Hit Entertainment meant that they, and no one else for that matter, ever expected them to become global superstars. They spent years building a loyal fandom through meaningful self-composed music & innovative technology, such as livestreams, subtitled variety shows and behind-the-scenes content, which are publicly available on YouTube. They were also one of the first K-pop groups to have English subtitles on their music videos, and one of the first groups on X (formerly Twitter), helping them gain more Western fans.

Today, Big Hit, which had 4 employees in 2007, has transitioned into a subsidiary of a 1000+ employee, multinational stock-listed conglomerate, HYBE Corporation. In 2019, before their renewed explosion in popularity as a top global artist, after the release of their smash-hit English trio, Dynamite, Butter and Permission to Dance, BTS were generating an estimated amount of ₩ (Korean Won) 5.56 trillion (~A (Australian Dollar) \$6.5 billion) per year in economic value, more than flagship airline Korean Air. As of 2017, 1 in 13 tourists came to South Korea because of their interest in BTS. Their 10-year economic impact was projected to be ~ A\$66.2 billion, more than the Pyeongchang Olympics. Dynamite was projected to generate ₩1.7 trillion (A\$1.97b) of economic activity, including nearly 8,000 new jobs, and ₩371.7b in increased exports for cosmetics, food, and drinks. BTS have wider economic standing other than their music sales and position as the faces of K-pop. BTS' promotion of K-culture is critical to their economic impact. For instance, leader RM's interest in Korean art has led to thousands of fans around the world flocking to the galleries he visits, as well as Korean books he reads being translated to English for the first time due to the interest of his fans. BTS' brand endorsement for products like Jin Ramen, Hyundai and Samsung draws people to try Korean food and technology.



South Korea stands to lose billions as a result of BTS' military enlistment. After years of their government debating on whether or not to exempt them, BTS announced that they would be terminating their special postponement (which they were given due to being awarded the President's Order of Cultural Merit). A crisis was immediately afoot. HYBE stocks immediately plummeted – BTS is, expectedly, the most popular group in the company. In June 2022, when BTS initially announced a group hiatus, government officials and industry representatives alike pleaded for them to reconsider, citing expected negative effects on the Hallyu Wave. It must be noted that K-pop's overall popularity can be attributed to BTS, as many overseas fans are introduced to the genre through them.

K-pop's contribution to the Hallyu Wave and soft power is at risk. Seemingly, the diversification of Hallyu Wave 4.0 could help offset the damage – keeping in mind that overall, compared to other more influential economic contributors, BTS currently make up just under 1% of the South Korean GDP.



North Korean Power Politics, Compared

Contrary to its southern counterpart, the Democratic Republic of North Korea focuses its power politics on hard power. It has been a long-time brandisher of nuclear power as a leverage for negotiation. Where the nation lacks in absolute military and economic power, it dominates in asymmetric power, with its nuclear stockpile rendering it a significant threat to the global community, particularly in South Korea and the wider Asia-Pacific sphere. The rest of the world fears North Korea's ability to start a nuclear war, and therefore does not risk provoking the isolated nation.

However, North Korea's hard power focus does not stop its citizens from being drawn to the culture of its prosperous neighbours.

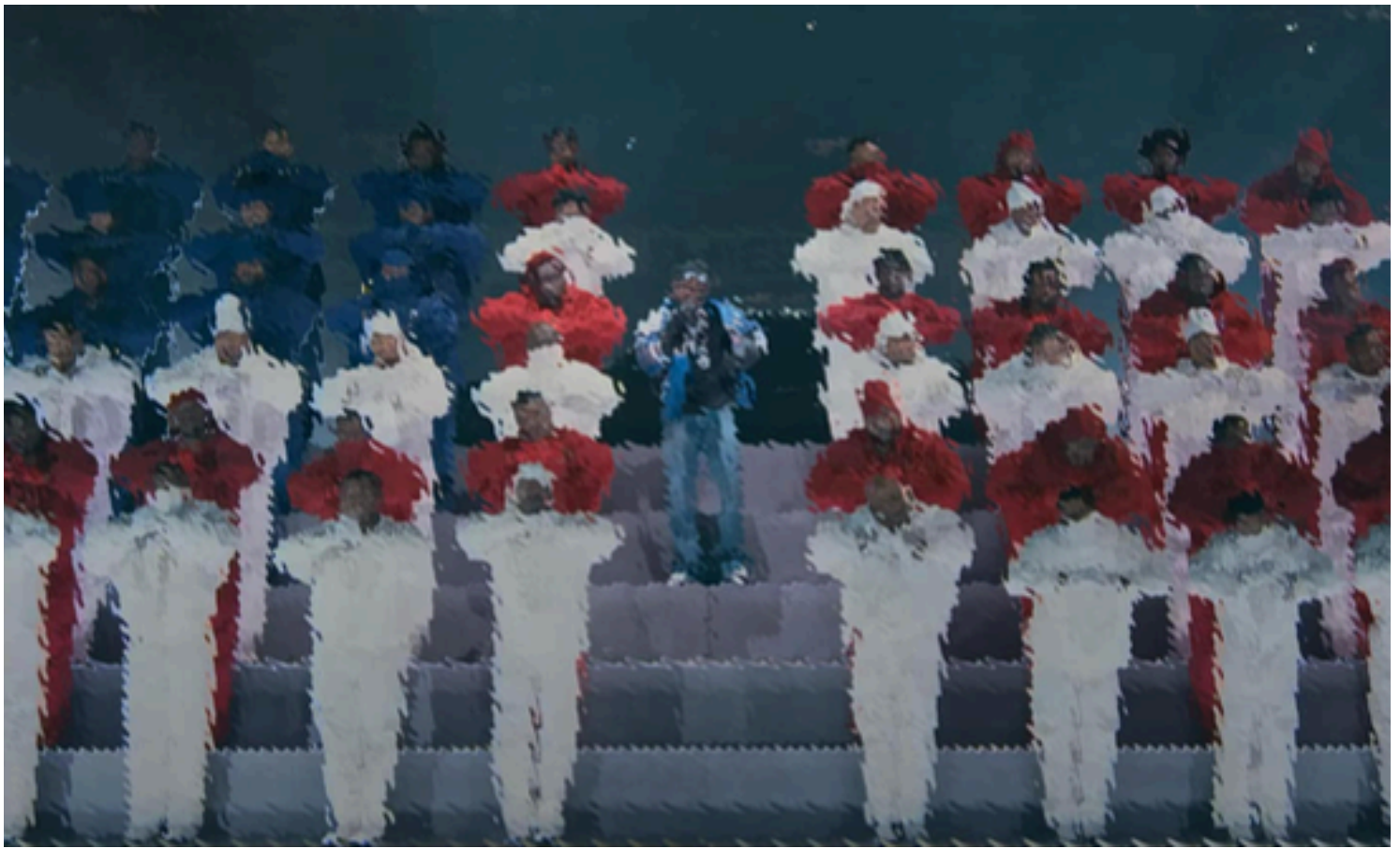
The phenomenon of smuggling in Hallyu products is a vast underground market in North Korea, with products like K-beauty and K-pop CDs being popular items. This cultural influence has not gone unnoticed by the North Korean government. Despite publicly punishing citizens who enjoy South Korean culture, since the Pyeongchang Olympics, North Korea has begun to shift to a soft power approach to international relations. It attempts to censor the influence of outside culture in order to foster solidarity among its people, as capitalist cultures are considered enemies.

As opposed to the behaviour-based soft power that Nye uses to describe South Korea, North Korea relies on resources such as diplomacy, agenda-setting, images and propaganda. During the Pyeongchang Olympics and the 2018 Asian games, North and South Korea formed a unified team, demonstrating that the nations are able to co-operate through non-political areas and signalling they may be able to co-operate politically in the future.

Conclusion

Between 2012 and 2022, the number of global Hallyu fans reported by the Global Hallyu Status multiplied over 17 times. South Korean soft power relies heavily on the Hallyu Wave, which allows it to gain significant global influence. The foremost representatives of this wave are BTS, who personify the Korean spirit of hard work and growth that the nation wishes to promote. South Korea's soft power aids it politically and diplomatically, contributing to shifting North Korean attitudes. The success of South Korea's approach to soft power diplomacy has been mimicked by nations around the world, who are fascinated by the nation's growing prestige. Barely 50 years ago, South Korea was struggling and desolate as it recovered from a war that resulted in a forced split from its neighbour. Due to unique innovation born out of the necessity that came with the Asian Financial Crisis, with regular exports failing, it became one of the most powerful economies, with cultural outputs that are household names around the world. K-pop has inspired the rise of P-Pop stars in the Philippines, and in the UK, girl groups and boy groups are having a resurgence. The American music industry is following K-pop's lead, debuting groups like Katseye and Boys World. With BTS set to return from military service this June, it appears that the Hallyu Wave and the soft power influence it brings is unflinching.

If the Korean government continues to embrace its cultural relevance, the small country may become more than an entertainment and technological giant, instead, a hub of Asian development. However, Korean politics have been fraught with leadership changes and parliamentary gridlock, much to the North Korean regime's delight, and the nation's overall economic growth appears to be slowing, in part due to low birth rates and an exhausted workforce. Only time will tell if South Korea will overcome these challenges and be a key player to watch in the Asian Century.



Symbols, Songs and Social Movements: How Music Directly Contributes to the Momentum of Social Movements and Culture

VY TRAN | APRIL 1

Despite performing on one of the world's most commercial and censored stages, one might argue Kendrick Lamar stood head to head with the current political turbulence that came with Donald Trump's re-election in 2025. Utilising vivid symbolism such as Samuel. L. Jackson as 'Uncle Sam', who acted out live 'critiques' of Lamar's performance as "too ghetto", and a disjointed American flag during his pointed performance of 'Humble', Lamar cemented his critiques of the White-oriented society of America by directly referencing the unfulfilled promise of '40 acres and a mule'. This was meant to serve as property and land reparations for formerly enslaved African Americans to financially uplift themselves after the Civil War.

How Does Music Contribute to Social Movements?

Music has, and will continue to be used as a platform for artists to candidly highlight issues in tense political climates by using imagery and lyricism. In the most direct way, artists have always used music as an uncensored form of political expression against oppression. A most notable example is the deep interconnection between Black political culture and African-American musical aesthetics. Reiland Rabaka in his book "Black Power Music!" discusses the political contributions of music in the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s.

Protest songs and clear lyrical messaging in musical genres like soul, jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock & roll openly reaffirmed African Americans' sentiments and critiques of America's lack of democracy and equal rights.

Moreover, these critiques continued in the development of Hip-Hop in the late 20th century and early 2000s, where rappers and artists such as Dr Dre, Nas, Queen Latifah, Tupac and Ice Cube openly addressed police brutality and social injustice in songs such as "F— the Police", "One Mic", "Me Against the World" and more. Despite backlash from White audiences, these songs were liberating in their explicit nature, rebellious spirit and confronting lyrics about violence against the Black community.



The development of Black music centres Blackness, self-identity and reclamation of power, thus decolonising music and putting a spotlight on the community's social and political interests. By clearly expressing a "Black is beautiful" and "Black and proud" message, music created by African-Americans during times of social change fortified the community's need for recognition and respect. In its unapologetic and visceral nature, Black music defiantly cements Black culture and people in a society that aims to silence them.

Symbolism and Songs

Whilst songs and lyrics have directly been used as part of activism, songs can also serve as emotional and motivational tools of empowerment for activists even if they are not inherently political or explicit in their messaging. The intersectionality of music fandom culture and activism is an unlikely, but very real crossover that can be seen in South Korea's pro-democracy protests that called for the impeachment and insurrection of Prime Minister Yoon Suk Yeol. Many, especially young, South Koreans, took to the streets in uproar against Yoon's sudden enactment of a martial law in early December 2024, which halted democratic mechanisms such as freedom of press, local legislature and political activity such as National Assembly proceedings in an alleged 'self-coup' to cover up his political scandals.

So how does K-pop, the viral music pop culture phenomenon that involves idols dancing and singing, relate to anti-martial law protests? K-pop fans spearheaded protesting initiatives, swapping traditional pro-democracy candles with sturdy lightsticks to create coordinated choreography in the dark streets of Seoul to loudly and proudly demonstrate their calls for democracy and resistance against corruption. Moreover, popular K-pop songs such as G-Dragon's "Crooked", Aespa's "Whiplash", 2NE1's "I Am the Best" and Girls' Generation "Into the New World" were chanted and sung. These household songs served to create synchronised protest anthems, championing messages of unity and freedom in the face of adversity despite not containing any explicit political messaging. K-pop songs also utilise beats that energised protesters during the freezing cold, serving as important devices for motivation during Korea's chilling winter. Thus, it is clear that non-political music can be symbolic in political unrest, by mobilising and invigorating protesters to stand their ground.

Unification and Harmonies

Moreover, various genres of music have evolved and grown to unify marginalised communities in times of violence, death and oppression. For instance, genres such as house and disco were significant in constructing spaces such as the ballroom scene and underground Queer clubs during the AIDS crisis. The LGBTQ+ community faced astronomical numbers of death and illness during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s, which was further exacerbated by homophobia and criminalisation from the heteronormative society that vilified a community that needed immediate help.

With fears of violence, loss of loved ones, and fatigue from fighting for Queer rights, safe havens oriented around music and dance were crucial for the Queer community in reassuring themselves that there was an environment that allowed them to truly express themselves. Music stemming from Queer roots symbolise defiance against gender norms and violence. This fortification of belonging and selfhood is crucial in maintaining momentum of social change, as celebrating self-identities and found family through artistic expression can help uplift communities feeling demotivated from facing mammoth-like crises.

Whilst current international affairs and political literature has rightfully focused on the scholars, activists and politicians that propelled social movements, the political importance of artistic experimentation, theatre and music has been left undiscussed in formal academia. This is arguably due to a de-politicisation of music, where a popular sentiment is that music should be able to be enjoyed without the context of politics. However, music arguably cannot be completely isolated from the political sphere – in fact, it is historically and currently being used for activism and protest. Music is an all-encompassing art form that reflects the human condition and societal values – meaning it is more political than audiences want to believe. 21st century artists like Kendrick Lamar have shown that even in the most commercial environments like the Super Bowl, music, art and theatrical performance have and will continue to be an integral tool in protesting against systemic mistreatment of marginalised groups in the modern world.



In Need of a Shepherd: Pope Leo XIV, a Church in Flux, and Our Desire for Moral Leadership

ESTHER CHEN, ALESSANDRO SALAMONE AND THOMAS (TOYO) WHITE | MAY 13

Pope Leo XIV, born Robert Francis Prevost, holds a series of firsts in the history of the Catholic Church.

He becomes the first pontiff born after World War II, the first Augustinian to ascend the throne of Saint Peter, the first pope from the United States and also the first native English speaker since Adrian IV (r.1154–1159). His election not only broadens the geographic reach of the papacy but disrupts the traditional Eurocentric dominance of Catholic leadership.

Leo holds dual US and Peruvian citizenship, the latter secured after decades of pastoral work in Peru, where he spent ten years heading Trujillo's Augustinian seminary, teaching canon law at the diocesan seminary, serving as prefect of studies, acting as judge in the regional ecclesiastical court, and ministering in parishes on the city's margins.

Robert Francis Prevost intentionally chose the papal name Leo XIV to align with the values of Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878– 1903), who is known as the architect of modern Catholic social teaching. Pope Leo XIII helped the Catholic Church grapple with the post-industrial revolution world, advocating for workers' rights and fair wages, encouraging labour unions and defending the working class.

Another surprise election:

The election of Pope Leo XIV came as a surprise to many across the world, with betting markets (yes, there were a lot of papal betting markets) only putting his chances at around 1-2% at best. World leaders reacted to his election with messages on social media.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called the pope's first words "a powerful call for peace, fraternity, and responsibility."

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said he hoped the Holy See could strengthen dialogue and human rights, while Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis underscored the "profound challenges" the world faces and the pope's potential as a unifying force.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy highlighted the Vatican's continued support in the face of Russian aggression, stating: "Ukraine deeply values the Holy See's consistent position in upholding international law... and protecting the rights of innocent civilians."



U.S. President Donald Trump praised the election as "a great honor for our country" and expressed excitement at meeting the first American pontiff. Vice President JD Vance added that "millions of American Catholics and other Christians will pray for his successful work leading the Church."

American body, global soul: the theology of Pope Leo XIV 's Augustinian roots. Before being nominated as a cardinal, Prevost served as the Prior-General of the Order of St Augustine (O.S.A.). This Augustinian formation is likely to have a significant influence on the theological orientation of his papacy.

The O.S.A. are a mendicant order of the Catholic Church, and they are inspired primarily by the writings and life of St Augustine of Hippo. Augustinians are required to take a vow of poverty to better serve the Church. As part of the Rule of St. Augustine, Augustinians are endowed with a unique mission of spreading peace and reducing conflict where possible. In his first Urbi et Orbi blessing, Pope Leo XIV called for a "disarming" peace, signifying that efforts to promote and maintain peace will be a cornerstone of his pastoral approach, demonstrating the influence of his Augustinian formation.

His experiences as a teacher and bishop among marginalised communities in Peru will influence his pastoral approach. As a bishop in the Diocese of Chiclayo, he was renowned for his uniquely personal relationships with the faithful. It was reported that he would engage with his faithful in a more personal manner as opposed to other bishops. His style of leadership recalls the famous words of St Augustine of Hippo, who memorably stated in a sermon that, "for you I am a bishop; with you I am a Christian," capturing the servant leadership style that will likely define the pontificate of Leo XIV. However, his leadership, both in Peru and Chicago, are far from without its controversies, with accusations of failing to discipline church members accused of abuse, and unlike other orders or dioceses, failing to publish a list of accused abusers under his jurisdiction.

To be (Francis), or not to be?

Pope Leo XIV's pontificate is expected to reflect continuity with the socio-political theology of Francis, centred on pastoral outreach. Before his ascendance to the throne of St Peter, Prevost had expressed socially conservative views. For instance, in 2012, he labelled "homosexual lifestyle" and abortion as being "at odds with the gospel". Whilst he hasn't explicitly renounced his prior views, since being made a cardinal in 2023, his social views have likely shifted to be in line with the views of Pope Francis. Given his 2023 statement in agreement with the late pope's views and actions towards various social groups, as well as his first speech as pope where he acknowledged Francis' efforts to welcome people to the Church, it is reasonable to assume that Leo XVI will pursue a progressive social agenda, both doctrinally and pastorally.

It has been made authoritatively clear that synodality, that is, 'walking together' in Christ and making the Church more inclusive, will remain the norm in the post-Francis church. In his first address to the College of Cardinals, Leo made clear that the Church would continue to uphold the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, and that the steps taken towards synodality would continue under his papacy. This suggests the efforts to expand the participation of the faithful, particularly the 'peripheral' faithful within the church, will continue. Despite being part of the Church's magisterium for over five decades, there has been much opposition towards embracing it fully, even by previous popes, such as Benedict XVI. Therefore, upholding the teachings of the Council amounts to a somewhat revolutionary stance within the Church, suggesting that Leo XIV will be a progressive, reformist pope.

A reformer? A diplomat? A philosopher? An advocate?

Following the first week of Pope Leo's papacy, many within and outside Catholicism still feel unclear about what the new Leonine Church's role will be in a world in flux, particularly compared to the Franciscan consensus.

LGBTQIA+ Catholics and their allies across the world, from the New Ways Ministry in Maryland, USA, to Parish Youth Ministry members at Imus Cathedral, Philippines, express hope that Pope Leo will continue and expand upon the Franciscan doctrine's more inclusive approach, but also express concern given his previous comments. Similar sentiments exist from abuse victim advocates, with hope that, now as pontiff, he will be more attentive and proactive in cracking down on abuse cases.

A further example of this can be seen in the Church's position on Gaza. Mere days before his passing, the Pope's nightly calls to the Church of the Holy Family parish in besieged Gaza went viral. At the Easter Mass, the day before he died, Pope Francis pleaded to the world for a lasting ceasefire. George Antone, the Church's spokesperson, says the parish 'hopes that [Pope Leo's] heart' will remain in Gaza, and in his very first Sunday Mass address, the Pontiff reiterated his predecessor's call for a 'Gaza ceasefire'.

Gaza is far from the only crisis afflicting the world at the moment, which will put the new pope's role as one of the world's most powerful diplomats to the test. There exists strong evidence for the importance of papal diplomacy historically, particularly in areas where it is perceived they have moral authority. Given the outbreak of conflict in Kashmir between India and Pakistan, with a US-mediated ceasefire seeming to have fallen through just hours after having been struck, and ongoing atrocities in Sudan, Myanmar, and the Congo, the ability of Pope Leo XIV to wield his office to help achieve the peace he calls for may be his ultimate test.

Which brings us neatly to an area where the Pope is likely to have a vital role: the United States. Despite the congratulatory tweets offered by both Vance and Trump, Pope Leo XIV has called out their administration's very limited scope of Christian love. While the Pope will be unlikely to directly intervene in national politics, his status as a critic of Trump and Vance while a cardinal may mean that his most important role on the global stage will be an American with moral authority, acting as an alternative to the MAGA movement.



But being the pope is a deeply different role from being a cardinal, and on many of these issues, both the faithful and the rest of the world may need to wait to see what this new Leonine church will be.

Peace:

The Papacy has a unique role on the global stage as the representative of a unique institution. A body that crosses borders and yet has them, is both more than an institution but deeply tied to the flaws of one. Being pope puts an individual into a role of contradictions. But some remain hopeful, with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres welcoming the election of Pope Leo XIV, hailing his leadership as both timely and significant for peace against the current global climate.

"The election of a new Pope is a moment of profound spiritual significance for millions around the world," Guterres said.

"It comes at a time of great global challenges. Our world needs the strongest voices for peace, social justice, human dignity, and compassion," he said.

But a world that looks towards a religious figure of a deeply flawed institution, and wants to see a saviour to bring us out of dark times, maybe says more about us than it ever said about him.

Pints and poetry: the increasing soft power of the Emerald Isle

ALESSANDRO SALAMONE | MAY 20

Despite being amongst the poorest nations in the world throughout its 800 years of British colonisation, Ireland has miraculously managed to cultivate soft power through its rich cuisine and arts. It has accrued a positive image throughout the world, as demonstrated recently by widespread approval for the Irish Republic's stance on Palestine. Irish artists are increasingly attracting international popularity – in March, 10,000 people packed out Federation Square in Melbourne for an impromptu performance by the Belfast Republican rap trio Kneecap. The cultural soft power of the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and, more generally, 'Irish Nationalists', continues to grow on the world stage.

Gastrodiplomacy

Irish drinks such as Guinness have long acted as ambassadors of Irish culture worldwide. Nations such as Ireland can create a 'brand', in order to encourage trade and cultural exchange with other nations – Ireland has done this through gastrodiplomacy, especially through alcoholic beverages such as Guinness. These beverages can contribute to what political scientist Simon Anholt calls 'clouds of trust' – everyday items that contribute to positive public perceptions of their nation of origin. Foreigners associate Guinness with Ireland as more than a drink, rather, a key cornerstone of Irish culture. For instance, during former US President Obama's visit to Ireland in 2011, photos were captured of him enjoying a pint of Guinness in his ancestral village of Moneygall. The depiction of a figure such as Obama specifically choosing to consume Guinness on an international trip suggests that Guinness is a quintessentially Irish product which 'sells' a positive image of Ireland to the world. This image reflects the concept of the 'friendly Irish' who are hospitable, wishing to share their culture with foreigners. Such cultural ideals assist Ireland in achieving its soft power goals, allowing Ireland to be perceived as a reliable trading partner or political ally.

Literature

Ireland has long been known as a 'nation of poets'. In 2025, over 100 years since the publication of *Ulysses* by James Joyce, Irish literature continues to dominate literature markets around the world. In Australia, Sally Rooney's *intermezzo* was the 19th best-selling book, with 73,000 copies sold.



As a state, Ireland has embraced its identity as a 'literary' nation by hosting the prestigious Dublin Literary Award, in which the Dublin City Council awards a prize of €100,000 for outstanding international fiction. This initiative can be best described as a form of literary diplomacy, in which Ireland attempts to initiate diplomatic dialogue with other states through literature.

The Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also promotes Irish literature to foster positive perceptions of Ireland worldwide. In 2021, the DFA hosted 30 Bloomsday events to celebrate the work of James Joyce. This included a double celebration of Midsommar and Bloomsday in Stockholm and a giveaway of copies of *Ulysses* in Johannesburg, among other events. Through these events, the notion of a 'literary nation' is promoted, enhancing Ireland's global perception.

Music

Irish musicians continue to act as cultural ambassadors for the nation of Ireland. They assist in promoting the impression of a post-colonial, socially conscious country. In the late 20th century, groups such as The Cranberries helped foster an image of Ireland as a peace-seeking nation. They did so through anthemic hits that discussed and condemned the violent conflict in British-occupied Ireland, taking place between the British armed forces, pro-British militias and the Irish Republican Army. The Cranberries 1994 single 'Zombie' has since become a protest anthem around the world against armed conflict. It has been most commonly used to spread awareness about the humanitarian situation in Gaza – most notably, by the 2024 Eurovision entrant for Ireland, Bambie Thug, at the Download festival in England.

More recent artists such as Kneecap, who filled Federation Square with 10,000 fans in March, have also been active in promoting the image of modern Ireland. In 2024, their biographical film of the same name premiered at Sundance to critical acclaim, blending dark comedy, Irish republican politics, and bilingual storytelling to challenge global audiences' expectations of Irish identity. In their art, they utilise the Irish language not only to communicate, but also to resist. By participating in the revival of a language long marginalised by colonial policy, they make it culturally relevant both in Ireland and beyond. Their advocacy for the Irish language has led to Ireland being recognised as a nation embodying progressive ideals while preserving its traditions.

Looking ahead

Ireland's soft power continues to grow through its cultural exports, which enhance its global image as a progressive and culturally rich nation. Through gastrodiploacy, literature and music, Ireland has successfully cultivated a positive image worldwide. The global recognition of Irish artists, the appeal of Irish literature worldwide and the ubiquity of Irish heritage brands around the world all contribute to the growth of Ireland's soft power. As Ireland seeks to embrace its rich heritage and combine it with modern progressive ideals, it fosters goodwill around the world, which solidifies its place on the world stage.



Eurovision 2025: the crossroads of culture and conflict



MIA GRACE FENTON | MAY 27

As the confetti settles in Basel's St. Jakobshalle after Austria's JJ claimed victory, the 69th Eurovision Song Contest leaves behind more than just glitter. What was once seen as a pure celebration of cross-border musical exchange has grown into a cultural flashpoint shaped by political undercurrents, shifting alliances, and a restless public seeking more than entertainment in reaction to Israel's Yuval Raphael's runner up placement. In 2025, Eurovision stands at a critical juncture: can it remain a unifying stage for music, or has it irrevocably become a geopolitical arena?

How Eurovision Works, and Who Pays for It

Established in 1956, the Eurovision Song Contest is organised by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), a Geneva-based alliance of public service media organisations. Each participating country submits an original song performed live, with artists competing in two semi-finals and a grand finale. The winner is determined through a mix of jury voting and public televoting. In recent years, a global audience has joined the process, giving non-participating nations a chance to cast votes that now influence results.

Not every participating country, however, is on equal footing. The 'Big Five' (Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) is a group that are guaranteed automatic qualification to the final. This privilege is not arbitrary. These nations are the largest financial contributors to the EBU and, by extension, to the contest itself. The EBU, while publicly committed to neutrality and artistic integrity, relies heavily on the continued financial support of the Big Five.

The Problem with 'Non-Political' Music

The EBU's official line remains that Eurovision is a non-political event. It imposes strict rules to prevent political messaging during performances or broadcasts, or, as the Swiss hosts so delicately put it, "nonpolitical, strictly neutral, doesn't matter if you're good or brutal". Many have started to question how true this statement really is.

In 2022, the decision to ban Russia following its invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point. It shattered any illusion of complete neutrality and set a precedent. With that precedent now established, calls to exclude Israel from Eurovision considering the ongoing conflict in Gaza have grown louder and more coordinated.



This year, the controversy intensified when Spain's broadcaster (RTVE) aired a bilingual pre-final message in response to Israel's inclusion in the competition:

"When it comes to human rights, silence is not an option. Peace and justice for Palestine."

The message, delivered to millions, was carefully phrased but deeply political. The EBU responded immediately with a formal warning, threatening financial penalties and citing a breach of contest rules prohibiting politicised statements.

The rebuke has deepened the tension between the EBU and one of its core partners. For RTVE, the message was an expression of human rights advocacy. For the EBU, it was a line crossed. The Spanish government responded forcefully. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez publicly criticised Israel's inclusion, arguing that "we cannot allow double standards in culture." His comments echoed widespread dissatisfaction among European audiences and artists who see political selectivity in the EBU's decisions.

This follows Belgium's message in 2024, where the national broadcaster VRT, interrupted the second semi-final of Eurovision held in Malmo, Sweden to protest against Israel's attacks in Gaza, displaying the message:

"This is a trade union action. We condemn the human rights violations of the Israeli state. Additionally, Israel is destroying press freedom. Therefore, we are taking a temporary break from our broadcast. Now, ceasefire," in Flemish.

Contestants Speak, Audiences Listen

Over 70 past contestants have called for Israel's exclusion. Now among them is the winner himself, JJ, who expressed disappointment with Israel's presence and stated his hope that Eurovision 2026 will be hosted in Vienna, and without Israel participating. Such sentiments signal a shift in how artists view their participation. No longer content to serve as mere entertainers, they are increasingly positioning themselves as advocates for causes that transcend the stage.

Calls for an audit of the televoting system by broadcasters in Spain, Belgium, and Ireland highlight another layer of concern. Bloc voting, the longstanding tradition of regional alliances favouring their neighbours, has always been part of Eurovision's history. Nordic countries reliably back each other, through an unofficial 'Viking Alliance', and Mediterranean and Eastern European nations follow similar patterns, often reinforced by diaspora communities and cultural proximity. But, critics argue that these voting habits, in a politically charged context, can now reinforce biases rather than celebrate diversity.

To balance these regional alliances, Eurovision incorporated a unique 'Rest of the World' televote in 2023, which aggregates votes from non-participating regions. This additional vote not only adds a democratically global perspective to the contest but also acts as a counterbalance against entrenched local allegiances, ensuring that a song's appeal is measured against both regional loyalty and global recognition. As of 2025, Israel has received full points from each Rest of the World vote.

The EBU's challenge lies in maintaining fairness and retaining legitimacy in the eyes of a growingly critical public. Transparency and consistency in rule enforcement are now essential to ensuring the contest remains credible.

Safety in the Spotlight

With politics in the foreground, the issue of safety has also taken centre stage. Swiss authorities deployed more than 1,300 officers around the Basel venue, reflecting heightened concerns about protest, violence, and public disruption. These measures included designated safe zones, mobile awareness teams, and a 24-hour hotline aimed at preventing incidents of assault, harassment, or racially motivated aggression.

In such a tense year for the song contest, the extensive security presence signalled the cost of staging an event that now carries global weight. As the cultural and political stakes grow, so does the infrastructure needed to ensure the contest's smooth execution, which comes at a great cost to host countries.

The EBU's Dilemma: Spain's Leverage

Spain is not just another country at Eurovision. It is a financial cornerstone as one of the Big 5. According to RTVE financial disclosures, Spain annually spends between €600,000 and €800,000 on the Eurovision song contest, not including promotional efforts and domestic investments, with approximately half of this figure being made up of their participation fee, which provides the EBU with its funding. With high viewership figures and a significant international fan base, RTVE's involvement bolsters Eurovision's visibility far beyond Europe's borders.

Eurovision's financial structure is fragile. The EBU depends on a mixture of public broadcaster contributions, sponsorships, and merchandise. Large contributors like Spain make the contest viable at its current scale. If dissatisfaction among Big Five countries spreads, the EBU may be forced to reconsider its operational model and its rules on political neutrality.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The EBU now faces a critical decision: whether to double down on its current framework or to adapt to a cultural and political landscape that is increasingly complex. Reassessing what 'neutrality' means in practice may be unavoidable. In an age when silence is itself interpreted as a political stance, the line between neutrality and complicity grows thinner.

Eurovision is no longer just a television event. It is a platform for identity, advocacy, and diplomatic positioning. Whether addressing gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, or this year, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, many Eurovision artists have made clear that they will not be muzzled by outdated rules.

To preserve the integrity and relevance of the contest, the EBU must establish clearer policies for political expression that do not rely solely on reactive punishment. Simultaneously, it must reassure its financial partners that their voices are valued in the strategic direction of the event. Without that assurance, the Big Five model itself could begin to crumble.

Music as a Mirror

Eurovision 2025 has exposed more than just musical talent. It has laid bare the tensions and contradictions within Europe's cultural diplomacy. While the contest has long danced around geopolitics, this year brought those tensions fully into view, through on-screen messages, the presence of contested delegations, and the subtleties of historic bloc voting. The lines between art and politics were not just blurred but openly debated.

What happens next depends on the EBU's willingness to adapt. The actions and statements from artists, governments, and viewers are clear: greater transparency, consistent enforcement of rules, and a redefinition of neutrality that acknowledges the political weight culture now carries. Preserving the contest's integrity will require not only avoiding overt politicisation but also engaging with the realities of the world it reflects.

Eurovision remains a dazzling spectacle. But beneath the lights and choreography lies a case study in 21st-century diplomacy. Music, once seen as an escape from political discourse, has become one of its most expressive tools. Whether the EBU can meet this moment with fairness, clarity, and integrity will shape not only Eurovision 2026, but the future of international cultural exchange.



The Kennedy legacy: A Gen Z twist, family divisions, and an all-American love story



ELIZZY BINGHAM | SEPTEMBER 23

In 1960, the four presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon were the first to be aired on television. The first debate – now arguably the most well-known – was viewed by a record 70 million people; at this point, most American households had televisions. The televised debates demonstrated the shift American politics was making alongside technology. Unlike radio or print, households screens allowed the public to view their presidential candidates – handsome, dapper Kennedy was able to play to the camera more successfully than Nixon in the first debate. Ever since, this debate's impact on Kennedy's win has been contested. Surveys after the debate showed that audiences who watched it on television believed that Kennedy won, while those who listened on the radio felt that Nixon won. The increasingly popular technology of the time was central to public perceptions of the President, and gave him the ability to connect with his constituents. At the time, and ever since, technology has been integral to developing and maintaining the Kennedy legacy; as "the first completely modern media political family," they have grown alongside technology, and employ it as a political platform.

JFK's presidency and ongoing legacy:

Kennedy served as a symbol of patriotism and political hope until his untimely death, exemplified by his famed quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country".

He had the role of navigating his country through a highly tumultuous period in both international and domestic affairs, such as the Cold War and in regards to civil rights. Some of his actions on these issues were controversial: the Bay of Pigs, a planned U.S. invasion of Cuba to overthrow Fidel Castro in 1961, was a failure; at first, he also took a cautious, non-committal stance on civil rights in order to maintain approval with his voters that leaned conservative. Nevertheless, his approval rating during his presidency *averaged 70.1 per cent*, the highest rating of any post-World War II president. Currently, his retrospective approval rate sits at a whopping 90 per cent. People approve of and respect Kennedy across party lines in the present day, as they did in his time, displaying his ability to unite the country. While his high approval ratings are likely somewhat impacted by his short term on account of his assassination, they point to his overwhelming popularity not just in his day, but over 60 years after his election. Despite only serving just over 1,000 days as President, Kennedy left a monumental legacy which would follow his family for generations. It was ultimately his death via assassination that crowned him as "the martyred prince of American politics".

The digital Kennedy:

The rise of JFK's only grandson, Jack Schlossberg, mirrors his grandfather's ascent into presidency. Affectionately referred to as "the people's princess," he gained popularity in 2024, particularly after joining Vogue as a political correspondent, and has maintained a social media presence since, boasting hundreds of thousands of followers on both Instagram and TikTok.

The “chronically online sensation” is typically unserious in his posting, and seems to have no problem sharing his streams of consciousness with the internet – political and otherwise. Schlossberg’s cultural relevancy was demonstrated with last year’s lookalike contest of him – 2024’s hot trend – positioning him among the pop culture greats who had their own lookalike contests, like Timothee Chalamet and Harry Styles.

Schlossberg was highly politically active in the lead-up to America’s 2024 election. As Vogue put it, he was “memeing for democracy”. In a constantly changing political landscape in which politicians and parties are scrambling to engage young voters, now-32-year-old Schlossberg was able to make use of his comparative youth and penchant for memes to mobilise the youth of America. He consistently used his substantial platform to campaign for Joe Biden, and later Kamala Harris. Schlossberg’s political advocacy is not new. In 2012, he publicly supported a second term for Barack Obama. It seems that Schlossberg’s zany, untraditional style of political communication may be the future of mobilising young voters.

Schlossberg said that his grandfather’s administration was, “a blueprint for how progressivism can work in America”. The Kennedy family name is built on Democratic Party values, a legacy which Schlossberg seems eager to continue.

The black sheep

One notable exception to the typical Kennedy progressivism, however, is Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Though once a Democrat, he vehemently supported Donald Trump in last year’s election. He cited the Democrats’ transition into, “the party of war, censorship, corruption, big pharma, big tech, big money” as his reason for leaving.

Now US Health Secretary, RFK Jr has certainly asserted himself as a figure outside of his family name, though it’s unclear whether he feels that all press is good press. A prominent vaccine skeptic, he has been criticised on numerous occasions for putting citizens’ lives at risk and devaluing the role of science in the current Trump administration. The public has split opinions about the controversial figure.

Although he has a greater disapproval than approval rating – while 43 per cent of Americans strongly or somewhat disapprove of RFK’s job performance, 36 per cent strongly or somewhat approve. Unsurprisingly, divisions in opinion align with party preference, as 72 per cent of Democrats disapprove of RFK’s performance compared to 14 per cent of Republicans.

The Kennedys themselves take issue with RFK’s disruption of their legacy and departure from Kennedy-style politics, with his sister saying that his decision to back Trump was a, “betrayal of the values that our father and our family hold most dear”.

Caroline Kennedy aligned the rest of her family against RFK’s medical beliefs, stating that they are, “united in terms of the public health sector...”.

Jack Schlossberg, too, has made his stance on his cousin clear. He asked the rest of his family to stand against the Health Secretary, and has publicly denounced him by making meme posts about him on many occasions. RFK shattered not just his family’s trust, but the Kennedy legacy of aligning with the Democrats, splintering family relations as well as impacting their reputation amongst the American people.

A screen-worthy love story

A testament to the seemingly everlasting legacy of the Kennedys, Ryan Murphy’s *American Love Story*, is currently in the works, a television series, detailing the revered, and ultimately tragic, relationship between John F Kennedy Jr and Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy. The two were an it-couple of the 90s: JFK Jr an accomplished member of his family’s empire, and Carolyn Bessette a Calvin Klein publicist beloved for her “effortlessly cool,” seemingly irreproducible style and bright blonde hair.

Both JFK Jr and Bessette-Kennedy died in a plane crash in 1999, both only in their 30s. *American Love Story* is set to cover their romance as well as their lives, images, and pressures as individuals. The development of the show has been met with coverage and enthusiasm, including from Vogue who have been honouring “eternal style icon” Bessette-Kennedy.

It seems to be, to some extent, the tragedies that have plagued that family – the ‘Kennedy curse’ – that continues to draw people to them and keeps them so firmly in not just the American imagination, but the global one. The series, which will be released more than a quarter of a century after the lovers’ untimely death, speaks to the ongoing fascination with their family.

A new era of Kennedy obsession?

The Kennedys are “America’s royal family,” remaining one of the most well-known political families in America, if not the world. The typical Kennedy charm, intellect, and attractiveness has allowed them to retain their regality, both in life and death. The bitterness of their family tragedies fuels public interest, both in those that were taken too soon, and those who remain and have continued contributing to the familial empire.

Recent family divisions have fuelled the public desire for gossip but ultimately fractured the Kennedy legacy, which has been shaped by new-age technology for three generations now. Whether their influence will truly be everlasting remains to be seen. For now though, there is a seemingly never-ending fascination with the eccentric cast of characters that make up the family. It seems like they will remain on the global stage for a while yet – whether that’s in politics, history books, or TikTok algorithms.

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The Restarting of History and the Decline of the Liberal Democratic Order

Ito Ay Manifestong Demokrasya: Elections, Political Culture, and Youth Power in Australia and the Philippines



THOMAS (TOYO) WHITE | JUNE 10

As if a tri-annual ritual, election season in Australia has brought forward the regular outpouring of veneration for our electoral system. This civic pride that we have in what can seem to outsiders as quite mundane, is of course well deserved. Pop-culture figures and commentators like Abbie Chatfield will proudly talk about just how preferential voting ‘means there’s no such thing as a wasted vote’. Without a preferential (or what’s sometimes called ‘instant-run-off’) voting system, both Peter Dutton and Adam Bandt would have likely held the seats of Dickson and Melbourne.

That is not even touching on the other factor making Australian voting unique: compulsory voting. Despite the fact it is essentially a way the government can fine you that doesn’t exist in most other countries, compulsory voting remains incredibly popular. Emeritus Professor of Politics at Monash University, Paul Strangio goes as far as saying it’s, “a mainstay of an Australian democratic exceptionalism”.

Yet at the same time as the Australian system is lauded as visionary, it creates large blind spots. Emphasis on how unique, special, and exceptional this system is makes it hard to take lessons on democracy from other parts of the world, especially those viewed as marred by corruption and cronyism, or gaming the government to assist one’s political allies.

But democracy is a project of constant improvement, and following on from the Australian election, it’s worth looking to a country that held its own election only 9 days after:

The Philippines.

Hurdles to democratic representation in the Philippines

The Philippines is far from a perfect democracy. Under the Economist’s Democracy Index, the Philippines has spent more than a decade as a ‘flawed democracy’, scoring particularly poorly on the ‘functioning of government’ and ‘political culture’. The abuse of state resources and ‘vote-buying’, a process by which resources, financial or otherwise, are exchanged for votes, are consistent problems in Philippine elections, including in the most recent #Halalan2025.

#Halalan2025, which are the midterm-elections that occurred in the Philippines on the 12th of May, made worldwide news with some of its headline results. Former President Rodrigo Duterte, father of Vice-President Sara Duterte who is currently facing impeachment charges in the Senate, re-won the mayoralty of the southern city of Davao, beating his closest opponent by over 540,000 votes, despite currently being in the Hague following a warrant from the ICC.

The Duterte Youth Party-List, a political grouping running in the party-list system (intended to represent minority interests in Parliament), came second on the party-list results, only to have that result struck down by the Commission on Elections.

These kind of stories may give Australians a fair amount of disquiet about the state of Philippine democracy, but #Halalan2025 is not the only election the Philippines is holding this year.

Sangguniang Kabataan: Recognition of Youth Power

On December 1, a unique election will take place in the Philippines, the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK, Youth Council) elections. The smallest unit of Philippine governance is the barangay, a unit that can sometimes take in a number of streets or a couple of blocks. Republic Act 7160 (The Local Government Code), aside from setting up the modern system of the barangay, required that by law, each of the 42,052 barangays across the country have an SK.

Voters between the ages of 15–21 are able to vote for candidates between the ages of 18–21 that will sit on a formal, empowered youth council. They have a set portion of the barangay budget to which they have sole discretion to use. They are elected in full council elections (such as the one happening on December 1st).

The SKs are of course not without their own controversy. They have been accused as a breeding ground for political dynasties, and failed at their main purpose, so much so that in 2016, the Republic Act 10742 aimed to reform and protect them from dynastic interference as well as introduce some much needed changes.

But it is important to note, that despite all their flaws, the SKs exist and are composed of members appointed in open, regulated, and national elections, which and that certainly counts for something. Trying to imagine the same kind of system occurring in Australia is legitimately difficult. Australian politicians have in the past lambasted young people in civic and political spaces as simply looking for ‘any opportunity to get out of school’ or that peer pressure and ‘[fitting] in with the crowd’ mean that young people would only be parroting existing political actors. Both quotes respectively are attributable to former Coalition MPs Keith Pitt (Nationals) and Craig Kelly (before his defection from the Liberals to the United Australia Party) respectively.

In his almost utopian work 2040, Australian filmmaker Damien Gameau dreamt up a similar idea occurring in Australia, but far into the future. Australia often ties itself in knots over the role of young people in our democracy, with half-hearted attempts at Youth Advisory Committees, political leaders lamenting school strikes for the climate as ‘too activist’, or the periodic discussion of lowering the voting age to 16. But this sense of youth activism and change is something the Philippines is deeply familiar with, with young people having played a critical part in the EDSA revolution that deposed former-President and dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and a continued role in contemporary political challenges. A country that has real experience of youth power may be more willing to provide formal structures for youth involvement.

Maybe the answer comes from a version of this system. Providing formal and universal structures of youth politics with independent decision-making power, and importantly, full elections, could offer a meaningful avenue for young Australians to influence national conversation. Pushing forward with ambitious ideas and legislation that attempt to create structures of meaningful youth power, even if they aren’t always perfect, is something that Australia can learn from a democracy born out of popular revolution.

Pag-unlad: democracy is always a work in progress

There are likely many things that Philippine elections could learn from how elections are done in Australia. Preferential ballots, compulsory voting, and strong electoral transparency are only the beginnings of a list. However, views of Australian exceptionalism should not stop Australians looking for answers in unexpected places. Australians shouldn’t believe that they have nothing to learn from the conduct of Philippine democracy, or for that fact, any democracy.

No democracy is perfect, and democratic governance requires constant innovation and adaptation. Despite the adage, there is no ‘democracy manifest’, in Australia or abroad, there is only the hard work of democracy



Anatomy of a breakup: the split of the Coalition and the worldwide state of agrarian populism

EAMON SOMERVILLE, LAKMALIE WIJESINGHE AND
THOMAS (TOYO) WHITE | MAY 27

After nearly four decades of strained ties, the National and Liberal parties have gone their separate ways, announcing a 'not unanimous but quite conclusive' split. Spearheaded by Nationals leader David Littleproud, the decision came after negotiations stalled over four key policy directives within the Coalition agreement – most notably regarding nuclear energy commitments and divestiture powers targeting supermarkets. Overall, this move has cast further doubt on future campaign prospects of the federal opposition, as it seeks to rebuild following an extraordinary defeat during the recent federal election.

How we got here

This divergence is not without precedent. Tensions last divorced the Coalition in 1987 after the fallout of the 'Joh for PM' campaign, seeing then PM Bob Hawke secure a third term against Liberal leader John Howard. Despite this, they reassembled in time for the next election – a scenario that may yet repeat as talks continue amongst both parties.

At the time of writing, the Liberal party room has shifted its position again, with members reportedly agreeing 'in principle' to a commitment on actionable nuclear energy policy and enforceable divestiture powers – both pivotal issues at the recent election. Two additional policy demands originally held at ransom during agreement talks have also been freshly considered – retention of a \$20 billion Regional Australia Future Fund and a promise to impose service obligations on telecommunications providers operating in remote and rural areas. These policies are not new to the Liberal platform, but their renewed analysis signifies that this split is less of a permanent rupture, but rather a tactical play. Littleproud is making it clear to new Liberal leader Sussan Ley that his decision to walk out leaves behind an open door that may eventually close, should Liberal party members not endorse mutual commitments.



While the parties appear to be taking a step back for the time being, their decoupling is indicative of broader tensions playing out beyond the domestic stage, between traditional conservative parties and populist agrarian factions.

Rural rebellion and populist pushback

Although the Nationals represent a unique example of an agrarian party playing a significant role in national government for much of the last century, agrarian movements themselves are not uncommon, nor are the tensions they experience with established conservative and liberal parties. In recent years, particularly across much of the developed world, there has been an eruption of pro agrarian movements and protests. These trends notably represent not just a rejection of many governments across the globe, but a growing discontent between populist interventionist and anti-climate 'pro farmer' movements and traditional fiscally conservative establishment parties, whether in government or opposition.

The justifications for these protests are as widespread as the protests themselves. In farmers' protests that gripped the EU in 2024 and 2025, the stated reasons often differed between emissions caps, stricter regulations, and ongoing trade negotiations particularly with Australia and MERCOSUR (a free trade bloc in South America). In the United Kingdom, farmers descended on London in tractors in protest of changes to inheritance laws which would have reduced tax exemptions carved out for farmers. In Canada, protests erupted over interest rate and trade regulations, and in India, farmers protested to request the government impose minimum prices for crop purchasing. These protests are not only varied in reasoning but also often fail to fall within the left-right dichotomy many people use to easily orientate themselves on the political spectrum. Regardless of the reasoning, the biggest losers of many of these movements are often the establishment conservative parties for which farmers traditionally represent a strong voter base. In France, the Yellow Hat Revolt saw the protest of farmer unions, FNSEA and Young Farmers (JA). These groups historically were often aligned with the moderate centre-right parties of Les Républicains and President Macron's Renaissance party. However, the major winner of these protests was Marine Le Pen's far right populist Rassemblement National (RN), seeing the most substantial boost in the polls among farmers. Similarly, the Dutch populist 'new-right' party BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB, Farmer-Citizen Movement) which emerged following the Dutch Farmers protests in 2019, saw significant electoral gains from the traditional Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal).

The tensions between populist farmer movements and conservative parties seem unlikely to abate any time soon. Underlying trends in these protests, including the Nationals' decision to split the coalition, can often be linked back to a mix of climate scepticism and successful mobilisation of broader farmer organisations by emergent or established 'new-right' populist parties. Populist policy that claims to 'challenge' the burdens placed on farmers by bureaucracy, climate change, environmental protection policy and/or free trade practices, aims to seize this key voter base from establishment parties, which struggle to address these challenges while maintaining their support bases among urban populations.

Growing apart: a coalition of divergence

While this breakup looks to be a temporary one, like in all relationships, fights can only ever be forgiven, not forgotten. There will be lasting consequences to this spat, and the dynamics at play did not start in Australia, and won't end with the Nationals.

Regardless, if the Liberals and Nationals decide to recommit, the foundations will be unstable. Dr Jill Shepherd, a senior lecturer in politics at ANU, notes that, "there's always been [...] mistrust," between the two partners, but one can imagine that the last week has only made this worse. Developing leadership and teamwork can prove difficult without trust, even on a personal basis. Whilst seemingly minor, the small ripples of personal relationships can create waves in organisations, and that's most true in government. Petty disputes between individual National and Liberal politicians that have occurred in the past few days seem to indicate this is indeed the case. A lot of trust-building (and maybe a healthy dose of couples therapy) may be needed for a renewed coalition.

Additionally, if international examples of party collapse are indicators, the ideological divide between the establishment right and the populist right is growing. Following Australia's 2025 federal election, the two former coalition partners are in vastly different situations, but the ideological divisions were visible long before. Many Liberals are anxious about their party's position, and want to pitch towards the centre to regain legitimacy. But others within the Liberals and Nationals disagree. Former Nationals leadership-hopeful Senator Matt Canavan has publicly argued the Nationals' best option is a pitch to the right.

The style of politics that arose from the BBB in the Netherlands or Rassemblement National seems to be echoing in the Nationals. Opposition to renewables (such as wind farms) were both a prominent RN Policy and a belief of Senator Matt Canavan. Similar comparisons can be made between the Nationals' approach to net-zero and the agrarian BBB in the Netherlands. Even in a reunited coalition, these newly emboldened figures, riding on waves of populist and agrarian rage may create a church so broad that the roof falls in.

Going it alone

Coalition breakups tend to set a precedent, and could indicate an entrenchment of a multi-party set-up in Australia. International examples of populist split-offs have built in a more diverse political arena, such as in Germany, or what seems to be occurring currently in the United Kingdom. The Nationals are of course a unique force; they are decades old and a familiar face in Australian politics, but as populist movements with agrarian grievances spread in other parts of the globe, we may see a very different National party.

After all, no one's the same after a breakup.



The Restarting of History and the Decline of the Liberal Democratic Order

EAMON SOMERVILLE | AUGUST 12

In 1989, American political scientist and philosopher Francis Fukuyama wrote a now famous essay titled, 'The End of History.'

Facing a weakening Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Fukuyama, like many people at the time, was faced with a sense that victory of 'the West' and liberal capitalist democracy had been achieved, and that humanity was facing the epoch of its political development. While Fukuyama conceded newsworthy current events would continue to transpire, he contended liberal democratic ideology had established itself as the eventual destination of humankind.

36 years on from that monumental declaration, we find ourselves facing a world in which liberalism, the dominant global ideology, faces fatigue, despite it appearing so certain to absorb all. The dream of a world of western democracy seems increasingly challenged and the history of global development seems far from settled.

The rise of a global liberal order

While the idea of the 'western liberal democracy' as the inevitable end step of humanity was always contentious, there is no doubt that it has dominated almost every aspect of global politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The fall of the Soviet Union led to a rapid expansion of liberal economies and democratic principles in the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc states. By 2006, The Economist's Democracy Index identified twelve states formally part of the Soviet sphere of influence as having become democracies, seven of which had joined the European Union. Of those states that had not become democracies, market privatisation and liberal economics had been adopted by the grand majority.

Other events further emphasised this growing liberal trend. The collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992 and the adoption of liberal democracy by these emerging states further strengthened the spread of democracy in Europe.



In Asia, *Gǎigé kāifàng* or 'the reform and opening up of China' over the latter half of the twentieth century brought the world's most populous country closer to the liberal order. Following that monumental pivot, India undertook its own program of economic liberalisation: an economic crisis in 1991 forced India to seek out support from the International Monetary Fund.

With China and India, 37% of the global population was now brought into a new, more liberal economic system by 2000. This trend towards liberalisation was duplicated repeatedly across the world in the 80s and 90s with states like Nigeria and Indonesia all implementing plans for fiscal and trade liberalisation.

The absence of the Soviet Union also cemented, at least for a time, the USA as the unipolar world power unrivalled in influence, military capacity and cultural dominance. While it is debated in the modern age whether the USA still retains this unrivalled position as the singular global power, up until the 2010s, the USA faced no significant great power challenge to its foreign policy aims. The spread of liberalism became a core component of US foreign policy in the 1990s and 2000s, and was a major justification of the unilateral action used in the 'War on Terror'.

As much as the War on Terror was linked as a pragmatic response to the events of 9/11, US government officials made no secret to depict the intervention in Iraq, and later Afghanistan, as democratising missions.

Whilst the US interventions were often influenced by a realist foreign policy position, incentivised by strategic aims against 'hostile regimes', this was never the sole justification. In a 2010 memoir, President George Bush himself stated in relation to Iraq that, "We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better".

Idealist intervention on the concept of building up a liberal democracy was always a cornerstone of US foreign policy, and similarly influenced economic and military interventions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

Opponents in the periphery

However, liberal ascendancy has always faced opposition. Not only did it have its strong ideological opponents, but as the idea of western liberal democracy became heavily tied to US influence, western liberal democracy also faced backlash from states that became opponents to American unipolar hegemony.

The first challenge to the liberal world order emerged from the growing coalition of non-democratic powers across the globe. From 2019 onwards, The Economist noted consistent declines in the number of democracies across the world, with autocratic states strengthening their own institutions rather than continuing the transition to democratic norms. States like Russia and China cemented their opposition to the USA. Both states abandoned their prior liberalisation trends as the post-Cold War consensus between Russia and the USA collapsed and China saw significant economic development.

The greatest examples of this are reflected in Russia's increased militarisation and armed expansions in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and Ukraine again in 2022. Putin's own announcement of the invasion in 2022 argued one of the primary reasons for this invasion was the "expansion of NATO to the East".

While these reasons are often used to hide more practical and brutal political considerations, they do reflect a growing desire by states like Russia to push back against perceived 'western hegemony'. This is a claim China has also taken up economically with its development of institutions like the Asian Development Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Chinese government officials are well aware of the diplomatic strength their unique economic and political position gives them. Aligning with organisations like the Group of 77, an international voting alliance composed of developing states, exemplifies this. China uses this unique position to assert itself in opposition to the 'western' liberal order.

The internal crisis

The challenge to the liberal social and economic order is not exclusively external. Internal economic and political crises have pushed several nominally liberal democratic states into opposition to the liberal order. In response to the Global Financial Crisis and the Eurozone crisis, Europe, often seen as the heartland of liberal democracy, was rocked by several anti-liberal protests and a rise in 'New Right' parties.

These parties represented far right political movements founded in direct opposition to the liberal democracies they emerged in. Similarly, America saw the rise of the Tea Party movement, a loose new conservative alliance, that would eventually be followed and replaced by the MAGA movement who supported Donald Trump in 2016. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis would only accelerate this decline in liberal democratic support across these established democracies.

With this increased unpopularity, notable governments and leaders opposed to the liberal status quo began seizing power. Prominent Hungarian politician Viktor Orbán, most famous for describing his own government goal as the construction of an 'illiberal democracy', would win prime ministership of Hungary in 2014. In 2022, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, also advocated for a similar ideological departure from the liberal political order. In France, the far-right party National Rally and the left coalition New Popular Front endorsed several positions in opposition to the liberal consensus that had previously been endorsed by French President Emmanuel Macron. Spain's ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party has also seen significant internal debate over its role in an increasingly opposed 'American liberal order'.



Almost every European state has seen similar ideological conflicts, and the EU as a whole, reliant on member state consensus, has faced its own issues arising from these new anti-liberal member states.

In the USA, the rise of Donald Trump, first in 2016 and now in 2024 represents one of the most notable setbacks to liberalism globally. Since being re-elected, Trump has launched widespread and all-encompassing attacks on the liberal economic policies of the USA via restrictions on free trade and regular government intervention into the economy.



Similarly, he has undermined the liberal democratic principles of the state via ongoing and widespread attacks on the judiciary and the legislative branches, while bolstering executive authority. On top of all this, the USA has withdrawn its support from many of its liberal allies, removing its military, diplomatic and economic power from fellow liberal democratic states. These pivots reflect that the world's largest superpower has at least partially abandoned the global trend towards liberalism itself.

Decline or permanent setback?

As Francis Fukuyama became readily aware after his famous declaration, it's not possible to predict the future. In the collapse of the Soviet Era, liberal democracies looked not only ascendant but a genuine and real hope for many across the world. Many expected that the adoption of liberal democracy would become more and more widespread, leaving behind the fears and ideological clashes of the Cold War.

However, the method by which this culmination of human development would emerge was never fully answered by its adherents. Similarly, the political reality behind such a scenario guaranteed opposition from a variety of current and emerging powers. While liberalism is by no means in terminal decline, it seems less and less likely every year that we are experiencing an inevitable trend towards a global liberal society. In contrast, it seems more likely that observers must be prepared for the continuation of a multi-polar and multi-ideological world.

And so history marches on.

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Who are the Tehrik-Taliban Pakistan and why are they important to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations?

ALICE AE JACKSON | AUGUST 5

The Tehrik-Taliban Pakistan or TTP, are a terrorist organisation that has caused a significant security risk to Pakistan and aided further destabilisation of Central Asia. So, who are this group and how has the retreat of American forces in Afghanistan benefitted this group? And, what are their goals?

The TPP is an alliance of Taliban militants which formed in 2007 as a unified front against the Pakistani military. The TTP was formed as a response to Pakistani military operations against Al-Qaeda related militants during the War on Terror in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a semi-autonomous region in Northwestern Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan. The region existed from 1947 until 2018 where it was merged with the neighboring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the 25th amendment of the constitution of Pakistan.

From the beginning...

Tensions began in 1893 due to the Durand Line, a colonial border between Afghanistan and what is now Pakistan but then British India. The Pashtun people had primarily lived in this region and the Durand line cut through the Pashtun community, putting half the community into Afghanistan and the other half into British India, breaking apart community, culture and customs. Afghanistan refused to accept the border due to this breaking of communities and due to mistrust of the Afghan official who agreed to it.

The official, Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, was given his post as an official representation of Afghanistan by the British. Afghanistan argued that the Pashtuns should be governed in their own autonomous nation, whilst the British argued that the region had little value and that there would be no issue to dividing it as they did not understand the cultural importance of the land to the Pashtun people. Even in the division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, the Durand Line was not redrawn. It became the recognized border by Pakistan despite Afghan opposition.

The FATA lie along the Pakistani side of the Durand Line and in December of 2001, many Taliban leaders and Al-Qaeda terrorists took refuge in FATA where tribal laws and customs drove inter-tribal relations and people's lives, rather than the Pakistani government. Veterans of Pakistani jihad and local militants who had fought alongside the Taliban in the 1990s provided protection in FATA for fellow Pashtuns and Al-Qaeda forces, providing them cover to then begin attacking American led NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military then entered FATA due to pressure from the American military to hunt down Al-Qaeda members. The operation caused deeper resentment in the local Pashtun tribes who viewed the operation as an infringement on their autonomy and a violation of local custom. The local militants, who shared the radical interpretation of Islam with the Taliban, known as Deobandi, then banded together to confront the Pakistani state and its security forces, and so became the TTP.



What and why?

The TTP's overall goal is to overthrow the elected Pakistani government and establish an emirate based on the alliance's interpretation of Islamic law, or Sharia, known as the Deobandi ideology. Deobandi believe that strict adherence to Sharia is the path to salvation and seek to emulate the times of Prophet Muhammed. Particularly, it upholds the belief that global holy war, or jihad, is the sacred duty to protect Muslims across the world and holds an opposition to any non-Islamic beliefs or ideas.

The TTP is particularly famous for their anti-Shia stance, another branch of the Muslim faith which shares different beliefs about the Prophet Muhammed to the TTP's Sunni Islamic belief system. The Deobandi ideology is the basis for this stance, as they consider Shia Muslims to not be Muslim as they do not subscribe to the same interpretations of Islam.

The TTP, like other Deobandi military groups, has been protected and aided by the Pakistani government as a means to an end for policy objectives in Afghanistan and Indian controlled Kashmir. Pakistan has sometimes turned a blind eye to the movements of the TTP and has also indirectly funded the TTP through their aid of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

However, the TTP have turned their attention towards Pakistan, becoming the deadliest militant organization operating in Pakistan. The TTP's terrorist acts have caused the most deaths in Pakistan over the last decade. They are also known for their indiscriminate killing of civilians, including women and children.

Taliban (Afghanistan) and Taliban (Pakistan)?

Both the Taliban and TTP are based in Deobandi ideology and share the beliefs that women should be restricted to the home and that Shia Muslims are not Muslim. The TTP is also an umbrella organization with a leader at the helm. The group has also established links with other militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Punjabi Taliban. At its inception, the TTP claimed to be an extension of the Afghan Taliban with a similar goal to the Afghan Taliban of establishing an Islamic emirate but in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan. In 2018, the TTP also changed tactics in its 2018 manifesto, which moved the TTP from indiscriminate killing in order to incite fear, to instead redirect their killing to Pakistani military personnel and intelligence operatives.

Although sharing the Taliban denomination with the Taliban movement and being closely allied, the two groups are quite different with separate ideologies and command structures. The Taliban have however acted as mediators between the TTP and the government of Pakistan during peace talks, particularly as they seek to legitimize their role as the government of Afghanistan.

The now

Following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the TTP has become emboldened despite the significant strides made by the Pakistani government to quash the group. The return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 led to the release of TTP prisoners held by the old Afghani government, providing a resurgence of members and support.

The TTP has also benefitted from the advanced weaponry left by Americans in Afghanistan and seized by the Taliban in 2021 which has increased their operational capabilities. Ten militant groups also opposed to the state of Pakistan have merged with the TTP. Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) also share ties to the TTP despite the ISKP being created by dissatisfied TTP militants. This tie particularly emboldens the TTP as ISKP has been marked as having the potential to launch a terror attack in the West.



The increased capabilities of the TTP are the opposite of the hopes of the Pakistani government, who believed that the reinstallation of the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan would curb the TTP's activities. The Pakistan government believed that the Taliban would take back the Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and neutralize anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan. This never occurred. Pakistan has therefore taken matters into their own hands, launching military operations across the border into Afghanistan with the aim of neutralizing TTP militants.

TTP are a significant obstacle in Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations and stand in the way of crucial regional cooperation. Effective cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan could aid both countries in overcoming shared concerns such as border security, trade, water resources, regional connectivity, whilst reducing mistrust and fostering peace in the region.

The Taliban deny arming and fostering bases for the TTP, despite known TTP training camps operating in Afghanistan having opened earlier this year. However, Pakistan is known for deflecting the blame for the TTP's operations to neighboring Afghanistan whilst regularly citing the TTP as a reason to violate Afghanistan sovereignty. Pakistan's approach to terrorism echoes the classic terrorist policy played out by the United States of America and how they operated through the War on Terror: play the strongman game of violating sovereignty whilst maintaining an ambivalence, playing the line between friend and enemy through necessary cooperation all while maintaining mistrust.

So, with the Taliban looking to play a legitimate role in the central Asian region, it looks like the TTP and their protection will be used as a bargaining chip in the Afghan-Pakistan relationship. With the desire to legitimize, will the Taliban cut ties with the TTP like they are beginning to with other terrorist organizations, or are the TTP an ally worth fighting for?

Pillars of Strength: Breaking down the AUKUS Agreement

ALICE AE JACKSON | MAY 13

Donald Trump's response of "What does that mean?" may feel familiar to many when the acronym AUKUS is mentioned. Some readers may be familiar with the dialogue of submarines and the eye-watering amounts that this deal will apparently cost Australia (anywhere from \$268bn to \$368bn) but what actually is AUKUS and what does this all mean for Australia and the wider Indo-Pacific region?

What is AUKUS and what are the Pillars?

The acronym stands for Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States as this is a trilateral security partnership between the three states. AUKUS is nowhere near a new phenomenon, with the United Kingdom and the United States having shared nuclear technology knowledge since 1958. The AUKUS agreement was created by then Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, Ex Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, and then President of the United States of America, Joe Biden. There are two parts to this deal, known as Pillar One and Pillar Two. Pillar One is the part of the agreement that has garnered the most attention, as it covers the delivery of the more controversial part of the deal: eight nuclear powered and conventionally weaponed (meaning they do not use nuclear weaponry) Virginia class submarines. Pillar Two is the less interesting pillar of technological innovation and advancing capabilities. So, let's break these both down further.

Pillar One: what, when, how, and why?

Pillar One is all about the physical goods that are the submarines. The goal of pillar one is to have a rotational deployment of four American and one British submarine in Western Australia alongside at least three Australian submarines procured from the United States. These submarines are to aid stability in the Indo-Pacific Region and deter aggression from other states. There are nuclear-powered attack submarines, known by the acronym SSNs, which are the newest, most cutting-edge submarine technology, that are being built using Pillar Two of the AUKUS partnership. Australia is also purchasing American Virginia class submarines to supplement the new force. SSNs are to be delivered to Australia as soon as the early 2030s.



The controversial nature of the submarine procurement was that in 2016, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull signed a bilateral agreement with France to secure twelve of the French Barracuda class submarines for deployment potentially in early 2030. However, in 2021, Australia scrapped the \$90bn deal in favor of AUKUS. Australia cited cost blowouts and delays during major milestones as their reasoning behind backing out of the deal. The pivot away from France towards US submarines soured the Franco-Australian relationship – France withdrew its ambassador from Canberra in retaliation.

Pillar Two: The Technological Side

AUKUS Pillar Two originates from the Five Eyes countries' Technical Cooperation Program (TTCP) and is organised using the Five Eyes eight working groups: innovation, information-sharing, undersea capabilities, quantum science, artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomy, advanced cyber, hypersonics and counter-hypersonics, and electronic warfare.

Innovation and information-sharing are the overarching point of Pillar Two as it drives the capabilities of all the working groups. Part of this are innovation challenges that the AUKUS partners release to drive particular innovation. The challenge series is said to bring together the AUKUS innovation systems, so that capability can be rapidly developed and shared securely for the collective benefit of AUKUS partners. The innovation challenge enhances collective research and development and knowledge exchanges between Australia, America and the United Kingdom to aid in the acceleration of scientific design and capabilities to bolster the AUKUS alliance. The innovation side of AUKUS is also meant to trickle into civilian markets by bringing innovation, enhancing advanced manufacturing capabilities, and creating a highly skilled workforce.

Undersea capabilities pertaining to warfare have become a focus shift in recent years as the undersea domain becomes not just more complex and challenging but also fundamental in protecting Australian national interests and security, particularly in the South China Sea and amidst China's attacks on undersea cables. AUKUS is, at its forefront, going to improve underseas capabilities for all of the countries involved. Particularly as nuclear powered submarines like the American Virginia Class, and the soon to be SSN-AUKUS, are faster and able to stay underwater longer with a nearly limitless power supply. These submarines will be able to be on mission for nearly three months compared to the current Australian capability of eleven days, and will also be bigger, giving it a larger array of weaponry. The Virginia class submarine can carry 25 torpedoes, and 12 to 40 vertical launching tomahawk cruise missiles for hitting targets on land.

One of Pillar Two's main strategic goals is to minimize the lead that China currently has in dual-use emerging technologies such as quantum science and AI. By working collaboratively with American and British industry, Australia not only has the ability to bolster its own industries but also access both American and British markets and minds through a collaborative approach. Because of this, each AUKUS nation can benefit from the pool of minds at its disposal.

Hypersonic weapons are mainly long-range strike missiles which can travel five times the speed of sound and can be launched from land, sea and air. This technology is rapidly developing and much like the last three working groups, is an area in which Australia, America and the United Kingdom wish to be leading the charge. Specifically, AUKUS Pillar Two encompasses the Hypersonic Flight Test and Experimentation, or HyFLiTE project which looks to accelerate the development, testing, and evaluation of innovative hypersonic solutions. A funding pool of \$252 million USD has been created to fund the project. A key goal of HyFLiTE is to conduct up to six test flight campaigns by 2028.

Cyber is another domain that AUKUS focuses on as cyber is used to manipulate, deny, disrupt, degrade, or destroy targeted computers, information systems or networks, necessary for Australia to understand, navigate, and utilise for offensive and defensive purposes. However, not only is cyber important for military purposes, but also for the defence of civilian capabilities such as economic stability and growth through the protection of the digital economy. Cyber is another way civilians tangibly benefit from the AUKUS agreement other than state defence.



Electronic warfare is not just a byproduct of cyberspace but is a type of warfare which utilizes weaponry using the electromagnetic spectrum to attack enemy forces, facilities, or equipment. Electronic warfare is actually the innovation challenge focus point for 2025 between the AUKUS partners in their innovation working group. Electronic warfare is seen as a key capability, especially for the Indo-Pacific with China also looking to develop its electronic warfare capabilities such as high-power jammers to disrupt various networks to interfere with enemy operations by land, air, sea, and now, space.

And here comes Trump 2.0

As Trump shakes up the global order, there is an air of nervousness about where he stands on AUKUS, especially given his confused response when asked about it, revealing that he did not know what AUKUS was. However, top Republicans such as Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio have doubled down on America's AUKUS commitment, with Rubio stating that, "It is something that I think you're going to find very strong support for in this administration." It seems for now that Canberra is in positive spirits around the deliverability of the project and President Trump's commitments. However, Trump seems to be operating on a 'vibes-based' approach to international relations, so only time will tell.

The AUKUS alliance is already facing delays on the American side as delays in submarine shipbuilding haunt the American Navy's budget. Furthermore, Trump's tariff tirade could increase AUKUS costs, particularly due to tariffs on steel. Thus, the belief that Australia will receive its Virginia class submarines by early 2030 seems like more of a pipe dream than a reality. When this is put into the grand scheme of Australian military programmes, it is business as usual when it comes to cost blowouts and delays. When we cast an eye back to such programs as the Joint Strike Fighter F-35 program and the military Satellite Communications program known as SATCOM, it is evident that the issue of timeliness in delivery is a persistent challenge. The cost and timeline is less of a concern to Australia killing the agreement, rather, it seems Trump and the degrading situation in the South China Sea will be the measure of whether the programme comes to fruition and is a beneficial use of taxpayer funding.

Protector or puppeteer: Israel's weaponisation of sects and sovereignty in Syria

ROFIDA ARNAOUT | AUGUST 19

This article contains discussions of sensitive and potentially distressing topics, including violent crime. Reader discretion is strongly advised. If you find these subjects upsetting or triggering, please consider whether continuing is right for you.

After 13 brutal years of war, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December, following a flash offensive by Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), a breakaway faction of Al Qaeda, felt like a long-awaited victory for many Syrians.

The authoritarian state that had ruled through fear, censorship, and brutality had finally fallen. Relief bloomed, and along with it, hope for a new beginning, not dictated by differences but by unity. But, that moment of relief was short-lived.

Sectarian tensions have always been present beneath the surface of Syrian society, but only began to become more overt following the appointment of Syria's new government, led by interim President Ahmed Al-Sharaa. Fears of renewed sectarian violence quickly materialised. Just weeks ago, fierce clashes broke out in the city of Suweida, a majority Druze area in southern Syria, between Druze militias and armed Bedouin tribes. The initial violence left more than 30 dead and 100 wounded.

Current tensions between the two groups date back to 2000, following the killing of a Druze man by a Bedouin during a land dispute, which triggered protests that were later met with government repression. This latest wave of violence was reportedly sparked by the kidnapping of a Druze merchant at a checkpoint. The kidnapping spiralled into a chain of retaliatory attacks rooted in tribal and sectarian grievances, exacerbated by the fragility of a post-war environment and transitional government.



Who are the Druze?

The Druze are a small religious minority in Syria, known to be an offshoot of Islam, making up around 3% of Syria's pre-war population of 24 million. Like other minority groups, the Druze have long had a complicated relationship with the Syrian state and regional politics.

Though they participated in anti-Assad protests during the early days of the Arab Spring, their communities were largely spared the worst of the war, unlike Sunni-majority areas like Damascus and Aleppo – until now.

That changed when Hikmat al-Hijri, a prominent Druze religious leader, publicly called on Israel to intervene and protect the Druze. His comments were met with immediate backlash from some within the community, with some labelling him an “unhinged warlord” and insisting he did not speak for them.

On the same day as al-Hijri’s plea, July 16, Israel launched aerial strikes on both Syrian government targets and Bedouin positions in Suweida. The Bedouins are traditionally nomadic tribes inhabiting the outskirts of Syrian cities. This mobility gave them greater freedom to escape escalating violence during the war, but also made it harder to avoid accusations of shifting loyalties.

The Israeli Defence Forces claimed the strikes conducted were to ‘protect the Druze’. However, far from helping, the timing and nature of Israel’s strikes, under the pretext of ‘protection’, only heightened tensions and undermined Syria’s newly gained post-Assad sovereignty. Israeli interference after a 13-year war led to public anger and sectarian insecurities being misdirected at the broader Druze community, who were blamed for inviting an occupying force to interfere.

Protection or provocation?

This, of course, wasn’t Israel’s first incursion into Syria’s internal affairs. Since the start of the war in 2011, Israel has repeatedly undermined Syrian sovereignty, from its longstanding occupation of the Golan Heights, to its covert support of various rebel groups. Reports have also alleged that Israel funded more than a dozen militias, including HTS, treated wounded fighters in Israeli hospitals on occupied Syrian land, and consistently carried out airstrikes on Syrian military bases.

By weakening and destabilising the Assad regime and supporting rebel factions, Israel hoped to push back against Iranian-backed militias and sabotage any possibility of Iran gaining more power or influence, and keep Syria fragmented. Some Suweida residents argue that Israel’s interest in Syria has never been about the freedom or safety of Syrians, but the security of its borders. These rebels, once aided by Israel, were only a means to an end: the end of Bashar al-Assad.

Sectarianism as a strategy

This strategy of sectarian puppeteering is not unique to Syria. In 2015, following a terrorist attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited France and encouraged French Jews to come “home” to Israel. He was then publicly rejected by some French Jews who broke into the French national anthem in defiance, rejecting the idea that their religion should negate their national identity.

Netanyahu’s urge for migration to Israel has been viewed by some as an attempt to isolate a religious group and redirect it toward Israel. The same pattern arguably plays out in Syria, where Israel’s actions have suggested its agenda focuses on fueling instability and encouraging fragmentation.

Restoring peace or fuelling division?

The Syrian security forces that emerged after Assad’s fall, made up of various rebel factions, were deployed to de-escalate and restore order. Instead of peacekeeping, these forces carried out their own share of sectarian abuses and executions. In Suweida, they conducted home invasions, publicly humiliated and violated Druze men by shaving their beards, a symbol of faith, and executed unarmed civilians.

In one video that spread across Syrian social media, three relatives, Moaz Arnous, Baraa Arnous, and their cousin Osama, were shot at as they desperately tried to climb over a balcony to escape. Another gruesome video showed a 60-year-old man being interrogated by armed men for his religion. He repeatedly insisted he was simply Syrian, and when he finally admitted to being Druze, he was shot dead.

Just a few months earlier, in March, massacres unfolded in the coastal provinces of Tartus and Latakia, targeting Alawites, another Syrian minority group. Over 1,000 people were killed, among them children. Again, HTS-affiliated factions were implicated. Again, no one was held accountable.

Current situation

Since then, Bedouin families have been evacuated from Suweida, and a ceasefire has been implemented on the 19th of July (although this has since been violated). Food, water, and medical supplies are dwindling, and the remaining Druze residents left behind are pleading for help.

New fears of further attacks now add to concerns about the humanitarian crisis. In one hospital, a volunteer medic was shot dead at point-blank range, an execution style killing captured on CCTV and now circulating across social media. Meanwhile, Syrian authorities have banned journalists from entering the city.

The reliance on CCTV footage or videos filmed by perpetrators themselves to document such human rights violations raise serious concerns about the scale of incidents that remain unrecorded. Amid growing distrust in the government’s handling of the investigation into the coastal massacres, now cited by the UN Syria Commission of Inquiry as acts likely constituting war crimes, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has called for an independent inquiry into the violence in Suweida.

Israel, meanwhile, continues to push further into southern Syria, even as it faces growing international backlash amidst its treatment of Palestinians in Gaza. The tide appears to be shifting: Denmark, which currently holds the European Union (EU) presidency, is considering sanctions against Israel, while countries such as France and Australia are moving toward recognising a Palestinian state.

Caught between internal violence and foreign intervention, hopes for change in Syria are quickly eroding. What was meant to be a new chapter has quickly reverted to old patterns and grievances. Sectarianism, weaponised by foreign actors and the absence of justice, remains one of the greatest ongoing threats to Syria’s future.

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Nationalism, Femicide, and New Masculinities: The Far-Right's Weaponisation of Violence Against Women

The Cut: Female Genital Mutilation and its Persistence in the Modern World

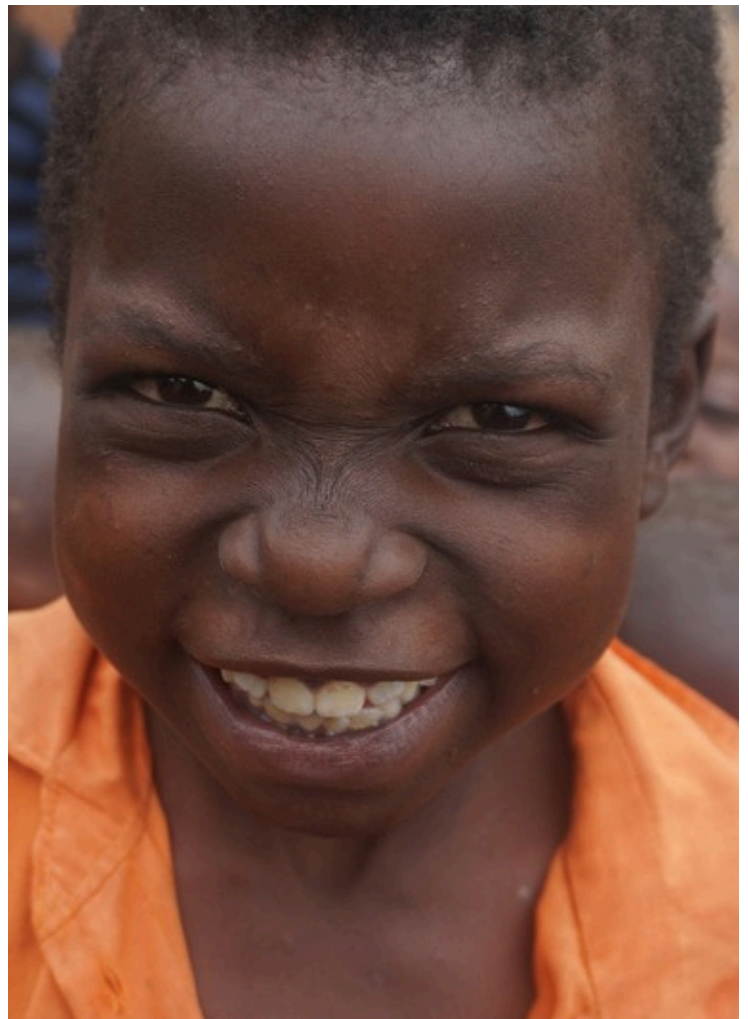
JASMINE PSOMAS | APRIL 8

Two months on from the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), we find ourselves having to condemn a practice that many would be surprised to learn remains a prominent issue.

What is FGM?

While possibly having heard about it, it's more than likely that most don't actually know what FGM entails. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines FGM as 'all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons'.

While this may seem like a rather distant issue, it is actually a lot closer to home than we might think. In fact, a 2019 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, estimated that 53,000 girls and women now living in Australia have undergone FGM. Globally, the World Health Organisation predicts that more than 230 million have been affected. In terms of the demographic, FGM is typically carried out on girls between infancy and 18 years of age, with 15 being the average. Its continued and contemporary practice is relatively limited to Asia, the Middle East and as the undisputed epicentre, Africa. Indeed, a staggering 60% of cases worldwide are accounted for by Africa alone. So with the fundamental information and statistics in mind, we naturally move to the why of it all; that is, why is FGM even practiced? Well, most commonly, FGM is conducted as part of the marriage ceremony and as a symbol of the transition from girlhood to womanhood. It is seen as a way to preserve femininity and modesty, ultimately ensuring premarital fidelity. Due to the deep-rooted cultural significance of the practice, it should hopefully become clear why education and awareness on the ground will be crucial to combat the persistence of FGM. Apart from the obviously problematic societal consequences, namely, perpetuating the systematic oppression and abuse of women, there are also significant health related consequences that develop from FGM.



It must be made clear from the outset that there are unequivocally no health benefits to this practice. On the contrary, it leads to both short term and lifelong psychological, physical and sexual health complications. To name just a few, most girls will experience post-traumatic stress disorder, infection, chronic pain and increased risk associated with childbirth. Most harrowing of all, FGM is a silent killer. A girl will die every 12 minutes as a result of FGM, with the global annual death toll estimated to be over 44,000. In Africa, the practice is the 4th biggest cause of death in women and girls.

The Challenges of Fighting FGM

In order to show true commitment to the rights of women and girls everywhere, the day must come where a worldwide ban on FGM and associated practices is possible. Unfortunately, there remain a number of obstacles in the way which must be addressed before we will see that day. Indeed, there is still controversy surrounding whether international human rights should even be promoting cross-cultural engagement to combat FGM.

To those from Western cultures, it may feel rather mind-boggling as to why there are challenges or objections to such a brutal practice. However, it is important to remember that practices like FGM are deeply enshrined in culture and society, and require a more nuanced understanding than just a knee-jerk reaction to name and shame. Indeed, the West does not always mean best and African people have actually raised objections to the imposition of Western ideals and understandings of 'female genital mutilation', even of the very name itself. There is an overwhelming sense that it implies a deliberate attempt to hurt family and community members, misconstruing its purpose and eliciting misguided and inappropriate reactions. For us, FGM is simply a gross violation of human rights which functions as one of, if not the most, extreme forms of gender discrimination. It is true that this Western view of FGM is quite cut and dry, but in being so, it runs the risk of vilification where it may not be warranted.

As such a unique intersection of culture, gender and race in human rights, FGM poses some rather complex questions. For example, 'If FGM is a patriarchal violation of the fundamental human rights of women, how should international law respond to the fact the FGM is practiced by women on women and girls?'

Now this is where the complexities rear their heads and circular arguments start to form. If we reject a universalist approach to FGM, that is, a 'one-size fits all' approach, cultural relativism may instead be exploited by states as a way to excuse the oppression and abuse of women through 'cultural' practices like FGM.

Another interesting argument worth considering is the emerging double standard and legal hypocrisy associated with the rise of female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) in the West. While it may initially seem problematic to conflate the two, there are actually a number of valid arguments to the contrary. First of all, conceptually or medically the two are really quite similar. Indeed, they share potential short and long term complications, both psychological and physical. Where some may say that FGM is discordantly rooted in controversial cultural ideals of femininity and purity, cannot the same be said for cosmetic surgery? While it may be described as a form of 'empowerment', the motivation behind FGCS stems also from societal expectations, particularly, the inescapable pressure to conform to hegemonic standards of beauty, typically for the sexual gratification of men. And so, if these practices are indeed so similar, how can we justify the disparities in their legal status? This dilemma has even been used as an argument for the decriminalisation and medicalisation of FGM. While an interesting argument, the sentiments are relatively flawed, specifically when considering the issue of consent. Again, we find ourselves in another vicious circular argument, the problematic and inherently racist double standard-

-and assumption that women of colour cannot 'willingly' consent to such an act. Perhaps, what remains most important to remember here, is that the average age of girls undergoing FGM is 15.



The Future of FGM

With an appreciation for the challenges of fighting the practice, the final step is to question how we can change the trajectory of FGM for good. There are already a number of relevant domestic laws in place which serve to protect those most vulnerable. In Victoria for example, the Crimes Act 1958 (Vic) directly prohibits FGM while the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic) may indirectly function to protect young girls who have been subjected to, or are at risk of being subjected to the practice. Across the way, the UK has taken further steps in protecting against FGM. In 2003, the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 came to be, providing a comprehensive, contextualised authority on FGM criminalisation, instead of assessing cases in isolation. In practice, this legislation however, has had some difficulties. These have included identifying victims, conducting medical examinations, persuading witnesses to give evidence and of course, gaining the trust of young women when asking them to give evidence against their own family. On a global scale, FGM is indeed recognised as a violation of human rights in international law. However, the efficacy of international law, as always, is questionable and the challenges surrounding enforceability are blaring. Indeed, as the statistics show, prevalence remains unacceptably high across the globe. As touched on earlier, what we need is to start on the ground. Appropriate, accessible strategies for countries where FGM is epidemic will likely prove the most effective and efficient way forward. A strong educational focus and awareness of the consequences of FGM in communities is key to changing attitudes and addressing the problem at the root. Charities like the Orchid Project as well as the work done by WHO and UNICEF are great examples of this and will continue to be instrumental in the future.

We even have the statistics to back up just how effective education can be. Indeed, opposition to FGM is unsurprisingly highest in women and girls who have a higher level of education, similarly, educated mothers are less likely to subject their daughters to it. The international community is presented with a rather colossal and complex task. Achieving justice for victims as well as prevention and protection for future generations will be contingent upon a befitting, bottom-up approach. Hopefully, by starting on the ground and addressing the problem with those most affected, we will be able to overcome the considerable challenges ending FGM faces. Unity and understanding of the cultural nuances that exist around such a sensitive practice will be imperative to achieving the end goal – dismantling FGM from the inside out.



Nationalism, Femicide, and New Masculinities: the far-right's weaponisation of violence against women

LIZZY BINGHAM | JUNE 3

Gendered violence is on the rise; it's been declared an epidemic in several countries, including Australia, with the past few years having proved particularly dangerous for women. For the hardline conservatives, there are a host of people to blame; recently, immigrants have been a favourite. The scapegoating of vulnerable communities by this section of the political spectrum has proven not just ineffective at combating male violence against women, but points towards a worrying trend of the dehumanisation of one group in the name of protection for another.

The Misogyny of Trump's America

American student Laken Riley was just 22 years old when she died from head trauma and asphyxiation at the hands of an undocumented Venezuelan immigrant. Her murder was a major talking point for the Republican Party in the 2024 election.

To Trump's voters, her tragic death seemed to be a reminder about the threat of Latino "rapists" that Trump had warned about in his first term. Even better, they could mobilise women by placing female safety at the forefront of their campaign. However, Trump's win required a convenient lack of discussion around the – at least – 26 women who have accused him of sexual misconduct, a court's finding that he is liable for sexual abuse, and his past graphic sexual comments about women.

Nevertheless, the Trump administration certainly capitalised on Riley's death, ushering in the Laken Riley Act. Introduced in January 2025, it requires the mandatory detention of undocumented immigrants who have been charged with certain crimes, most low-level and relatively non-violent such as theft or burglary. These people do not have to be convicted to be detained and do not have the right to apply for bail.

This ominous beginning to Trump's term sets a dangerous precedent; it degrades the right to due process that every person in the United States has, including immigrants. This right to due process is protected by the Fifth Amendment in the American Constitution, a document which is often a focus for American conservatives. When asked if he needs to maintain every person's right to the Fifth Amendment, Trump replied, "I don't know. I'm not a lawyer," and expressed concern over the volume of trials that would be needed to ensure the process.

Critics of the Trump administration point out hypocrisy in his response. Immigrants are scapegoated in the assumption that they will commit crime – including against women – but the President often ignores the Constitution, a document many of his supporters feel passionately about. His voter bases' claims to unending loyalty to the Constitution may be reasonably called into question if they are willing to look past Constitutional violations for the sake of their own narratives.



It appears hypocritical, too, that Trump played a role in freeing Andrew Tate and his brother and bringing them back to the States, despite their charges of rape and sex trafficking.

In many cases, abuse can be homegrown; a product of one's own society rather than solely imported. Fraternities – an all-American rite of passage – are notorious for their rape culture; women in sororities are 74% more likely to be assaulted than other women in college. Likewise, America's largest Christian denomination, the Southern Baptist Church, is deeply conservative and dominates the 'Bible Belt', a region which Trump won in a landslide in 2024. Almost 400 Southern Baptist church leaders have pleaded guilty to or been convicted of sex crimes since 1998, with most of the cases involving white male perpetrators. In recent years, there have been greater discussions around sexual violence in the church, as well as its patriarchal structure, which has been found to be a breeding ground for sexual abuse.

Save Europe – or its women?

Europe, too, has had a moral panic around immigration. Nationalist ideas have long been amplified on social media, but reached TikTok several years ago, with users exclaiming that their leaders need to 'save Europe'. The conservative Reform party in the United Kingdom certainly feels this way, promising to secure Britain's borders as a major party policy. Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform, was, unsurprisingly, a staunch supporter of Brexit. He expressed concern that Pakistani gangs, targeting young British girls, are being ignored.

The Reform focus, however, disregards the broader issue in the UK of general violence against women; it was declared a national emergency last year. In July 2024, three women were killed by the 'crossbow killer'. The murderer raped his ex-girlfriend following their breakup, and killed her, her sister, and her mother. Last year, another British citizen murdered three girls at a dance class – they were between the ages of six and nine. He injured several other young girls. Once again, immigration is clearly not the sole cause of violence and femicides. In France, the true extent of sexual violence committed by nationals became clear in the Gisele Pelicot case, in which at least 50 different men raped Pelicot after she was drugged by her husband. Most of the offenders lived within 50 kilometres of her house; one she knew personally, one was a soldier, one a nurse, many with wives and children of their own. Pelicot's case demonstrates that it is not necessarily strangers women need be most worried about, but often those around them. Globally, current and former intimate partners account for up to 38% of femicide's perpetrators. Over 51,000 women were murdered by their intimate partners or family members alone in 2023. This issue must be front and centre in Europe's fight against gender-based violence.

Too Close to Home

Australia voted no to Opposition Leader Peter Dutton's immigration policies at the 2025 election, but that doesn't ensure that the tide has turned on social attitudes. Anthony Albanese declared violence against women to be a "national crisis" last year, with one woman murdered every four days, an upwards trend in the last few years. Many communities are especially impacted, including Indigenous women, as well as refugee and migrant women who face challenges reporting and seeking help for violence. At least 69 women were murdered in acts of femicide last year, but some reports place the number significantly higher. Australian women are over three times more likely to experience sexual violence at the hands of a man they know than by a stranger.

This May, a 'She Matters' mural, dedicated to women who have allegedly died as a result of male violence, was defaced with the words "war on men". The mural, located in Hosier Lane, has the names and pictures of over 100 women. This flagrant disrespect for the mural, and the women on it, shows a lack of compassion for gendered violence – and also demonstrates a worrying attitude. 40% of Australian men under 35 feel that feminism has gone too far, and nearly 20% of Australian men believe that feminism should be violently resisted if necessary; but in the face of mass violence experienced by women, this idea must be challenged if we are to improve women's safety.

The Bondi Stabbing was a horrific reminder that Australia is not immune to misogynistic violence, necessitating feminist perspectives. When Joel Cauchi attacked the Bondi Junction shopping centre in April last year, he killed six people, five of whom were women, and stabbed a total of 14 women and three men. Before Cauchi's identity – white and Australian – was released, there was speculation on social media about the attacker, particularly that they were an Islamic extremist committing an act of terrorism, despite no information to suggest this. At least two people were wrongly named as the perpetrator, which spread Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-semitic rhetoric.



After the identity of the killer was released, however, the attack was branded a mental health crisis, and it was claimed that his motivations were not ideological, despite Cauchi's focus on attacking women. Following the incident, Cauchi's father said his son was "desperate for a girlfriend", which suggests the attack was an act of incel violence, incidents which are becoming increasingly common with the rise of the 'manosphere'. It appears that Cauchi's motivations were rooted in a hatred for women, giving rise to considerations about whether gender-based attacks like the Bondi Stabbing can be considered terrorism themselves. Though a term often reserved for non-nationals, the incident, and its response, begs the question of why violence against women is so often deemed separate to political violence. In the wake of the stabbing, Australia will review its definition of terrorism for a new era, one in which mass violence against women may be addressed with the appropriate severity.

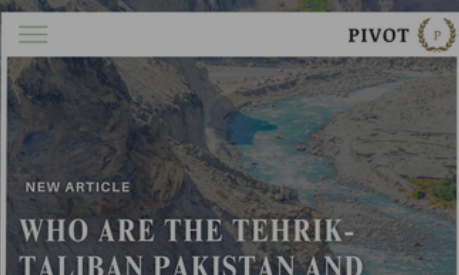
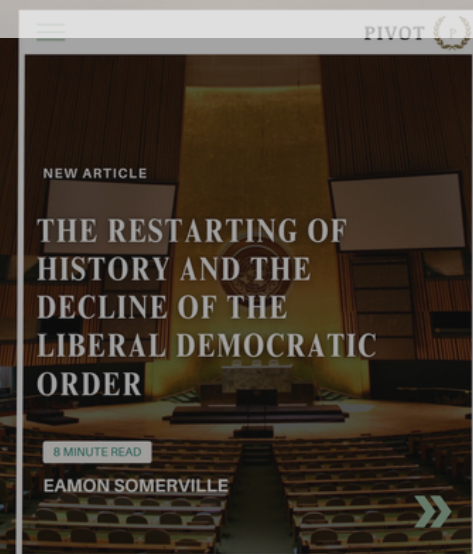
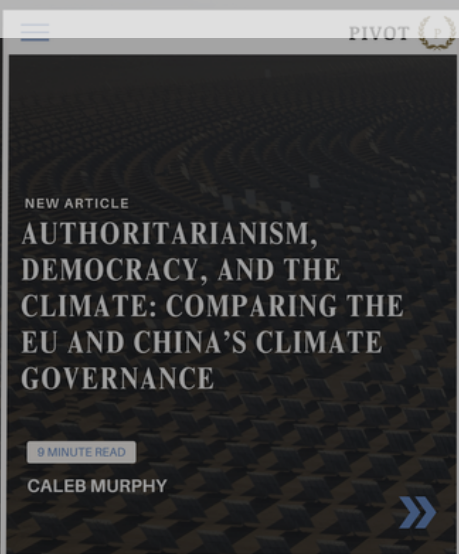
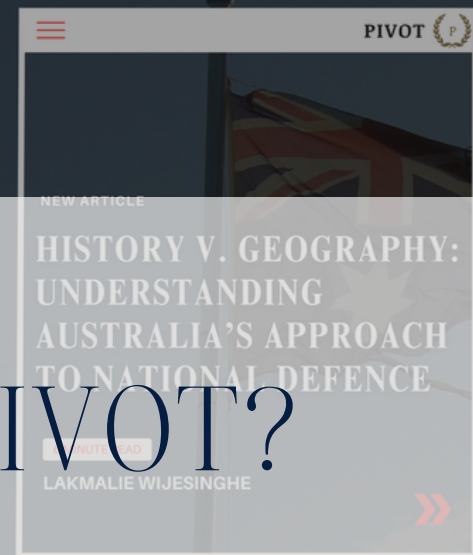
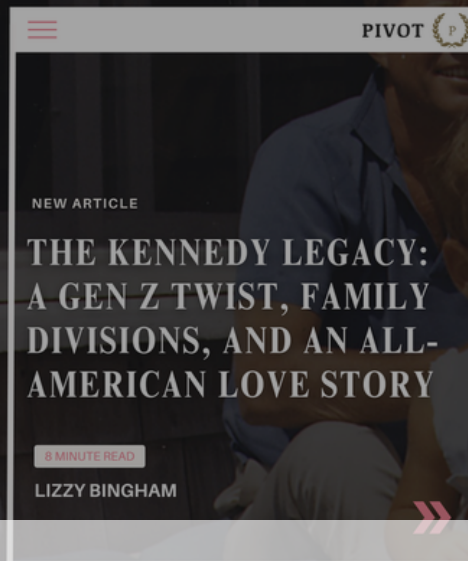
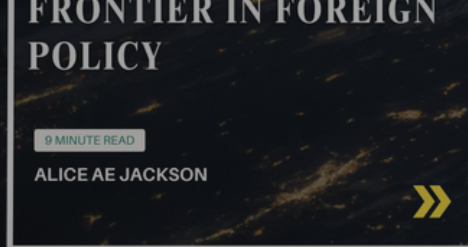
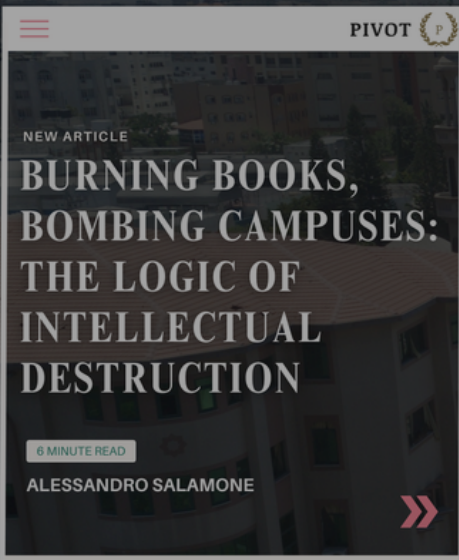
Defining and Combating Violence

It is not uncommon for vulnerable communities to be scapegoated in apparent concern for women. When one woman is murdered every ten minutes by a partner or family member around the world, it is clear what the issue is – male violence against women. 140 women and girls are killed every day by someone close to them.

These appalling statistics display the universality of gendered violence, as well as the necessity to prevent and combat it – and claiming that specific marginalised groups (often immigrants or those of 'other' races or religions) are the primary reason for the issue is disingenuous.

The West's preoccupation with immigrant men's violence must extend to their national men to effectively fight the issue. We cannot shy away from issues in our own communities; after all, if one in five women experience sexual abuse in our country, it's very likely to know someone who has committed that violence. Femicide and sexual assault does not just involve sporadic, disconnected murders of women and girls – it is the result of consistent, systemic failures to ensure women's safety, and cannot be boiled down to increased immigration. Women's safety must be at the forefront of national security, in Australia and globally, to work towards a more equitable future that gives women and girls the justice and security that they deserve.

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