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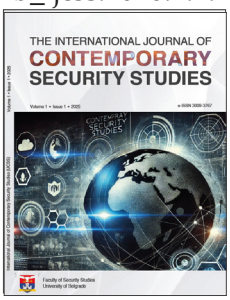
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Review article

The Balance of Power in Ukraine and Deterrence Effectiveness Against Nuclear-Armed Russia

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ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised several significant questions regarding the impact of deterrence, the European balance of power and the ability of current security frameworks to restrict the actions of nuclear-armed revisionist powers. This paper uses an integrated theoretical framework consisting of deterrence theory, the balance of power theory, the security dilemma and neorealism to analyze the dynamic relationships between Russia, Ukraine and the Western alliance. The primary contribution of the paper is to develop a comprehensive analytical framework to evaluate the relationship between different aspects of deterrence (i.e., to prevent an initial attack, to limit further escalation and to preclude the use of nuclear weapons) and the relative performance of each within the context of nuclear asymmetrical. The paper employs qualitative analysis of secondary literature, policy documents and empirical developments since 2014 to evaluate the extent to which Western military, economic and informational strategies to deter Russia have been successful, and Russia's corresponding adaptations including nuclear signaling and hybrid escalation. The paper demonstrates that while deterrence was ineffective in stopping Russia's initial attack on Ukraine, it has been somewhat effective in restricting further escalation, preserving NATO's territorial integrity and in preventing the use of nuclear weapons. However, the paper also demonstrates that the conflict highlights the inherent structural limitations of deterrence and the balance of power approach when used to protect non-member states from nuclear coercion. Overall, the Ukraine conflict provides clear evidence of the ongoing relevance and the growing constraints of classical realist frameworks in the face of increasingly complex and dangerous forms of conflict. Furthermore, the paper identifies the need for new approaches to deterrence and defense planning that consider the increasing complexity of the international security environment.

KEYWORDS

Deterrence, balance of power, Ukraine, Russia, nuclear weapons.

1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine is much more than a conflict between two neighboring countries. The war in Ukraine is a proving ground for some of the most enduring issues in International Relations: How do states deter aggression, especially from nuclear-armed adversaries? Can the balance of power be maintained when one side is committed to revising the status quo through force? How do the securi-

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ty dilemmas facing each side as they attempt to improve their respective security create the potential for an escalating war? Most broadly, do the classical theories that have guided our understanding of world politics continue to explain the behavior of states in an era of hybrid warfare, nuclear blackmail and information operations?

When Russian Tanks entered Ukraine in February 2022, it was not the first time that Moscow had challenged the post-Cold War Order. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the proxy war in eastern Ukraine served as early warning signs that the assumptions underlying the stability of European Security, the inviolability of borders and the deterrent capabilities of the West were far weaker than many had assumed (Mearsheimer, 2014). The large-scale invasion of Ukraine by a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the owner of the world's largest nuclear arsenal destroyed any remaining illusions. Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has been a test of deterrence, the cohesion of the Western Alliance and the ability of international organizations to manage great power conflict in the nuclear age.

The article examines three related research questions. First, why did deterrence fail to stop Russia's conventional aggression against Ukraine, but generally succeeded in preventing attacks against NATO member states? Second, how has nuclear asymmetry affected the dynamic of escalation, the behavior of the Western Alliance and the limits of Western intervention? Third, what does the Ukraine war tell us about the current relevance and limitations of deterrence theory, the balance of power logic, the security dilemma, and neorealism?

The overall goal of this article is to offer a theoretically grounded and empirically informed evaluation of the effectiveness of deterrence during the Ukraine conflict and to derive wider conclusions regarding the state of European and Global Security in the emerging era of great power rivalry.

The article is organized as follows. First, it develops a theoretical base, providing a review of the four dominant theories that help us understand the conflict: Deterrence Theory, Balance of Power Theory, the Security Dilemma and Neorealism. Second, the Ukraine war is situated in historical and strategic terms, examining the interrelation of conventional and nuclear forces, alliance politics and the risk of escalation. Third, the core of the paper evaluates the success of Western deterrence policies toward Russia employing a variety of military, political and informational tools. Fourth, the paper derives a set of implications for the development of European and Global Security and offers recommendations for improving deterrence and crisis management in the years ahead.

The Ukraine conflict has provided a live laboratory for testing several of the most important theories in international relations. Four theories are especially relevant here: Deterrence Theory, Balance of Power Theory, the Security Dilemma, and Neorealism. Each provides a distinct perspective on how states act in a period of acute insecurity, and together they illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the four approaches.

2. Methodology

This study is based upon a qualitative, conceptual-analytical methodology. As such, it is based on a systematic analysis of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed articles from the academic literature, policy studies, public declarations from governments and open-source empirical accounts of the Ukraine conflict from 2014 to 2024. The selection of sources was made to include a broad cross-section of theoretical perspectives and policy views, with special emphasis placed on scholarly work focused on deterrence, nuclear signaling, alliance politics and the escalation process.

The article does not intend to contribute original quantitative data nor causal models. Instead, its value lies in theoretical synthesis and interpretive analysis using empirical developments to illustrate how classical international relations theories function in the contemporary context of nuclear-armed conflict.

Deterrence Theory

At its simplest, deterrence seeks to influence the decision-making of an adversary by creating the threat of unacceptable consequences should an adverse action be taken (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2004). In the traditional view of deterrence, credible (the adversary believes that the threats will be followed through), capable (the means exist to punish or deny objectives) and communicative (the adversary understands what is being threatened and why) are required. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was anchored by the mutually assured destruction concept to maintain peace despite extensive proxy wars on the fringes of the system (Jervis, 1979).

However, the Ukraine conflict presents a variation on this traditional view of deterrence. Unlike NATO members, Ukraine enjoys neither the protection of explicit security assurances, nor an independent nuclear deterrent. To date, Western deterrence of Russian escalatory actions has relied primarily on the threat of economic sanctions, military supplies, and diplomatic isolation rather than the threat of direct military intervention. Moreover, Russia has used nuclear signaling to deter greater Western engagement, thereby increasing the stakes and diminishing the options available to the West (Acton, 2022). The issue is whether "punishment-based" or "denial-based" deterrence can be successful against an adversary willing to incur considerable costs, while simultaneously threatening to employ nuclear weapons.

Balance of Power Theory

The idea that stability arises from an approximate equality of power among states is as ancient as the field of International Relations (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). The balance of power model assumes that no state is permitted to grow strong enough to dominate the system; alliances emerge and shift to counter the rise of a particular threat. The post-Cold War unipolar moment (the temporary predominance of the United States) has given way to renewed multipolarity and regional imbalance as Russia rebuilds its military capability and pursues to revise the European order (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004).

Ukraine is positioned at the cusp of this evolving balance. Ukrainian aspirations to associate with the West have repeatedly prompted Russian attempts to establish a sphere of influence in its "near abroad." Western responses in the form of sanctions, military assistance, and limited forward deployments in Eastern Europe constitute an effort to reestablish a balance of power against Russian revisionism. However, the success of these measures depends on the nuclear dimension: Can a regional balance of power be established without provoking catastrophic escalation?

Security Dilemma Theory

The security dilemma describes the tragic logic of how the measures that one state takes to increase its own security (for example, military build-up, formation of alliances) are seen as a threat by another, leading to countermeasures that ultimately decrease the security of all parties involved (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). In the case of Ukraine, Russia has long considered NATO expansion and Western support as existential threats, thus legitimizing its actions as defensive. Conversely, Ukraine and the West see Russian aggression as unprovoked revisionism that necessitates robust counteraction.

The Ukraine war illustrates the standard security dilemma dynamics: Each party's moves to deter or defeat the other serve to heighten mutual distrust and destabilization. The additional layer of fear created by nuclear signaling serves to exacerbate these fears, as both sides seek to stay below the threshold of nuclear escalation that would render control over the course of the war impossible.

Neorealism

Neorealism (or structural realism) exists at the next level of abstraction, assuming a structural theory of human conflict whose roots lie not in individual actors but in the anarchy of the international system itself (Waltz, 1979). States are rational actors that seek to maximize their security; the distribution of capabilities (especially military and nuclear capability) shapes the likelihood of war or peace between actors. Rather than rooting conflict in human nature or the ambition of leaders

(classical realism), neorealism highlights the constraining influence of systems and the inexorable logic of competition between states.

For the neorealist theorist, the Ukraine conflict is a product of power transition and the failure of deterrence at the outer edges of the system. Workers of the iron hand of the North, Russians are expending themselves trying to reclaim and restore their sphere of influence while simultaneously attempting to check NATO encroachment. The Western response derives from alliance commitments, interest in avoiding direct confrontation with a nuclear peer and the need to preserve credibility in the eyes of other potential challengers (China).

Each lens tells us about a different aspect of the Ukraine conflict. Deterrence theory teaches us how much of Western restraint, and indeed much of Russia's nuclear coercion, depend on questions of credibility, signaling, and control of escalation. Balance of power theory identifies Ukraine as part of a shifting continental equilibrium, a system transitioning from imbalance regionally to counterweighting alliances. The security dilemma identifies the way that reciprocal threat perceptions lead to increased risk of escalation even as actors profess themselves interested only in self-defense. Neorealism teaches us why this conflict erupted at the very margins of the international system, where security guarantees were weakest and power transitions most marked. Together, these analyses provide for a high-level overview of the factors necessary to assess the effectiveness of deterrence across several degrees of escalation in the Ukraine war.

The Ukraine war has generated a vast literature of international relations theory, military strategy, regional studies, and security policy. Scholars have weighed in on its causes and course and its implications for the balance of power, deterrence, and the future of nuclear stability in Europe. We will now situate our analysis in the context of that scholarship. Most accounts of the Ukraine crisis have begun with the post-Cold War enlargement of NATO and the European Union. Proponents in the West argued it was a matter of giving the Central and Eastern European states the opportunity to join the liberal international order (Asmus, 2002). Critics particularly in the realist tradition contend that NATO enlargement threatened Russia's vital interests and made conflict over Ukraine virtually unavoidable (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sarotte, 2021). The 2008 Bucharest Summit where Ukraine and Georgia were declared to be eventual NATO members marks an inflection point in Moscow's perception of its threats. The color revolutions of the 2000s of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and then the 2014 Euromaidan protests share some blame for further rousing Russian ire. Revolution in the 2000s to Russia was a Western-conceived effort to erode its influence and engender regime change, not the democratic cries for self-determination that Westerners ascribed attempted to the uprisings (Wilson, 2014). Annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas represented a definitive break with the post-Cold War order and bequeathed a new era of open confrontation between Russia and the West (Gessen, 2017; Menon & Rumer, 2015).

Evolution of geostrategic status of Ukraine

The geostrategic significance of Ukraine cannot be overstated. It is at the juncture of Europe and Eurasia, long a buffer zone and prize in great power rivalry (Brzezinski, 1997). In Russian eyes, control or sway over Ukraine integral to national security, access to economy and defense of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers abroad (Hill & Gaddy, 2015). For the West, helping to secure Ukraine is both a question of principle and preventing the formation of a Russian sphere of influence threatening NATO's eastern flank.

Before 2014, Ukraine had walked a diplomatic tightrope getting close to both the European Union and Russia while remaining outside of formal alliances. The 2014 revolution and Russian intervention shattered this ambiguity of direction in Ukraine's foreign policy. Since, Ukraine has oriented decidedly Westwards, seeking security guarantees, economic integration and military aid. This reorientation has made Ukraine the fulcrum of East-West power competition and a testing ground for deterrence beyond the NATO umbrella. Balance of power in Europe: From unipolarity to multipolarity

The end of the Cold War ushered in a period of dominance that has been referred to in commentary as a form of "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990/91). The United States and its allies

enjoyed a massive military, economic and technological lead. Russia got eviscerated with economic crisis and political turmoil and ironically was in no situation to challenge this new order. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia regained strength, however, and sought a more assertive role, modernizing its military and using energy and hybrid warfare to gain influence and gratify its interests (Giles, 2016).

By the 2010's the multipolarity in the European security situation was beginning to take root and Russia positioning itself as a counterweight back to NATO and the EU. This war in Ukraine has sped that trend and revealed both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Western alliance. Unity has been shown, but divisions over strategy, burden-sharing and risk tolerance remain (Deni, 2022).

Deterrence in practice: western strategies and Russian responses

The underlying theory of deterrence put much focus on credible threats and the manipulation of risk to inhibit action (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2004). In the Ukraine conflict, we see deterrence in used in multiple ways: (1) deterrence by denial and the attempts to fortify the Ukrainian defenses through military aid, training and intelligence sharing and, in a way, making Russian victory more costly and less possible to actually secure. (2) deterrence by punishment composed of threats and enforcement of harsh economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and the possibility of long-term problems of attrition warfare. (3) nuclear deterrence like explicit and implicit messages that escalation to NATO territory could incur a nuclear retaliation while Russia on its part argues that threat to its existence might open up its own use of nuclear weapons. While some analysts argue that Western deterrence has failed to stop an invasion thanks to lack of clarity, unity and credible commitment (Charap & Priebe, 2019), others state that in any case since 2022, the West has stepped up support and Ukraine was able to stop and actually roll back some Russian advances, suggesting partial deterrent success (Kofman & Lee, 2022). Still, Russia's nuclear weapons constrain the scope of Western intervention, with different messaging of Russia's nuclear status consisting of public exercises, changes in alert status, and rhetorical threats aimed at deterring both conventional escalation and actions threatening its regime. NATO has avoided direct military entanglement by declining requests of a no-fly zone and calibrating weapons deliveries to minimize escalation risks (Sauer & Revera, 2023).

The security dilemma and escalation

The dialectic of deterrence and security dilemma is apparent in the Ukraine case as Russia's efforts to secure its periphery and prevent NATO from expanding further are seen by the West as aggressive and destabilizing, while in turn Western military aid and troop deployments are viewed by Moscow as an existential threat and justification for further escalation. Scholars like Jervis (1978) and Glaser (1997) have pointed out the dangers of misperception and unintended escalation in these contexts. The war in Ukraine has featured multiple instances of signaling, counter-signaling and brinkmanship that raised fears of inadvertent or strategic escalation to nuclear levels (Acton, 2022). Both sides have attempted to mitigate the potential for such an escalation through backchannel communication, deconfliction lines and carefully calibrated public communication, but the margin for error has not been very broad.

Neorealism and Structure of Competition

To the neorealist, the Ukraine conflict reflects the workings of systemic declines in power and the failure of deterrence at the peripheries of the international system (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). With perceptions of the decline of strategic depth and proximity to threatening rival coalitions rising, Russia has sought to assert itself boldly whilst the West is constrained, unable to credibly reassure without the acceptance of the risk of direct conflict with a nuclear peer. Such dynamics are expected within the anarchical system in which great powers compete for security, influence and ultimately their existence. Neorealists will see implications that stretch well beyond the region with lessons to be drawn for actors (China, Iran, North Korea) that may seek to push Western deterrence to the limits once again (Kim, 2022).

Key debates and gaps

The literature surrounding Ukraine, deterrence and balance of power is wide and deep. Major debates include, for example, whether war was inevitable wherein realists assert that Russia's confrontation with the West was backed by the structure of international power, whereas others emphasize the agents of historical agency, miscalculation and domestic politics; on the success of deterrence or otherwise wherein some see the West as having responded too slowly or ambiguously whereas others highlight Ukraine's resilience and the alliance's unity; the role of the nuclear threat and whether Russia can regain its security footing and restore a new balance of power where there are varying opinions on whether it can be contained without being directly confronted or whether a new security architecture is required. This article therefore aims to contribute to these ongoing debates by synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirics with an emphasis on deterrence and balance of power in Ukraine.

The balance of power in Ukraine: Empirical analysis

To return to earlier points, the position of Ukraine in the European security system has changed dramatically over the past decade, and what was once considered a buffer state is now home to a multi-dimensional contest involving military, economic, informational and psychological power. This section examines the evolving balance of power among Russia, Ukraine and the western alliance since 2014.

At the outset of the 2022 invasion, Russia entered with a commanding superiority in conventional military power in terms of the number of troops, armor aircraft and artillery space (Kofman & Lee, 2022). However, Ukrainian troops received multiple years of Western training and a flow of modern weaponry and mounted a more effective defense than many would expect. To boot, everything from anti-tank missiles to drones to air defense to near real time intelligence helped Ukraine weather the first wave and manage a successful counteroffensive in Kharkiv, and later Kherson (Bronk, 2022).

Russia retorts with mass mobilization, long-range fires and attempts to adjust its capabilities to contest western weaponry. Essentially, the war has become a greasy war of attrition with the frontlines constantly changing and high casualties being taken by both sides. The power projection balance is ever changing due to who gets more help - westerners or Russians, and the resolve of the Ukrainian people.

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Nuclear signaling and escalation management

Throughout the war, Russia has employed its nuclear arsenal to threaten and coerce. Early in the invasion, President Putin placed Russian troops on a "special combat alert", and it's cited that Russian officials threaten nuclear action if they perceive the US is also upping the ante and providing even more support to Ukraine (Sauer & Revera, 2023). NATO is reiterated in their own nuclear deterrence and is careful not to do anything that could signal direct intervention in the conflict. However, this nuclear signaling is believed to have failed at reducing aid since Putin issued threats and has only proportionately limited the escalation of action in the European continent, (Acton, 2022). The fear of a nuclear disaster due to a miscalculation and thus accelerates the conflict remains high.

Alliances, institutions, and economic power

The war has tested western alliances for their duress and efficacy and caused solidarity from NATO particularly. NATO members have emoted to tripwire defense causing attacks of any kind to be an act of war. Perhaps even greater perhaps has been the EU which has imposed tariffs from blocking Russian end of its financial and banking systems, and use of elite networks (Connolly, 2022). But these repercussions have so far not seemed to yield a change in Russian action. Ukraine's bid to membership is symbolic and represents what is to come in the list of priorities that are shaking the regional balance of power.

Westerners, for example, have taken steps to isolate Russia economically and politically including imposing sanctions as a way to punish Russia for its aggressive actions. However, as Russia has found ways to adapt to those sanctions and as the conflict continues the effectiveness of the sanc-

tions as a tool of deterrence has become increasingly disputed. Additionally, as we see in the case of Russia's behavior in Ukraine and as well explore in greater detail in article 7 deterrence is not always a guaranteed success. The problem is that deterrence relies on a combination of factors — including the threat of punishment and the potential for an adversary to absorb the costs of failing to comply. As Russia's actions demonstrate, an adversary can choose to absorb those costs if they believe that failing to act aggressively will lead to a loss of "existential" interest. The issue then becomes determining whether those costs are worth the benefits of avoiding confrontation. As we saw in article 4, that calculation depends on a variety of factors including how much the adversary values its goals, what alternatives exist for achieving them, and whether the adversary believes that the other party will follow through on its commitments.

In the case of the Ukraine conflict, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine demonstrates that sanctions alone are insufficient as a means of deterring aggression. While the West has employed a range of sanctions including freezing assets of key officials, limiting access to capital markets, and restricting imports/exports Russia has managed to find ways to mitigate the effects of those sanctions. For example, Russia has turned to other countries including China and India for economic support and has also found ways to circumvent the impact of Western sanctions.

Furthermore, even as the conflict continues, Russia has shown no indication that it intends to withdraw from occupied territories or cease military operations despite the cost of sanctions. This raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool of deterrence particularly when the other party is willing to absorb the costs associated with sanctions. As noted earlier, the concept of "punishment" is a key component of the idea of deterrence. However, as the case of Russia demonstrates punishment alone is insufficient to deter an adversary from pursuing its objectives. If an adversary is willing to accept the costs of sanctions in order to achieve its goals, then sanctions alone are unlikely to provide a sufficient incentive to comply.

Moreover, because sanctions are imposed unilaterally by the United States and supported by many other Western nations there is a significant concern that sanctions will lead to unintended consequences such as an escalation of violence or the destabilization of neighboring countries. As discussed in Chapter 4, the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool of statecraft is highly dependent on the extent to which other countries particularly those in the region are able to cooperate in enforcing the sanctions.

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As such, the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine serve to highlight a critical shortcoming in the application of the deterrence model to contemporary international relations namely, the assumption that punishment alone will provide a sufficient incentive for compliance. In reality, the decision to impose sanctions or engage in any other form of coercive diplomacy should be made with a clear understanding of the potential consequences of those actions including the possibility of unintended consequences.

A second concern regarding the application of the deterrence model is the difficulty of assessing the level of commitment to the cause of the adversary. In the case of Russia as in the case of Nazi Germany prior to World War II the question of whether the leader of the country is committed to his cause is extremely difficult to assess. In such cases, it is impossible to know whether the threat of punishment will be sufficient to induce compliance or whether the leader is prepared to pay any price to achieve his objectives.

Finally, the deterrence model assumes that the adversary is rational in the sense that he weighs the potential costs and benefits of any course of action. However, as the case of Russia demonstrates an adversary may be willing to take extreme risks including risking the very survival of his country in pursuit of his objectives. In such cases, the deterrence model is of little value in predicting how the adversary will behave.

While the deterrence model provides a useful framework for analyzing the dynamics of international conflict and the potential for using coercion as a tool of statecraft it has several shortcomings. In particular, it fails to account for the subjective nature of commitment to cause the uncertainty surrounding the commitment of the adversary and the irrationality of the adversary.

As such, the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine serve to highlight the need for policymakers to adopt a more nuanced view of the potential effectiveness of deterrence and to carefully consider the potential unintended consequences of using coercion as a tool of statecraft. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of developing a broader range of tools beyond deterrence for managing international conflict and promoting stability.

Ultimately, as we will discuss in the final chapter of this article, the deterrence model is but one of the number of models that can be applied to analyze the dynamics of international conflict. By combining elements of multiple models and adopting a more nuanced view of the complex variables involved in international conflict, policymakers can develop a more comprehensive and effective approach to managing international relations and promoting peace.

In summary, the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine serves to illustrate the challenges of using deterrence as a tool of statecraft particularly when dealing with a committed adversary that is willing to absorb the costs associated with sanctions and other forms of coercive diplomacy. Moreover, it highlights the need for policymakers to think more creatively and broadly and to develop a more nuanced view of the complex dynamics of international conflict if they hope to manage international relations effectively and promote peace.

This section of the paper has provided an overview of the deterrence model and a review of the recent history of its application to contemporary international relations. As we move forward in this paper we will examine a series of challenges and limitations in the application of the deterrence model including the subjectivity of commitment to a cause the uncertainty surrounding the commitment of the adversary the irrationality of the adversary the subjective nature of the adversary's preferences the complexity of the variables involved in international conflict and the need to think more creatively and broadly in managing international relations and promoting peace.

Overall, the Ukraine war has disrupted the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe. This disruption has implications for the logic of deterrence and for the incentives facing non-nuclear states. It has also highlighted the limits of extended deterrence and the need for a new strategy to address the challenges of the post-Cold War world.

From a deterrence perspective, the crisis in Ukraine shows how deterrence can fail when the costs of maintaining the status quo are low compared to the costs of changing it. This is true not only for Russia but also for other states that might seek to challenge the current international order. If the international community is to prevent similar crises in the future, it needs to rethink the logic of deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons in the world today.

There are also implications for the future of European and global security. The crisis in Ukraine has exposed the weaknesses of the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe and has shown the limits of reliance on extended deterrence. A new security strategy is needed to address these challenges and to ensure that the international community can respond effectively to future crises.

That new strategy should include a renewed commitment to collective defense as embodied in Article V of the NATO treaty combined with a more robust and flexible framework for addressing emerging security challenges. The international community also needs to rethink the role of nuclear weapons in the world today and to develop new approaches to preventing and responding to crises like the one in Ukraine.

The next paragraph examines how the deterrence model and other models of state behavior apply to emerging challenges in the post-Cold War world. It reviews the challenges posed by the rise of new powers such as China and India and by emerging technologies such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. It also discusses the implications for the role of nuclear weapons and for the logic of deterrence in the world today.

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3. Research findings

3.1. The Ukraine war has caused a fracture in the security structure that existed in Europe since the end of the Cold War

The Budapest Memorandum of 199 in which Ukraine relinquished its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the United States and the UK has been made null and void by

Russian aggression. The collapse of the Budapest Memorandum has far-reaching implications for the logic of deterrence and for the incentives faced by non-nuclear states. NATO's strategy of enhanced forward presence deploying multinational battlegroups to the Eastern Flank has helped to restore some degree of deterrence vis-a-vis Russian expansionism. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has further solidified the Alliance's posture in the Baltic and Arctic regions. However, this expansion also runs the risk of reinforcing and justifying further militarization along Russia's borders. Non-NATO states such as Moldova, Georgia and others continue to be vulnerable to coercion or outright attack. Additionally, the credibility gap in extended deterrence is now a major challenge for Western strategists.

3.2. The implications of the Ukraine conflict on the future of non-proliferation

The most alarming consequence of the Ukraine conflict is its influence on the norms of non-proliferation globally. Inasmuch as the decision of Ukraine to relinquish the Soviet nuclear weapons it had inherited was celebrated as a triumph for international peace and security, today it is quoted as a warning. When a state does not possess a deterrent of its own, then it is vulnerable to being conquered by a neighbor who is either stronger or armed with nuclear weapons (Waltz, 1981; Budjeryn, 2022). For this reason, we can expect to see a reevaluation of the utility of nuclear weapons as a guarantee of sovereignty by states such as Iran, North Korea and even those in East Asia and the Middle East. We can reasonably anticipate that the ongoing fear of proliferation may be further aggravated by the perception that only nuclear-armed states are completely secure from invasion or regime change (Kim, 2022).

3.3. Security dilemmas and escalation management

The Ukraine war exemplifies how the security dilemma works in Eastern Europe, as each party moves to increase its own security. The actions taken by NATO, by Russia's mobilization and nuclear threats and by Ukraine's requests for advanced weapons systems are seen as threatening by the other party and prompt retaliatory actions and raise the likelihood of unintended escalation (Jervis, 1978). Furthermore, these dynamics are dangerous in light of the extreme information warfare, cyber operations and psychological manipulation that exist during the Ukraine war. Therefore, the possibility of misperceiving the intentions of the other party, miscalculating the other party's actions or accidentally escalating is always present, and therefore, the use of back-channel diplomacy, crisis hotlines and clear signaling is essential to contain the danger of an uncontrolled cycle of action and reaction (Acton, 2022).

3.4. Balance of power in a multipolar world

The conflict has hastened the emergence of a multipolar and unstable international environment. Russia's move toward China, India and other non-Western partners is both a reaction to the Western sanctions imposed upon it and a bid to create new centers of power (Gabuev, 2023). Although the West has displayed remarkable unity, the divergence of threat assessments, economic interests, and political pressures on individual states will limit the capacity of states to maintain a prolonged confrontation. Furthermore, China's aspirations for Taiwan, Iran's regional plans, and North Korea's persistent provocations are all influenced by the perceived successes and failures of deterrence in Europe (Kim, 2022). Today, the credibility of the military, economic and diplomatic commitments of the United States and its allies are on trial internationally.

3.5. Reconsidering deterrence, balance and realism

The Ukraine war has shown the limitations and applicability of traditional concepts in security studies. Deterrence remains a powerful analytical tool, yet it requires credibility, communication, and the determination of the adversary. The balance of power is still central, but asymmetric nuclear power modifies the strategic calculus, whereas the security dilemma generates an arms race and cycles of distrust. The systemic logic of neorealism has been confirmed by the resurgence of great-power competition, however, the experience in Ukraine also shows the significance of agency, leadership, and domestic politics. Based on these observations, therefore, researchers must revise their theories to take into consideration new forms of war (hybrid, informational, cyber) and the psychological and normative dimensions of escalation. Deterrence must thus be defined in terms of material capabilities and also of perceptions, signaling, and the willingness of parties to risk catastrophic loss.

Future scenarios: Risks and Opportunities

There are various scenarios that are likely to emerge looking ahead. First, the most probable short-term result is a protracted, attrition-based conflict with recurring periods of escalation and temporary ceasefires. This will test the unity of the West, exhaust resources and delay a resolution to the status of Ukraine. Second, accidents, miscalculations, or deliberate Russian attacks on NATO territory may provoke a direct conflict, with the attendant dangers of nuclear use. Third, a change in Russian leadership, a shift in the fortunes of battle, or changes in the international environment may provide an opportunity for negotiations, although the terms and duration of such an agreement are extremely uncertain. Fourth, the impression of vulnerability among non-nuclear states, the inability of the West to effectively deter, and the lessons learned by other revisionist powers may produce new crises, undermine global nonproliferation norms, and destabilize regional balances.

Policy Recommendations

Given the evolving nature of the war in Ukraine, the persistent risk of escalation, and the lessons for the global security architecture, policymakers must develop comprehensive, multi-faceted policy approaches to address the challenges presented by the war. The analyses suggest that effective deterrence and a sustainable balance of power cannot be achieved solely through military means; they require diplomatic, informational, economic, and normative approaches that are deliberately designed to minimize risks and signal resolve.

Signal deterrent commitments and escalation thresholds, especially concerning NATO's eastern border and reactions to attacks on NATO territory. A major lesson of Ukraine is that ambiguity in red lines and security guarantees undercuts the effectiveness of deterrence. For this reason, Western actors should engage in clarifying commitments. For NATO, this includes reaffirming Article 5 publicly, specifying the consequences of attacks on NATO territory and clearly articulating plans for rapid reinforcement of vulnerable member-states (Deni, 2022). For non-NATO states, signaling the types of support available from military, economic, diplomatic and informational avenues can diminish uncertainty and deter opportunistic aggression. Further, the unity of the alliance could be demonstrated not merely through military maneuvers or summits but also through coherent, synchronized public communication about escalation thresholds, the permanent nature of sanctions, and end-game objectives (Freedman, 2019).

Support and stabilize the military assistance provided to Ukraine to enhance deterrence through denial and to signal that resolve to endure is unwavering. Deterrence by denial relies on deterring potential aggressors through uncertainty and high costs. For this reason, continued provision of advanced weaponry (air defense, artillery, precision-guided munitions, drones) and training as well as intelligence to maintain the combat capability of Ukraine, are essential in order to deny an adversary the opportunity to escalate or consolidate its position on the battlefield. Additionally, financial support for Ukraine's infrastructure repair, cyber-defense and civilian resilience could improve Ukraine's ability to withstand hybrid and conventional assaults. Financial support, rebuilding

planning, and debt relief can be crucial for supporting Ukraine's ability to wage war and recover after the war.

Maintain crisis communication and deconfliction channels to mitigate the risks of nuclear and conventional escalation. Policymakers should maintain back-channel diplomacy, even in the face of public confrontations. Back-channel diplomacy are indispensable to clarify the intentions of the other party, to articulate the red lines of the other party, and to de-escalate crises (Acton, 2022). Military-to-Military Hotlines, Intelligence Sharing, and Mediation by Third Parties can help mitigate the risk of miscommunication. At the same time, Western leaders should reaffirm, both publicly and privately, the disastrous consequences of any nuclear use by each party, while refraining from using language that may be perceived as preparing for nuclear retaliation or regime change in Russia.

Strengthen Alliance Unity and Burden-Sharing. NATO and EU unity have proven to be a significant advantage for Ukraine but is not assured. To maintain credible deterrence and avoid the exhaustion of the alliance due to fatigue, increased contributions from all alliance members (both in terms of defense spending and non-military support) can demonstrate a collective commitment to the cause. Rapid incorporation of Finland and Sweden into the alliance, in a seamless manner, can also demonstrate that the security needs of new members can be addressed without undermining the unity of the alliance. However, the conflict may be lengthy, and hence, domestic publics must be prepared for extended involvement, which may include energy shortages, economic burdens and humanitarian obligations.

Renew Initiatives in Nonproliferation and Arms Control. The Ukraine war has diminished trust in nonproliferation and arms control initiatives. To restore the frameworks, partners could pursue diplomatic efforts to reaffirm the importance of nuclear restraint, including public backing for the Non-Proliferation Treaty and negative security assurances for non-nuclear states. Partners may also initiate Strategic Stability Talks with Russia (and, if possible, China) that concentrate on de-escalation, transparency and risk-reduction in both nuclear and conventional domains (Sauer & Revera, 2023). Engaging middle powers and non-aligned states in developing new consensus on arms reductions, confidence-building measures, and crisis-management mechanisms may also be beneficial.

Counter Disinformation and Promote Societal Resilience. Information warfare is central to both deterrence and conflict-resistance. Western and allied states must make investments in public diplomacy, media-literacy and the rapid identification of adversary misinformation campaigns. They should support independent journalism and fact-checking projects in Ukraine and throughout the region (Pomerantsev, 2022). The West must strengthen its defenses against cyberattacks, electoral interference and other types of hybrid warfare that seek to weaken domestic cohesion and alliance solidarity.

Preparation for Post-War Security Arrangements. Regardless of when the war concludes, a new European security framework will be needed. Consequently, policymakers must start discussing what type of security arrangements will be in place for Ukraine and other vulnerable states once the war concludes, regardless of whether through NATO, bilaterally or new multilateral arrangements. They should expedite Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO, where possible, by establishing clear benchmarks and timetables for membership or partnerships. Policymakers may also support initiatives for regional arms-control agreements, cross-border cooperation and reconciliation to lower the probability of renewed conflict.

In sum, both researchers and policymakers must learn from the Ukraine war and expand their military and deterrence doctrines to incorporate the aspects of hybrid warfare, cyber operations and the psychological dimensions of escalation. Additional investments in research and analysis to support academic and policy research on deterrence, escalation management and the evolving balance of power, which draw on interdisciplinary and international perspectives, may also be warranted.

4. Conclusion

The Ukraine War has developed into a defining crisis of the current global order that is testing the limits of deterrence, the resiliency of the European balance of power and the ability of Western and allied states to manage the persistent threat of nuclear escalation. Classical International Relations theories (deterrence, balance of power, security dilemma, and neorealism) continue to be relevant, albeit requiring adaptation to accommodate the hybrid, informational, and psychological aspects of modern Great Power Competition.

Deterrence in the context of the Ukraine war has been successful and unsuccessful. On the one hand, Western policies (military assistance, economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation) have allowed Ukraine to resist Russian aggression and have thus far prevented nuclear escalation or a direct conflict between NATO and Russia. On the other hand, deterrence did not prevent the war from occurring and remains fundamentally asymmetrical since Russia's nuclear threats constrain Western intervention but the lack of security guarantees for non-NATO states leaves them exposed to similar aggression.

The Ukraine war has also revealed and exacerbated the security dilemma since each party is attempting to increase its own security through military buildups, the formation of alliances and nuclear signaling. The likelihood of misperceiving the intent of the opposing party, miscalculating the actions of the opposing party, or unintentionally escalating is increasing, and thus the psychological and informational elements of deterrence are more critical than ever, and the need for clear communication, credible commitments, and adequate crisis management mechanisms is greater than ever. The conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the urgent need to strengthen the credibility and clarity of deterrence, to reinforce Ukraine's defensive, economic, and social resilience, to mitigate the risks of escalation, and to revive nonproliferation and arms control initiatives. This implies that the stakes are higher than Ukraine alone, and that the lessons derived from this conflict will inform the considerations of revisionist powers, the confidence of U.S. allies, and the future of the global nuclear order.

The war in Ukraine serves as a "live laboratory" for testing, revising, and combining classical and contemporary theories of International Relations and Security Studies. The findings emphasize the fact that deterrence is not a fixed recipe, but a dynamic and context-specific process that is affected by the perceptions, signaling, leadership and the shadow of nuclear weapons. As the conflict continues, the necessity for strategic patience, alliance unity and innovative diplomacy will need to be strengthened by all parties involved. This is necessary, because the decisions made in Ukraine will have repercussions throughout Europe and beyond and will determine the pace of international security for decades to come.

Author's Contribution:

Edmond Chick authored this article by himself. The author conceptualized this study, created the research design for it, did all the literature reviews and analyses, and did all the writing and revisions to the manuscript.

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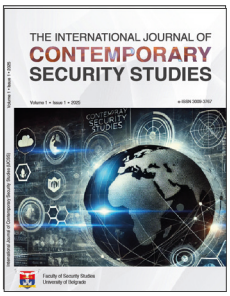
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Article

Security Communication and the Security Dilemma: Insights from the Iran-Israel Rivalry

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how security communication, often intended as deterrence or reassurance, can heighten insecurity within enduring rivalries, using the Iran-Israel conflict as a case study. It finds that during the 2025 Twelve-Day War, rhetorical threats, symbolic military gestures, and coercive diplomatic signalling reinforced perceptions of existential threat, deepened mistrust, and escalated the crisis. These communicative patterns illustrate how strategic messaging can construct rather than merely convey threat. In contrast, the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates that interpretive clarity and direct diplomatic exchange can mitigate such risks. The study refines the security dilemma framework by positioning communication as a constitutive driver of insecurity rather than merely a reflection of material capabilities. It argues that interpretive transparency, institutionalised back-channels, and sustained dialogue are critical for transforming security communication from an instrument of threat amplification into a means of conflict management. The findings contribute to theoretical debates on the communicative dimensions of security and offer insights for policymakers seeking durable de-escalation mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

Security Dilemma, Security Communication, Iran-Israel Conflict, 12-Day War, International Security.

1. Introduction

The Iran and Israel rivalry exemplifies one of the most enduring paradoxes in global security, as efforts at reassurance through communication often become triggers for escalation. During the June 2025 Twelve-Day War, both states sought to project deterrence and reassure their domestic audiences; however, these same messages were interpreted by the opposing side as hostile signalling, thereby intensifying the conflict. Israeli officials described pre-emptive strikes as defensive, while Tehran viewed them as existential threats. In turn, Iranian leaders framed uranium enrichment as lawful and peaceful, but Israel interpreted it as a covert nuclear weapons programme. This pattern of misreading is not unique to the Iran-Israel context. It reflects a broader theoretical question of why communicative acts intended to reduce insecurity so frequently deepen it.

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Existing studies on the security dilemma, such as those by Booth and Wheeler (2008) and Jervis (1978), have shown how defensive measures can be perceived as offensive provocations. However, the communicative dimension of this dilemma, understood as the verbal, symbolic, and legal signals through which states convey reassurance or deterrence, remains undertheorized. While scholars have acknowledged the importance of signalling in international politics (Taylor & Bean, 2019; Baker, 2019), much of the literature continues to treat communication as secondary to material power, emphasising weapons capabilities, force postures, and strategic doctrines. What remains insufficiently explored is how verbal and nonverbal exchanges serve as mechanisms that sustain or mitigate the security dilemma. This gap has become even more urgent in the contemporary context of information warfare, cyber signalling, and media framing.

The Iran-Israel conflict provides a critical case for interrogating this theoretical gap. It reveals how communicative practices ranging from statements of intent and appeals to international law to targeted assassinations and displays of military technology are interpreted in ways that reinforce cycles of mistrust. For example, Israel's invocation of an "existential threat" draws legitimacy from Article 51 of the UN Charter; however, its ambiguity permits unilateral military actions whose legality is widely contested (Green et al., 2022). Similarly, Iran's depiction of support for groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas as "resistance" is interpreted by Israel as encirclement and provocation. These communicative acts thus represent not merely exchanges of words but instruments that generate insecurity and deepen antagonism.

Comparatively, the misinterpretation of signals in the Iran and Israel rivalry echoes other historical confrontations such as the Cuban Missile Crisis (Scott & Hughes, 2015), the Cold War arms race, the 1999 Kargil conflict (Gill, 2021), and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. In each instance, communicative misjudgments created opportunities for miscalculation and escalation. Against this background, this study hypothesises that miscommunication and rhetorical escalation are central mechanisms intensifying the security dilemma in the Iran and Israel rivalry. Accordingly, the study asks how security communication, intended as reassurance or deterrence, becomes a mechanism that intensifies the security dilemma in enduring rivalries such as the Iran-Israel conflict. By extending the security dilemma framework to foreground communication, the paper contributes to theoretical and empirical debates in global security studies and provides a comparative perspective for analysing other rivalries across the international system.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical foundation of the study

The security dilemma and securitisation theories jointly provide the theoretical foundation for this study. Together, they explain how communication functions as both a reassurance and a provocation mechanism in enduring rivalries such as that between Iran and Israel. While the security dilemma offers a structural and psychological understanding of insecurity, securitisation theory brings a communicative perspective that highlights how discourse transforms ordinary politics into perceived existential threats. Their integration provides a platform for introducing the concept of security communication, which captures how messages, signals, and symbols intensify or alleviate tensions in protracted conflicts.

The security dilemma remains one of the most enduring and influential concepts in international relations. First introduced by Herz (1950), it describes the paradox whereby actions taken by a state to increase its security, such as military modernisation, alliances, or deterrence, inevitably make other states feel less secure. Jervis (1978) elaborated this logic by emphasising the role of uncertainty and the difficulty of distinguishing between offensive and defensive intentions. Glaser (1997) refined the framework further by distinguishing between "benign" and "malign" dilemmas, showing that mistrust rather than material capability often drives escalation. Moreover, Booth and Wheeler (2008) later advanced the discussion by identifying the psychological dimensions of the dilemma, particularly fear and identity. Collectively, these scholars underscore that insecurity is not only structural but also perceptual, driven by how states interpret one another's signals.

This theoretical lens provides a structural explanation of the Iran-Israel rivalry. Defensive actions such as Iran's uranium enrichment or Israel's pre-emptive military postures are interpreted by each side as offensive provocations. Consequently, what begins as deterrence often becomes escalation. The same logic applies to other rivalries such as India and Pakistan, where nuclear signalling and public rhetoric repeatedly transform reassurance into provocation (Kapur, 2007). Similarly, in the Russia and Ukraine context, defensive troop movements and symbolic language about sovereignty have triggered deep suspicion and intensified confrontation. These examples reveal how communication, whether verbal or material, lies at the heart of the security dilemma's tragic spiral.

While the security dilemma explains the structural logic of mutual suspicion, it does not fully account for how security meanings are communicated, constructed, and contested. Here, securitisation theory provides a complementary communicative framework. Developed by Wæver (1995) and later expanded by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), securitisation theory posits that issues become security concerns not because they are inherently dangerous but because authoritative actors label them as existential threats through what Wæver termed "speech acts." In doing so, political leaders justify extraordinary measures beyond the realm of normal politics. The theory thus explains how discourse shapes what societies perceive as threats.

It is, however, important to distinguish between securitisation and security communication. While securitisation focuses on discrete moments when political elites elevate issues onto the security agenda, security communication captures the ongoing process through which states express, negotiate, and interpret security meanings through both verbal and nonverbal channels. It offers a broader analytical lens, particularly suited for complex and long-term rivalries such as that between Iran and Israel. Security communication comprises not only official statements and policy declarations but also symbolic gestures, media narratives, and digital signals that shape perceptions of threat or reassurance (Taylor & Bean, 2019).

The multidimensional character of security communication can be seen in various global cases. For example, North Korea's missile tests and military parades serve as internal affirmations of regime strength while simultaneously sending deterrent messages to the United States and South Korea (Ekmektsioglou & Lee, 2020; Kim & Park, 2019). Similarly, China's naval activities in the South China Sea are domestically framed as protective of sovereignty but are interpreted externally as signals of regional expansion (Alessio & Renfro, 2022; Poling, 2021). Turkey's cross-border incursions in northern Syria, justified as counterterrorism measures, are likewise viewed by neighbours as assertions of regional dominance (Ferah & Tunca, 2022; Al Asad, 2025). These examples demonstrate how communicative acts are inherently complex, aimed at both domestic audiences and international rivals, and often misinterpreted in ways that exacerbate insecurity.

In the Iran and Israel context, securitisation theory illuminates how both states portray the other as an existential threat. By framing their rival as a danger to survival, political leaders justify exceptional measures ranging from military readiness to diplomatic isolation. The interaction between these two processes, securitisation and misinterpretation, illustrates how communication can transform political rivalries into perceived security crises.

2.2. Conceptual framework

Concept of Security Communication

Security communication, as articulated by Taylor and Bean (2019), refers to the ways in which states construct and express perceptions of threat and intention through both verbal and nonverbal acts, including speeches, diplomatic declarations, symbolic gestures, and military postures. The concept emphasises that security is not only about what states do but how their actions are communicated, interpreted, and legitimised within wider political and social contexts. It assumes that threats are discursively constructed, that security performances are mediated, and that public legitimacy is central to the effectiveness of security narratives. In this respect, security is dynamic, continuously shaped and reshaped through communicative practices.

Although the security dilemma has often been conceptualised in structural or material terms, scholars have increasingly recognised the communicative dimension that underpins it. Schelling's (1970) work on deterrence and bargaining demonstrated that strategic success depends on credible signalling and interpretation (Taylor, 2019). Later, securitisation theorists (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2011) expanded this understanding by showing how speech acts and symbolic performances produce security realities. The communicative turn in security studies, therefore, highlights that discourse, rhetoric, and media framing are not peripheral but constitutive of security itself.

Recent efforts to bridge the classical and communicative perspectives have yielded important insights. Booth and Wheeler (2008) proposed "security dilemma sensibility," a disposition grounded in empathy and trust-building communication. Kydd (2005) showed that credible commitments and consistent signalling can reduce uncertainty. Comparative cases such as India and Pakistan (Kapur, 2007) and Cold War diplomacy (Lebow & Risse-Kappen, 1996) reveal that communication, whether through backchannel talks, deterrent statements, or symbolic gestures, can either ease or escalate rivalries depending on interpretation. However, despite these advances, much of the literature remains focused on state elites, neglecting the roles of media, public discourse, and transnational communication that have become increasingly vital in the digital age.

Security Communication in the Iran-Israel Rivalry

Despite progress in integrating communication into security studies, limited research explicitly applies the concept of security communication to enduring Middle Eastern rivalries. Existing works have tended to prioritise material or strategic dimensions, such as Iran's regional interventions or Israel's deterrence strategies (Zafar, Akhtar, and Shaukat, 2025). Few have examined how verbal, symbolic, or cyber exchanges sustain mutual suspicion and escalation. The June 2025 Twelve-Day War provides a vivid example. Both states relied heavily on rhetorical threats, symbolic demonstrations of force, and media-based signalling rather than direct diplomacy. Israeli airstrike warnings were framed as preventive communication, while Iranian statements on retaliation were presented as defensive justice. These communicative performances, amplified by state-aligned media and digital propaganda networks, transformed reassurance attempts into triggers of further insecurity.

Amaliya (2025) has examined the cyber dimension of the rivalry, framing digital attacks as strategic tools of competition. However, her analysis remains anchored in realism and does not capture the communicative construction of threat. By contrast, this study situates security communication at the centre of analysis, exploring how threats, rhetoric, media narratives, and symbolic acts perpetuate the security dilemma. Like the India-Pakistan and Russia-Ukraine cases, the Iran-Israel conflict demonstrates how rhetorical escalation and communicative misjudgement deepen insecurity rather than alleviate it.

In bridging classical security dilemma theory with the communicative turn in security studies, this research addresses a crucial gap. It proposes that miscommunication and rhetorical escalation are not incidental to conflict but are central mechanisms that intensify the security dilemma. This conceptual synthesis advances the understanding of global rivalries by placing communication, rather than weapons or alliances, at the core of how insecurity is produced and reproduced.

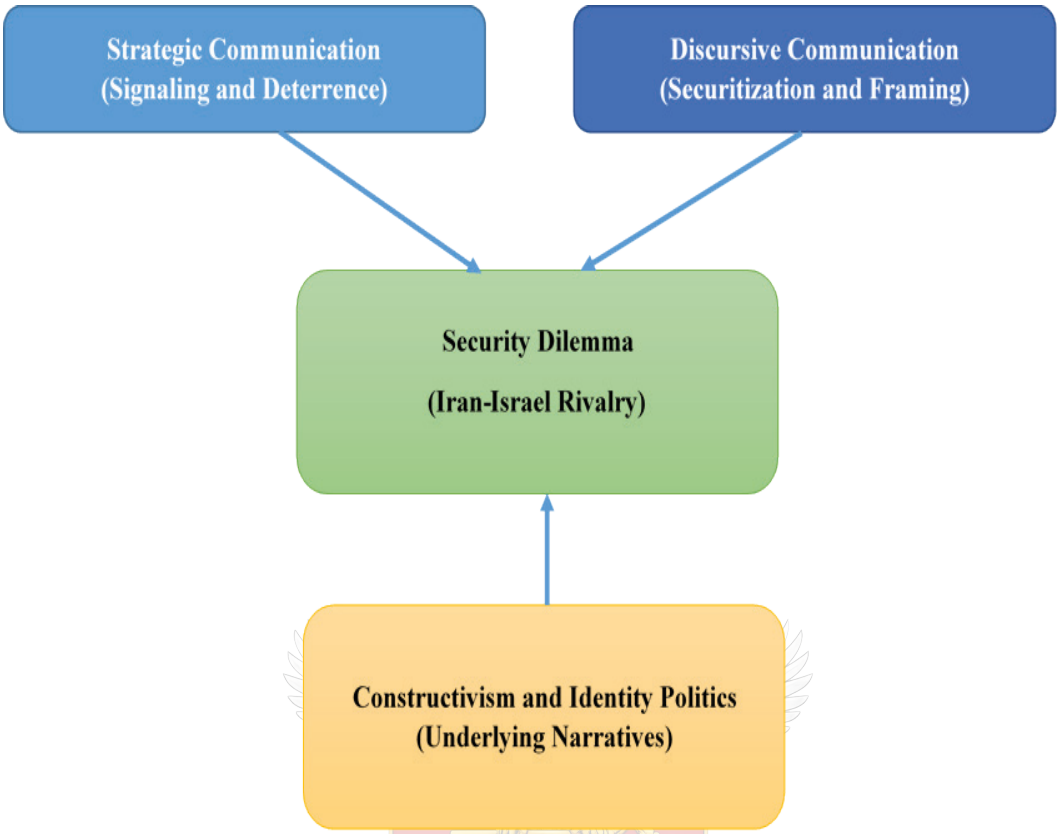


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Security Communication and Security Dilemma. **Source:** Authors' Construct, 2025.

The conceptual framework illustrates the interrelationship between security communication and the security dilemma in the context of the Iran-Israel rivalry. At its core, security communication explains how political leaders, state institutions, and media actors construct one another as existential threats through speeches, statements, and symbolic gestures. This process of securitisation transforms political disagreements into matters of survival. The rival state, in response, interprets these communicative actions through the logic of the security dilemma, where defensive measures by one side are perceived as offensive intentions by the other. This dynamic produces a recurring cycle of mistrust, military preparation, and strategic confrontation. The framework also recognises the potential moderating role of communication mechanisms such as backchannel diplomacy and crisis signalling, which either may intensify or ease tensions. Ultimately, it demonstrates that discourse and structural dynamics operate together to sustain and reproduce the enduring insecurity that defines the Iran-Israel relationship.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in documentary analysis and comparative case logic. The choice of qualitative methodology reflects the study's focus on meanings, representations, and communicative patterns rather than quantifiable variables. The analysis is guided by the theoretical intersection of the security dilemma and security communication, which together provide a lens for interpreting how verbal and nonverbal exchanges between Iran and Israel sustain cycles of insecurity.

The case material comprises a wide range of secondary and open-source data, including official government statements, speeches by state leaders, United Nations records, media reports, policy documents, and scholarly analyses. These sources were purposively selected to capture the communicative dimensions of security interactions between Iran and Israel, particularly during critical episodes such as the June 2025 Twelve-Day War and earlier confrontations over nuclear development and regional influence.

The data were systematically organised using thematic categorisation. This involved identifying recurring patterns and motifs in the language and symbolism of both Iranian and Israeli actors. Three analytical criteria guided the evaluation. The first involved examining rhetorical framing, focusing on how each state's official discourse constructs the other as a threat or as a legitimate actor. The second criterion concerned symbolic signalling, encompassing nonverbal communication such as military displays, cyber operations, and diplomatic gestures. The third criterion involved media framing, analysing how national and international media narratives amplified, reframed, or moderated these security communications. Together, these categories enabled a structured interpretation of how communicative acts both reflect and reproduce the logic of the security dilemma.

The data analysis followed a process of iterative reading and coding, consistent with qualitative interpretive methods. Texts were read repeatedly to detect emerging themes and intertextual linkages, after which the patterns were compared across different time periods and communication contexts. Particular attention was paid to moments of escalation and de-escalation, where the interpretation of messages shifted the direction of the rivalry.

Although the study provides a rich interpretive account of security communication, it acknowledges certain limitations. The reliance on secondary and open-source data constrains the ability to make causal inferences about state intentions or decision-making processes. Additionally, because official communications are often strategically constructed, they may not reflect the full range of internal deliberations within either state. Nonetheless, the study mitigates these limitations through cross-validation of sources, triangulation across different media and policy documents, and the application of established theoretical frameworks.

4. Results

Iran-Israel and the Cuban Missile Crisis

The Iran-Israel rivalry and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis share structural similarities rooted in the security dilemma. Both involved nuclear-capable states, mutual mistrust, and ideological hostility that transformed defensive actions into perceived offensive threats. However, the stark difference in outcomes lies in the quality and credibility of communication. While the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the stabilising potential of structured negotiation, the Iran-Israel confrontation illustrates how communication failure entrenches insecurity.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, direct and backchannel negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union were central to de-escalation. These communication mechanisms provided interpretive clarity and prevented worst-case assumptions. Secret correspondence between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev allowed both sides to exchange concessions without public escalation. Khrushchev's message to Kennedy, offering to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba in return for assurances and the later removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey, demonstrates how credible dialogue and mutual recognition of interests averted catastrophe (Cawley, 2017; Kim & Martín, 2021; Radchenko & Zubok, 2023). The episode shows that when communication is transparent, reciprocal, and institutionally grounded, even existential tensions can be contained.

In contrast, the Iran-Israel conflict, particularly during the Twelve-Day War of 2025, demonstrates how securitised rhetoric, unilateral military action, and disrupted diplomatic efforts fuel escalation. Israel's pre-emptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, supported by U.S. air operations, was publicly framed by President Donald Trump as a "spectacular military success," aimed at the "total destruction of Iran's nuclear capacity" (The Guardian, 2025). This communication reinforced Iranian perceptions that negotiation had been replaced by coercion. Iran's foreign minister condemned the attack as a "grave violation of the UN Charter," while President Masoud Pezeshkian declared that Iran "does not seek war but will defend itself forcefully" (New Indian Express, 2025; Nichols, 2025). In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu portrayed the assault as an act of existential defence, emphasising that "hesitation is not an option" (UN News, 2024). These mutually exclusive narratives illustrate how verbal and symbolic acts deepened mistrust and delegitimised diplomatic dialogue.

Even when Iran expressed readiness for negotiation, as Ali Larijani noted regarding missile restrictions, external demands and asymmetrical conditions prevented progress (Tehran Times, 2025). In this communicative environment, rhetoric and military gestures became tools of assertion rather than reassurance, contrasting sharply with the structured, reciprocal engagement that resolved the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This comparison underscores that effective crisis management depends less on military balance and more on communicative integrity. Where credible, institutionalised negotiation channels exist, interpretive clarity can transform potential escalation into compromise. Where such mechanisms are absent, as in the Iran-Israel case, communication becomes a vehicle for securitisation, amplifying fear and hostility.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Communication Dynamics

Variable	Iran-Israel Rivalry (2025)	Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)
Negotiation Channels	Fragmented, indirect, and often mediated through third parties	Direct and backchannel negotiations between leaders
Mutual Trust	Extremely low; characterised by ideological rigidity and adversarial framing	Minimal but functional trust is maintained through controlled communication.
Interpretive Clarity	Low; rhetorical threats and symbolic gestures misinterpreted as aggression	High; reciprocal communication and credible signalling reduced ambiguity.
Outcome	Escalation, breakdown of diplomacy, and enduring mistrust	Peaceful resolution through mutual concessions and institutionalised communication

Implications of the Iran-Israel Conflict

The Twelve-Day War revealed the structural fragility of Iran-Israel relations and the global reach of their rivalry. Initiated by Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites and followed by Iranian missile retaliation, the conflict caused widespread human and infrastructural losses (Abo El-Kasem, 2025; Milton, 2019). Both states experienced casualties, blackouts, and societal anxiety, exposing the psychological and material consequences of failed communication (Al Jazeera, 2025; Fabian, 2025; Cornwell, Hafezi & Holland, 2025).

Unlike the Cuban Missile Crisis, where backchannel diplomacy contained escalation, the Iran-Israel confrontation lacked interpretive clarity and credible mediation. U.S. airstrikes on Iranian targets and the absence of sustained dialogue reinforced perceptions of betrayal and existential threat. The addition of cyber operations, proxy engagements, and strategic media campaigns further distorted communication, multiplying misinterpretations and heightening instability.

The implications extend beyond the Middle East. Africa's reliance on Gulf oil exposes it to economic shocks, while Iranian and Israeli engagements across the continent risk turning African regions into peripheral arenas of proxy competition (Akerele, 2021; Gidron, 2024; Lob, 2024; Salman, 2021). Ideological narratives from the conflict also resonate within local political movements, influencing security discourses.

Consequently, the Iran-Israel case demonstrates how security communication can construct threat perceptions and escalate rivalries when dialogue is absent or manipulated. In contrast, the Cuban Missile Crisis exemplifies the transformative role of credible and reciprocal communication in mitigating insecurity. Together, these cases reaffirm that the security dilemma is not merely a structural condition but a communicative process whose management depends on interpretive transparency, trust-building, and the institutionalisation of dialogue.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the theoretical argument that security communication is not a neutral conduit of information but a constitutive mechanism that actively constructs threat perceptions within the security dilemma. Communication does not merely transmit meaning; it produces it, shaping the strategic behaviour of states through signals, interpretations, and performances. In the Iran-Israel rivalry, verbal, symbolic, and legal-diplomatic acts intensify rather than ease insecurity. Threatening rhetoric, selective diplomatic engagement, and publicised military demonstrations function as communicative acts that define the adversary's intentions. As Wæver (2015) and Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) explain through securitisation theory, speech acts and symbolic gestures elevate political disputes into existential questions, mobilising domestic legitimacy while reinforcing external hostility. This finding resonates with Herz's (1950) foundational insight that the security dilemma emerges when defensive measures are misinterpreted as offensive, and with Jervis's (1978) view that perception and interpretation, more than material capability, often drive escalation.

The communicative dimension of the Iran-Israel rivalry further demonstrates that misperception is not a by-product of conflict but a structural outcome of how states speak, signal, and perform their insecurities. Booth and Wheeler's (2008) notion of "security dilemma sensibility" is instructive here, as it calls for empathy and interpretive caution in state communication. However, such sensibility remains absent in the Iran-Israel context, where interactions are defined by mutual suspicion and ideological rigidity. Each side constructs the other through hostile discourses that leave little room for interpretive ambiguity. This aligns with Taylor and Bean's (2019) argument that contemporary security practices are communicatively mediated, with both state and media actors contributing to the production of threat narratives in the global arena.

In practical terms, the Iran-Israel rivalry illustrates the limits of deterrence and reassurance in the face of communicative distortion. Attempts to demonstrate restraint, such as Iran's periodic willingness to re-engage under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), are often overshadowed by symbolic provocations like airstrikes, cyber operations, and inflammatory rhetoric. These communicative acts, meant to project resolve, are received as threats, thereby converting reassurance into provocation. The comparison with the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights this contrast: through structured backchannels and interpretive transparency, the United States and the Soviet Union managed to avoid nuclear confrontation despite extreme tension (Cawley, 2017; Kim & Martín, 2021; Radchenko & Zubok, 2023). In the Iran-Israel case, by contrast, fragmented communication channels and unilateral coercive measures undermine interpretive clarity, creating an environment in which every message risks escalation.

Normatively, these findings underscore that the management of enduring rivalries depends as much on communicative reform as on military or diplomatic initiatives. When communication is unidirectional, ideologically rigid, or mediated through antagonistic narratives, escalation becomes almost inevitable. Policies that prioritise interpretive transparency, backchannel diplomacy, and institutionalised trust-building mechanisms can transform communication from a driver of hostility into a stabilising tool. Such mechanisms include verified dialogue frameworks, reciprocal signalling protocols, and third-party mediation structures that facilitate understanding even amid deep mistrust. These measures echo Booth and Wheeler's advocacy for empathy in security relations and Taylor and Bean's call for communicative reflexivity in statecraft.

Consequently, the Iran-Israel rivalry illustrates that security communication possesses a dual character. Under conditions of credible negotiation and interpretive clarity, it can mitigate the security dilemma; in their absence, it deepens it. By situating these findings alongside other enduring rivalries such as India-Pakistan and Russia-Ukraine, the study advances the proposition that insecurity is co-produced through language, perception, and performance as much as through power and strategy. This reinforces the broader theoretical synthesis that security communication and the security dilemma are not separate domains but mutually constitutive processes that shape the dynamics of contemporary conflict.

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that security communication is not a neutral exchange of information but a constitutive force that shapes threat perceptions and sustains the security dilemma. Through the Iran-Israel rivalry, it demonstrates how verbal, symbolic, and diplomatic acts construct rather than simply convey intent, transforming reassurance into provocation and perpetuating cycles of mistrust.

Theoretically, the study contributes to security scholarship by integrating communicative processes into the logic of the security dilemma, thereby reframing communication as a mechanism through which insecurity is produced and reproduced. Comparatively, it provides insights relevant to other enduring rivalries, such as India-Pakistan and Russia-Ukraine, where miscommunication and rhetorical escalation similarly deepen mutual suspicion.

For policy and practice, three implications emerge. First, interpretive transparency should be institutionalised in diplomacy to minimise misperception. Second, backchannel and crisis communication mechanisms must be strengthened to enable adversaries to clarify intentions. Third, trust-building communication frameworks, supported by third-party mediation, can transform adversarial exchanges into constructive dialogue. These measures recognise that peace depends not only on material restraint but on reconfiguring the communicative structures through which states define and manage insecurity.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

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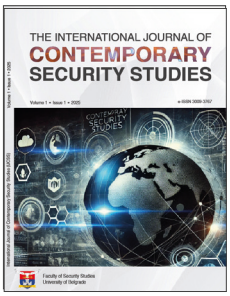
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Review article

Multi-Actor Deterrence of Small States: The Case of the Republic of Serbia

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary security context of small states requires a reexamination of classical concepts of deterrence, based on the symmetry of military capabilities and bilateral relations. The paper analyzes multi-actor deterrence as an expanded analytical framework for understanding how small, militarily neutral states manage security risks amid geopolitical uncertainty and hybrid threats. The paper hypothesizes that deterrence in hybrid environments can no longer be understood as a state-centered mechanism, but as a multi-actor system shaped by state, non-state, and corporate actors in multiple domains. The aim of the paper is to develop an analytical framework of multi-actor deterrence applicable to small states. Through a case study of the Republic of Serbia, the paper shows that the deterrent effect does not primarily arise from the threat of force, but from the potential for networking among different actors and multi-domain synergy, which increases the costs and uncertainty of potential aggression. The paper also identifies key challenges to implementing this model, including institutional fragmentation, capacity asymmetry, and external pressures, highlighting the importance of continued management of multi-actor deterrence mechanisms to preserve the strategic autonomy of small states.

KEYWORDS

Multi-actor deterrence, small states, Serbia, military neutrality.

1. Introduction

The contemporary international security environment is characterized by a profound transformation of the nature of threats, actors, and forms of confrontation. Classical models of deterrence, developed in the context of the bipolar Cold War order, were based on relatively clear assumptions. States were perceived as dominant and rational actors. The lines between peace and war were clearly demarcated, as was the primary role of military power, especially nuclear potential, in deterring aggression. However, in the conditions of the post-bipolar and increasingly multipolar system, these assumptions have significantly eroded. Hybrid threats mark today's security environment, actions below the threshold of armed conflict, multi-domain warfare, and, most importantly, the diffusion of actors involved in deterrence and coercion. This transformation is further accelerated by the penetration of artificial intelligence and cyberspace into the domain of risk management and security

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planning (Beriša, Cvetković, & Pavić, 2024; Cvetković et al., 2025; Cvetković et al., 2023; Cvetković et al., 2021; Cvetković, Čvorović, & Beriša, 2023a; Cvetković, Renner, & Jakovljević, 2024).

In such a context, deterrence is no longer exclusively a bilateral relationship between two states. However, it increasingly takes the form of a complex network of interactions involving various state and non-state actors. This phenomenon is described in contemporary literature as multi-actor deterrence, a form of deterrence in which multiple actors, capacities, and domains of action simultaneously influence a potential aggressor's calculation. In addition to the armed forces and classical instruments of state power, this process also involves international institutions, military alliances, economic and technological actors, the media, legal regimes, and even social resilience and the public's cognitive perception. As Milenković et al., points out, this understanding of resilience relies on integrated institutional mechanisms of risk management (Milenković, 2025; Milenković & Cvetković, 2025; Nikolić et al., 2025; Cvetković & Šišović, 2024; Cvetković et al., 2024) Recent research indicates that deterrence in the modern security environment is conceptualized as a distributed and networked process, in which responsibility for the deterrent effect is not concentrated in a single actor, but is distributed among multiple institutions and actors of different levels of power (Baev, Marsh, & Martins, 2025).

A particular analytical challenge is applying the concept of deterrence to small states. Traditional theories of deterrence, based on symmetry or at least on the relative priority of capabilities, are difficult to apply to states that lack significant military or economic power. In this sense, small states are often viewed in classical theory as passive objects of deterrence, as beneficiaries of protection by great powers and alliances, or as actors with limited opportunities to influence security dynamics independently. However, the modern multi-actor environment opens the space to reconsider this approach. It is precisely the complexity, fragmentation, and networking of modern security relations that allow small states, despite limited resources, to achieve a relevant deterrent effect through a combination of different actors, domains, and instruments of action.

The Republic of Serbia can be considered a very interesting case in this regard. As a small state with formally proclaimed military neutrality, Serbia is located in the geopolitically sensitive Balkans, which is also a zone of overlapping interests among several major and regional powers. Surrounded by NATO members (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and strongly connected to the European Union (EU), while maintaining developed relations with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and other actors, Serbia is exposed to various political, economic, informational, and security pressures. These pressures rarely manifest as a direct military threat. However, they are mostly expressed through hybrid instruments of action, including strategic communications, legal and institutional mechanisms, economic leverage, and influence in the information space. A special place in this spectrum is occupied by cyberattacks such as ransomware operations that can produce systemic economic and security consequences (Vidović, Cvetković, Beriša, & Milašinović, 2025).

In such an environment, classical deterrence, based on the threat of punishment, proves insufficient and difficult to sustain. Serbia does not have the capacity to impose unacceptable costs on a potential aggressor through direct military escalation, nor can it rely fully on collective deterrence mechanisms given its specific foreign policy position. However, this does not mean that Serbia is deprived of deterrence potential. On the contrary, in its case, deterrence is increasingly achieved through a combination of deterrence by deprivation, the increasing complexity of the security environment, and strategic pragmatism in foreign policy (Pavić & Beriša, 2025).

The starting assumption of this paper is that small states such as Serbia already employ elements of multi-actor deterrence. However, they are not always explicitly articulated in strategic and doctrinal documents. State institutions, armed forces, diplomatic activity, economic ties, legal and normative frameworks, as well as non-state actors such as the media, academia, the information sector, and the diaspora, together contribute to creating a deterrence effect that is not based on the threat of force, but on increasing costs, uncertainty, and political risk for potential sources of pressure. In this sense, Serbia can be seen not as a front or buffer zone, but as a strategic node in a wider network of security relations. The contribution of this paper is reflected in the conceptualization of multi-actor deterrence as an analytical framework applicable to small states, which bridges the gap between classical deterrence theory and contemporary hybrid security challenges.

The authors will present, through theoretical analysis and a case study of the Republic of Serbia, an analytical framework of multi-actor deterrence applicable to small and militarily neutral states. The paper uses a combined methodological approach that includes a theoretical analysis of the concept of multi-actor deterrence and a case study of the Republic of Serbia, with a focus on institutional and non-state actors. A qualitative approach to the case study of the Republic of Serbia is applied, based on the analysis of strategic documents, laws, official statements, reports, and academic publications. The sources were selected for their relevance to multi-actor and multi-domain deterrence to identify specific mechanisms and instruments of deterrence.

While the existing literature mainly analyses multi-domain and integrated deterrence from the perspective of great powers and alliances, this paper shows that multi-actor deterrence is a key mechanism of security adaptation of small and militarily neutral states, which bases deterrence not on superior force, but on managing complexity and risk perception. In the "multi-actor deterrence" model, military neutrality is treated as a supporting, but not necessary, factor. It shapes the framework in which Serbia maneuvers, providing an additional signal of independence and minimizing the risk of confrontation with great powers. However, the concept of multi-actor deterrence itself can also function in the context of small allied states, with less flexibility in signaling and greater dependence on collective security mechanisms. Neutrality is not the driver of the model, but a factor that strengthens the credibility and consistency of deterrence in a complex multi-actor environment.

2. Theoretical framework: from classical to multi-actor deterrence

The classical theory of deterrence was developed within the realist paradigm of international relations. Deterrence was defined as the ability of a state to dissuade an adversary from taking a particular action by threatening unacceptable costs, either through deterrence by punishment or denial of success (Mazarr, 2018). Such an approach implied a relatively clear link between capacity, intent, and credibility. However, the end of the bipolar system and the emergence of new security challenges have led to an expansion and re-examination of this concept. Continued low-intensity conflicts, hybrid threats, cyber operations, and information warfare point to the limitations of a model that relies exclusively on military force and state actors. Instead of symmetrical relations, asymmetry dominates, and actors' rationality becomes contextual and culturally conditioned.

In such an environment, deterrence is no longer a one-time act of signaling, but a continuous process of interaction. It encompasses not only preventing an armed attack but also managing the behavior of actors in "gray zones," where the boundaries between peace and war are blurred (Fukuda, 2024). This transformation opens space for conceptualizing multi-actor deterrence as a broader analytical framework.

Multi-actor deterrence is not treated in this paper as a normative model that states should adopt, but rather as an analytical framework for understanding how deterrence is actually achieved in a complex and multi-domain security environment. This approach is in line with recent work suggesting that deterrence can be understood less as a linear relationship between threat and response, and more as the result of the interaction among multiple actors, domains, and institutional mechanisms within a complex security system.

2.1. Classical deterrence theory: assumptions

Deterrence theory is one of the fundamental concepts of security and strategic studies in the second half of the 20th century. Its classical form was developed in the context of the nuclear confrontation between the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet Union and rested on a relatively stable set of assumptions: states are rational and unitary actors, security interactions are primarily bilateral, and decisions about the use of force are made based on cost-benefit calculations. In such a framework, deterrence is defined as preventing an adversary from taking undesirable action by threatening unacceptable punishment or denying the opportunity to succeed in aggression.

A key contribution to this understanding of deterrence was made by Thomas Schelling, who understood deterrence as a special form of influencing an adversary's behavior, based not on the direct use of force but on the threat of its use and the management of expectations and perceptions (Schelling, 1960). In this sense, deterrence is primarily a psychological and communicative process, not exclusively a material demonstration of power. Later authors, such as Glenn Snyder, have further elaborated on the distinction between deterrence and coercion, as well as the role of credibility and interest in the sustainability of deterrent relationships (Snyder, 1961).

Within the classical theory, the division into deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial is particularly significant (Freedman, 2004). The first form involves the ability and willingness to impose unacceptable costs on the aggressor after the aggression has been committed, while the second aims to make aggression unprofitable or infeasible in advance by strengthening defenses and reducing the probability of success of the attack. However, both forms are present in classical theory; deterrence by punishment dominated during the Cold War, primarily in the nuclear domain.

2.2. Limitations of classical theory in the modern security environment

With the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the international system, it has become increasingly clear that the classical theory of deterrence has significant limitations. Contemporary conflicts rarely unfold as open, high-intensity interstate wars. They are increasingly realized through a complex network of interactions that take the form of protracted, fragmented, and hybrid confrontations below the threshold of formal war. In such conditions, the clear lines between peace and war, as well as between military and non-military instruments, become blurred.

One of the key challenges to classical deterrence is the emergence of multi-domain warfare, in which actions take place simultaneously in land, sea, air, cyber, and information space (Hew, 2013). In addition, the rise of non-state actors plays a significant role, whose behavior often does not fit the rationalist models on which classical deterrence theory is based. These actors may have diffuse decision-making structures, asymmetric goals, and limited sensitivity to classical forms of punishment.

Additionally, contemporary "gray zone" strategies allow actors to avoid activating classical deterrence mechanisms through gradual and incremental action. As Michael J. Mazarr points out, such activities are designed to fall below the threshold that would justify a strong response, thereby undermining the credibility of traditional deterrence threats (Mazarr, 2015). In this sense, deterrence can no longer be understood as a stable state, but as a dynamic and contextually conditioned process.

2.3. Multi-Actor Deterrence as an Expanded Analytical Framework

In response to these changes, attempts to expand the concept of deterrence beyond the narrow state-centric framework are increasingly appearing in contemporary literature. Multi-actor deterrence is based on the assumption that the decisions of a potential aggressor are not influenced exclusively by a single state actor, but by a network of different actors and domains of action whose effects intertwine and multiply.

In this sense, deterrence can be viewed as a network phenomenon in which states, alliances, international institutions, economic and technological actors, as well as social and cognitive factors, jointly shape the perception of risk and costs. This understanding of deterrence is close to the concepts of "integrated deterrence" and "cross-domain deterrence", which emphasize the need for coordination among different instruments of power and actors to achieve a cumulative effect (Ochmanek et al., 2017).

Unlike the classical model, multi-actor deterrence does not necessarily imply a clearly articulated threat or centralized control over all actors. On the contrary, its effectiveness often stems from the very complexity and uncertainty it creates for a potential aggressor. This characteristic makes multi-actor deterrence particularly relevant for small states. Which, rather than relying on the limited

capacities of classical military force, may seek to network different actors and domains in order to increase the costs and risks of aggressive action against them.

Modern deterrence cannot be understood without insight into the multi-domain environment in which it is implemented. The military, political, economic, informational, and cognitive domains are intertwined, meaning that actions in one domain produce effects in others. This inter-domain dynamic further complicates the deterrence process and increases the importance of coordinating different instruments of power. Modern research indicates that the application of artificial intelligence significantly improves the coordination of responses in complex crises (Ocal & Torun, 2025). Of particular importance is the information domain, in which perceptions, legitimacy, and interpretations of actor behavior are shaped. In this sense, strategic communications and information operations become the central element of multi-actor deterrence, rather than its accompanying segment.

Table 1. Actors and effects in multi-domain deterrence

Actor Type	Examples of actors	Key Domain	Basic instrument	Deterrence effect
State	Government, armed forces, diplomacy	Political / Legal	Diplomatic and legal mechanisms	Increase in political costs
Non-State	Media, NGOs, academia, diaspora	Informational	Narratives and public visibility	Perceived increase in costs
Corporate	Companies, technology platforms	Economic / Technological	Investments, institutional decisions	Increase in economic costs
International	UN, EU, OSCE	Normative	Institutional pressure	Increase in legitimacy costs

Table 1 presents multi-actor deterrence as an analytical framework in which different categories of actors, through different domains of action, cumulatively produce political, perceptual, and economic and legitimacy costs of escalation. Essentially, it shows the categories of actors in multi-domain deterrence and their cumulative impact on the costs and risk perception of potential aggressors. Deterrence effects on the listed categories of actors are produced through a cause-and-effect logic: actions in a specific domain (political, economic, informational, or normative) activate mechanisms that increase the costs, uncertainty, or risk of a potential aggressor. For example, political-legal instruments of state actors signal international legitimacy and legal consequences; informational instruments of non-state actors shape public perception; and economic-technological instruments of corporate actors increase the material and operational costs of undesirable actions.

The uniqueness of the concept of multi-actor deterrence in this paper emphasizes the plurality of actors (state, non-state, and corporate) and the diffusion of responsibilities across multiple domains, to shape the risk perception of a potential aggressor. Unlike integrated or cross-domain deterrence, the focus is not only on the coordination of instruments or the networking of domains, but on the interaction of multiple actors, which produces a cumulative deterrent effect. The concept begins with the identification of relevant actors and domains and ends with an increase in uncertainty, costs, and political risk, without the direct use of force.

3. Small states and the logic of multi-actor deterrence

The importance of adaptive and unconventional models of deterrence for small states has been confirmed in recent academic debates, including the international conference Defense Strategies of Small States and Smaller Forces held in 2025, which emphasized that limited resources encourage the development of innovative, multi-domain, and multi-actor approaches to defense (SSU, 2025). In addition to the above, special discussions were held on the contemporary defense adaptations of small states, which support the thesis that they develop innovative models of deterrence in the absence of military force dominance. However, before we consider this concept through the lens of small states, it is necessary to formalize it. Namely, multi-actor deterrence is the process of strategically shaping the behavior of potential adversaries in a complex security environment. In which multiple state and non-state actors of different levels of power and rationality participate, through the coordinated use of military, political, economic, informational, and normative instruments, to

prevent undesirable actions below and above the threshold of armed conflict (Black & Obradovic, 2022). Key features of this concept are the plurality of actors, the diffusion of responsibility, the multi-domain nature of action, and the primacy of perception over material capacities. Unlike classical deterrence, where the relationship between the deterrent and the deterred is relatively clear, multi-actor deterrence operates as a network of interactions in which roles are often fluid.

A particular challenge with this concept is identifying actors. Within multi-actor deterrence, three basic categories of actors can be identified: primary state actors and alliances, secondary non-state and proxy actors, and structural actors that shape the normative and informational context. This typology indicates that deterrence does not operate exclusively through direct power relations, but also through indirect mechanisms of influence.

In addition to the above, it is necessary to define appropriate mechanisms and instruments of action. In addition to the classic mechanisms of punishment and deprivation, multi-actor deterrence also includes deterrence through interdependence, legitimacy, and strategic ambiguity. Economic connectivity, legal regimes, and dominant narratives become means of increasing the costs of undesirable behavior for potential adversaries. The three previously mentioned segments related to the definition, selection of actors, mechanisms, and instruments are also a starting point for further analysis in the context of small states.

3.1. Structural constraints of small states in classical deterrence

In international relations theory, small states are traditionally defined primarily by their limited material capacities and limited influence on the structure of the international system. In the context of classical deterrence theory, these characteristics produce clear structural limitations: an inability to impose unacceptable costs on a potential aggressor, limited ability to escalate dominance, and dependence on external security guarantees (Keohane, 1969). As a consequence, small states are most often treated in classical models of deterrence as objects of deterrence, rather than as autonomous subjects that actively shape relations in the deterrence process.

Maria Keinonen argues that small states can strengthen their deterrence through national factors, such as strong defense and societal resilience, as well as international factors, such as military and political alliances. Limited resources and low international status can translate into national deterrent advantages, while the political intentions and historical practices of potential aggressors act as international deterrent factors that shape decisions and enhance the deterrent effect (Keinonen, 2024).

In addition to material constraints, small states also face significant political and strategic risks. Any reliance on deterrence through punishment carries the risk of uncontrolled escalation, in which the small state lacks the capacity to manage the conflict's dynamics. As a result, classical deterrence strategies are often either unavailable or strategically unsustainable for small states, further reinforcing the importance of alternative approaches.

3.2. From deterrence by force to deterrence by complexity

The contemporary security environment, marked by hybrid threats and gray-area operations, opens space for a different logic of deterrence for small states. Instead of relying on the threat of punishment, deterrence by deprivation, which aims to make aggression slow, costly, and uncertain, is gaining increasing importance (Freedman, 2004). This form of deterrence does not require symmetry of capacity, but the ability to deny the adversary a quick and clear success.

In this context, the concept of "deterrence through complexity" emerges, which implies a deliberate increase in the institutional, social, legal, and operational complexity of the environment in which potential aggression would have to be implemented. As Lawrence Freedman points out, contemporary deterrence relies less and less on a single dominant threat, more and more on the cumulative effect of various, often indirect, mechanisms of influence (Freedman, 2013). For small states,

this logic represents a rational strategic adaptation, as it allows them to maximize the deterrent effect while minimizing confrontation.

One of the significant factors shaping and complicating contemporary concepts of deterrence is the development of technology such as artificial intelligence. Dingil (Hurşit Dingil) shows that artificial intelligence transforms traditional, state-centric models of deterrence, extending them to a multi-actor environment in which non-state and corporate actors play a significant role (Dingil, 2025). Artificial intelligence acts as a strategic power multiplier, but it also increases the risk of destabilization and miscalculations. Therefore, effective deterrence increasingly relies on multilateral governance mechanisms and institutional coordination between different actors.

3.3. Network logic and multi-actor deterrence

Multi-actor deterrence is a logical continuation of this evolution. Instead of a centralized, state-exclusive model, deterrence is viewed as the result of the interaction among multiple actors deployed across different domains. Among other things, the modern security ecosystem is characterized by the growing role of private military actors (Vračević, 2025). These actors do not have to act in sync or under a unified command to produce a deterrent effect; it suffices that their mere existence and potential actions increase a potential aggressor's perception of risk and uncertainty.

The literature on small states suggests that networking with alliances, international institutions, economic and technological partners, and non-state actors is a key mechanism for compensating for structural weaknesses (Thorhallsson, 2012). In this sense, a small state can function as a "node" in a wider network of security relations, the significance of which does not derive from the concentration of force, but from position and connectivity.

Contemporary conflicts increasingly involve military actors in roles beyond classic combat tasks (Popović Mančević, 2025). More recent analytical models of non-kinetic deterrence suggest that instruments such as institutional signals, economic interdependencies, and normative positioning can have a stabilizing deterrent effect, especially in environments where the use of military force is limited or politically risky (Meng, 2025).

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3.4. Comparative insights: experiences of small states

Empirical insights from the practice of several small states further support the relevance of multi-actor deterrence. Finland and Estonia have developed concepts of comprehensive and total defense, which integrate military, civilian, economic, and information capabilities into a single resilience system (Järvenpää, Major, & Sakkov, 2019). Singapore, on the other hand, combines limited territorial depth with highly developed institutional and technological complexity, thereby significantly increasing the costs of any external pressure (Matthews & Timur, 2023).

The common characteristic of these examples is not the size of the armed forces, but rather the state's ability to mobilize and coordinate a wide range of actors and domains of action. This is precisely the essence of multi-actor deterrence of small states: deterrence is not achieved with a single blow or a single threat, but through the permanent creation of an environment in which aggression becomes politically, operationally, and socially unprofitable.

These insights provide a necessary analytical bridge to the case of the Republic of Serbia. An analysis of Serbia's strategic and security context is a prerequisite for understanding how the logic of multi-actor deterrence can be, and to some extent is, applied within its specific geopolitical and normative framework.

4. Case study: Republic of Serbia

Serbia's geopolitical position, historical experience of multi-layered foreign policy pressures, and commitment to military neutrality position it as a pivotal actor in a multi-actor deterrence system (Glišin, 2025). As a state located at the intersection of the interests of several major and regional powers, Serbia simultaneously receives, interprets, and sends signals to various centers of power, without formal allied obligations that would define its behavior in advance (Gajić, 2023). In this sense, its role is not passive but mediating and adaptive, with deterrence achieved through the management of perceptions, uncertainty, and spaces for maneuver in a complex security environment.

The concept of deterrence of the Republic of Serbia relies on a combination of limited but credible military capabilities, active and balanced diplomacy, normative legalism, and controlled information-narrative strategies. Unlike the classical logic of deterrence based on the threat of force, the Serbian deterrence model focuses on the production of political, perceptual, and legal costs for actors who would opt for escalation. Of particular importance is the consistent emphasis on respect for international law and the status quo, which is a key element of national security strategies that thoroughly analyze military neutrality and cooperation as instruments for achieving the national interests of the Republic of Serbia (Ćurčić & Dinić, 2024). This expanded understanding of deterrence shifts the focus from the narrow military domain to the broader political and social space.

At the same time, the implementation of this approach is accompanied by significant structural challenges and paradoxes of military neutrality. Although neutrality reduces the risk of automatic involvement in great-power conflicts, it increases the need for sophisticated signal management, credibility, and alignment with external actors' expectations. In a multi-actor environment, Serbia's deterrence does not rest on superior force, but on the ability to influence the calculations of others through a combination of strategic restraint, selective assertiveness, and sustained diplomatic activity, which makes this model sensitive, but also potentially effective in conditions of limited resources (Lekić, 2017).

Viewed in light of the modern concept of deterrence, as well as the multi-actor deterrence in question, Serbia's position can be interpreted as an example of a small state that deters not by concentrating force but by managing a network of relationships, expectations, and institutional constraints. Military neutrality can be considered as a starting point. Serbia officially practices military neutrality as the basis of its foreign and security policy. Military neutrality has a normative aspect, grounded in national legal acts and international law, and a political aspect, as it allows Serbia to maneuver among different global actors and blocs.

From Serbia's perspective, as well as that of other small countries, it is important to distinguish neutrality from isolation. While isolation implies distancing from international processes and weakening state capacities, neutrality is an active stance that requires deterrence, diplomatic flexibility, and participation in regional security initiatives, such as partnerships with NATO through the Partnership for Peace. As an example, Serbia participates in multinational exercises with NATO partners while maintaining military and economic relations with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, showing that neutrality is not a passive policy.

One factor that may be of great importance is Serbia's geopolitical hub in the Balkan environment. It is expressed in the position of the Balkan "geopolitical cross" in the "sensitive intersecting zone", which was formed centuries ago, in the field of aggressive geopolitical action outside the Balkan political factors (states and alliances), as a zone of their violent infiltration (Despotović, 2010). As previously stated, Serbia is located in the geopolitical hub of the Balkans, a region that represents a contact zone for major actors. The presence of several global and regional powers - the EU, the USA, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and Turkey - creates a dynamic environment in which every decision has effects in multiple domains. For example, China's investments in infrastructure, US diplomatic pressure on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija, and EU integration processes require Serbia to maintain credibility and flexibility simultaneously in a multi-actor environment. Serbia's specific geopolitical position allows it to act as a mediator, but also requires constant risk management from pressures.

4.1. Threat perception

Modern threats include a range of hybrid and information-based components that operate below the threshold of armed conflict and may pose a threat to national security. As a small country, Serbia is not immune to these threats. Threat perception in Serbia can be grouped into three main categories.

The first group of threats is cyber and critical infrastructure. Threats include hacker attacks on state systems, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure. Such incidents can disrupt state functions and cause significant economic and security consequences. These threats include cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure and state systems, which can disrupt the functioning of basic social and economic resources. Another form of threat manifestation is most often disinformation campaigns and the manipulation of media narratives, which affect the public's beliefs and institutional capacity for decision-making. The last example is economic and political pressures from great powers. These often manifest as economic dependence, conditionality, and foreign policy pressures that undermine institutional stability.

An example is research on the economic aspects of cybersecurity. Vidović and Beriša show that cyberattacks have direct socio-financial consequences that materialize outside the digital space, including jeopardizing the functioning of critical infrastructure and financial flows within the national economy (Vidović & Beriša, 2025). This is precisely why the development and strengthening of information and cybersecurity capacities have become a priority in Serbia, which implies institutional coordination and the ability to respond not only to the technological but also to the structural implications of such attacks (Stošić & Janković, 2022).

The second group of threats comprises informational influences. Disinformation, propaganda, and manipulation of public opinion can affect political stability and the perception of legitimacy of state institutions. Controlled media narratives and diplomatic channels attempt to mitigate this effect. Disinformation and propaganda narratives, as part of broader informational threats, can undermine trust in institutions and the useful functioning of democratic processes. Studies in the regional and international contexts indicate that hybrid operations include media manipulation as a means of political influence, which requires a prolonged, multi-actor response (Kuçi, 2024). A similar principle can be applied to Serbia, which is a significant regional actor in the Balkans.

The third group of threats comprises economic and political influence. Threats come through economic sanctions, energy dependence, or pressure from international actors. Serbia perceives them as a challenge to maintaining strategic autonomy and pragmatic positioning. In addition, economic and political pressures from great powers, whether through economic dependence, investment ties, or political conditionality, represent a powerful instrument in hybrid strategies that operate below the threshold of military conflict and can have serious implications for institutional stability and national autonomy. This is in line with a broader security approach that recognizes that security is achieved not only through military resilience, but also through economic resilience and social stability. In addition, resilience is generally conceptualized as a multidimensional system that encompasses institutional, technological, and social capacities (Milenković & Cvetković, 2025).

Therefore, Serbia perceives these threats as a direct challenge to national security and institutional stability, requiring the development of a multi-actor deterrence system that combines state, private, and civilian capacities. In addition, modern approaches increasingly emphasize the need to integrate defense studies and disaster risk reduction into a single security framework (Roković & Dimitrijević, 2025). Such a system includes strengthening cyber resilience, legal and regulatory frameworks, public diplomacy, and strategic communications that aim to reduce vulnerability to information and economic pressures, while building society's capacities to respond to complex and asymmetric threats.

4.2. Actors

In the context of the Republic of Serbia, it is possible to distinguish several actors in the concept of multi-domain deterrence: state, non-state, and societal actors. The main carriers of multi-actor deterrence in the Republic of Serbia are state actors, primarily the Serbian Armed Forces, security institutions, and the diplomatic network. The Serbian Armed Forces are a key element of deterrence, underpinned by a defense concept aimed at protecting territorial integrity and responding to crises in the immediate environment. Its capabilities to operate across multiple domains, including cyber and information space, enable limited but credible responses to hybrid threats, thereby contributing to deterrence without relying on the classical superiority of force. In addition, security institutions integrate intelligence, police, and civilian capacities, thereby strengthening the preventive dimension of deterrence and enabling early recognition and neutralization of threats below the threshold of armed conflict. Serbia's diplomatic network also plays a significant role, enabling flexible management of multi-vector relations, especially regarding key issues such as Kosovo and Metohija, regional stability, and energy security.

In addition to state structures, non-state and societal actors also make a significant contribution to multi-actor deterrence in Serbia. The academic and expert community helps shape security policies through analyses, studies, and public expertise, thereby indirectly influencing the quality of strategic decision-making and increasing the rationality of responses to complex threats. The media and information space plays a special role in shaping deterrence signals, as it influences public perception and external actors alike, thereby bringing deterrence into the domain of strategic communications. At the same time, the information sector and national cyber capabilities represent a key line of defense against cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and institutional systems, acting both preventively and reactively. The diaspora, as a specific social actor, can act as an external multiplier of Serbia's influence, especially in diplomatic, economic, and informational processes, thereby expanding the reach of national deterrence beyond formal state channels.

The interaction of state and non-state actors represents the essence of the multidomain logic in Serbia's multi-actor deterrence system. It is precisely through this synergy that the political and operational costs of potential aggression increase, thereby reducing the cost-effectiveness of hybrid and indirect actions against the state. Instead of positioning itself as a frontline actor in the confrontation with great powers, Serbia, through coordinated actions by various actors, positions itself as a "node" in the regional and broader security environment. Such an approach allows the maintenance of deterrence credibility without the need for symmetrical military superiority, relying on a combination of institutional resilience, social cohesion, and active perception management. Multi-actor deterrence thus appears as an adaptive, contextually responsive model of security for a small state in conditions of limited resources and formal military neutrality.

In the Serbian context, multi-actor deterrence operates through fragmented but recognizable coordination paths. State actors, namely the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Security Council, integrate political and legal instruments. In contrast, non-state and corporate actors (energy and technology companies, media actors) contribute technical and cognitive signals. International actors and partners operate through formal and informal mechanisms of consultation and advice. The governance mechanism is partly centralized (through state coordinators), but in practice is fragmented, reflecting the limitations of small, neutral states in a multi-actor environment and confirming the need for strategic pragmatism.

In addition, in the case of Serbia, multi-actor deterrence manifests itself through multiple domains and actors. First, legal and normative signaling is realized through the adoption of defense strategies and participation in international agreements, which indicates to potential aggressors an institutionally regulated and predictable environment. Second, diplomatic channels and media narratives are used to convey clear messages about interests and readiness to coordinate with alliances and partners; an example is diplomatic contacts with NATO members and simultaneous public communication about the policy of military neutrality. Third, cyber capabilities and corporate partnerships serve as an indirect deterrent, as modern IT systems, together with technology companies and institutional platforms, increase the costs of potential hybrid attacks and prevent information

manipulation. These examples show how different actors and domains, through concrete and verifiable activities, produce a cumulative deterrent effect in a complex security environment.

4.3. Limitations and risks of multi-actor deterrence in the case of Serbia

It is particularly important to consider the limitations and risks of applying this concept to small states, including Serbia. The multi-actor approach to deterrence faces several challenges in small states. Coordination challenges and capacity asymmetry can be particularly highlighted here. Namely, multi-actor deterrence involves interactions among multiple state and non-state actors, often leading to coordination problems in implementing the strategy. Institutional fragmentation and the diversity of competencies slow the decision-making process and can cause delays in responding to crises, especially in the case of cyberattacks or information overload. In addition, the asymmetry in actors' capacities, where some have significant resources and expertise. In contrast, others have limited ability to act, can result in uneven implementation of the strategy, reducing its credibility and influence with potential adversaries. These coordination challenges underscore the need for clear governance mechanisms, standardized procedures, and ongoing dialogue among all relevant actors for multi-actor deterrence to be effective.

Contemporary threats to Serbia's national security, including cyberattacks, information influence strategies, and economic and political pressures, are increasingly viewed as part of a hybrid threat that requires an integrated, multi-actor response from state and non-state actors. Academic analysis indicates that modern threats encompass "non-military threats and hybrid components" that are inextricably linked to the functioning of the national security system and require broad coordination of capacities in order to effectively counter them (Lović & Stojanović, 2024).

Another significant segment comprises the risks of instrumentalization and external pressures. In addition to internal coordination challenges, multi-actor deterrence in Serbia carries the risk of instrumentalization by non-state actors. When the academic community, media, information sector or diaspora act independently or are influenced by external actors, there may be a loss of control over initiatives and questions of legitimacy of these activities. At the same time, Serbia faces external pressures from great powers that seek to reduce the state's room for maneuver and to binarize its choices of political or economic orientation. These factors reduce the flexibility of the multi-actor approach and require careful coordination of state and non-state actors to maintain deterrence as credible, adapted to the context, and resistant to instrumentalization or political pressures.

Finally, we can divide constraints into internal and external. Internal constraints arise from fragmented coordination and differing capacities among state and non-state actors, thereby reducing the effectiveness and consistency of deterrence measures. Also, legitimacy issues and incoherent messaging can undermine the perception of deterrence signals, which require clear lines of accountability, regular synchronization mechanisms, and coordinated strategic communication.

External constraints include pressures to take sides, the influence of intermediaries, and economic dependence, which can narrow the room for maneuver. Mitigating them involves a multi-vector diplomatic approach, clear frameworks for cooperation, and diversification of sources to maintain flexibility and deterrence effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

The contemporary international security environment requires small states such as Serbia to adapt classical deterrence models to multi-actor and multi-domain forms. Serbia does not rely on the symmetry of force or formal allied guarantees for its security, but rather develops a network of state and non-state actors that influence the risk calculation of potential adversaries. This strategy of multi-actor deterrence allows for increasing the costs of undesirable behavior, managing uncertainty, and maintaining strategic maneuver space in conditions of military neutrality. The paper confirmed the hypothesis that Serbia, as a small and militarily neutral state, achieves a deterrent effect

through a combination of state and non-state actors, the networking of different domains of action, and the strategic shaping of the perception of risk among potential aggressors.

The analysis shows that small states can achieve deterrence through multi-actor and multi-domain strategies that do not rely solely on military superiority. Key elements include:

- Increasing the complexity of the security environment;
- Coordination of state and non-state actors;
- Strategic pragmatism and networking in international institutions.

The multi-actor approach shows that deterrence is no longer a linear process between two powers, but a dynamic and contextually conditioned phenomenon in which institutional complexity, perception and coordination of different domains play an important role. At the same time, this logic fosters structural fragmentation, the potential instrumentalization of non-state actors, and external pressures that require constant attention and flexibility in strategic planning.

The application of multi-actor deterrence in the case of Serbia points to a new model of adaptive, complex, and networked deterrence that could serve as an analytical framework for other small states in multipolar and hybrid security environments. The key conclusion is that the effectiveness of small states' deterrence does not stem solely from the amount of force, but from the ability to manage the complexity of the environment, institutional capacities, and risk perception.

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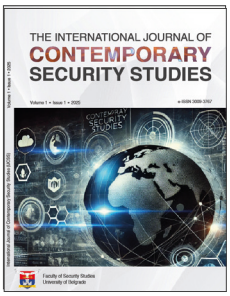
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Review article

United States–Republic of Korea Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines: Evaluating Alliance Coordination Against the North Korean Threat

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 United States-Republic of Korea Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines, as a subsidiary document to the Republic of Korea-United States General Security of Military Information Agreements and based on the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, contemplate strengthening the extended deterrence in the face of North Korea's progressing nuclear and missile threat. The guidelines institutionalize cooperation between the two allies in nuclear planning, intelligence sharing, and crisis management. This article examines their strategic implications for nuclear deterrence, extended deterrence, and alliance theory. The research is based on a qualitative systematic review of official policy documents, defence white papers, joint communiqués, and secondary academic literature. It adopts a theory-based analysis framework, drawing on classical and modern deterrence theory and alliance institutionalism, to examine shifts in coordination, credibility, and crisis stability. The guidelines bolster deterrence credibility through institutionalized consultative mechanisms, deeper integration of intelligence, and an enhanced joint military exercise program. Institutionalized nuclear consultation enhances interoperability and signals resolve, thereby reducing uncertainty in crises. However, closer integration also poses challenges for managing escalation and could exacerbate regional security dilemmas, especially in Northeast Asia's multipolar strategic environment. It can be concluded that the guidelines constitute a substantial development in alliance nuclear governance, as they operationalize extended deterrence commitments. They bolster both preparedness and alliance cohesion, but continued diplomatic engagement and tailored signaling are necessary to avoid inadvertent escalation. The study adds to discussions on managing nuclear alliances and can inform policy on crisis stability in Northeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

Nuclear deterrence; extended deterrence; alliance coordination; crisis management; security in Northeast Asia.

1. Introduction

The strategic environment in the Korean Peninsula has changed dramatically, with North Korea moving from a basic nuclear deterrent to a more diversified and operationally credible nuclear force. The emergence of intercontinental ballistic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, and multiple

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delivery systems (Kalanj, 2025; Popović Mančević, 2025; Porel, 2025) has transformed crisis stability and escalation dynamics in Northeast Asia (Panda, 2022; Sigal, 2020). These further complicate perennial questions about the credibility of extended deterrence in the United States–Republic of Korea alliance.

Extended deterrence denotes the nuclear-armed state's promise to defend its ally against nuclear or conventional attack (Huth, 1999; Kroenig, 2018). Classical deterrence theory posits that deterrence stability hinges on the supremacy of the threat of unacceptable retaliation (Schelling, 1966; Waltz, 1981). However, as capabilities develop in adversaries—especially those that can strike the defender's homeland—the credibility of such commitments comes to be doubted politically and strategically. Trends in public opinion in South Korea, such as rising support for indigenous nuclear capabilities, are symptomatic of this emergent credibility dilemma (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2023).

Reflecting the changing nature of threats, the United States and the Republic of Korea agreed to the 2023 Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines through coordination between the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense. The guidelines entrench structured nuclear consultations, intelligence sharing, joint planning processes, and crisis coordination procedures. The main research question this article investigates is whether proceduralized nuclear cooperation enhances deterrence credibility and alliance cohesion without exacerbating regional security dilemmas.

This study is important for both theory and policy. Theoretically, it advances debates in deterrence theory, extended deterrence research, and alliance institutionalism by considering the influence of institutional processes on credibility and escalation management. Whereas theories of nuclear deterrence focus on material capabilities, alliance theory highlights institutional mechanisms that address the challenges of abandonment and entrapment (Snyder, 1997; Cha, 2016). At the same time, security dilemma scholarship warns that defensive alignment may be misinterpreted by third parties as offensive aggregation, thereby causing instability (Jervis, 1978; Fravel, 2020). Understanding how the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines operate within these theoretical strains is crucial to the study of contemporary security.

The existing literature is informative but scattered. Deterrence scholarship focuses on strategic stability amid mutual vulnerability (Schelling, 1966; Waltz, 1981). Emphasis on credibility and reassurance in extended deterrence literature (Kroenig, 2018; Morgan et al., 2023). From a constructivist and normative perspective, deterrence is socially constructed through direct institutional interactions and shared narratives (Acharya, 2014; Tannenwald, 2018). However, few studies systematically link operational coordination mechanisms to alliance politics and the dynamics of regional perception. In particular, little attention has been paid to how institutionalized nuclear consultation affects such things as adversary signaling, allied reassurance, and third-party threat perceptions.

To fill this gap, the article has three objectives: (1) to analyze how the Joint Nuclear Defense Principles formalize nuclear consultation and crisis management in the context of the alliance; (2) to analyze their impact on deterrence credibility and alliance unity; and (3) to explore their wider regional security consequences.

The study proposes two hypotheses:

- First, the institutionalized nuclear consultation that is an integral component of the United States extended deterrence commitment-making process serves to bolster the credibility of extended deterrence by institutionalizing commitment within structured decision-making procedures and identifiable joint contingency planning processes.
- Second, the internal cohesion of the alliance is strengthened by institutionalization but may exacerbate regional security dilemmas unless balanced by moderate diplomatic signaling and crisis management.

This study is expected to contribute to theoretical debates on nuclear alliance management in Northeast Asia and to situate the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines within broader debates on deterrence and alliance governance.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative method within an interpretivist–critical realist ontological position. Critical realism posits that material phenomena of security, such as missile tests, doctrinal shifts, and alliance military exercises, exist outside observation while their strategic meaning is socially constructed through policy discourse, institutional practice, and alliance signaling (Bhaskar, 2008; Sayer, 2010). Qualitative design is suitable, as the research aims to explore institutional logics, credibility-building, and governance mechanisms rather than to test statistical relationships.

The study is designed as an embedded single-case study of the 2023 Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines within the United States–Republic of Korea alliance. The case study method facilitates an examination of institutional processes and context within the current Northeast Asian security environment.

2.2. Collecting Data

Data were gathered through systematic document collection and archival research. Predecessors included publicly accessible reports and policies from the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of the National Defense, alliance joint communiqués, defense white papers, congressional records, and official briefings. Tertiary sources are peer-reviewed academic articles, scholarly books, policy think-tank reports [for example, RAND, CSIS], and United Nations documents concerning missile testing and sanctions monitoring. The data collection focused on the years 2010–2023 to examine how North Korea developed its nuclear and missile capabilities and how the alliance adapted in response. All resources were accessed from official government sites, scholarly databases (such as JSTOR and Scopus), and institutional repositories.

2.3. Sampling Strategy

This study analyzes publicly available policy documents, strategic communications, and analytical literature on the United States–Republic of Korea alliance and North Korean nuclear issues from 2010 to 2023. A purposive sampling strategy was employed. Documents were chosen according to the three criteria:

- About the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines or the extended deterrence policy;
- Favorable comments on allied coordination mechanisms, nuclear doctrine, and crisis response in general;
- It was ensured that the data met the criteria of public availability and verifiability, so that the research process is transparent and replicable.

It is systematic in nature and examines some 60 key documents, including core alliance agreements, defense white papers, and major analytical contributions. Sampling was biased towards documents with institutional standing or significant scholarly impact to produce a meaningful, manageable analysis.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

This study is based on open sources and secondary materials. There were no human subjects, classified materials, or confidential information involved. Therefore, institutional ethical approval was not required. The research meets international standards for academic integrity, truthful citation, and the accountable representation of sources. All the files were processed in accordance with open access policies and copyright laws.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and process tracing. First, the documents were thematically coded to identify emergent categories related to deterrence credibility, alliance consultation mechanisms, intelligence integration, crisis coordination, and regional signaling. Coding was done manually through iterative reading and tabbing, which enabled the authors to cross-check during interpretation. Second, process tracing was applied to understand how the North's nuclear capabilities and institutionalization within the alliance have developed. This allowed the tracing of causal mechanisms through threat evolution, alliance proceduralization, and credibility signaling. Interpretive bias was minimized by applying analytical triangulation through the synthesis of primary documents and secondary scholarly works. It is not intended to judge secret capabilities or predictive results; rather, it is designed to explore institutional design, governance mechanisms, and strategic signaling processes. The integration of systematic document selection, transparent coding procedures, and theory-informed analysis guarantees methodological rigor and enables replication of the study by other researchers using the same publicly accessible corpus.

3. Results

3.1. Institutionalizing Nuclear Consultation Mechanisms in Practice

The document review reveals a distinct transformation from declaratory reassurance to regular, institutionalized nuclear consultations in the United States–Republic of Korea alliance. United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense official documents show a rising level of procedural detail.

Main observed trends are:

- Establishment of institutionalized high-level consultative bodies on extended deterrence.
- Nuclear planning was formally incorporated into alliance defense discussions.
- Development of common means of crisis communication and decision support.
- Joint strategic table-top exercises increase in frequency.

These procedures and others have appeared consistently in alliance statements since 2016 and are elaborated in great detail in 2023.

3.1.1. Coordination of Intelligence and Information Sharing

The heightened rhetoric about intelligence interoperability and early-warning cooperation was noted in the analysis of policy documents from after 2017. In particular:

- Expanded real-time information-sharing commitments.
- Institutionalized missile launch notification and evaluation.
- Integration of missile defence coordination procedures.

Table 1 presents the identifiable trends in institutional coordination.

Table 1. The Development of Alliance Nuclear Coordination Mechanisms (2010–2023).

Period	Consultance Frequency	Nuclear Planning Integration	Intelligence Coordination	Criss Simulation Exercises
2010-2015	Ad hoc / periodic	Limited	Bilateral exchange	Occassional
2016-2020	Regularized forums	Structured discussions	Expanded Integration	Increased frequency
2021-2023	Institutionalized	Formal Procedural Framework	Real-time mechanisms	Formalized joint simulations

[1] Data derived from publicly available alliance communiqués and defense policy documents.

3.2. Indicators of Deterrence Credibility

The review of materials from 2022-2023 points to greater stress on conspicuous signals of alliance solidarity. Identified indicators include:

- Strategic asset deployments that are announced to the public.
- Joint exercises that mention nuclear response scenarios.
- High-level reconfirmations of extended deterrence promises.
- More public pronouncements that alliance cooperation was part of crisis preparedness.

Documented references to extended deterrence consultation mechanisms display an overall upward trajectory across the study period (2010–2023): they remain largely stable from 2010 to 2016, increase noticeably after 2017, and reach their highest level in 2023.

Process tracing reveals the growing formalization of crisis-response thresholds. Procedural portions witnessed include:

- Predetermined escalation triggers for consultation.
- Predetermined channels for decision-making coordination.
- Pre-planned simulation exercises for tactical nuclear scenarios.

Numbered elements of escalation control noted in the documents of 2023:

- Early-warning notification agreement
- Prompt bilateral strategic consultations
- Joint public messaging strategy
- Joint adjustment of military postures

Review of regional security reporting revealed:

- More frequent statements by regional actors that the alliance is now a form of "nuclear consolidation."
- Stronger diplomatic protests after big joint drills.
- Larger regional military exercises between neighboring powers, after the announcement of the alliance.

There is no forward-looking judgment; these are observations only, based on responses documented in publicly available materials.

During this same period of institutional consolidation, secondary sources show an increase in domestic controversy in the Republic of Korea over homegrown nuclear options.

Observed trends include:

- More poll references to an independent nuclear option.
- Parliamentary debates with reference to extended deterrence credibility.
- In policy discourse, alliance consultation is linked to domestic reassurance.

For the 2010–2023 period, the document analysis reveals three major patterns of empirical:

- The development of the institutionalisation of nuclear consultation mechanisms.
- Greater procedural codification of crisis coordination.
- Concomitant increases in visible signalling and in regional response formations.

These findings form the empirical basis for the next analytical section."

4. Discussion

This section discusses the results in the context of the broader literature on deterrence, alliance politics, and regional security. It considers the theoretical implications, policy relevance, and limi-

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tations of the study. The analysis indicates that proceduralized coordination—based on joint planning, intelligence sharing, and scenario-based exercises—enhances the operational dimension of extended deterrence in the United States–Republic of Korea alliance. The 2015 Counter-provocation Plan and the 2023 Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines formalize structured consultation thresholds and crisis response mechanisms, thereby institutionalizing commitment.

This development aligns with scholarship on extended deterrence, which posits that credibility is not just about material capability but also about visible risk-sharing and consultative integration (Huth, 1999; Kroenig, 2018). The massive exercises Foal Eagle and Ulchi-Freedom Guardian, involving some 300,000 Republic of Korea personnel and 28,000 United States personnel, are a case in point of how alliance signaling bolsters deterrent posturing (Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2019).

Meanwhile, the escalation environment has grown more complex. North Korea carried out over 120 missile tests from 2015 to 2022 (Arms Control Association, 2023), signifying a move toward operational readiness and a varied nuclear capability. In this asymmetrical environment, proceduralization seems to act as a stabilizer by defining escalation levels and compressing response times. The results support the assertion in alliance theory that institutions minimize uncertainty and fears of abandonment (Snyder, 1997; Cha, 2016). The institutionalization of nuclear consultation processes within the United States Department of Defense and the Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense appears to enhance alliance solidarity by formalizing extended deterrence.

The findings also implicate the security dilemma theory, as it increases the alliance's internal cohesion. Defensive coordination could be viewed from the outside as strategic pooling (Jervis, 1978). China and Russia have repeatedly portrayed greater United States–Republic of Korea military integration as destabilizing, reflecting wider regional balancing dynamics (Fravel, 2020).

This dynamic shows that there is a tension in modern deterrence management: internal reassurance-oriented behavior can heighten perceptions of external threats. Hence, the results confound to some extent classical deterrence thinking that greater capability brings about stability (Waltz, 1981). Rather, stability is a consequence of the interpretation of signals within a multipolar regional system.

Diplomatic takeaways from the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) also demonstrate strategic learning within the alliance. The guidance, which incorporates the consultative thresholds and decision-making mechanisms, signals a convergence between deterrence and diplomatic signaling (Cha, 2019; Green, 2015). This combination method of deterrence implies that deterrence governance in the twenty-first century may require both military preparedness and diplomatic calculation.

This article makes several contributions to the literature on:

Deterrence theory finds that institutional design, not just material capability, is a crucial variable in deterrence credibility.

The Extended Deterrence Literature allows the formal consultation mechanism to serve as a credibility enhancer amid growing adversary capabilities.

Alliance Institutionalism: Proceduralization is shown to diminish internal uncertainty while, at the same time, creating possible external security dilemmas.

This article offers a more detailed analysis and understanding of nuclear alliance governance and links the operational, political, and normative levels. According to constructivist theories, institutionalized behaviors and signaling logics socially create deterrence credibility (Acharya, 2014; Tannenwald, 2018).

5. Conclusions

This research examined the United States–Republic of Korea Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines in 2023 to assess the impact of proceduralized nuclear coordination on deterrence credibility, alliance cohesion, and regional stability. The doctrinal and secondary literature qualitative analysis reveals that institutionalized consultation, joint exercises, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms increase op-

erational readiness, reduce uncertainty in crisis management, and lend greater credibility to the alliance. The codification of these procedures leads to more predictable decisions and actions in response to North Korean nuclear provocations. Nevertheless, the study also stresses that the regional perspective remains very important. China, Russia, and other players in the region may view greater procedural integration as a form of strategic consolidation, raising the possibility of security dilemmas that require diplomatic management. The guidelines enhance the cohesion of the internal alliance, and external signaling needs to be balanced to avoid escalation or perception problems.

In conclusion, the Joint Nuclear Defense Guidelines represent a strategic extended deterrence approach that blurred procedural detail with the doctrine of alliance cohesion and crisis response. In establishing institutionalized consultation, intelligence sharing, and scenario-based exercises, the guidelines strengthen deterrence credibility and underscore the ongoing significance of managing perceptions regionally and integrating diplomatic engagement into nuclear management.

5.1. Recommendations

The consultation, decision-making, and joint conduct of exercises among allies must be periodically reviewed in light of evolving threats and the operational environment. Crisis communication mechanisms, simulation exercises, and real-time intelligence-sharing mechanisms should be included in the guidelines to build capacity for swift responses. Japan, China, and Russia should be invited to strategic dialogues, where appropriate, to increase transparency and reduce the risk of misperceptions and inadvertent escalation. The Alliance should ensure that, as it strengthens deterrence, it maintains opportunities for diplomatic engagement and de-escalation to prevent crises from escalating.

5.2. Limitations

The investigation relies solely on open-source documents and secondary reporting. Accordingly, detailed operational information and the decision-making processes at the secret level were not available, and some numbers and procedures may vary across sources. The research makes no speculation about the details of secret capabilities; instead, it focuses on documented policies, exercises, and publicly expressed alliance mechanisms.

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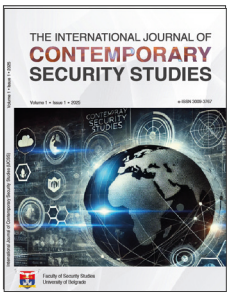
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Article

Occultism in Warfare and Espionage: An Unholy Alliance

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the roots of occultism in warfare and espionage from an academic perspective that argues that occults have changed the dynamics of war. It finds that occultism, despite its intriguing manner, has some serious impacts on the outcome of war. While tracing the history of occultism associated with war and espionage, this paper takes a more nuanced approach to explore the possibilities of occultist involvement in warfare throughout human history. The article examines various epochs, showing how nations turned to the occult to achieve their military goals. However, it should be noted that this article does not make a persuasive effort to prove the existence of occultism, as it can lead to a pseudo-scientific path, and the onus of this paper lies in presenting a strong argument that occultism has been used as a propaganda tool and psychological weapon. This outcome, stemming from this work, aims to address the research gap in the scholarship that treats occultism's involvement in warfare and espionage as a fallacy. Using historical literature and declassified documents as methodological tools, this paper provides a comprehensive picture of occultism's role in warfare and espionage. In particular, it emphasizes the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Iran wars, and occultism's claims on those issues offer practical lessons for the reader.

KEYWORDS

Occultism, warfare, psychology, propaganda, historical analysis, declassified documents, espionage.

1. Introduction

This paper begins with a conjecture that any attempt to seek occultist roots in warfare or in its use can attract harsher criticism, leading to the denial of such connections as pseudo-scientific endeavors. However, occultism's tryst with warfare is as old as war itself, which proves the inseparable nature of the two, regardless of the ostensible impossibility. If one emulates Clausewitz's adage that defines war as the continuation of politics by other means, the definition of occultism can be nuanced, as occult methods can differ subjectively. The term occultism derives from Latin *occultus*, meaning "secret" or "hidden," and applies equally to an array of sects, from paganism to mysticism. Describing the nature of occultism, Justin Sausman states, "Occultism posits that there are hidden energies or forces animating the natural world that orthodox science cannot explain, and that the goal of magic is the transformation of the self through using these forces" (Sausman, 2019).

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The central point of the discussion arising from this paper lies in the use of occultism in warfare. While occultism generally aims to use or rely on power beyond mundane forces, occultism in warfare can be defined as the invocation of a power beyond human control. In the words of Austin Lee, the use of occultism in warfare stands as purely an unconventional tactic beyond human control (Lee, 2025).

The use of occultism in warfare and espionage has existed throughout history, from ancient times to the modern era. In the Western tradition, the association between occult practices and military success is often traced to sixteenth-century Elizabethan England, where English witches allegedly claimed responsibility for the "Protestant wind" that destroyed the Spanish Armada (Parry, 2008). This narrative entered the English national consciousness and exerted a lasting psychological influence on subsequent generations. Residual cultural beliefs originating in sixteenth-century occult narratives resurfaced in wartime Britain during the 1940s, most notably in the Helen Duncan case, when the British Prime Minister openly criticized the Witchcraft Act as an anachronism, arguing that the promotion of occult or supernatural beliefs would distract the public from the realities of war (Rosenbaum, 1971).

2. Methods

The theoretical impetus for this article has emanated from the concept of "Psychological warfare," which places heavy emphasis on the human psyche's connection to the outcomes of war. Beyond these theoretical underpinnings, this article draws on a strong body of secondary sources, including declassified documents and other secondary literature.

The case materials used in this paper include a wide range of primary sources drawn from declassified documents in the archives, supported by many secondary sources, from scholarly texts to open sources. The sources were systematically categorized using thematic categorization. This involved exploring the use of occultism by various alleged actors in history, showing how powerfully it was used to change the dynamics of war and espionage. The scope of this paper does not exceed the boundaries of scientific analysis on the use of occultism in warfare and espionage, as it does not try to rationalize the pseudo-scientific claims recorded elsewhere. However, this paper also pays equal attention to them to construct its narrative of occultism's relevance in warfare.

3. Results

This article analyzes the influence of occultism on warfare and espionage through historical trajectories, focusing on modern European history up to the Second World War, to assess whether occult beliefs influenced military decision-making. Although establishing a direct causal relationship remains difficult, this study examines how efforts to employ occult practices in support of wartime objectives nonetheless strengthened the perceived connection between occultism and warfare.

3.1. Occult fascination in the West

The scientific revolution that drove technological advancements in the West did not eliminate longstanding beliefs in occultism. Neither the witch purges in Europe nor the influence of the Christian church in the 15th century diminished the impact of occultism on statecraft. The Anglo-Spanish rivalry of the 16th century demonstrated the enduring presence of occultism in political affairs, as Catholic-dominated Spain feared Elizabethan England for its alleged mystical powers, particularly following the defeat of the Spanish Armada by the English navy. Notably, Elizabethan scholar and mathematician John Dee was frequently involved in espionage activities linked to occult practices. Dee advised Queen Elizabeth on complex matters of statecraft and dedicated his leisure time to invoking angels as sources of information (Trattner, 1964)

The 18th-century Enlightenment in Europe shifted occultism from its earlier state-sponsored role, as rationalism and scientific thinking gained prominence. However, Enlightenment ideals did not eliminate the fascination with occultism among statesmen, especially during wartime. In the late 19th century, as the Russo-Anglo rivalry over Central Asia intensified during the "Great Game," both countries developed a renewed interest in occultism (Hopkirk, 1994). This climate led to suspicion of several historical figures, including Madame Helena Blavatsky, whose loyalty was questioned by the British, who suspected her of being a Russian spy posing as a mystic (Amarasinghe, 2024). Blavatsky was known for her charismatic presence and claimed abilities in occultism and theosophy, though some scholars later dismissed her as a charlatan. Despite ongoing speculation about her abilities, the British colonial administration in South Asia closely monitored her activities, particularly her connections with Buddhist monks in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Sadhus in India, which heightened British concerns about her intentions.

The West's fascination with the occult intensified during the First World War, as the conflict created new avenues for the alleged involvement of occult beliefs and practices on the battlefield. The enduring impact of the legend of the Angels of Mons remains evident in British war literature, which romanticized the belief that angelic figures protected British forces from annihilation by the numerically superior German army during the Battle of Mons in 1914. Following the publication of a short story by Welsh author Arthur Machen, which depicted supernatural forces averting the impending defeat of British troops at Mons, a wave of similar narratives emerged that attributed British success to occult or supernatural intervention (Clarke, 2002). While British society was captivated by romanticized accounts of the Battle of Mons, the Ottomans—a key member of the Central Powers—drew upon battlefield practices associated with longstanding occult traditions dating back to the fifteenth century. Ottoman tradition embraced the concept of the "men of the hearts" (*gönül erleri*), unseen armies composed of the souls of martyrs and saints believed to engage the enemy before physical combat commenced; this mystified belief system was revitalized when the Ottoman Empire entered the Great War (Saryannis, 2025).

In addition to references to occult practices on the battlefield, rumors regarding the use of occultists for intelligence gathering during the inter-war period evolved into post-war legends, generating numerous stories. The narrative surrounding the eccentric Aleister Crowley remains particularly enigmatic, prompting ongoing questions about his potential association with British intelligence. Crowley, born into an evangelical family in England, established a reputation in occultism, Eastern mysticism, and various forms of ancient knowledge. His multifaceted persona led to shifting public perceptions and contributed to diverse interpretations of his character. Crowley referred to himself as "The Great Beast 666," engaged in sex magic and Tantric Yoga, studied Buddhism, and later became a controversial critic of the British monarchy (Owen,1997). The development of Crowley's alleged connections with British intelligence appears unusual, especially given his open disdain for social norms, which led to his marginalization within English society. However, scholars such as Richard B. Spence have argued that British intelligence exploited Crowley's anti-British persona to infiltrate German secret societies, thereby enhancing British understanding of German operations (Spence, 2006). Spence further contends that Crowley's public image as the Great Beast effectively masked his intelligence activities, diverting attention by portraying him as merely an eccentric figure with unconventional behavior. Western interest in occultism and its use in warfare and intelligence during modern Europe was closely linked to shared historical roots in paganism. These collective memories, combined with contemporary needs, helped sustain occult practices in everyday life.

3.2. Nazi occultism in the military during the Second World War

Today, there is a steeping alacrity among scholars and the general public in exploring the hidden roots of occult sciences in Nazi ideology and their alleged involvement in the German war front. Inspired by several works such as Occult Roots of Nazism, many have developed several claims on Nazi Germany's interest in occultism, especially Ahnenerbe, the Nazi research institute founded in 1935, and its expeditions have buttressed different narratives in the post-war world (Winkler,2016). To some degree, those narratives suggesting the Nazis' fascination with the occult seemed to have

reached beyond any scientific claims to a hyperbolic end by generating pseudo-scientific theories. The real question that comes to the fore is whether the German Third Reich actually relied on occultism as a decisive factor in bolstering its war efforts.

Answers to this question are rooted in the secret lives of many Nazi leaders and their personal interest in occult sciences. SS leader Himmler, who patronized the activities of Ahnenerbe to seek Aryan origin through esotericism, was a key proponent of Nazi occultism. Leaders such as Rudolph Hess, Alfred Rosenberg were known for their association with the Thule society (Mosse,1960) One of the strongest claims indicating Nazi Germany's fascination with Occultism can be found in Eric Kurlander's work "*Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich*, in which Kurlander contends that Nazi scientists zealously worked to manufacture a wonder weapon called " *Die Glocke*" to reverse the tides of the Second World War (Kurlander, 2007). Although the main stream scholars have ignored any story related to *Die Glocke* as a conspiracy narrative, it is plausible to assume that German zest for a such a weapon during the Second World War may had risen from Nazi's occult interest, mainly inspired by ancient Indian Sanskrit texts on *Vimmanas* that further suggests Nazi scholars strived to seek arcane knowledge to fasten their military victories.

From a vantage point, the myth-making associated with Occultism in Nazi Germany intended to boost the morale of the nation, claiming that German war machinery would not be vanquished. Especially, the wonder weapon (Wunderwaffe) narrative came to the fore in the dying days of the Third Reich as the Allies advanced, and Goebbels aptly used it to motivate ordinary Germans to support the war. In short, Occultism during Nazi Germany fulfilled two objectives; first, it appeared to be a tool of interest in the German leadership to trace its imaginary Aryan origins and imaginary secret knowledge. Secondly, it made a profound appeal to the German public as a booster to increase their confidence in the Nazi government.

3.3. How occults shaped up the Post-War order in warfare and espionage?

Even though the scientific community never accepted the involvement of occultism in deciding the outcomes of war or gathering intelligence, the post-war development in those fields continued silently as the proclivity on occultism embraced a new dimension called "Parapsychology", which began to make a stir in the Cold War theatre between the Soviets and the US. The Soviet Union regarded the occult as anathema due to its Marxist doctrine, which mandated a strictly materialist foundation; deviation from this principle was often viewed as nearly treasonous. However, recent studies by post-Soviet scholars have traced alleged secret links between Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and occult practices, reporting that he placed considerable faith in psychics for several political endeavors. Given the ideological contradictions that pervaded the Soviet sphere, the adoption of psychic programs or occult practices as Cold War instruments in the postwar period required a significant paradigm shift in Soviet dogma. Leonid Vasiliev, a renowned Soviet parapsychologist, worked to meet this requirement by persuading Moscow of the strategic importance of psychic research for the Soviet Union's success in the Cold War (Williams, 1982). Indeed, Vasiliev's efforts aligned with the strategic objectives of the USSR, as evidenced by his appointment to a special laboratory at Leningrad University devoted to psychical research, where he claimed in 1963 to have conducted successful long-distance telepathy experiments between Leningrad and Sevastopol.

Between 1965 and 1970, Soviet experiments based on parapsychology saw a gradual development that produced astonishing results depicting effects of using psychic powers for war and intelligence. The U.S. government first became aware of these experiments through Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder's 1970 book Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain, which claimed that Soviet intelligence agencies were conducting a nationwide search for the most talented psychics and that they had already established "twenty or more centers for the study of the paranormal with an annual budget estimated in 1967 at over 12 million rubles (Ostander & Schroeder, 1977).

Meanwhile, the CIA kept a hawk eye on the development related to parapsychology and occultism within the Soviet Union, as the recently issued declassified reports contain serious information on Soviet endeavors to use these unusual factors in the Cold War. One of the CIA's unclassified

reports concludes. "The major impetus behind the Soviet drive to harness the possible capabilities of telepathic communications, telekinetic, and bionic is said to come from the Soviet military and the KGB. Today, it is reported that the USSR has twenty or more centers for the study of parapsychological phenomena, with an annual budget estimated in 1967 at over 12 million rubles" (Hamilton, 1977).

In particular, the mysterious activities of Nina Kulagina, a housewife and former member of a Red Army tank brigade, attracted the attention of the United States and subsequently contributed to the development of Washington's own programs to counter the perceived threat of Soviet "psychic spies."What particularly alarmed U.S. officials were the so-called remote-viewing experiments conducted by Soviet scientists using groups of psychics, which prompted American authorities to reinforce their own efforts to explore psychic capabilities for espionage and military applications (LoMeo, 2016). Some U.S. intelligence analysts believed that Soviet advances in parapsychology could undermine core aspects of U.S. national security, as such capabilities might enable Moscow to achieve several strategic objectives:

- Know the contents of top secret US documents, movements of the American ships, troops
- Disable, at a distance, US military equipment of all types, including spacecraft.
- Cause the instant death of any US official at a distance.

In this context, the USA opted for its own program based on parapsychology that sponsored many American think tanks to explore the possibilities of remote site seeing, and the best-known beneficiary of this funding was Stanford Research Institute, a respected university-affiliated think tank that began to develop the possibilities of remote viewing under the leadership of a young academic called Hal Puthoff (Little, 2004). Although the CIA funded the initial remote viewing project, their attitude towards its success was skeptical. However, this hesitation began to reverse when a remote viewer named Pat Price appeared to visit a sensitive NSA facility on the East Coast psychically. Price's verbal and graphic description of the facility was accurate to the core, which created a great deal of interest within the US defense community to boost the program using psychic spies, a special program called "Grilled Flame" (Little, 2004).

Declassified CIA reports released much later confirm that American psychic operatives were tasked with gathering intelligence on key facilities in Tehran during the 1979-1981 hostage crisis, on terrorists and Western hostages in the Middle East, the whereabouts of Manuel Noriega during the 1989 U.S. raid on Panama, the location of al-Qadhdhafi prior to the 1986 bombing of Libya, and the positions of Scud missiles during Operation Sand Storm (CIA, 1991). The advancement of U.S. psychic espionage was largely motivated by Washington's concerns regarding Russian progress in parapsychology, as early Soviet successes in remote viewing placed them ahead in this field. A prominent defense official in Washington remarked, "If the Russians have remote viewing and we do not! Then we are in trouble" (CIA, 1993). This sentiment exemplifies the Cold War mentality that drove the United States to explore unconventional technologies, including occult and parapsychological methods.

4. Discussion

Project Star Gate can undoubtedly be described as the apogee of America's desire for the development of parapsychology in the realm of defence. However, it should be noted that Cold War currents drove the American administration to pursue its own program. Initiated in the 1970s under the direct supervision of the CIA and DIA, the Star Gate process saw robust development by the 1980s, when the US administration recognized the imperative of remote viewing to counter the Soviets (Edmund, 2025). Despite the scientific knowledge championed by the US, there was a zest among the scientists involved in the Star Gate project to trace ancient wisdom and occults, investigating the unfathomable scope of the human mind, which was key to the psychic spies. For instance, a declassified CIA document released to the public shows how American scientists sought the methods of Indian yogis who practiced Kundalini meditation, and that such ancient knowledge was intended to be used to understand the mechanism of the brain. In a report submitted by Wayne McDonnell to the CIA in 1981, McDonnell states, "The states of bliss described by those whose Kundalini symp-

toms have completed the full loop along the hemispheres may be explained as a self-stimulation of the pleasure centers in the brain caused by the circulation of a current along the sensory cortex" (McDonnell, 1981).

The above-mentioned statement aptly demonstrates the gravity of ancient knowledge for scientific development in the USA during the Cold War. Although the Star Gate project ended in 1995, at least according to official records, its legacy has never faded from the intelligence and defence circles. On the face of it, Star Gate opened a path to blend ancient occults and mysticism, which lurked in the veil of the past, with modern scientific knowledge. It is no hyperbole to state that the notion of "Remote Viewing" as a concept had never been a wonder in the Indic tradition among the Yogis, who were well acquainted with many mystical abilities. Aphorism 3.26 of Patanjali's classic work Yoga Sutras (400 B.C.) describes the first of the ashta-siddhis (or psychic powers) that a serious practitioner of Yoga can acquire as 'obtaining knowledge of the small, the hidden or distant by directing the light of superphysical faculty'. Russell Targ has commented that the techniques used by the US viewers for 'looking into the distance and the future' are 'strikingly similar to the detailed instructions given in the Yoga Sutra!' (Targ, 1977).

Notwithstanding the bizarre narratives glorifying the use of remote viewing and psychic spies, it should be equally remembered that such claims seemed to be psychological warfare tools and propaganda techniques at an unprecedented level.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War, effectively establishing the United States as the sole unipolar superpower (Vracevic, 2025). This geopolitical transformation, however, did not diminish modern states' interest in occult forces for warfare and espionage. The reliance on occult practices in determining war and peace remains as persistent today as it was in antiquity. This section examines the growing tendency among contemporary world leaders to employ occult practices in critical decision-making related to war. The core argument advanced in this section is that humanity's perennial predilection for occultism—as a force associated with warfare and intelligence gathering—remains unshaken despite advances in modern science. When Russia launched its unprecedented military campaign in Ukraine in 2022, its ideological rationale resonated with the narratives advanced by Russia's far-right ideologues in their support for Putin. According to Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar, Putin demonstrated an explicit interest in incorporating occultism into state decision-making, reflecting the Kremlin's long-standing affinity for mysticism in governance (Rubanov, 2025). Zygar reports that President Putin undertook several visits to Siberian shamans prior to launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's long-standing affinity with occultism has long permeated its political elite, and Putin's actions represent a continuation of this historical tradition. In addition to drawing upon occultism to bolster its own military objectives, the Kremlin employs narratives accusing Ukrainian forces of invoking dark, demonic powers. Rooted in the sixteenth-century theological doctrine of Filofei's "Third Rome," which sought to sanctify Moscow's role as the guardian of Orthodox Christianity (Amarasinghe, 2021). Ironically, Moscow simultaneously relies on the very same occult practices as a means of psychological and ideological reinforcement in warfare. Thus, the Russian case reveals the indispensable yet paradoxical role of occultism in modern warfare, functioning as a double-edged sword.

The most recent incident related to the alleged use of occultism erupted in the aftermath of the 12-day escalation between Iran and Israel in 2025, as Tehran started a propaganda campaign targeting Jerusalem that denoted Israel's or commonly Jewish competence over the art of occultism. From a vantage point, this allegation is akin to long-standing anti-Semitic views that dominated the Middle East, labelling Jews as sorcerers, which brings the mythical narratives such as Solomon's Ring and Kabbalah mystics to the stormy arena of the conflict in the Middle East (Amarasinghe, 2025).

Tehran's claim over alleged use of occultism by Israel in the 12-day war firstly sprang from one of the state-sponsored media in Tehran called "Javan. Its editor, Abdollah Ganji, stated After the recent war, a few sheets of paper were found on the streets of Tehran containing talismans with Jewish symbols." (Sinajee, 2025). The same official argued, quoting some unverified sources, that Netanyahu met several Jewish occultists after Gaza strikes began. Iranian paranoia about Jewish occultism as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic has not emerged recently. Even before the 12-day war broke out this year, a plethora of allegations from Iran targeted Israel for invoking Jinns and other

supernatural forces to cripple the Islamic regime. In March 2020, supreme leader Ali Khamenei alleged in a televised address that "enemies from among both jinn and human beings" were arrayed against Iran.

Notably, certain targeted sites in Iran, including its nuclear reactor, featured geometric patterns resembling the Star of David, a principal symbol of Israel and its Jewish identity. Additionally, several Iranian generals, such as the late Tariq Soleimani and IRGC Commander Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, were recognized for wearing protective rings inscribed with Quranic verses. Although the tradition of wearing rings dates back to the era of the Caliphates in the Arab world, the contemporary use of protective rings among Iranian generals reflects a persistent narrative that attributes the use of occult forces in warfare to Israel. Furthermore, longstanding beliefs in the Muslim world regarding Jinnis and their perceived powers to bring harm to humanity continue to reinforce such narratives related to warfare and intelligence. Islamic beliefs and regional folklore in the Middle East often attribute significant influence to Jinnis, sometimes suggesting their involvement in critical events, including military conflicts. For example, following the surrender of an Iraqi army regiment to advancing ISIS militants in 2014, rumors circulated that Jinnis had possessed the regiment, compelling them to relinquish their territory. Consequently, recent claims arising after the 12-day conflict between Iran and Israel are not isolated incidents but are instead connected to broader, enduring narratives within the region.

Notwithstanding the claims on Israel's use of occultism in warfare and espionage, a set of people within Israel also seems to have relied on such claims, propelling the truth behind them. In Israel, Uri Geller, a psychic and an author, has advocated for the existence of occultism as a pivotal factor ensuring the very existence of the Jewish State from its hostile neighbors (Reich, 2025). Considering the peculiar history of Geller's previous claims and his involvement in the National Security Agency's *StarGate* project during the 1970s, his statement cannot be dismissed as mere fallacy. Geller participated in the *StarGate* project after American authorities recognized his alleged abilities as a potential asset in a covert program aimed at exploiting psychic powers for military and espionage purposes. According to Geller, the information obtained by American researchers contributed to the formulation of a plan to demilitarize an entire Russian city in the event of an escalation between the two superpowers. Certain details of this highly classified project entered the public domain when the NSA declassified a series of related documents in 2011.

The aforementioned claims during the Iran-Israel 12-day war cannot be solely taken as accurate examples depicting the use of occultism on the battlefield. On the contrary, such claims, as discussed earlier in this article, are used for multiple purposes, ranging from boosting morale to instilling fear.

5. Conclusion

The above-mentioned analysis, spanning various historical incidents to the modern era, attempts to construct a detailed picture of the intrinsic connections between occultism and warfare. Mankind's desire for occult practices has remained unaltered throughout history, denoting its power over the human mind. The same manner deployed by war to deter the people for particular objectives rooted in political gain can be equally applicable towards occultism. The specific historical incidents discussed above in this article reveal the use of occultism in warfare at different levels. While occultism is discarded as a pseudo-science, its effects seemed to have encompassed the fields of defense and intelligence gathering.

It is not far from obvious that the use of occultism or at least the propagation of occultism in the theatre of war makes a pivotal psychological impact. Thus, it is by no means an exaggeration to describe the use of occultism in warfare as embodying one of the best forms of psychological warfare tactics. A working paper compiled by RAND in 1950, under the heading "The Exploitation of Superstitions for Purposes of Psychological Warfare," questioned the possibility of non-rational actors in changing the causes of war. This report clearly illustrates how allies used Rudolf Hess's great interest in occultism to turn it against him, convincing him to fly to England on an auspicious day, which ultimately led to his arrest by the British. In fact, the use of occultism as a psychological tactic

can debilitate a person, and there have been many instances from the days of yore that show how leaders ruthlessly relied on occultism to weaken their enemy's morale on the battlefield.

In particular, the example of the Battle of Mons, which perpetuated the story of angelic assistance to the British against German troops, boosted British public opinion during the Great War, and its aftermath effects pervaded war rhetoric until the end of the Second World War. A similar analysis can be drawn by examining the role of Shamanists in the Russian propaganda campaign, as their active role tends to present Russian triumph as inevitable. In contrast, Russian media often report the alleged occult rituals practiced by Ukrainian forces, depicting Russia's rivalry as an unholy, Satanic force.

The Iranian claims about Israeli occultism reveal two sides of the broader discourse on occultism in warfare and espionage. Even though it is rooted in the fervent anti-Semitic legacy in the Middle East, which maintains a sheer abhorrence towards Jews in general, its current deployment by the Iranian regime stands for a different story. It is simply a story that covers their inability to defend Iranian airspace when the Israeli fighter jets dominated the sky during the 12-day war. Bemused by the apocalyptic fall of its security apparatus during the brief war, Tehran seems to have looked at occultism as Israel's secret advantage that succored its massive strikes, especially a strong security network built up by Iran, which they presumed to be impenetrable.

Beneath all this speculation of categorizing occultism as a typical tool for psychological warfare, one uncanny factor remains unanswered, and it cannot be conjured from a research article. The results emerged from the Star Gate project and the Soviet-led activities that proved the notion of remote viewing to be more than a fanciful idea, demonstrating how non-rational factors, such as psychic spies, can contribute massively to defense. Especially, the Star Gate project involved different occultist practices from Yogic to Tantric meditations in order to reach its objectives, which is a stark illustration of the co-existence of occultism and military objectives. All in all, it can be plausible to suggest that occultism's relationship with warfare is a solid partnership as a psychological tool for achieving military objectives. However, it remains a mystery without empirical evidence.

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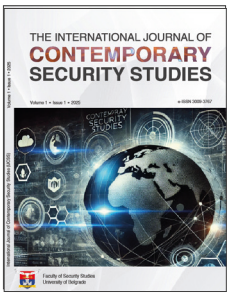
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Article

Mexican Cartels and U.S. National Security: Between Criminal Economies and Securitization Discourses

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Department of State designated several Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in February 2025. This measure reignited debates about the threat posed by these groups to U.S. national security. This article contends that such classification exaggerates their role as transnational terrorist actors and risks distorting bilateral security cooperation. Drawing on an ethnographic study of cartels in Michoacán, the analysis highlights three defining features: their primarily economic orientation, their reliance on systemic corruption, and the absence of ideological agendas directed at the United States. These characteristics distinguish cartels from traditional terrorist organizations. Their impact on U.S. security is indirect—deriving from the destabilization of Mexico's institutions and society, which undermines regional stability and U.S. strategic interests. The study concludes that cartels should be understood as powerful criminal corporations embedded in Mexico's political and economic structures. Their threat lies in eroding governance south of the border rather than in any direct existential challenge. The article further argues that the FTO designation may exacerbate violence and complicate bilateral cooperation while creating new legal and financial risks for legitimate businesses.

KEYWORDS

Mexican Cartels, national security, securitization theory, transnational organized crime, U.S.-Mexico relations.

1. Introduction

The U.S. Department of State designated several Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in February 2025. Implemented during the early days of the Trump administration, this measure rests on the premise that these organizations "threaten the security of the American people, the national security of the United States, and the stability of the international order in the Western Hemisphere" (U.S. Department of State, 2025). An objective analysis of their operational dynamics suggests this characterization may be excessive and counterproductive.

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This article argues that while drug cartels threaten Mexico's internal stability, their nature and objectives differ from those of terrorist groups with political-ideological motivations. Cartels impact U.S. national security indirectly. They do not seek political destabilization of the United States; their motivation is economic. By 'criminal corporation' we refer to hierarchically structured organizations whose primary objective is profit maximization through diversified illicit activities, which invest in legal economies, and which exercise governance functions—including taxation and dispute resolution—in territories where state presence is weak. Nevertheless, their violence generates tangible consequences for U.S. interests, including migratory flows, affected binational investments, and risks to U.S. citizens. Fentanyl flows have emerged as a particular concern, with U.S. overdose deaths reaching record levels. However, framing this public health crisis exclusively through a counterterrorism lens obscures the complex dynamics of supply and demand that sustain the illicit drug trade.

The methodology employs an ethnographic approach, stemming from the authors' status as natives of Michoacán and their trajectory of over twenty years as criminology academics. The ethnographic work, conducted primarily between 2015 and 2024, focused on municipalities across the Tierra Caliente, Meseta Purépecha, and Costa regions. It involved informal interviews with residents, business owners, former members of community self-defense groups, journalists, and local government officials. Given the sensitive nature of the research, all informants have been anonymized to ensure their safety. This long-term engagement provides unique insights into criminal governance often absent from policy discussions.

The ethnographic approach captures lived experiences of communities subjected to cartel control—experiences often invisible in aggregate data. As Zarb (2015) demonstrated in his study of securitization dynamics in Michoacán's Tierra Caliente region, "the inability of the state to establish rule of law over all of its domain has led to a variety of actors rising and attempting to establish order in their own way." This observation remains prescient: the vacuum left by the state has been filled by cartels and vigilante groups competing for territorial control. The emergence of autodefensas in 2013-2014 challenged both criminal and state authority, demonstrating that communities retain agency even in extreme violence.

The analysis focuses on three defining characteristics: economic nature, operation within structural corruption, and absence of ideological motivations toward the United States. This work adopts the perspective that "securitization" of U.S. national security has turned policy toward cartels into an instrument of pressure and intervention, often at the expense of deeper cooperation on institutional reform.

2. Methods

This study is grounded in a qualitative, ethnographic methodology designed to understand the complex social, economic, and political dynamics of organized crime from the perspective of those who live with it daily. The principles of symbolic interactionism inform our approach and seek to uncover the meanings that local actors ascribe to cartels' presence and governance. As natives of Michoacán and criminology academics with over two decades of regional research experience, we occupy a unique position that blends analytical distance with deep, contextual understanding.

The primary fieldwork for this research was conducted over nine years, from 2015 to 2024, across three key regions of Michoacán: the Tierra Caliente, the Meseta Purépecha, and the Costa. These areas were selected because they represent distinct socio-economic landscapes and have been epicenters of cartel activity and community resistance. The extended timeframe was crucial not only for observing the evolution of criminal groups—such as the transition from La Familia Michoacana to the Knights Templar and their successors—but also for building the trust necessary to engage with a population deeply affected by violence and intimidation.

Data collection relied on two main qualitative techniques:

1. Participant Observation: Researchers spent extended periods in local communities, attending public events, and observing daily life in public spaces (town squares, markets, transporta-

tion hubs). This allowed for an embodied understanding of how criminal governance manifests in the routines of everyday life, from the visible presence of armed groups to the subtle ways residents self-censor or navigate checkpoints.

2. In-depth, Informal Interviews: We conducted over 80 informal interviews with a diverse range of informants. This sample included: residents (n=30), small and medium-sized business owners (n=20), former members of community self-defense forces (autodefensas) (n=10), local journalists (n=8), and low-level local government officials who requested anonymity (n=12). The interviews were unstructured, guided by a conversational approach that allowed informants to define what was significant. Topics explored included perceptions of security, experiences with extortion (la cuota), the relationship between local authorities and criminal groups, and the impact of violence on family and work.

All informants were guaranteed anonymity to mitigate the extreme risks associated with speaking about organized crime. No real names, specific locations that could identify individuals, or other identifying details are used in this article. Field notes were coded thematically, first using open coding to identify emergent patterns, followed by axial coding to relate these patterns to the core concepts of economic motivation, corruption, and the absence of political ideology. The ethnographic data were then triangulated with documentary analysis of news reports, government statements, and existing academic literature to ensure the robustness of our findings. This rigorous, long-term qualitative approach provides the empirical foundation for our argument that cartels are best understood not as terrorist entities, but as deeply embedded criminal corporations.

3. U.S. National Security Perspectives and the Nature of the Threat

Dominant theoretical perspectives in U.S. national security are framed within traditional paradigms of international relations, particularly offensive and defensive realism. These privileged states protect against external threats through hard power (Mearsheimer, 2001). These visions have evolved to incorporate critical approaches such as securitization theory, which analyzes how certain actors are discursively constructed as "threats" to justify exceptional policies. The shift from state-centric to threat-centric conceptions of security has opened the door to an ever-widening range of phenomena being framed as existential dangers.

Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, posits that threats are socially constructed through political discourses. Presenting them as existential allows implementation of extraordinary measures that transcend conventional legal frameworks (Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This framework is relevant for analyzing the designation of major Mexican cartels as FTOs. This characterization omits that cartels lack the defining elements of traditional terrorist organizations. Nowhere in their public communications or internal documents do these groups articulate a political program or express ambitions to govern territory beyond immediate operational needs.

The distinction between criminal and terrorist violence has profound implications for policy responses. As the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2025) noted in its analysis of FTO designations, "although both use violence, organized criminal groups seek to profit, while terrorist groups are usually politically or ideologically motivated. Furthermore, the most efficient criminal networks are those that act discreetly, while terrorists typically seek to attract attention." This observation underscores a fundamental difference in operational logic: cartels thrive when operating without public attention; terrorist groups depend on publicity to advance political agendas. The FTO designation conflates these distinct phenomena, potentially misdirecting law enforcement and military resources. Applying counterterrorism frameworks to criminal groups risks importing tactics and legal authorities designed for one threat into contexts where they may be ineffective.

Securitization theory reveals how the FTO designation serves domestic political interests, such as diplomatic pressure on Mexico or justification of exceptional measures at the border. Trump's statement about possible military intervention illustrates this: "Mexico probably doesn't want it, but we have to do it." Pre-existing legal tools, such as the Kingpin Act, already allowed financial

sanctioning of cartels (U.S. Congress, 1999). Securitization operates as a mechanism for risk amplification, benefiting specific political agendas. The designation allows the executive branch to bypass deliberative processes and deploy counterterrorism finance, surveillance, and military cooperation without meaningful congressional oversight.

Critics of the FTO approach have warned that "a purely securitized approach will be insufficient" and that "a military response to an economic issue will have limited results" (Global Initiative, 2025). Addressing cartel violence requires understanding their economic motivations: "If the money dries up, the cartel goes away." This perspective aligns with our argument that cartels function as criminal corporations whose primary vulnerability lies in their financial networks. Billions of illicit proceeds are generated annually and moved through sophisticated financial infrastructure spanning multiple jurisdictions. Disrupting these financial flows requires intelligence cooperation, regulatory alignment, and technical assistance—tools independent of the FTO framework.

Building on the analytical framework developed by Vidović and Beriša (2025) to examine the socio-financial consequences of security threats, this study applies their approach to demonstrate how economic criminality in Mexico is framed through security discourses that justify exceptional state responses. Just as cyber attacks are increasingly framed as existential threats warranting military responses—with Vidović and Beriša highlighting how "the materialisation of damage outside the digital framework" creates cascading economic and social consequences—drug trafficking has been similarly elevated from a law enforcement problem to a national security crisis, with analogous risks of mission creep and unintended consequences.

In summary, securitization theory provides the most useful lens for explaining the discursive construction of cartels as existential threats, despite their predominantly economic character. This designation obeys domestic politics more than a realistic assessment of capabilities, reflecting broader post-9/11 trends where boundaries between crime, terrorism, and war have blurred.

Historical Evolution of U.S. National Security and Criminal Groups

The conception of U.S. national security has progressively expanded from state-centric threats to incorporate non-state actors and asymmetric threats. During the Cold War, realism dominated, defining national security in terms of containing rival powers and nuclear deterrence (Mearsheimer, 2001). The fall of the Soviet Union marked a turning point, forcing a redefinition of threats. The 1990s saw the emergence of "new threats" discourse, encompassing international terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and environmental degradation—all framed as challenges requiring coordinated international responses.

The September 11, 2001, attacks were the definitive catalyst, enshrining non-state transnational terrorism as the primary existential threat. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the enactment of the PATRIOT Act in 2002 institutionalized an exceptional legal framework aimed at preventing terrorist acts, reflecting the classic application of securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This framework centralized intelligence, expanded surveillance authorities, and created new crime categories and penalties, subsequently applied to non-terrorist contexts.

The conceptualization expanded to include "hybrid threats" or "transnational organized crime." The 2011 National Strategy for Combating Transnational Organized Crime declared these networks represented "a significant threat to the national security" of the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 2025). The strategy explicitly linked organized crime to terrorism, arguing criminal networks provided logistical support and financing to terrorist groups—a claim debated among scholars and practitioners.

Expanding national security frameworks to encompass criminal groups has significant legal consequences. Under U.S. law, providing "material support" to a designated FTO constitutes a felony punishable by up to life in prison. This broad prohibition captures commercial activities that might otherwise be ordinary business transactions, including transportation, communications, and financial services. As the National Law Review (2025) noted, "transactions that once posed primarily anti-money-laundering or corruption risks now carry exposure to terrorism financing, secondary

sanctions, and private Anti-Terrorism Act litigation." This creates a chilling effect on legitimate commerce, as companies navigate an increasingly complex regulatory landscape.

The 2025 designation represents the culmination of this trajectory, framing cartels' economic activities under the label of "terrorism." The designation has prompted other countries to follow suit. Within a month, "Argentina designated the Venezuelan criminal gang Tren de Aragua as a terrorist group, Canada listed seven organizations as terrorist entities under the Criminal Code, and Peru and Ecuador are planning to follow suit" (Global Initiative, 2025). This international diffusion suggests that the securitization of organized crime is becoming a global phenomenon, with potentially far-reaching consequences for cross-border commerce and human rights. Proliferation of terrorism designations for criminal groups risks creating a parallel international legal framework operating outside established human rights protections and due process guarantees.

Genesis and Evolution of Mexican Cartels: Institutional Weakness

While the evolution of U.S. national security frameworks demonstrates how the concept of "threat" has expanded, this expansion cannot be understood without examining the parallel transformation of organized crime in Mexico. As Washington broadened its security agenda, Mexican cartels consolidated power through structural weaknesses in Mexico's political and judicial institutions. This convergence of U.S. threat perceptions and Mexican institutional realities has created a dynamic where each country's responses shape the other's actions, often with unintended consequences.

Research on cartel finances reveals deep integration into local economies. Aldama-Navarrete (2020) found that "local drug cartel activity causes an increase in bank deposits, and branch networks grow in affected areas," and that "banks with prior exposure to criminal activity are more likely to enter areas where cartels operate." These findings complicate narratives of cartels as purely external threats, revealing deep embeddedness in Mexico's economic fabric. Efforts to disrupt cartel finances must contend with legitimate financial institutions accustomed to operating in criminal-influenced environments. The line between legitimate and illicit economic activity blurs as cartels invest in legal businesses, employ thousands, and provide services the state fails to deliver.

Mexican drug cartels emerged in the late 20th century as marijuana trafficking organizations. Their role transformed during the 1980s and 1990s due to two external factors: an explosive increase in U.S. cocaine demand and the effective closure of Caribbean maritime routes by U.S. authorities. This forced Colombian cartels to seek new transit routes, finding indispensable logistical partners in emerging Mexican groups. This strategic pact allowed Mexican cartels to evolve from traffickers into sophisticated transnational criminal corporations, accumulating vast financial resources and power through control over critical land corridors to the United States (Valdés Castellanos, 2013). The shift from maritime to overland trafficking fundamentally altered drug trade geography, concentrating power in Mexican organizations controlling border crossings.

The extractive logic extends beyond drug trafficking to encompass predatory activities. Contemporary cartels derive substantial revenue from extortion, kidnapping for ransom, fuel theft from state-owned pipelines, illegal mining concessions, and control of legal industries such as avocado production, lime cultivation, and transportation. In Michoacán, cartels have inserted themselves into the avocado export chain, extracting payments from producers, packers, and transporters. This diversification reflects a sophisticated understanding of local economies and the ability to exploit vulnerabilities across multiple sectors. The avocado industry, worth billions annually and destined largely for U.S. markets, has become a particular focus of cartel attention, with producers forced to pay protection fees on every kilo exported.

Prosecutorial institutions remain weak. As Delgadillo (2025), a member of the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, documents, "the Prosecutor's Office in Mexico has historically been a tool of political control. It has never been an autonomous institution, independent from the executive branch, serious and professional, committed to truth and justice." This institutional failure means even when crimes are reported, investigations are rarely effective, and perpetrators rarely face consequences. According to impunity indexes, over 90% of crimes in Mexico go unpunished, signaling that criminal organizations can operate with near-total impunity. Lack of effective pros-

ecution enables cartel violence and undermines citizen trust in state institutions, creating a cycle where communities turn to non-state actors for protection.

In sum, perceiving Mexican cartels as purely criminal masks underlying structural problems. Absence of effective Rule of Law and systemic corruption has created fertile ground for collusion between political power and organized crime. This symbiosis constitutes an indirect threat to the United States, generating migratory flows, economic instability, jeopardizing U.S. investments, and increasing cross-border illicit activities. Addressing these root causes requires long-term commitment to institutional reform, transcending electoral cycles and partisan politics in both countries.

4. Results: Criminal Governance and Lived Realities in Michoacán

Our ethnographic research in Michoacán, conducted over nine years (2015-2024) across the Tierra Caliente, Meseta Purépecha, and Costa regions, provides concrete empirical evidence that supports the characterization of cartels as economically motivated criminal corporations rather than politically driven terrorist organizations. Through over 80 informal interviews with residents, business owners, former autodefensa members, journalists, and local officials—all anonymized for their safety—we gained access to lived experiences that are often invisible in policy debates. The findings are organized around three primary themes that emerged from our fieldwork: the cartel as a parallel tax-collecting entity, the erosion of trust in state institutions, and the economic logic of violence. Together, these themes illuminate how criminal governance operates at the community level and why the FTO designation fundamentally misrepresents the nature of these organizations.

4.1. The Cartel as a Parallel State

The data reveal that the most pervasive and visible interaction between cartels and the civilian population is fiscal, not ideological. In communities across the Tierra Caliente, business owners consistently described a system of systematic extortion that functions as a parallel tax regime. One produce transporter in the region near Apatzingán explained: "We pay five thousand pesos monthly per truck. In return, they give us a windshield sticker. With that, we can pass through their checkpoints without trouble. It's like a toll, or a tax. You don't agree, you don't work, or you disappear." This testimony, echoed by over fifteen other business owners, illustrates that the relationship is fundamentally transactional. The cartel provides a service—guaranteed passage, "protection" from rival groups—in exchange for a regular fee. This extractive logic prioritizes the stability required for economic activity over the chaos that would deter it. A shopkeeper in a town in the Meseta Purépecha noted, "It's better when things are calm. You pay your *cuota*, and you can open your doors. When they fight, you can't do anything. You just stay home and lose money." This reveals a perverse form of criminal governance where cartels provide a semblance of order that enables commerce to continue—a finding that directly contradicts the indiscriminate violence often associated with terrorism.

The extractive logic extends beyond drug trafficking to encompass diverse economic sectors. In the avocado-producing regions of Uruapan and surrounding areas, cartels have inserted themselves directly into the export chain. As one producer described: "The narco had taken over the avocado packing houses. They forced the owners to pay two pesos for every kilo that left for the United States. Some farmers refused, and they were taken. Days later, we found their bodies with signs warning others to pay." This diversification reflects a sophisticated understanding of local economies and the ability to exploit vulnerabilities across multiple sectors. The avocado industry, worth billions annually and largely destined for U.S. markets, became a particular focus of cartel attention precisely because of its profitability and its connection to cross-border commerce. The producers we interviewed estimated that between 10 and 20 percent of their operating costs now go toward extortion payments. This tax functions as a de facto criminal tariff on international trade.

4.2. Erosion of Trust and the Community Response

Our interviews consistently uncovered a deep erosion of trust in official state institutions, which creates the very vacuum that criminal organizations fill. A former member of a community *autodefensa* in Uruapan recounted the event that catalyzed their movement: "We went to the police, to the mayor. They did nothing. Some said they were already on the narcos' payroll. We realized we were alone." This narrative was not isolated. A local journalist from the Costa region explained the complicity between authorities and criminals: "The small-town police don't fight the cartel; they work for them. They warn them when the army is coming. They point out the troublemakers. For the people, there is no difference between a uniformed policeman and an armed *sicario*. Both can extort you, both can kill you. The only difference is the uniform."

These testimonies demonstrate that the state's failure to provide security and justice leads communities to view the government as either irrelevant or complicit. One municipal official, speaking on condition of strict anonymity, offered a rare inside perspective: "The campaigns are expensive—very expensive. Where do you think that money comes from? The cartels don't give donations out of generosity. They expect returns. A judge here, a police commander there. It's not that the institution is weak; it's that parts of it have been captured." This observation aligns with broader patterns of institutional infiltration that have characterized Michoacán for decades. When the state becomes indistinguishable from criminal actors in the eyes of citizens, the social contract fractures, pushing communities toward either submission to cartel rule or, as in the case of the *autodefensas*, to take up arms themselves.

The emergence of community self-defense forces in 2013-2014 marked a profound rupture. These groups, initially composed of farmers and residents, successfully expelled the Knights Templar from several municipalities before many were co-opted, disbanded, or transformed into new criminal actors. Their rise and fall illustrate a tragic paradox: in the absence of legitimate state authority, communities seeking to defend themselves often find that the very tools of armed resistance entangle them in new forms of criminality. One former *autodefensa* member reflected bitterly: "We started to protect our families. Now some of us are dead, some are in prison, and others are working for the very people we fought against. The government never gave us a real alternative."

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4.3. The Economic Logic of Violence

Our findings highlight the fundamentally economic logic underpinning cartel violence, which is instrumental and targeted rather than political and indiscriminate. Violence is used as a business tool to enforce payment, eliminate competitors, and maintain territorial control. An avocado producer described a common scenario: "If you refuse to pay the *cuota*, they don't bomb a public square. They come for you, or they come for your son. It's a message to everyone else. The violence is for us, the people who live here, not for the Americans. It's about control, not about politics." This instrumental use of violence was confirmed by a former low-level cartel lookout who stated, "We had orders not to cause trouble for Americans or for big foreign companies. The boss said that brings too much heat. Our fight was with the rival gang and with the people who didn't pay. The goal was always money, always the business."

This internal logic, focused on operational security and profit maximization, is fundamentally at odds with the publicity-seeking, ideologically motivated violence of terrorist groups. The targeting is specific and localized, aimed at maintaining the economic viability of the criminal enterprise, as one resident put it: "For them, we are not enemies or converts. We are just part of the landscape, resources to be exploited." Nowhere in their public communications or internal practices do these groups articulate a political program or express ambitions to govern territory beyond immediate operational needs. The pseudo-religious narrative of La Familia Michoacana and the Knights Templar—which presented themselves as vigilante forces protecting communities—has largely disappeared, replaced by the unabashed corporate efficiency of successor groups like the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) and the reorganized remnants of La Familia.

4.4. Historical Evolution and Fragmentation

The contemporary landscape of organized crime in Michoacán is the product of successive waves of fragmentation and realignment. The criminal substrate dates to marijuana growers in the Tierra Caliente during the late twentieth century. La Familia Michoacana emerged in the early 2000s, distinguished by its pseudo-religious narrative of community protection, followed by the Knights Templar, who developed an elaborate code that ostensibly protected the poor and prohibited killing for money. Following the death of Templar leaders in 2014-2015, the group fragmented, creating a power vacuum that fundamentally reshaped Michoacán's criminal landscape. Into this void stepped the CJNG, which exploited the chaos to expand its territorial ambitions beyond its Jalisco stronghold, absorbing former Templar cells and eliminating those who resisted. Simultaneously, remnants of La Familia reorganized and reasserted control over portions of the Tierra Caliente, while smaller groups like Los Viagras carved out their own fiefdoms.

By 2025, these successor groups had abandoned any pretense of vigilante justice, concentrating instead on systematically collecting "protection fees" from nearly all legal economic activity. A documented episode from our research in Apatzingán illustrates this new reality: a local transporter reported paying 5,000 pesos per truck monthly to CJNG, receiving a windshield sticker guaranteeing safe passage—"tax" collection mirroring state functions. The February 2025 killing of CJNG leader Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera Cervantes illustrates the limitations of leadership-focused strategies. While his death was celebrated as a major victory against organized crime, the aftermath revealed the resilience of cartel financial networks. Within hours, armed groups erected roadblocks, set vehicles and properties ablaze, and paralyzed transport across multiple states. More significantly, the money-laundering infrastructure—built through years of strategic investment in shell companies, real estate, and trade-based money laundering—remains intact. As Aldama-Navarrete (2020) demonstrates, the billions in illicit funds generated by these organizations do not disappear when the cartel head is eliminated; the financial infrastructure continues to function and may even accelerate illegal activity as factions compete for control.

In summary, the lived experiences of Michoacán's residents consistently depict cartels as parasitic economic actors embedded in the fabric of local life. They function as shadow governments, taxing economic activity, exploiting the absence of a legitimate state, and exercising coercive governance functions that institutions have proven unable to provide. Their violence, while brutal, is not aimed at political transformation in the United States or Mexico, but at the preservation and expansion of their illicit business. These results strongly support the article's central thesis: that the threat posed by these groups is one of institutional erosion and criminal extraction, not of political terrorism. The FTO designation, by conflating criminal and terrorist threats, obscures the specific institutional weaknesses—corrupt judiciaries, compromised police forces, captured local governments—that enable cartels to thrive. Addressing this threat requires understanding cartels not as terrorist organizations but as deeply embedded criminal corporations whose power derives from their integration into local economies and political structures.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Mexican cartels do not represent a direct terrorist threat to U.S. national security. Their lack of political ideology, confirmed by our ethnographic findings in Michoacán, defines them as criminal corporations whose primary objective is territorial control to maximize profits. As our results demonstrate, their interaction with communities is fundamentally fiscal—taxing economic activity—and their violence is instrumental, targeting those who resist payment rather than pursuing political transformation. This characterization aligns with Unaam's (2025) framework, distinguishing between groups seeking political transformation and those engaged in extractive violence. Applying his conceptual lens to the Mexican context reinforces our argument that cartels are entities focused on extractive violence—seeking economic rents rather than political change. The distinction is critical: groups seeking political transformation require political solutions; those engaged in extractive violence require institutional strengthening and economic alternatives. The threat they pose is indi-

rect: eroding governance and the Rule of Law in Mexico creates instability—manifested in migration pressures, spillover violence, and illicit financial flows—that ultimately harms U.S. strategic interests.

The FTO designation may exacerbate rather than resolve the problem. Proponents of the FTO designation argue that it provides additional legal tools for asset freezing, enables intelligence sharing with allied nations under counterterrorism frameworks, and signals political resolve. However, our analysis suggests significant risks outweigh these potential benefits:

First, conflating criminal and terrorist threats risks misdirecting resources toward militarized responses proven ineffective while diverting attention from institutional reforms. Second, it creates impossible dilemmas for businesses compelled to provide "material support" under duress, exposing them to prosecution under terrorism statutes. Third, it may complicate bilateral cooperation by creating incentives for unilateral U.S. military action that would violate Mexican sovereignty and undermine trust.

Michoacán cartels have flourished due to institutional weakness and a political system favoring coalition-building between criminal groups and political power. This infiltration does not respond to ambition for formal political power, but to the pursuit of impunity. As Zarb (2015) documented, the state's inability to establish the rule of law leads other actors to attempt to establish order. In this vacuum, cartels exercise coercive governance functions that the state has proven unable to provide.

It is therefore recommended that the United States consider a strategy focused on supporting democratic governance in Mexico. Based on this analysis, several actionable points emerge:

- **Prioritize institutional strengthening:** Shift bilateral security assistance from a narrow focus on interdiction toward programs bolstering judicial independence, police professionalization, and anti-corruption mechanisms. This includes supporting the development of autonomous prosecutorial authorities capable of investigating crimes without political interference.
- **Enhance financial intelligence cooperation:** Move beyond FTO designation and focus on joint task forces tracking and seizing cartel assets, targeting their economic structure as criminal corporations. Cartels are most vulnerable when financial networks are disrupted.
- **Address shared responsibility:** Acknowledge U.S. drug demand and illicit firearm sales fueling cartel violence, and strengthen bilateral efforts to disrupt these flows.

The FTO designation, whatever its political appeal, is unlikely to achieve its stated objectives. Conflating criminal and terrorist threats obscures specific institutional reforms necessary to address criminal violence effectively. A more effective approach recognizes Mexican cartels as fundamentally criminal corporations whose power derives from integration into local economies and political structures. Addressing this threat requires strengthening institutions that cartels exploit: autonomous judiciaries, professional police forces, and effective financial intelligence units. The evidence from Michoacán suggests that only structural reforms—not securitized responses—offer a path toward lasting security.

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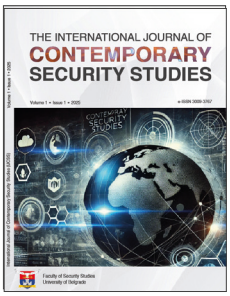
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Article

Impact of Social Support in Reducing Anxiety and Depression of Women Exposed to Violent Conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of social support in reducing anxiety and depression among women exposed to violent conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria. Using a quasi-experimental design, 100 women in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps were selected through a multi-stage sampling process and assigned to either a treatment group receiving social support or a control group. The Depression and Anxiety Scale (DASS), with a reliability index of 0.90, was used to assess participants' psychological status. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) revealed significant differences in post-test mean scores on anxiety and depression levels between the treatment and control groups. The finding indicates that social support was effective in reducing anxiety and depression symptoms. The findings highlight the importance of prioritizing social support as a key component of interventions to promote the psychological well-being of women affected by conflict. The study's results underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that incorporates social support, mental health services, and community-based initiatives to support the mental health and well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts.

KEYWORDS

Anxiety, depression, social support, violent conflicts, women.

1. Introduction

Social support and psychological well-being are essential for women exposed to violent conflicts. Social support refers to the emotional, informational, and tangible assistance provided by others, which can help women cope with the trauma and stress of conflict. Psychological well-being, on the other hand, refers to the positive emotional and cognitive states that enable women to thrive despite adversity. Social support can directly affect psychological symptoms and mediate the effects of stress. Despite this knowledge, the mechanisms through which supportive relationships lead to psychological benefits are still unknown. This lack of understanding poses challenges in developing effective supportive intervention programmes. (Thoits, 2015).

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Women exposed to violent conflicts often experience a range of negative emotions, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Social support from family, friends, and community members can help alleviate these symptoms by providing a sense of safety, security, and connection. Additionally, social support can also promote psychological well-being by fostering a sense of hope, optimism, and resilience.

Research has shown that social support is a critical factor in promoting psychological well-being among women exposed to violent conflicts. For example, a study by Sullivan et al. (2018) found that women who received social support from their communities had lower levels of PTSD and depression than those who did not. Similarly, a study by Hammock and Oesterle (2017) found that social support from family and friends was associated with greater resilience and coping capacities among women exposed to conflict.

However, social support is not always available or accessible to women exposed to violent conflicts. In some cases, women may be isolated or displaced, making it difficult for them to access social support networks. Additionally, cultural and social norms may restrict women's ability to seek support or disclose their experiences of violence.

To address these challenges, it is essential to develop and implement interventions that promote social support and psychological well-being among women exposed to violent conflicts. This may involve training community members to provide emotional support, establishing support groups for women, and promoting cultural and social norms that support women's well-being.

Depression and psychological well-being are critical concerns for women exposed to violent conflicts. Depression is a common mental health disorder that can arise from the trauma, stress, and loss experienced during conflict. Women may exhibit symptoms such as persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating.

The psychological well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts is also severely affected. They may experience anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues. The trauma and stress of conflict can lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and a loss of control over one's life. Research has shown that women exposed to violent conflicts are at a higher risk of developing depression and other mental health issues. For example, a study by Sullivan et al. (2018) found that women in conflict-affected countries had higher levels of depression and anxiety than those in non-conflict countries. Another study by UNHCR (2019) found that women refugees experienced high levels of PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

Women exposed to violent conflicts are at a higher risk of developing depression and experiencing poor psychological well-being. The trauma of experiencing or witnessing violent events, such as physical and sexual violence, torture, and forced displacement, can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The loss of loved ones, homes, and communities can also lead to anxiety, prolonged grief and depression.

Displacement and migration can further aggravate depression and anxiety because women are forced to flee their homes and experience uncertainty and instability. Social isolation, stigma, and discrimination can also contribute to depression and poor psychological well-being, as women may feel disconnected from their communities and struggle to access support. The lack of access to healthcare, including mental health services, can also make it difficult for women to manage their depression and psychological distress.

Cultural and societal factors, such as gender roles and expectations, can also play a role in depression and poor psychological well-being among women exposed to violent conflicts. Women may be expected to fulfil certain roles, such as caring for family members, and may face discrimination and stigma if they are unable to fulfil these roles. Economic insecurity, poverty, and unemployment can also contribute to depression and anxiety, as women struggle to provide for themselves and their families. Historical trauma, including intergenerational trauma, can also have a lasting effect on women's mental health and well-being. Women may experience ongoing stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of historical trauma, and may struggle to access support and resources to address these experiences. It is essential to recognise the unique experiences and challenges faced

by women exposed to violent conflicts and provide tailored support to promote their psychological well-being and resilience (Obiefuna & Adams, 2021).

The depression, anxiety and psychological well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts can have severe consequences on their daily lives. They may struggle to care for themselves and their families, maintain social relationships, and engage in economic activities. Moreover, the trauma and stress of conflict can be passed down to future generations, perpetuating a cycle of violence and poverty. To address these concerns, it is essential to develop and implement interventions that promote psychological well-being and address depression among women exposed to violent conflicts. This may involve providing access to mental health services, promoting social support networks, and addressing the root causes of conflict and violence. Existing research has largely focused on descriptive assessments of trauma symptoms rather than intervention-based evaluations that test the effectiveness of specific psychosocial support strategies. Furthermore, limited empirical attention has been given to the role of organized social support programmes within IDP camps in Nigeria, where violent conflicts and displacement have created significant humanitarian and mental health challenges.

Against this background, the present study investigates the impact of a structured social support intervention on anxiety and depression among women exposed to violent conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria. By employing a quasi-experimental design involving treatment and control groups within IDP camps, the study provides empirical evidence on whether organized social support programmes can significantly reduce psychological distress among displaced women. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on psychosocial interventions in conflict settings and provide practical insights for humanitarian agencies seeking to design effective mental health support strategies for vulnerable populations.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Women exposed to violent conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria, are disproportionately affected by the trauma, stress, and loss associated with conflict. As a result, they experience high levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, which can have severe consequences on their daily lives, social relationships, and overall well-being. The trauma of experiencing or witnessing violent events, displacement, and loss of loved ones can lead to prolonged grief, anxiety, and depression.

Despite the critical role of social support in promoting psychological well-being, many women in conflict-affected areas lack access to supportive relationships and networks. Social isolation, stigma, and cultural norms can restrict women's ability to seek support or disclose their experiences of violence. Furthermore, the lack of access to healthcare, including mental health services, exacerbates the psychological distress experienced by these women.

The mechanisms through which social support leads to psychological benefits are not well understood, posing challenges in developing effective interventions. There is a need to investigate the impact of social support in reducing anxiety and depression among women exposed to violent conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria. This study aims to address this knowledge gap and inform the development of targeted interventions to promote the psychological well-being of women affected by conflict.

By exploring the difference in anxiety and depression levels among women exposed to social support and those in a control group, this study seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness of social support as an intervention strategy. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions for conflict-affected areas to support the mental health and well-being of women.

1.2. Theoretical Perspective: Social Support and Social Capital

The present study is anchored in social support theory and social capital theory, which emphasize the role of interpersonal relationships and community networks in promoting psychological well-being. Social support theory posits that supportive social relationships provide emotional comfort, practical assistance, and informational resources that help individuals cope with stressful life events. According to Thoits (2015), supportive social ties can reduce psychological distress by fostering a sense of belonging, increasing self-esteem, and strengthening individuals' coping capacity.

Closely related to this perspective is the concept of social capital, which refers to the resources embedded within social networks that individuals can access through relationships and community participation. Social capital may exist in the form of bonding ties within close relationships, bridging connections between social groups, and linking relationships with institutions. These networks can provide critical support during times of crisis by facilitating access to emotional, informational, and material resources.

In conflict-affected environments, the disruption of social networks can significantly weaken the availability of social capital, thereby increasing psychological vulnerability among displaced populations. Research has shown that women living in disaster- and conflict-affected settings often rely heavily on informal social networks for emotional support and coping strategies (Cvetković & Svrdlin, 2020). Similarly, Kutub, Cvetković, and Huq (2017) found that social support networks play a crucial role in enhancing coping mechanisms among women living in high-risk environments.

Studies have also highlighted the gendered dimensions of vulnerability in crisis contexts. Women frequently face disproportionate exposure to violence, economic insecurity, and social marginalization during conflicts, which may increase their susceptibility to psychological distress (Kalanj, 2025). At the same time, community-based interventions that strengthen social connections and peer support can significantly improve psychological resilience among affected populations.

Despite these insights, empirical evidence on structured social support interventions targeting internally displaced women in Nigeria remains limited. The present study, therefore examines whether organized social support programmes can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression among women living in IDP camps in Plateau State.

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1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the difference in the post-test mean scores on the anxiety and depression levels of women exposed to violent conflicts in the control group and social support.

1.4. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent will there be any difference in the post-test mean scores on the anxiety levels of participants exposed to social support and control group?

2. What is the magnitude of difference in the post-test mean scores on the depression levels of participants exposed social support and control group?

1.5. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide this study:

H_{o4} There is no significant difference in the post-test mean score on the anxiety levels of participants exposed to social support, and control group.

H_{o5} The mean post-test scores on depression levels are not equivalent for participants in the social support and control groups.

1.6. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, the study did not directly measure participants' social network characteristics, such as network size, density, or interaction frequency. Since social support operates within broader social networks, the absence of such measures limits the ability to determine how existing social connections influenced intervention outcomes. Future studies should incorporate social network analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which social support affects psychological well-being.

Second, the study was conducted within IDP camps located in two local government areas of Plateau State, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other conflict-affected regions with different socio-cultural conditions. Finally, the quasi-experimental design, although appropriate for field interventions, does not provide the same level of causal control as randomized controlled trials.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design, specifically a pre-test-post-test control group design, to investigate the effect of social support on women affected by violent conflicts in IDP camps in Plateau State, Nigeria. The study consisted of two groups: a treatment group that received social support and a control group that did not receive any treatment. This design was chosen for its ability to control for extraneous variables that could impact the experiment's internal and external validity.

The study was conducted in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps located in Barkin Ladi and Qua'an Pan Local Government Areas of Plateau State, Nigeria. These areas have experienced repeated episodes of violent conflict and communal clashes, resulting in large numbers of displaced persons. Women living in the camps often face multiple stressors including loss of homes and livelihoods, insecurity, limited access to healthcare services, and prolonged displacement. These conditions create significant psychological burdens and increase vulnerability to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression.

The study's population comprised 1,523 women displaced across the state's three Senatorial Zones, according to the Plateau State Peace Building Agency (2022). A multi-stage sampling process was used to select participants. First, two Local Government Areas (Barkin Ladi LGA and Jos South LGA) were selected using stratified sampling. Then, one IDP camp was selected from each LGA using purposive sampling. Finally, 50 participants were selected from each of the two IDP camps using simple random sampling, resulting in a total of 100 participants.

Although 100 participants were initially recruited for the study, six participants were unable to complete the intervention and post-test assessment due to relocation and personal circumstances within the IDP camps. Consequently, data from 94 participants were included in the final analysis.

The Depression and Anxiety Scale (DASS) was used to assess participants' psychological status and determine the degree of negative emotional states. The DASS has been shown to have construct validity, with factor loads ranging from .36 to .80 for depression and .31 to .64 for anxiety. It also has high compliance validity with the Beck Depression Inventory and Beck Anxiety Inventory, and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .90. In the present study, the scoring of the DASS instrument was adjusted such that higher scores reflect improved psychological well-being and lower levels of anxiety and depression. Consequently, higher post-test scores indicate improvement following the intervention.

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis, and hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

The social support intervention consisted of structured group sessions designed to provide emotional, informational, and peer support to women affected by violent conflicts. The sessions were facilitated by trained counsellors and community support workers within the IDP camps. Participants were encouraged to share personal experiences, discuss coping strategies, and provide mutual emotional support. Psychoeducational components were also included to help participants understand common psychological reactions to trauma and develop adaptive coping strategies. The intervention aimed to strengthen interpersonal connections, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance psychological resilience among the participants.

2.1. Structure of the Social Support Intervention

Component	Description
Intervention Type	Structured group-based social support programme
Theoretical Basis	Social Support Theory and Community Resilience Framework
Duration	6 weeks
Session Frequency	One session per week
Session Length	60–90 minutes
Delivery Format	Small group sessions within the IDP camps
Facilitators	Trained counsellors and community support workers
Core Activities	Emotional sharing, peer discussion, psychoeducation, coping strategies, stress management techniques
Key Objectives	Strengthen social connections, reduce emotional isolation, improve coping mechanisms, and provide psychological encouragement

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Participant Flow

Participants recruited (n = 100)

Random assignment

Social Support Group (n = 50)	Control Group (n = 50)
Dropouts (4)	Dropouts (2)
Completed study (n = 46)	Completed study (n = 48)

Final sample analysed = 94

3. Results

Hypothesis Two

The null hypothesis states that there is no significant difference in the post-test mean score on the anxiety level of participants exposed to social support and control group. The hypothesis was tested using an Analysis of Covariance statistics. The result of the analysis is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Data on Pre- and Post-Test on Anxiety of Experimental Groups.

Experiment Condition	n	Pre-Test Mean	Pre-Test Std	Post-Test Mean	Post-Test Std	Mean Difference
Social Support	46	34.93	7.06	54.65	7.19	-19.72
Control	48	35.58	6.45	37.32	4.27	-1.64
Total	94	34.29	11.7	50.21	14.76	-15.92

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of anxieties of the participants. The table shows that the social support and control groups have mean values of 34.93 and 35.58 respectively at the pre-test stage. At the post-test stage, the mean scores of the experimental group increased significantly to 54.65 while that of the control group marginally increased to 37.32. Hence, the mean differences of -19.72 indicate that social support followed the order of ranking. In order to determine if the differences in mean values were significant, the Analysis of Variance was applied as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of Covariance on the Effect of Anxiety.

Source of Variance	Sum of Square	Df	Mean of Square	F-ratio
Corrected Model	1474.06	5	294.81	2.98
Intercept	297.78	1	297.78	3.01
Pretest	273.05	1	273.05	2.76
Experimental Group	690.54	1	345.27	3.49*
Anxiety	393.74	1	393.74	3.98*
Exp. Group/anxiety	274.04	1	274.04	2.77
Within Group (Error)	13058.76	88	98.93	
Total	16461.97	93		

* Significant at 0.05; df = 1, 2 $\propto$ 132; critical F = 3.96 $\propto$ 3.05

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Table 10 reveals that a calculated F-value of 3.49 resulted in the effect of experimental treatment on the anxiety level of psychological well-being of women in IDP camps. This calculated F-value is significant since it is higher than the critical F-value of 3.05 given at 2 and 98 degrees of freedom at a 0.05 level of significance. Hence the null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 2 further indicates that a significant calculated F-value of 3.98 resulted in the effect of anger on the psychological well-being of women in IDP camps when compared to the critical F-value of 3.96 given at 1 and 88 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This means that women who are exposed to treatment have higher anxiety management than those who do not. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis Two

The null hypothesis stated that there is no significant difference in the post-test mean score on the depression level of participants exposed to social support and control group. The hypothesis was tested using an Analysis of Covariance statistics. The result is presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Descriptive Data on Depression of Experimental Group.

Experiment Condition	N	Pre-Test Mean	Pre-Test Std	Post-Test Mean	Post-Test Std	Mean Difference
Social Support	46	35.68	9.65	56.13	10.36	-20.45
Control	48	34.66	7.36	37.06	8.47	-3.27
Total	138	35.47	13.27	49.05	10.26	-13.58

Table 4 reveals the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of depressions of the participants. The table shows that the social support and control groups have mean values of 35.68 and 35.66 respectively at the pre-test. At the post-test stage, the mean scores of the two experimental groups increased significantly to 56.13 while that of the control group moderately increased to 37.06. Hence, the mean difference of -20.45 indicates that social support followed the order of ranking. To determine if the differences in mean values were significant, the Analysis of Variance was performed as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis of Covariance on Depression.

Source of Variance	Sum of Square	Df	Mean of Square	F-ratio
Corrected Model	1862.80	5	372.56	3.68
Intercept	304.73	1	304.73	3.01
Pretest	290.56	1	290.56	2.87
Experimental Group	664.14	1	332.07	3.28*
Depression	297.65	1	297.65	2.94
Experimental/Depression	271.32	1	271.32	2.68
Within Group (Error)	13363.68	88	101.24	
Total	17054.88	94		

*Significant at 0.05; df = 1, 2 $\propto$ 132; critical F = 3.96 $\propto$ 3.05

Table 4 found that a calculated F-value of 3.28 resulted in the effect of depression on the psychological well-being of women in the violent conflict zone. This calculated F-value is significant since it is greater than the critical F-value of 3.05 at the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

4. Discussion

The findings showed that there was a significant difference in the post-test mean score on the anxiety level of women exposed to violent conflicts under the social support and control group. The findings of this hypothesis implied that women who partook in social support had a significantly lower post-test mean score on anxiety levels compared to the control group, who did not receive the intervention. This indicates that the intervention had a positive effect on reducing anxiety levels in women who have experienced violent conflicts. The finding revealed the importance of addressing anxiety as a critical aspect of trauma recovery and the potential benefits of social support in this process. As Hassan, Maina and Shuaib (2021) opine, vocational and social support is imperative in managing the anxiety of people who face the challenges of insurgencies. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

The finding furthermore indicates that there is a notable difference in the post-test mean score on depression levels among women exposed to violent conflicts who received social support, compared to those in the control group. This suggests that the intervention had a positive effect on reducing depression levels among women exposed to violent conflicts. The findings also revealed that the intervention was effective in reducing depression symptoms and improving mental health outcomes

for internally displaced women. The social support likely provided a sense of purpose, confidence, and connection, helping to alleviate depressive symptoms and improve overall well-being. This opinion is supported by Olamide and Audu (2020), who opined that if there are proper social supportive programmes for the vulnerable women in the IDP camps it would lead to better psychological lives for the women and their children. These opinions led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The notable difference in post-test mean scores on depression levels among women exposed to violent conflicts who received social support compared to the control group, can be attributed to the multifaceted benefits of the intervention. Social support as an intervention offered women a sense of connection and belonging, alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness that often exacerbate depressive symptoms. The synergistic effect of these interventions likely contributed to the significant reduction in depression levels and improvement in mental health outcomes among internally displaced women.

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the specific socio-cultural and humanitarian context of internally displaced women in Plateau State. While the results suggest that social support interventions can reduce psychological distress among displaced women, variations in cultural norms, conflict dynamics, and available support systems may influence the effectiveness of such interventions in other contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of social support in reducing anxiety and depression among women exposed to violent conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria. The findings highlight the importance of prioritizing social support as a key component of interventions aimed at promoting the psychological well-being of women affected by conflict. By investing in social support programs and mental health services, policymakers and humanitarian organizations can help mitigate the psychological impact of conflict on women, promoting their resilience and overall quality of life. Ultimately, this study's results underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that incorporates social support, mental health services, and community-based initiatives to support the mental health and well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts. Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that:

1. Integration of Social Support Programs: Humanitarian organizations and policymakers should integrate social support programs into existing interventions for women affected by conflict. This can include community-based initiatives, support groups, and counselling services.
2. Training Community Members: Training community members to provide emotional support and connect women to resources can help alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression. This can be achieved through workshops, training sessions, and community outreach programs.
3. Accessible Mental Health Services: Mental health services should be made accessible and available to women affected by conflict. This can include providing counselling services, psychological support, and psychiatric care in IDP camps and other conflict-affected areas.

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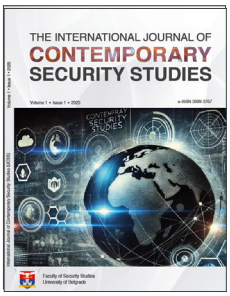
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Review article

Oil, Militancy, and National Security: The Nexus in the Niger Delta

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta has remained a central arena of conflict in Nigeria's national security architecture due to its vast oil wealth and persistent patterns of militancy. This study examines the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta, situating the analysis within the framework of the resource curse theory. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and credible media sources. Data were systematically collected and subjected to documentary analysis, employing qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, narratives, and underlying dynamics linking oil production to militant activities and security challenges. The findings reveal that oil wealth, rather than fostering development, has intensified socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation, elite capture, and weak governance, collectively fueling grievances and militant mobilization in the region. Militancy, expressed through pipeline vandalism, oil theft, kidnappings, and armed confrontations, poses significant threats to national security by undermining economic stability, reducing state revenue, militarizing the region, and eroding public trust in state institutions. The study concludes that the persistence of insecurity in the Niger Delta reflects a broader manifestation of the resource curse, where governance failures and inequitable resource management transform natural wealth into a source of conflict. It recommends inclusive governance reforms, environmental remediation, equitable resource distribution, and sustainable development strategies as critical pathways to breaking the cycle of oil militancy insecurity in the Niger Delta. The study contributes to existing scholarship by deepening the understanding of how resource-driven conflicts intersect with national security in resource-rich developing states.

KEYWORDS

Militancy, security, exploration, poverty, marginalisation, degradation.

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents one of the most profound paradoxes of resource wealth and socio-economic insecurity in the Global South. Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in the 1950s, the Delta has become the epicenter of Nigeria's petroleum economy, contributing an estimated 80% of government revenue, 95% of export earnings, and roughly 90% of foreign exchange receipts (Willies, 2024; Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007). Despite this economic centrality,

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the region remains chronically underdeveloped, environmentally degraded, and socially unstable, creating conditions that have given rise to widespread militancy (Willies, 2024; Ezirim, 2018).

Although oil wealth significantly boosts national income, the rents from petroleum have been unevenly distributed, marginalizing local communities and entrenching socio-economic injustices (Ezirim, 2018). Longstanding environmental degradation caused by oil spills, gas flaring, and neglect of infrastructural development has deepened frustration among indigenous populations who see little benefit from resource extraction on their lands (Willies, 2024). This structural deprivation, in combination with poverty and youth unemployment, forms the backdrop against which militant actions have emerged (Oluwatoyin, 2010, as cited in Ezirim, 2018).

Militancy in the Niger Delta is often traced to the failure of peaceful protest and political negotiation to secure control over resources and equitable distribution of oil rents. After years of promulgating grievances through civil society and nonviolent agitation, various militant groups, most notably the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), emerged in the early 2000s as armed insurgent movements targeting oil infrastructure, government officials, and multinational oil companies (Okoli & Ntol, 2025; Willies, 2024). These groups employ tactics such as sabotage of pipelines, kidnappings of oil workers, illegal bunkering, and violent clashes with Nigerian security forces, actions which not only disrupt production but also signal deeper socio-political alienation (Ezirim, 2018; Nwogwugwu et al., 2022).

While militants in the Niger Delta often articulate a rhetoric of resource control and environmental justice, scholarship also highlights the complexity underlying their actions, with some research identifying "petro-rentier criminality" in which militancy and organized crime intertwine with illicit activities such as oil theft and black-market sales (Okoli & Nachanaa, 2025). Thus, militia activity cannot be read solely as political insurgency but must also be understood in relation to broader networks of economic crime and structural inequalities.

The nexus between oil and militancy has direct implications for Nigeria's national security. Disruptions in oil production due to militant attacks have historically led to significant revenue losses, undermining government capacity to provide public services and weakening its fiscal stability (Ezirim, 2018; Willies, 2024). Additionally, the persistence of violent unrest manifested in sabotage, kidnapping, and maritime insecurity poses challenges for state authority and law enforcement, compelling large allocations to military and policing expenditures that could otherwise be invested in development (Ezirim, 2018). Scholars argue that the sustained presence of armed groups and the militarization of the region threaten not only economic stability but also social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. The state's reliance on force in responding to militancy, including military crackdowns and security task forces, has sometimes exacerbated tensions, creating cycles of resistance and repression that further entrench insecurity (Ezirim, 2018; Okwechime & Owolabi, 2007).

Despite periodic amnesty programs and government interventions designed to reduce violence, militant activity persists, reflecting unresolved structural grievances in the Niger Delta (Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007; Willies, 2024). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that sustainable stability in the region requires more than short-term security measures; it demands inclusive governance, equitable resource sharing, environmental remediation, and meaningful economic development that addresses the root causes of conflict (Willies, 2024; Ezirim, 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Militancy

An aggressive, antagonistic, and confrontational form of collective action that uses both violent and nonviolent tactics to advance a cause or philosophy is frequently referred to as militancy. For example, it is defined as a "collective action that is adversarial, confrontational, and motivated by grievances." Other definitions describe militancy as being "combative or predisposed to fight," or as involving "force or strong pressure to achieve social or political change," emphasizing its aggressive or forceful character (Peterson & Thorn, 1994). Its expression can range from terrorism and violent

insurrection to acts of noncooperation, civil disobedience, and protest. For instance, as demonstrated by the American civil rights struggle, nonviolent militancy includes protests and civil disobedience. Guerrilla warfare, terrorism, or insurgency, such as that practised by the Viet Cong or ISIS, are examples of violent militancy (Peterson & Thorn, 1994).

A common identity, alienation, and discontent are often the core causes of militancy. Feelings of exclusion or frustrated ambitions can psychologically drive aggressive behavior. From a sociological perspective, recruitment into militant activities is often enabled by strong social networks and a shared sense of group identity (Easy Sociology, 2024). Contemporary militant actors often organize events not only to create impact but also to attract media attention. In the rapidly changing realm of digitally mediated politics, these "media events" help amplify their message. Extremism, insurgency, and militancy are distinct yet connected ideas. According to one analysis, an organised armed conflict against a state, frequently with external assistance and political goals, is known as an insurgency (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies & Analyses, 2014).

2.2. Security

Despite its widespread use in academic and policy contexts, the term "security" lacks a broadly accepted definition. It creates what academics call the paradox of security by invoking both the promise of safety and the possibility of violence. A consensus definition of the term is not feasible or always desirable because it depends so heavily on historical, political, and social context (Jarvis & Holland, 2014). Historically, security has been centered on the state's ability to survive external threats, especially during the Cold War. However, in the post-Cold War era, security studies have broadened to encompass societal, human, and environmental dimensions, reflecting growing concerns about sustainability, individual well-being, and cultural integrity (Baldwin, 1997; Rothschild, 1995). This expanded focus includes ecological security, which explores how issues such as natural resource scarcity, climate change, and environmental disasters threaten both states and individuals. and economic and cultural security, which focuses on maintaining identity and artistic integrity while highlighting how global shocks and cultural conflicts pose new security risks (Herz, 1950). According to Baldwin (1997) and others, security is an "essentially contested concept" shaped by values and therefore open to multiple interpretations. Baldwin argues that, due to its diverse applications, ranging from state to human security, and its inherent inconsistencies, security is more often conceptually misunderstood than fundamentally debatable.

2.3. Structural Causes: Oil Wealth, Marginalization, and Environmental Degradation

A dominant strand of scholarship on the Niger Delta crisis situates the region's protracted conflict within the broader analytical framework of the resource curse and rentier state theory, which posit that states heavily dependent on natural resource rents often experience weak institutions, poor governance, and violent contestations over resource control. In the Niger Delta context, oil wealth has paradoxically deepened socio-economic exclusion rather than fostering inclusive development. Watts (2004) argues that the abundance of oil has entrenched a political economy characterized by centralized revenue control, elite capture, and the systematic exclusion of oil-producing communities from decision-making processes. This has resulted in persistent feelings of dispossession among local populations, who bear the environmental and social costs of extraction while receiving minimal benefits.

Scholars further contend that the rentier structure of the Nigerian state has weakened accountability and fostered corruption, thereby limiting the state's incentive to invest in human development and infrastructure in oil-producing regions (Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007). Consequently, oil-bearing communities experience chronic poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural neglect despite their strategic importance to national revenue generation. This contradiction has become a central grievance around which resistance and conflict have coalesced.

Environmental degradation has compounded these structural inequalities. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, and industrial pollution have devastated farmlands, mangrove forests, and aquatic ecosystems that sustain local livelihoods. Babatunde (2023) demonstrates that environmental degradation in the Niger Delta has directly undermined food security, reduced household incomes, and heightened vulnerability among rural populations. The destruction of traditional means of subsistence has intensified perceptions of injustice and reinforced narratives of exploitation by both the state and multinational oil corporations.

The literature consistently identifies environmental harm as a catalyst for social mobilization and violent resistance. Nwanolue and Okeke (2022) argue that environmental degradation functions not merely as an ecological issue but as a political grievance that symbolizes the broader marginalization of Niger Delta communities. Owolabi and Okwechime (2007) similarly frame environmental destruction as a threat to human security, emphasizing its implications for health, livelihoods, and social stability. These intersecting dimensions of poverty, ecological damage, and governance failure provide a structural foundation for militancy and insecurity to emerge.

2.4. Structural Drivers of Militancy in the Niger Delta

Scholarly literature attributes militancy in the Niger Delta primarily to environmental degradation, livelihood insecurity, and governance failure. Unaam (2024) and **Barnett** and **Adger (**2007**)** argue that environmental change undermines human security by reducing access to livelihoods and increasing vulnerability to conflict, particularly in contexts of poverty and weak governance. In the Niger Delta, oil exploration has severely damaged ecosystems, destroying traditional economic activities such as farming and fishing and generating widespread socio-economic grievances.

This argument is reinforced by **Okpara, Stringer,** and **Dougill** (2020), who identify resource scarcity and weak institutional structures as key drivers of conflict. Similarly, **Onimisi** and **Okoli(2025)** emphasize the role of governance failure, socio-economic marginalization, and inadequate policy responses in sustaining armed violence. Collectively, these studies suggest that environmental injustice, economic exclusion, and institutional weakness created conditions conducive to militant mobilization in the Niger Delta.

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2.5. Transformation from Protest to Armed Resistance

Militancy in the Niger Delta developed gradually from peaceful protest to armed resistance following the perceived failure of nonviolent strategies. Early activism, particularly by Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, relied on dialogue and international advocacy to demand environmental protection and control over resources. The repression of these movements and continued neglect of community demands, however, generated widespread disillusionment and radicalization.

This shift culminated in the emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta**,** which framed militancy as a response to state violence, environmental injustice, and economic exclusion. While early militant activities emphasized political demands such as resource control and community development, the movement later evolved to include criminal activities, including oil theft, kidnapping, and illegal bunkering.

2.6. Political Economy and Youth Alienation

The persistence of militancy is further explained by its integration into informal economic networks surrounding oil extraction. Augustine Ikelegbe argues that illicit oil economies created self-sustaining systems of violence, enabling militant groups to recruit unemployed youths, acquire

weapons, and sustain prolonged confrontation with the state. This development blurred the boundary between political resistance and organized crime.

Alienation theory complements this explanation by linking militant mobilization to structural exclusion. The **African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes** (2008) describes armed attacks and sabotage as forms of violent protest through which marginalized youths seek recognition and bargaining power, highlighting militancy as a response to entrenched socio-political exclusion rather than mere criminality.

2.7. Security Impacts: National and Regional Implications

Studies on internal security challenges in Nigeria indicate that violent non-state actors continue to undermine national stability due to weak policy responses and socio-economic grievances (Onimisi & Okoli, 2025). Similar dynamics are evident in the Niger Delta, where militancy linked to oil exploitation has become a major threat to national security. The literature is overwhelmingly in agreement that militancy in the Niger Delta constitutes a major threat to Nigeria's national security and economic stability. Attacks on oil infrastructure, including pipelines, flow stations, and export terminals, have repeatedly disrupted crude oil production, resulting in substantial revenue losses for the Nigerian state. Given Nigeria's heavy dependence on oil revenues, these disruptions weaken fiscal capacity, undermine development planning, and constrain the state's ability to provide public goods (Ezirim, 2018). Beyond economic consequences, militancy has eroded state authority and challenged the monopoly of violence traditionally associated with sovereign power. Persistent attacks and the emergence of armed non-state actors signal the fragility of state control in the region, raising concerns about internal security and territorial integrity. The securitization of the Niger Delta has also diverted national resources toward military operations, often at the expense of social investment.

At the regional level, insecurity in the Niger Delta has had spillover effects on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, a vital corridor for global energy supplies and international trade. The proliferation of piracy, oil theft, and armed robbery at sea has increased shipping costs, raised insurance premiums, and discouraged foreign investment. Nwogwugwu et al. (2012) further demonstrate that persistent insecurity negatively affects foreign direct investment inflows, reinforcing cycles of economic stagnation and underdevelopment. The literature also critically examines the state's militarized response to militancy. Bassey (2012) argues that heavy-handed security operations have often exacerbated local grievances, resulting in civilian casualties, human rights abuses, and further alienation of host communities. Rather than resolving the conflict, militarization has in some cases entrenched cycles of violence and resistance, undermining long-term national security objectives.

2.8. Policy Responses: Amnesty, Governance, and Conflict Management

In response to escalating militancy, the Nigerian government has implemented various conflict management strategies, most notably the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). The programme aimed to demobilize militants through disarmament, rehabilitation, and reintegration, offering financial incentives and vocational training. Several scholars acknowledge that the amnesty led to a temporary reduction in violence and a partial restoration of oil production (Ezirim, 2018).

However, the amnesty programme's limitations are widely documented. Critics argue that the initiative focused narrowly on armed actors, neglecting broader community grievances and the structural drivers of conflict. The exclusion of women, non-militant youths, and affected communities from the benefits of the programme generated new forms of resentment and inequality. Moreover, the emphasis on stipends and training failed to address deeper issues such as environmental remediation, political inclusion, and equitable resource governance.

Contemporary literature increasingly advocates for holistic and preventive approaches to peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Environmental peacebuilding scholars emphasize the need for stricter environmental regulation, corporate accountability, and meaningful engagement between oil com-

panies and host communities. Natural resource governance frameworks similarly stress the importance of decentralizing resource control, promoting transparency, and ensuring fair revenue sharing as prerequisites for sustainable peace.

2.9. Failed Governance and Lasting Poverty

Despite the vast revenues from oil extraction, local communities continue to live in poverty. Billions of dollars exit the delta without translating into infrastructural development or improved living standards. High youth unemployment and inadequate public services persist, exacerbating the region's vulnerabilities (WIRED).

Restoration efforts, including UNEP's cleanup plans in Ogoni-land, projected to span decades, have been stalled or mismanaged. Agencies such as HYPREP, tasked with environmental remediation, have faced criticism for corruption and poor implementation of cleanup efforts (AP News; The Guardian).

In response to this ongoing crisis, many locals have turned to illegal oil refining, or "bunkering," a hazardous but increasingly common source of livelihood amid deepening poverty and high youth unemployment (Wired, 2013). The cycle of environmental harm, livelihood collapse, and illicit economy fuels rising discontent.

The 2009 Amnesty Program, designed to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate militants, achieved initial success by encouraging over 10,000 militants to surrender arms (nearly 3,000 weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition), thereby reducing armed hostilities (Center for Security Studies).

2.10. Gap in Literature

Existing scholarship on the Niger Delta crisis is extensive, particularly in examining oil exploitation, environmental degradation, militancy, and underdevelopment. A dominant body of literature has focused on the socio-economic and environmental consequences of oil extraction, emphasizing issues such as poverty, unemployment, ecological destruction, and community–state–corporate relations. While these studies have provided valuable insights into the root causes and manifestations of conflict in the Niger Delta, several critical gaps remain.

First, much of the literature treats militancy primarily as a localized socio-economic or environmental response, with limited systematic analysis of its broader implications for Nigeria's national security architecture. Studies often emphasize community grievances and developmental deficits without sufficiently situating militancy within the wider context of state security, economic stability, and territorial integrity. As a result, the interconnectedness between oil-induced conflicts in the Niger Delta and national security challenges—such as revenue loss, militarization, criminal networks, and state legitimacy—remains under-theorized.

Second, although the resource curse theory is frequently referenced in discussions of resource-related conflicts in Nigeria, its application to the Niger Delta has often been descriptive rather than analytical. Many studies invoke the theory to explain underdevelopment and conflict, but fail to rigorously interrogate the specific mechanisms through which oil wealth translates into militancy and security threats. There is a paucity of studies that explicitly link the core assumptions of the resource curse—governance failure, rent-seeking, elite capture, and weak institutions to the emergence and persistence of militancy as a national security problem.

Third, the methodological orientation of existing studies reveals another significant gap. A substantial proportion of the literature relies on primary data, particularly interviews and surveys conducted at the community level. While valuable, such approaches often produce fragmented or localized findings that limit broader analytical generalization. Conversely, there is limited use of systematic documentary analysis that synthesizes existing scholarly, policy, and institutional sourc-

es to provide a holistic and longitudinal understanding of the oil–militancy–security nexus in the Niger Delta.

Finally, thematic integration remains weak across the literature. Many studies examine oil politics, militancy, or security as discrete phenomena, rather than as interrelated processes within a single analytical framework. This fragmentation obscures the cumulative and reinforcing effects of oil exploitation, militant violence, and state security responses over time.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a theory-driven, methodologically rigorous analysis of the nexus among oil, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta. By applying the resource curse theory through qualitative content and thematic analysis of secondary data, the study provides an integrated perspective that bridges local grievances and national security concerns, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the existing body of knowledge.

2.11. The Resource Curse Theory

The resource curse theory, also referred to as the paradox of plenty, posits that countries endowed with abundant natural resources—particularly non-renewable resources such as oil, gas, and minerals—often experience slower economic growth, weaker institutions, poor governance, and higher levels of conflict than resource-poor countries (Auty, 1993; Sachs & Warner, 2001). Contrary to classical economic expectations that natural resource wealth should stimulate development, the resource curse thesis argues that reliance on extractive resources can generate structural distortions that undermine long-term socio-economic and political stability.

At its core, the resource curse theory challenges the assumption that natural resource abundance is inherently beneficial. Instead, it suggests that the manner in which resources are managed, distributed, and governed determines whether they become a blessing or a curse. This framework has been widely applied to oil-producing states in the Global South, including Nigeria, where petroleum wealth has coexisted with poverty, conflict, and underdevelopment.

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2.12. Economic Dimensions of the Resource Curse

One of the key economic mechanisms associated with the resource curse is Dutch Disease, a phenomenon whereby large inflows of foreign exchange from resource exports lead to currency appreciation, making non-resource sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing less competitive (Corden & Neary, 1982). In resource-dependent economies, this often results in an economic monoculture, in which the state becomes excessively reliant on a single commodity for revenue.

Sachs and Warner (2001) empirically demonstrate that countries with high levels of natural resource dependence tend to exhibit lower growth rates than those with more diversified economies. In Nigeria, oil dependence has weakened agricultural productivity and industrial development, contributing to unemployment and income inequality. The volatility of global oil prices further exposes resource-dependent states to economic shocks, fiscal instability, and budgetary crises.

2.13. Political and Governance Dimensions

Beyond economic distortions, the resource curse theory emphasizes the corrosive effects of resource wealth on political institutions and governance. Resource rents provide governments with substantial unearned income, reducing their reliance on taxation and, consequently, weakening the social contract between the state and citizens (Ross, 2001). When governments do not depend on citizens for revenue, incentives for accountability, transparency, and democratic responsiveness diminish. This dynamic often fosters rentier-state behavior, in which political elites prioritize control over resource rents over productive economic management or inclusive governance. In such contexts, corruption, patronage networks, and elite capture of resource revenues become pervasive

(Karl, 1997). Nigeria's oil economy exemplifies this pattern, as oil revenues have historically been centralized and distributed through patron-client networks, reinforcing political exclusion and regional inequality.

2.14. Resource Curse and Conflict

A central contribution of the resource curse literature is its explanation of the link between natural resources and violent conflict. Scholars argue that valuable resources increase the stakes of political competition, incentivizing both state and non-state actors to engage in violence to gain or maintain access to resource rents (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Resource wealth can finance armed groups, prolong conflicts, and weaken state capacity to maintain order.

In oil-producing regions like the Niger Delta, resource abundance has intensified local grievances over ownership, control, and environmental damage. Watts (2004) contends that oil has transformed the Niger Delta into a zone of "petro-violence," where struggles over resource control are embedded in broader histories of marginalization and state neglect. The presence of oil infrastructure also provides strategic targets for militant groups, making violence a tool for bargaining and visibility.

2.15. Social and Environmental Dimensions

The resource curse theory also incorporates social and environmental dimensions, particularly in extractive regions. Resource extraction often leads to environmental degradation, community displacement, and loss of livelihoods, exacerbating poverty and social tensions (Bebbington et al., 2018). When environmental harm is not adequately compensated or remediated, affected populations may perceive extraction as exploitative, reinforcing resistance and conflict.

In the Niger Delta, widespread oil spills and gas flaring have devastated ecosystems and traditional livelihoods, deepening social exclusion and fueling grievances that align with resource curse dynamics. Environmental injustice thus becomes a critical mechanism through which resource wealth translates into instability rather than development.

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2.16. Strengths of the Resource Curse Theory

One of the major strengths of the resource curse theory lies in its counterintuitive insight. By challenging the assumption that natural resource abundance automatically leads to economic prosperity, the theory offers a powerful explanation for why many resource-rich countries continue to experience poverty, inequality, and instability. This conceptual shift has been particularly influential in development studies and political economy, encouraging scholars to interrogate governance structures rather than relying solely on resource endowments (Auty, 1993; Sachs & Warner, 2001).

The theory is also empirically robust. Numerous cross-national and longitudinal studies provide statistical evidence linking heavy dependence on natural resource exports to slow economic growth, weak institutions, and authoritarian tendencies (Ross, 2001; Sachs & Warner, 2001). These empirical foundations make the theory attractive for comparative analysis and policy evaluation, especially in oil-producing states such as Nigeria, Angola, and Venezuela.

Another significant strength is the theory's interdisciplinary applicability. The resource curse framework integrates insights from economics, political science, sociology, and security studies. It explains not only economic stagnation but also governance failures, corruption, democratic erosion, and violent conflict. For instance, the theory effectively accounts for the emergence of militancy in resource-rich regions by linking competition over resource rents to political exclusion and violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

The theory is particularly valuable in explaining conflict dynamics in extractive regions. It highlights how valuable resources increase the incentives for armed struggle, finance rebel movements,

and prolong conflict. In the Niger Delta, the theory helps illuminate why oil wealth has intensified rather than alleviated insecurity, as control over oil rents becomes a central axis of political and violent contestation (Watts, 2004).

Finally, the resource curse theory has strong policy relevance. By identifying governance failure, lack of transparency, and rent-seeking as key mechanisms of underdevelopment, the theory informs policy prescriptions to improve resource management, strengthen institutions, and promote accountability. Initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) draw directly on insights from resource curse scholarship.

2.17. Weaknesses of the Resource Curse Theory

Despite its explanatory power, the resource curse theory has several notable weaknesses. A major criticism is its deterministic tendency. Early formulations of the theory often imply that resource abundance inevitably leads to poor development outcomes, overlooking cases where resource wealth has been successfully managed. Countries such as Norway, Botswana, and Canada challenge the theory's universality, demonstrating that strong institutions and sound governance can transform resource wealth into sustainable development (Brunnschweiler & Bulte, 2008).

Closely related to this is the theory's insufficient attention to institutional variation. Critics argue that the resource curse does not adequately explain why some resource-rich states fail while others succeed. By treating resources as the primary causal factor, the theory risks underestimating the role of historical trajectories, political institutions, leadership choices, and global economic structures (Karl, 1997).

Another weakness lies in its overemphasis on economic indicators. Much of the early empirical literature focuses narrowly on GDP growth and export dependence, which may obscure broader dimensions of development such as human security, environmental sustainability, and social well-being. As a result, the lived experiences of communities in resource-rich regions—particularly environmental degradation and cultural displacement—are sometimes under-theorized.

The resource curse theory has also been criticized for conceptual ambiguity. There is no consensus on how to measure "resource abundance" or "resource dependence," leading to inconsistent findings across studies. Some scholars argue that it is dependence on resource rents, rather than resource abundance per se, that produces negative outcomes (Brunnschweiler & Bulte, 2008).

Additionally, the theory tends to underplay the role of external actors, including multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and global commodity markets. In regions like the Niger Delta, the actions of multinational oil companies and fluctuations in global oil prices significantly shape local outcomes. Yet, these factors are often insufficiently integrated into explanations of the resource curse.

Finally, critics argue that the theory provides limited micro-level explanations. While it effectively captures macro-structural dynamics, it is less effective at explaining why specific communities or groups choose violent resistance, how identities are mobilized, or how local power relations shape conflict trajectories. Consequently, scholars increasingly complement the resource curse theory with frameworks such as human security, environmental justice, and political ecology.

2.18. Relevance of the Resource Curse Theory to the Niger Delta

The resource curse theory remains highly relevant to understanding the Niger Delta crisis. The region's experience reflects many of the theory's core propositions: heavy dependence on oil revenues, centralized control of resource rents, environmental degradation, weak governance, and violent contestation over resource control. Oil wealth has not translated into broad-based development for host communities; instead, it has intensified inequality, fueled militancy, and undermined national security.

By situating the Niger Delta conflict within the resource curse framework, scholars can link local grievances to broader structural dynamics of the Nigerian political economy. However, contemporary studies increasingly emphasize the need to complement the resource curse theory with governance, human security, and environmental justice perspectives to fully capture the complexity of oil-related conflict in the region.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying primarily on descriptive and analytical approaches to examine the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta. A qualitative design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore complex social, political, economic, and environmental dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurements alone. Issues such as marginalization, environmental injustice, militancy, and security are deeply contextual and require interpretive analysis to understand actors' motivations, power relations, and historical processes.

The study is also explanatory in nature, as it goes beyond mere description to interrogate why oil wealth has contributed to conflict and insecurity rather than development. By situating militancy within the broader framework of the resource curse theory, the research design enables a systematic analysis of causal relationships between oil wealth, governance failures, and violent resistance.

3.2. Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawn from reputable and authoritative sources. These include peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, policy reports, government publications, and documents from international organizations. Journals such as *Geopolitics*, *World Politics*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Africa Development*, and *Oxford Economic Papers* provide theoretical and empirical insights into resource conflict, militancy, and national security.

Secondary data also includes reports from credible institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, Amnesty International, and academic research centers focusing on peace, security, and environmental governance. Newspaper reports and media publications are used cautiously and primarily to contextualize events, not as primary analytical evidence.

The use of secondary data is justified by the sensitivity of militancy and security issues in the Niger Delta, which makes primary data collection through interviews or surveys potentially risky, ethically complex, and logistically challenging.

3.3. Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic documentary analysis. Relevant literature was identified using academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and university repositories. Key search terms included *Niger Delta militancy*, *oil and conflict*, *resource curse theory*, *national security in Nigeria*, and *environmental degradation in oil-producing regions*.

Selection criteria were based on relevance to the study objectives, academic credibility, and recency, with preference given to peer-reviewed publications and widely cited works. This ensured that the study is grounded in established scholarship while also engaging with contemporary debates.

3.4. Method of Data Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the collected data. Content analysis allows for the systematic examination of texts to identify recurring patterns, arguments, and narratives related to oil exploitation, militancy, and security. Through thematic analysis, the data were organized around key themes, including resource control, environmental degradation, youth alienation, militant mobilization, and state security responses.

The analysis is guided by the resource curse theory, which serves as the principal analytical framework. This theory provides a lens for interpreting how oil wealth shapes governance structures, economic incentives, and conflict dynamics in the Niger Delta.

3.5. Study Area

The geographical focus of the study is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, comprising oil-producing states such as Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River. The region is selected due to its strategic importance as the hub of Nigeria's oil production and as the epicenter of militancy and oil-related insecurity. Concentrating on the Niger Delta allows for an in-depth examination of how local grievances intersect with national security concerns.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, the study triangulates data from multiple scholarly sources, ensuring that consistent findings across different studies support arguments. The reliance on peer-reviewed literature and established theoretical frameworks further strengthens the analysis's credibility.

Reliability is ensured through transparent documentation of data sources and consistent application of analytical procedures. By using widely accepted concepts and theories, the study allows for replication and comparison with similar research on resource conflict in other regions.

3.7. Analysis of the Study

This study analyses the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta by situating empirical realities within the broader theoretical framework of the resource curse. The analysis reveals that militancy and insecurity in the region are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded in Nigeria's political economy of oil, characterized by structural marginalization, environmental degradation, and governance failure.

4. Results

4.1. Oil Wealth and Structural Contradictions

The analysis demonstrates that oil wealth in the Niger Delta has generated profound structural contradictions. While the region serves as the backbone of Nigeria's national economy, contributing the bulk of export earnings and government revenue, it remains characterized by poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural decay. This paradox aligns closely with the central proposition of the resource curse theory, which argues that resource abundance can undermine development when governance institutions are weak.

Evidence from the literature shows that oil revenues are centrally controlled by the federal government, leaving host communities with limited influence over resource management and revenue allocation. This centralized rent distribution system has entrenched feelings of exclusion and injustice among the Niger Delta communities. Rather than functioning as a catalyst for development, oil wealth has reinforced inequality and fostered resentment, thereby creating fertile ground for conflict and resistance.

4.2. Environmental Degradation as a Catalyst for Conflict

A critical finding of the analysis is the central role of environmental degradation in transforming economic marginalization into active resistance. Oil spills, gas flaring, and land contamination have destroyed traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming, undermining food security and household income. This environmental harm is not merely incidental but systemic, reflecting regulatory failures and weak enforcement mechanisms.

The analysis shows that environmental degradation functions as both a material and symbolic grievance. Materially, it deprives communities of sustenance and economic security. Symbolically, it represents neglect, exploitation, and injustice by the state and multinational oil corporations. These dual dimensions intensify community alienation and legitimize militancy as a form of protest in the eyes of affected youths.

4.3. Militancy as a Response to Marginalization and Alienation

The study's analysis indicates that militancy in the Niger Delta emerged as a response to prolonged political and economic exclusion, particularly after the failure of peaceful advocacy to secure meaningful reforms. Early nonviolent movements sought dialogue and institutional change, but state repression and policy inertia eroded confidence in peaceful engagement.

As a result, armed militancy became a strategic alternative through which marginalized youths sought visibility, leverage, and access to resources. The analysis confirms that militancy initially had strong political undertones, centered on demands for control over resources, environmental justice, and community development. Over time, however, militancy evolved to incorporate criminal activities such as oil theft and kidnapping, reflecting the emergence of a conflict economy that sustains violence.

This transformation supports the argument that militancy in the Niger Delta cannot be understood solely as criminality or insurgency. Rather, it represents a complex hybrid of political resistance and economic survival within a structurally constrained environment.

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4.4. Implications for National Security

From a national security perspective, the analysis reveals that militancy in the Niger Delta poses both direct and indirect threats to Nigeria's stability. Directly, attacks on oil infrastructure disrupt production, reduce government revenue, and weaken fiscal capacity. Given Nigeria's dependence on oil income, such disruptions have far-reaching consequences for national development planning and service delivery.

Indirectly, prolonged insecurity erodes state legitimacy and challenges the state's monopoly over the use of force. The persistence of armed non-state actors signals institutional weakness and undermines public confidence in government authority. Furthermore, the spillover of insecurity into the Gulf of Guinea has regional and international implications, affecting maritime security, trade, and foreign investment.

The analysis also highlights the counterproductive effects of militarized state responses. Heavy reliance on security forces has often escalated tensions, resulting in civilian casualties and human rights abuses that further alienate local communities. Rather than eliminating militancy, coercive approaches have, in many cases, deepened cycles of violence and resistance.

4.5. Assessment of Policy Responses

The analysis of policy interventions, particularly the 2009 Amnesty Programme, reveals a pattern of short-term stabilization without long-term resolution. While the amnesty reduced violence tem-

porarily and restored oil production, it failed to address the structural drivers of conflict, such as environmental degradation, youth unemployment, and inequitable resource governance.

The study finds that the focus on disarmament and stipends treated militancy as a security problem rather than a development and governance challenge. By prioritizing former militants over affected communities and nonviolent youths, the programme inadvertently reproduced inequalities and created incentives for future violence.

This outcome underscores the limitation of reactive policies that do not tackle root causes. Sustainable security in the Niger Delta, as the analysis shows, requires integrated strategies that combine environmental remediation, inclusive governance, economic diversification, and community participation.

4.6. Theoretical Implications

The findings largely validate the explanatory power of the resource curse theory in the Niger Delta context. The theory effectively explains how oil wealth, when mediated by weak institutions and exclusionary governance, generates conflict rather than development. However, the analysis also reveals the limits of a purely structural explanation. Local agency, youth identity, environmental injustice, and the role of multinational corporations add layers of complexity that the resource curse theory alone cannot fully capture. Consequently, the study reinforces the argument that the resource curse should be treated as a conditional, context-sensitive framework, complemented by human security and political ecology perspectives.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the nexus between oil exploitation, militancy, and national security in the Niger Delta through the lens of the resource curse theory. The findings reveal that Nigeria's oil wealth has served less as a driver of development and more as a catalyst for marginalization, environmental degradation, and governance failure. These structural conditions fostered grievances that initially manifested as peaceful resistance but later evolved into armed militancy, as the state's inability to address demands for equity, environmental justice, and inclusive governance fueled the escalation. The study further demonstrates that militancy in the Niger Delta has transformed over time into a hybrid phenomenon combining political resistance with criminal economic activities, thereby complicating security management. While state responses—particularly militarization and the 2009 Amnesty Programme—produced temporary reductions in violence, they failed to address the structural roots of the conflict. Consequently, insecurity in the Niger Delta continues to pose serious threats to national economic stability, energy security, and regional maritime safety.

Recommendations

The study recommends comprehensive reforms in Nigeria's resource governance framework to ensure transparency, accountability, and equitable distribution of oil revenues to host communities. Environmental regulation and remediation should be strengthened, with strict enforcement of compliance by multinational oil corporations to restore livelihoods and reduce ecological injustice.

Security strategies should shift from predominantly militarized responses to development-centered peacebuilding approaches that prioritize youth employment, infrastructure development, and social welfare. The Amnesty Programme should be restructured into a community-based reintegration model that includes women and non-militant youths and focuses on sustainable economic empowerment rather than stipends.

Finally, institutionalized multi-stakeholder engagement involving government, local communities, civil society, and oil companies is essential for fostering trust, mitigating conflict, and promoting long-term stability in the Niger Delta.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the literature by reinforcing the relevance of the resource curse theory while demonstrating its conditional nature in the Niger Delta context. It advances scholarship by integrating environmental degradation and human security into analyses of oil-related militancy, offering a more holistic understanding of conflict dynamics.

The study also conceptualizes Niger Delta militancy as a hybrid political–criminal phenomenon sustained by conflict economies, helping to explain the limitations of coercive and amnesty-based interventions. By linking oil exploitation, militancy, and national security within a single analytical framework, the research provides a concise empirical and theoretical contribution relevant to resource-conflict studies, policy formulation, and peacebuilding practice.

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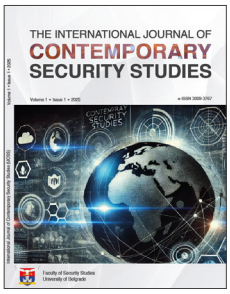
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Article

The Human Body War: A Strategic Analysis of Internal Conflict Dynamics within States

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ABSTRACT

Modern states face increasingly complex challenges that originate not only from external threats but also from internal systemic dysfunctions. This study introduces the "Human Body War" framework as a conceptual analytical model, defining it as a sustained internal struggle among state subsystems that generates instability when institutional coordination breaks down. Rather than treating internal conflict as a series of isolated crises, the framework interprets corruption, disinformation, and institutional decay as interconnected political pathologies that disrupt coordination and feedback among the organs of governance. Adopting an interdisciplinary conceptual approach grounded in systems theory, strategic analysis, and institutional theory, this study develops a theoretical synthesis rather than relying on empirical datasets**.** It examines how feedback loops, communication flows, and decision-making processes shape the stability or degeneration of the political system. Illustrative examples are incorporated to demonstrate how systemic imbalances translate into observable conflict dynamics. The study argues that resilience and adaptation function as forms of political immunity, enabling states to absorb internal stress and restore equilibrium without structural collapse. It further demonstrates that internal conflict emerges from failures in systemic interaction rather than from isolated institutional weaknesses. The study concludes that sustainable stability arises not from power centralization but from systemic harmony: a balanced interplay among governance, the economy, communication, and civic participation. By framing the state as a living organism, the proposed model provides a diagnostic and analytical tool for understanding internal conflict and informing preventive governance strategies.

KEYWORDS

Internal conflict; systems theory; political anatomy; governance resilience; institutional decay; strategic stability; political immunity.

1. Introduction

In an age defined by internal instability and complex forms of conflict, the modern state faces challenges that increasingly emerge from within rather than from external enemies. Traditional approaches to security and conflict analysis often prioritize external threats or discrete political events, thereby overlooking the systemic and interconnected processes that gradually erode a nation's stability over time.

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This study introduces the concept of the "Human Body War" as a framework for analyzing internal conflict as a sustained systemic struggle within the state's institutional structure. Rather than viewing instability as a series of isolated crises, the framework conceptualizes the state as a living organism whose survival depends on the coordination and balance of its internal subsystems. From this perspective, internal conflict is understood as the result of dysfunction, misalignment, or breakdown in the interactions among these subsystems, analogous to conflict among organs in a biological body.

By likening institutions, resources, and governance systems to the organs and functions of the human body, the study seeks to uncover how imbalance, dysfunction, and systemic failure generate crises that threaten national survival. This approach shifts the analytical focus from event-based explanations of conflict to a structural and process-oriented understanding of instability.

The contribution of this study lies in integrating systems theory, institutional analysis, and complexity perspectives into a unified conceptual model that explains internal conflict as a product of systemic interaction rather than isolated institutional failure**.** In doing so, it provides a diagnostic framework that enables a deeper understanding of how internal instability develops, escalates, and potentially transforms into systemic breakdown.

1.1. Background and Rationale of the Metaphor "Human Body War."

The state, like the human body, can be understood as a complex system composed of interconnected and interdependent components that must operate in coordination to sustain stability and survival. When one component fails, the effects are not isolated but propagate across the system, potentially leading to broader dysfunction. This systemic perspective provides an analytical foundation for interpreting internal conflict as a process of structural imbalance rather than as a collection of independent crises.

The concept of the "Human Body War" is introduced to describe a sustained internal struggle among institutional subsystems, where breakdowns in coordination, communication, or function generate systemic instability**.** Within this framework, institutional imbalances, corruption, and ideological extremism are conceptualized not merely as political problems but as systemic pathologies that disrupt the state's equilibrium.

In the contemporary context, threats to state stability increasingly originate from internal dynamics rather than external confrontation. These include the erosion of legitimacy, the breakdown of trust, governance inefficiencies, and the spread of disinformation. Such processes reflect failures of systemic interaction, in which institutions either underperform, overreact, or operate in isolation from one another.

Just as the human body experiences dysfunction when regulatory systems fail or when internal mechanisms turn against each other, states encounter instability when institutional coordination collapses or when political actors engage in self-reinforcing cycles of conflict. This analogy is therefore used not as a descriptive comparison but as an analytical tool to examine how internal systemic failures generate conflict dynamics.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

This research seeks to interpret internal conflict through a systemic and biological lens, integrating insights from political science, strategic studies, and systems analysis. The primary purpose is to develop a conceptual framework that explains how internal instability emerges from the interaction of institutional subsystems rather than from isolated structural weaknesses.

By bridging political analysis with the logic of complex systems, the study offers a multidimensional understanding of how states deteriorate from within and how resilience can be constructed

and sustained. It moves beyond traditional event-based explanations of conflict by focusing on processes of interaction, feedback, and systemic adaptation.

The significance of this approach lies in its ability to transform abstract political complexity into a structured analytical model. Similar to diagnostic models in medical science, the framework enables the identification of symptoms (instability), underlying causes (systemic dysfunction), and potential interventions (institutional reform and adaptive governance). This perspective enhances both theoretical understanding and strategic application in the study of internal conflict.

1.3. Research Questions and Objectives

The study addresses the following core questions:

1. How does the "Human Body War" framework contribute to a deeper understanding of internal conflict dynamics within states?
2. Which institutional subsystems are most vulnerable to systemic dysfunction, and how do their interactions influence the escalation of instability?
3. How can insights derived from systemic and biological analogies inform strategic approaches to conflict management, prevention, and state resilience?

Based on these questions, the main objectives are to:

1. Develop a systemic conceptual framework for analyzing internal conflict within states.
2. Establish analytically grounded parallels between biological systems and political institutions.
3. Propose strategic approaches to strengthen institutional resilience and reinforce long-term systemic stability.

2. Methodological Overview and Scope

This study adopts a conceptual qualitative research design to develop an analytical framework rather than to test empirical hypotheses. It integrates insights from systems theory, institutional theory, and strategic analysis to construct a theoretical model for interpreting internal conflict as a product of systemic interaction within the state.

Methodologically, the research follows a structured analytical approach consisting of three main steps. First, it synthesizes key theoretical perspectives, particularly systems theory (Easton, 1965), complexity theory (Jervis, 1997), and institutional theory (Hall & Taylor, 1996), to establish the foundational logic of systemic interaction. Second, it develops the "Human Body War" framework by mapping biological systems onto political institutions in order to identify functional parallels and patterns of interaction. Third, it applies this conceptual mapping to interpret how disruptions in coordination, communication, and resource distribution generate internal conflict dynamics.

The study uses the human body as a conceptual framework to analyze how states maintain balance under stress and how internal weaknesses lead to dysfunction. Rather than relying on empirical datasets, the analysis is supported by illustrative examples drawn from the existing literature and real-world observations to demonstrate the framework's applicability**.** These examples are used analytically, not as formal case studies, to clarify how institutional "organs" interact, whether through cooperation or conflict, and how governance structures can either adapt or decay.

The scope of this study focuses on the internal mechanisms of governance rather than external geopolitical confrontations. It examines how communication systems, economic flows, defense mechanisms, and policymaking structures correspond to biological systems within the body. This scope is intentionally delimited to emphasize internal systemic processes and avoid conflating domestic instability with external conflict dynamics.

It is important to note that this study does not aim to produce generalizable empirical findings, but rather to offer a conceptual and analytical model that can guide future empirical research. In this sense, the framework functions as a diagnostic tool for understanding how stability is achieved, maintained, or disrupted within the complex structure of the modern state.

In summary, viewing the state as a living organism reveals that political stability depends not merely on authority or power, but on balance, coordination, and systemic health. Internal conflict emerges when communication breaks down, resources are misallocated, or institutions fail to perform their specialized functions; much like a body experiencing disease when its organs lose synchronization.

This methodological approach provides the foundation for the subsequent conceptual framework, where the dynamics of internal conflict are systematically defined and analyzed through the integrated lens of systems theory and political anatomy.

3. Conceptual Framework

This section builds the theoretical foundation of the study. It explains how internal conflict can be understood not only as a political or military crisis but as a systemic and relational disorder that affects the state's entire institutional structure. Drawing upon major theories from political science and international relations, including systems theory, complex systems analysis, and institutional theory, this framework integrates these perspectives into a unified analytical model to interpret how governance, communication, and decision-making processes interact to maintain or disrupt stability.

Rather than treating these theories as separate explanatory tools, the study combines them to explain internal conflict as an emergent outcome of systemic interaction, feedback failure, and institutional dysfunction. In this context, the "Human Body War" framework serves as a conceptual bridge, translating abstract theoretical insights into a structured model of internal instability.

3.1. Defining Internal Conflict and State Dynamics

Internal conflict in political science refers to tensions, rivalries, or breakdowns that originate within the boundaries of the state. These conflicts can take many forms, including armed civil wars, political polarization, economic collapse, social unrest, and institutional corruption. As Gurr (2016) explains, internal conflict is often triggered by relative deprivation, when groups perceive inequality between what they believe they deserve and what they actually obtain. Over time, this imbalance erodes legitimacy and provokes confrontation between citizens and institutions.

State dynamics, meanwhile, describe how political, social, and economic institutions interact to maintain equilibrium. According to Waltz (1979), a state's behavior, whether stable or conflict-prone, results from both its internal structure and the environment in which it operates. However, this study places greater emphasis on internal systemic interaction, arguing that instability is primarily driven by failures in coordination among domestic institutional subsystems.

Inside the state, feedback loops between leaders, institutions, and citizens determine how effectively the system adapts to pressure. When feedback mechanisms fail, through censorship, corruption, or miscommunication, states lose their capacity for self-correction, much like an organism losing its regulatory sensitivity. This failure of feedback represents a core mechanism through which internal conflict emerges and escalates.

Thus, understanding internal conflict requires analyzing how these dynamics, inputs (societal demands), conversion (policy processes), and outputs (decisions), interact within a systemic framework (Easton, 1965). Disruptions in any stage of this cycle generate cumulative imbalances that propagate across the system**.** A disturbance in any part can destabilize the whole, producing what

this study defines as a "Human Body War": a sustained internal conflict driven by systemic dysfunction and breakdown in institutional coordination.

This systemic perspective aligns with recent analyses of structural transformation in international systems, where internal and external dynamics jointly shape state behavior (Farag, 2026a).

3.2. Theoretical Foundations: Systems Theory, Complex Systems, and Institutional Theory

Systems Theory

David Easton's (1965) systems analysis model is one of the most influential frameworks in political science. It views the political system as a structured process that receives inputs from society (such as demands and support), processes them through institutions, and produces outputs (policies and decisions). These outputs then feed back into the environment, shaping future inputs. The system remains stable only if feedback mechanisms function properly.

Within this study, systems theory provides the structural foundation of the "Human Body War" framework by defining how inputs, processes, and outputs interact within the political system. It establishes the logic through which internal conflict can be traced to disruptions in feedback cycles and systemic imbalance.

To illustrate the logic of systemic interaction and feedback regulation within the political system, **Figure 1** presents a simplified representation of input–output dynamics and feedback circulation.

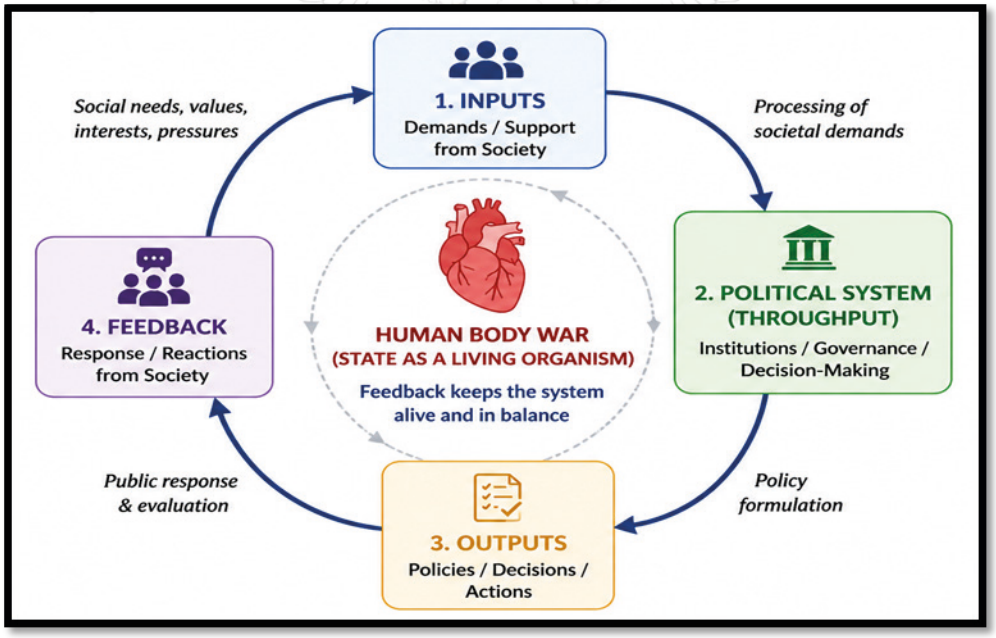


Figure 1. Feedback circulation is the bloodstream of the political system.

As shown in **Figure 1**, the stability of the political system depends on the continuous circulation of feedback between inputs, institutional processing, and outputs. Disruptions at any stage of this cycle distort system responsiveness, leading to imbalance and increasing the likelihood of internal conflict. This model provides the structural foundation for understanding how feedback failure initiates systemic instability.

When applied to internal conflict, systems theory suggests that crises arise when the feedback loop is distorted; when inputs like social demands are ignored, or outputs like unjust policies generate negative feedback. In biological terms, this resembles a regulatory disorder: signals fail to reach their targets, and corrective responses are delayed or absent. This disruption represents the initial stage of systemic imbalance that may escalate into broader internal conflict.

Complex Systems Theory

While Easton's model provides structural clarity, complex systems theory adds analytical depth by emphasizing non-linearity, interdependence, and emergence. States, like living organisms, are adaptive systems whose behavior cannot be predicted by examining their parts in isolation (Jervis, 1997). Small disruptions, such as misinformation or economic inequality, can produce disproportionate effects, leading to cascading instability or systemic collapse.

In this framework, complexity theory explains the dynamic dimension of internal conflict, particularly how localized dysfunctions evolve into system-wide crises. It highlights that internal conflict is not linear but emerges through interconnected processes that amplify disturbances across institutional networks.

Complexity theory, as applied in international relations, also explains why internal conflicts can escalate rapidly once networks of communication and control break down (Bousquet & Curtis, 2011). Thus, it complements systems theory by explaining not only where breakdown occurs, but how it spreads and intensifies within the political system.

Institutional Theory

Institutions are the "organs" of the state; formal and informal structures that regulate political behavior and ensure continuity. Institutional theory, as described by Hall and Taylor (1996), argues that stability or conflict depends on how institutions evolve, adapt, and maintain legitimacy. When they lose efficiency, transparency, or inclusivity, they begin to malfunction.

Within the "Human Body War" framework, institutional theory provides the functional dimension by identifying how specific subsystems contribute to overall systemic stability or dysfunction. It explains why certain institutional failures, such as corruption, weak governance, or exclusion, serve as primary sources of internal conflict.

New institutionalism also emphasizes path dependence: historical decisions constrain future options. This explains why some states remain trapped in cycles of instability, because their institutional "structures" reproduce patterns of dysfunction over time. This path dependency reinforces the persistence of internal conflict, even when external conditions change.

Integrated Theoretical Perspective

Together, these three theoretical pillars, systems theory, complexity theory, and institutional analysis, form an integrated analytical model in which each perspective contributes a distinct but complementary dimension**.** Systems theory explains the structural organization of the state, complexity theory explains the dynamic processes of interaction and escalation, and institutional theory explains the functional roles and failures of governance structures.

By combining these perspectives, the study conceptualizes internal conflict as an emergent outcome of systemic imbalance, dynamic interaction, and institutional dysfunction. This integrated approach strengthens the analytical foundation of the "Human Body War" framework and moves beyond descriptive analogy toward a structured theoretical model.

This interaction-based interpretation is consistent with recent work emphasizing power-conversion processes as drivers of systemic change (Farag, 2026b).

3.3. Mapping the Analogy: Body Systems vs. State Institutions

With this theoretical foundation, the "Human Body War" framework can be systematically operationalized by mapping biological systems onto state institutions. This mapping is not merely illustrative, but analytical, as it identifies functional roles, interaction patterns, and failure mechanisms within the political system.

To enhance clarity and analytical precision, the correspondence between biological systems and state institutions is summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Analytical Mapping of Body Systems to State Institutions.

Biological System	State Equivalent	Primary Function	Dysfunction Outcome
Immune System	Security and Defense Institutions	Detection and neutralization of internal and external threats	Overreaction → authoritarianism; Underreaction → insecurity and vulnerability
Nervous System	Information and Communication Networks	Transmission of information and coordination of response	Misinformation or censorship → loss of coordination and systemic blindness
Circulatory System	Economy and Resource Distribution	Flow of resources, capital, and welfare	Inequality, corruption, monopolization → systemic imbalance and social instability
Skeletal & Muscular Systems	Governance and Administrative Structures	Structural stability and execution of decisions	Weak institutions → state fragility and collapse of authority
Endocrine System	Policymaking and Regulatory Mechanisms	Long-term strategic regulation and adaptation	Policy inconsistency or paralysis → systemic instability

Each system performs a distinct yet interdependent function within the state's overall structure. Stability depends on the coordination among these subsystems rather than the isolated performance of any single component.

When applied analytically, this mapping demonstrates that internal conflict emerges not from a single institutional failure, but from the interaction of multiple dysfunctions across interconnected subsystems. For example, economic imbalance may amplify social unrest, which in turn pressures governance structures and disrupts communication systems, producing a cascading effect of instability.

This interconnected perspective reinforces the study's central argument: internal conflict is an emergent systemic condition rather than an isolated event**.** In this sense, the "Human Body War" represents a condition in which multiple institutional subsystems simultaneously experience dysfunction, leading to cumulative instability.

This analogy not only simplifies the complexity of governance but also enables a diagnostic approach. Internal conflict can be interpreted as a symptom of systemic imbalance affecting one or more institutional subsystems. Effective response, therefore, requires both immediate intervention (addressing symptoms) and structural reform (addressing root causes).

To provide a visual representation of the analytical mapping between biological systems and state institutions, **Figure 2** summarizes the functional correspondence across key subsystems.

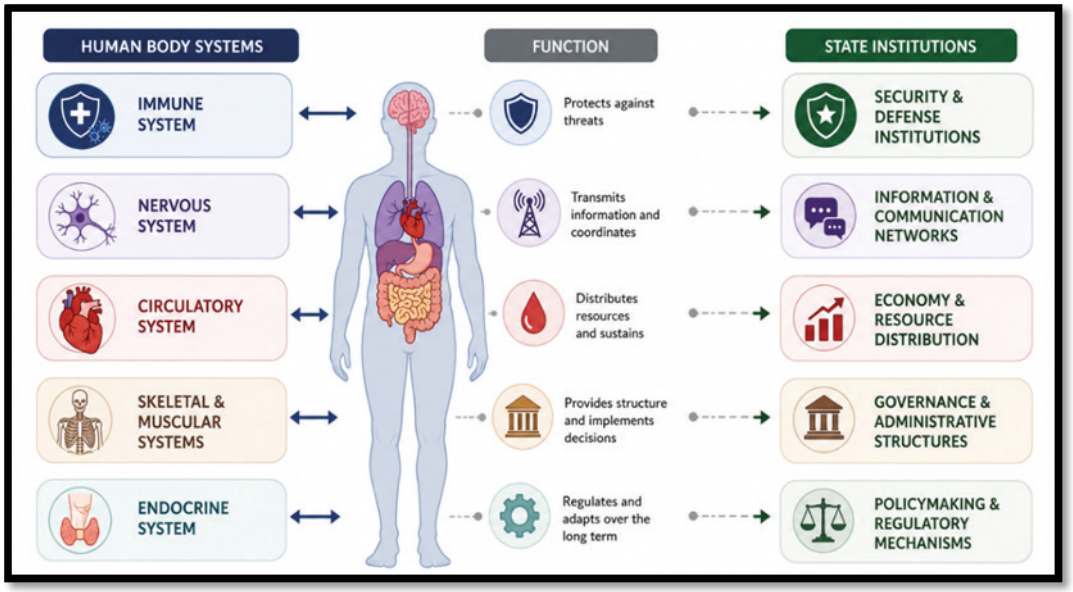


Figure 2. Conceptual mapping of the human body systems to state institutions.

Figure 2 demonstrates how each biological system corresponds to a specific institutional function within the state. This mapping highlights that internal conflict does not arise from isolated failure, but from dysfunction across interconnected subsystems. The figure reinforces the systemic nature of instability, in which a breakdown in one domain propagates across the entire structure.

In sum, the conceptual framework transforms the traditional study of internal conflict into a holistic analysis of systemic health. Drawing from systems theory, complexity analysis, and institutional theory, the framework provides an integrated model that links structure, function, and dynamic interaction within the state**.** This mapping establishes the analytical bridge between theoretical abstraction and strategic diagnosis, preparing the ground for the next section, where each subsystem is examined in greater functional depth.

4. The Human Body Analogy

Building upon the conceptual framework, this section translates the "Human Body War" framework into a functional analytical model. Each subsystem of the human body represents a cluster of state institutions that perform analogous roles in maintaining order, adaptation, and survival. Rather than serving as a descriptive comparison, this model is used to analyze how institutional functions, interactions, and failures contribute to systemic stability or instability.

Political stability, like biological health, depends on coordination among these subsystems and the timely response to internal or external stressors. Instability emerges when this coordination breaks down, producing cumulative effects across interconnected institutional domains.

This mapping draws on structural-functionalism (Parsons, 1952), which views society as a system of interdependent parts working toward equilibrium, and on realist and liberal theories of international relations, which emphasize the balance between security, communication, economy, and governance in sustaining state power (Morgenthau, 1948; Nye, 1977).

4.1. The Immune System and Security and Defense Institutions

The immune system protects the body from external and internal threats; similarly, the state's security and defense institutions protect sovereignty and social order. In the realist tradition, security constitutes the foundation of state survival (Waltz, 1979).

Analytically, the effectiveness of this subsystem depends on proportionality and responsiveness. When security institutions underperform, threats penetrate the system, leading to instability. Conversely, when they overreact, they generate internal repression that weakens legitimacy and produces systemic backlash. This dual risk mirrors the distinction between immune deficiency and autoimmune response.

Effective "immunity" therefore depends on maintaining a balance between threat neutralization and institutional restraint, ensuring that security mechanisms do not undermine the broader stability they are meant to protect (Buzan, 1991).

4.2. The Nervous System and Information and Communication Networks

The nervous system transmits signals that coordinate bodily functions; information systems perform the same role in governance. According to Deutsch (1963), communication is central to political control and adaptation.

From an analytical perspective, this subsystem regulates feedback and coordination across institutions. When communication flows are disrupted, through misinformation, censorship, or manipulation, the system loses its capacity for accurate perception and timely response.

Liberal institutionalists argue that transparency and open communication channels enhance learning and resilience (Keohane, 2005). Thus, dysfunction in this subsystem produces systemic blindness, in which decision-making becomes disconnected from reality, increasing the likelihood of miscalculations and conflict escalation.

4.3. The Circulatory System, Economy, and Resource Distribution

The circulatory system ensures the distribution of essential resources; the economy performs a similar function by allocating capital, goods, and opportunities. Economic stability is therefore central to overall systemic balance (North, 1990).

Analytically, this subsystem determines the distributional equilibrium within the state. When resource flows are disrupted, through corruption, inequality, or monopolization, imbalances emerge that generate social tension and political instability.

As Wallerstein (2004) notes, patterns of resource circulation influence both domestic and global stability. Persistent economic dysfunction can therefore act as a structural driver of internal conflict, amplifying pressures on other institutional subsystems.

4.4. The Skeletal and Muscular Systems and Governance and Administrative Structure

The skeletal and muscular systems provide structure and enable movement; in political terms, they correspond to constitutional frameworks, bureaucratic systems, and the rule of law. Parsons (1952) describes these as essential structural components of social order.

This subsystem provides the institutional capacity for decision implementation and coordination. When governance structures weaken, due to corruption, inefficiency, or institutional decay, the system loses its ability to execute policies effectively, leading to fragmentation and loss of control.

Conversely, resilient governance structures maintain both stability and flexibility, enabling adaptation without systemic breakdown. This balance is essential for preventing localized dysfunction from escalating into systemic failure.

4.5. The Endocrine System and Policymaking/Regulatory Mechanisms

The endocrine system regulates long-term adaptation through signaling mechanisms; similarly, policymaking institutions guide the state's strategic direction. Legislatures, regulatory bodies, and central banks produce policies that shape systemic behavior over time.

Constructivist theorists emphasize the role of norms and ideas in shaping these processes (Wendt, 1999). Within this framework, policymaking functions as a regulatory mechanism that aligns short-term responses with long-term stability objectives.

When regulatory signals are inconsistent, delayed, or contradictory, the system experiences strategic disorientation, resulting in policy paralysis or reactive decision-making**.** Effective governance, therefore, requires coherence between immediate policy actions and long-term strategic orientation.

Integrated Analytical Insight

In sum, the relationship between biological systems and state institutions highlights that security, communication, the economy, governance, and policymaking function as interdependent subsystems whose interactions determine overall stability.

Internal conflict arises when dysfunction in one subsystem interacts with weaknesses in other subsystems, producing cumulative systemic imbalance**.** Structural-functionalism explains their interdependence; realism and liberalism provide insight into strategic behavior; and constructivism highlights the role of norms and ideas.

The "Human Body War" framework thus conceptualizes internal conflict not as a random or isolated phenomenon, but as a systemic condition requiring coordinated diagnosis and multi-level intervention.

5. Pathologies of the Body Politic

No political system is free from internal dysfunction. Pathologies of the body politic refer to structural and behavioral failures that disrupt systemic equilibrium, including corruption, extremism, disinformation, and institutional decay. Within the "Human Body War" framework, these pathologies are understood as systemic disruptions that weaken coordination among institutional subsystems and reduce the state's capacity for adaptation and response.

These dysfunctions affect core processes such as resource distribution, communication, and governance, thereby transforming localized institutional weaknesses into system-wide instability**.** This section applies insights from governance studies, security theory, and comparative politics to diagnose these political pathologies, distinguish between external and internal sources of disruption, and examine resilience as a mechanism of systemic recovery.

5.1. Political "Diseases": Corruption, Extremism, and Disinformation

Corruption represents a fundamental distortion in the allocation of resources and authority within the state. Nye (1967) defines corruption as behavior that deviates from formal public duties for private gain, undermining institutional legitimacy and public trust. Huntington (1968) further argues that rapid modernization without corresponding institutional development increases the likelihood of corruption.

Analytically, corruption functions as a systemic blockage that disrupts resource flows and weakens institutional performance, thereby generating cumulative pressures on other subsystems. Its effects are not isolated but propagate across governance, economic, and social domains, contributing to broader instability.

Extremism, in contrast, represents an ideological and organizational distortion within the political system. Scholars such as Crenshaw (1981) and Horgan (2004) explain radicalization as a process driven by structural inequality, identity conflict, and psychological factors.

Within the systemic framework, extremism operates as an amplifying mechanism, intensifying conflict dynamics by polarizing social groups and undermining cohesion**.** It transforms existing grievances into organized confrontation, increasing the likelihood of escalation and institutional breakdown.

To conceptualize the primary political pathologies affecting the state, **Figure 3** illustrates the core "diseases" and their systemic impact.

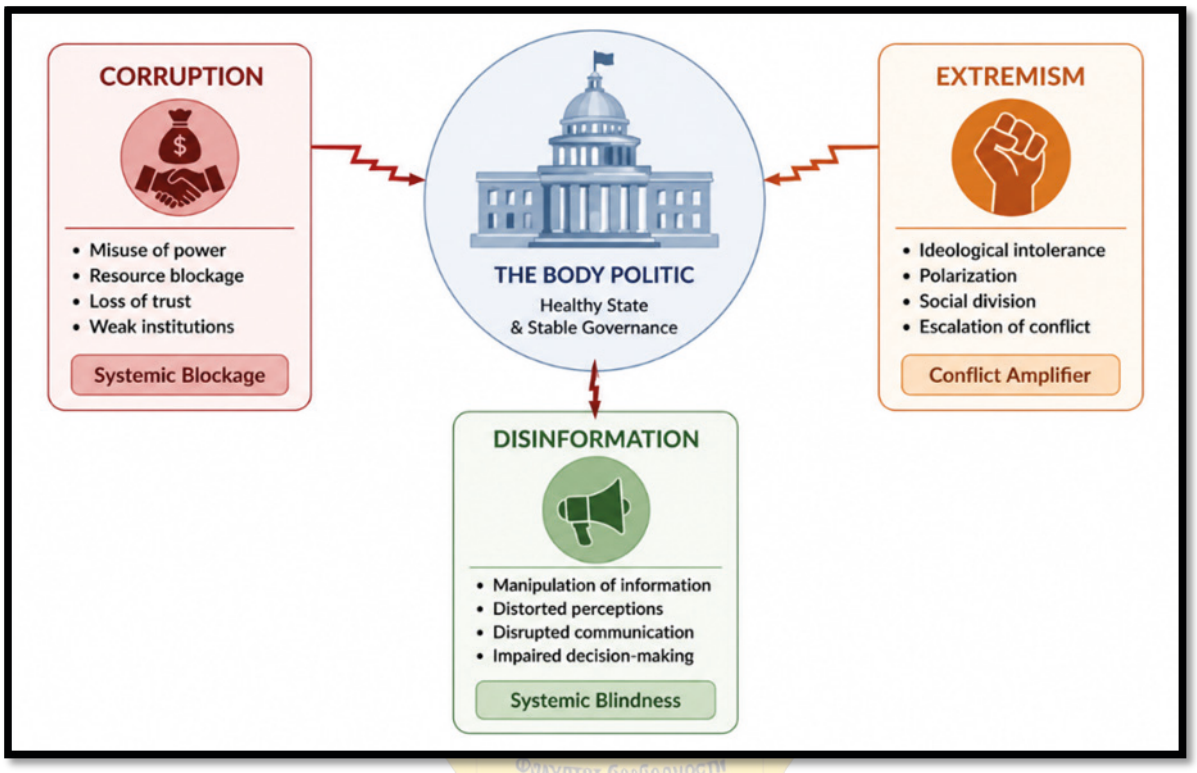


Figure 3. Major "diseases" affecting the body politic.

As illustrated in Figure 3, corruption, extremism, and disinformation operate as interconnected disruptions that affect different subsystems simultaneously. Their combined impact generates cumulative instability by distorting resource flows, communication processes, and institutional legitimacy, thereby accelerating internal conflict dynamics.

Disinformation has emerged as a critical driver of contemporary instability. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) describe propaganda as a mechanism for manipulating perception that disrupts rational decision-making.

From an analytical perspective, disinformation directly targets the communication subsystem, distorting feedback loops and impairing the system's ability to respond effectively to emerging challenges**.** Its rapid diffusion through digital networks increases systemic vulnerability by amplifying uncertainty and misperception.

5.2. External Infections vs. Internal Autoimmune Responses

External disruptions to the state can be conceptualized as pressures originating from outside the system, including foreign interference, sanctions, and proxy conflicts. Realist scholars argue that such pressures are inherent to an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

However, the framework emphasizes that external pressures become destabilizing primarily when internal institutional capacity is weak**.** In other words, vulnerability to external "infections" is mediated by internal systemic resilience.

Internal autoimmune responses, by contrast, occur when state institutions act against their own society. Examples include authoritarian repression, politicized security forces, and exclusionary governance practices. Dahl (2008) highlights the importance of institutional checks and balances in preventing such outcomes, while constructivist perspectives emphasize the role of identity and narrative in shaping internal conflict (Wendt, 1999).

Analytically, autoimmune responses represent a critical escalation mechanism within the system, where internal actors generate instability that exceeds the impact of external pressures**.** These dynamics often produce self-reinforcing cycles of conflict, where repression generates resistance, which in turn justifies further repression (Farag, 2025b).

The interaction between external pressures and internal responses is particularly important, as external threats can trigger disproportionate internal reactions, leading to systemic overcompensation and instability.

This distinction aligns with broader findings on asymmetric threats, in which internal vulnerabilities amplify the impact of external pressures (Farag & Tayie, 2024).

5.3. Role of Resilience, Immunity, and Political Antibodies

Resilience represents the system's capacity to absorb shocks, adapt, and restore equilibrium. Boin et al. (2010) identify resilience as a function of learning, coordination, and institutional flexibility.

Within this framework, resilience operates as a systemic regulatory mechanism that prevents localized disruptions from escalating into full-scale instability. It depends on institutions' ability to maintain effective feedback loops, respond adaptively, and coordinate across subsystems.

Political "antibodies" include institutions and mechanisms that detect and counteract dysfunction, such as independent media, watchdog agencies, civil society organizations, and legal accountability systems.

These mechanisms serve as corrective forces, restoring balance by identifying and addressing systemic distortions before they escalate. When they are weakened or suppressed, the system loses its capacity for self-regulation, increasing the likelihood of prolonged instability.

From a systems perspective, resilience depends on maintaining open communication, institutional redundancy, and adaptive capacity (Easton, 1965). Preventive strategies, such as transparency, civic participation, and institutional accountability, are therefore more effective than reactive measures focused solely on crisis management.

Integrated Analytical Insight

In sum, the health of the state depends on its ability to identify, contain, and correct systemic dysfunctions before they escalate**.** Corruption distorts resource flows, extremism amplifies conflict dynamics, and disinformation disrupts communication processes, together generating multi-dimensional instability.

The "Human Body War" framework conceptualizes these pathologies as interacting elements within a broader system of dysfunction, in which instability arises from cumulative imbalances rather than isolated failures. External pressures may contribute to instability, but the most critical factor remains the state's internal capacity for coordination, adaptation, and self-correction.

Building resilience, therefore, requires strengthening institutional capacity, maintaining effective feedback mechanisms, and fostering social cohesion to ensure long-term systemic stability.

6. Strategic Analysis of Conflict Dynamics

Conflict within a state can be understood as a systemic response to internal stress rather than a random or isolated event. Within the "Human Body War" framework, internal conflict is conceptualized as a process driven by feedback failures, resource imbalances, and institutional dysfunction, which collectively alter the state's structural equilibrium.

Strategic analysis, therefore, focuses on how internal conflicts originate, escalate, and transform systemic stability. Using insights from systems theory, complex adaptive systems, and conflict transformation theory, this section identifies key triggers of instability, examines patterns of institutional interaction under stress, and distinguishes between adaptive and degenerative responses.

6.1. Triggers and Escalation Patterns of Internal Conflict

Internal conflict typically begins as a disturbance in systemic equilibrium. According to Gurr (2016), relative deprivation, the gap between expectations and reality, acts as a primary driver of political unrest.

Analytically, this gap generates accumulated pressure within the system, particularly when institutional mechanisms fail to process and respond to societal demands. Over time, unresolved grievances intensify, increasing the likelihood of escalation.

From a systems perspective (Easton, 1965), inputs such as social demands must be converted into effective policy outputs. When this conversion process breaks down, feedback loops become distorted, preventing corrective adjustment and amplifying instability.

Collier and Hoeffler (2004) further demonstrate that both grievance (inequality) and greed (resource competition) act as structural triggers of conflict. These dynamics interact to create reinforcing cycles of instability, where economic and political pressures jointly escalate tensions.

Escalation, therefore, follows a cumulative sequence: initial imbalance generates pressure, pressure produces systemic strain, and unresolved strain evolves into open conflict. Without effective feedback correction, institutional competition replaces coordination, increasing the likelihood of fragmentation and instability.

Such escalation patterns are also evident in regional security contexts, where adaptive failure intensifies instability dynamics (Farag, 2026c).

6.2. Interaction between Institutional Organs

The stability of a state depends on the coordinated interaction among its institutional subsystems. Deutsch (1963) conceptualizes this as political cybernetics, where system performance depends on the ability to process information and respond effectively.

Within this framework, internal conflict emerges when disruptions in one subsystem propagate across others through interconnected feedback mechanisms. For example, economic instability can weaken governance capacity, while loss of legitimacy can undermine enforcement institutions.

Jervis (1997) describes such dynamics as "system effects," in which localized disturbances produce unintended, cascading consequences. These cascading effects transform isolated dysfunctions into systemic crises by amplifying interdependencies among institutions.

Strategically, stable systems rely on horizontal coordination and mutual regulation across key domains, security, economy, governance, and communication. When these relationships break down, subsystems operate in isolation or in competition, leading to systemic fragmentation and reduced adaptive capacity.

Resource dynamics further reinforce these interactions, as control over strategic assets influences both stability and conflict trajectories (Edmond et al., 2025).

6.3. Adaptive vs. Degenerative Responses of the State

Under conditions of stress, state responses can be broadly categorized as adaptive or degenerative.

Adaptive responses are characterized by the system's ability to detect imbalance, process feedback, and implement corrective measures. These responses require transparency, institutional flexibility, and participatory governance (Boin et al., 2017). Through adaptive processes, conflict is transformed into an opportunity for institutional learning and systemic renewal.

Degenerative responses, in contrast, focus on suppressing symptoms rather than addressing underlying causes. Authoritarian consolidation, censorship, and over-centralization may produce short-term stability but weaken long-term institutional capacity (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Analytically, degenerative responses reduce system complexity and feedback diversity, limiting the system's ability to adapt and increasing vulnerability to future shocks**.** Constructivist perspectives further suggest that exclusionary narratives and identity polarization intensify internal divisions, reinforcing instability (Wendt, 1999).

The distinction between adaptive and degenerative responses is therefore central to understanding whether internal conflict leads to systemic recovery or systemic decline.

Integrated Strategic Insight

In sum, internal conflict reflects a systemic process shaped by triggers, escalation mechanisms, and institutional responses. Within the "Human Body War" framework, conflict is understood as the outcome of cumulative dysfunction across interconnected subsystems rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

Triggers emerge from unresolved imbalances, escalation occurs through feedback failure and subsystem interaction, and outcomes depend on the system's adaptive capacity. Sustainable stability, therefore, requires continuous regulation, effective communication, and institutional learning mechanisms that enable the system to absorb and respond to internal stress.

7. Toward a Healthy State System

If previous sections diagnosed the causes and mechanisms of internal instability, this section develops a framework for systemic recovery and long-term resilience. Within the "Human Body War" framework, a healthy state system is defined not by the absence of conflict, but by its capacity to manage, absorb, and transform internal pressures without systemic breakdown**.**

A stable system is characterized by institutional coordination, adaptive governance, and continuous feedback. Rather than relying solely on centralized control, systemic health depends on balanced interactions among governance, economic, and social subsystems.

Drawing upon governance theory, resilience studies, and political development literature, this section outlines strategic prescriptions for conflict prevention and recovery, introduces the concept of "governance nutrition," and explains how states can build long-term political immunity.

7.1. Strategic Prescriptions for Conflict Prevention and Recovery

Conflict prevention does not aim to eliminate stress, but to manage it effectively. From a systems perspective, prevention involves strengthening the mechanisms that detect, process, and respond to emerging imbalances before they escalate into conflict.

Boin et al. (2017) emphasize that resilience depends on anticipation, coordination, and institutional learning. Accordingly, effective prevention strategies include**:**

- Developing early-warning systems based on transparent data and monitoring mechanisms
- Strengthening independent media and information channels to ensure accurate feedback
- Enhancing institutional coordination to enable timely and coherent responses

Recovery, in contrast, requires both stabilization and structural reform. Fukuyama (2011) highlights that institutional capacity, not merely formal governance structures, determines recovery outcomes.

Strategically, recovery policies should focus on:

- Restoring institutional legitimacy through accountability and transparency
- Rebalancing resource distribution to reduce structural inequality
- Reinforcing governance effectiveness to rebuild public trust

The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the system's ability to convert crisis into institutional learning rather than systemic deterioration.

7.2. Governance Nutrition: Education, Justice, and Civic Engagement

The concept of "governance nutrition" refers to the foundational inputs that sustain systemic stability. These inputs, education, justice, and civic engagement, function as long-term stabilizing factors that enhance the system's adaptive capacity.

Education strengthens cognitive resilience by enabling citizens to critically assess information and resist manipulation (Sen, 2014). It reduces vulnerability to disinformation and ideological polarization.

Justice systems ensure equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities, maintaining systemic balance (Rawls, 2017). When justice is perceived as fair and consistent, it reinforces institutional legitimacy and reduces incentives for conflict.

Civic engagement sustains feedback loops between citizens and institutions, ensuring continuous system adjustment (Putnam, 1994). It enhances responsiveness and prevents the accumulation of unresolved grievances.

When these elements are weakened, systemic vulnerability increases, reducing adaptability and increasing the risk of instability**, governance** nutrition is therefore not supplementary but essential to long-term systemic health.

7.3. Building Long-Term Political Immunity

Political immunity refers to the system's capacity to withstand and recover from internal and external disruptions without structural collapse. It is achieved through the interaction of redundancy, adaptability, and social trust.

Redundancy ensures that system functions are not dependent on a single institutional actor. Adaptability allows policies to evolve in response to changing conditions. Trust provides the social cohesion necessary for coordinated action.

March and Olsen (2006) argue that institutional stability depends on shared norms and predictable procedures. Within this framework, such norms function as stabilizing mechanisms that guide behavior and reduce uncertainty.

Constructivist perspectives emphasize the role of identity and narrative (Wendt, 1999). Inclusive and cooperative narratives strengthen cohesion, while exclusionary narratives amplify division and instability.

Building political immunity, therefore, requires:

- Institutional diversification to reduce systemic vulnerability
- Adaptive policymaking to respond to dynamic challenges
- Strengthening social trust through inclusive governance and shared identity frameworks

Integrated Policy Insight

In sum, a healthy state system is one that continuously adapts, self-corrects, and maintains balance across its subsystems. Within the "Human Body War" framework, stability is achieved through the interaction of preventive capacity, adaptive governance, and institutional resilience.

Education, justice, and civic participation function as foundational inputs, while trust, feedback, and adaptability sustain long-term stability. Internal conflict, when managed effectively, can serve as a mechanism for renewal rather than decline.

The strategic objective of governance is therefore not to eliminate conflict, but to regulate it in ways that strengthen systemic resilience and preserve institutional integrity.

8. Conceptual Findings and Analytical Implications

Rather than presenting empirical results, this section synthesizes the key conceptual insights derived from the "Human Body War" framework and outlines their analytical implications for understanding internal conflict dynamics.

The framework provides a structured interpretation of how internal instability emerges as a systemic condition shaped by the interaction of institutional subsystems. The key analytical insights include:

8.1. The State as a Systemic Organism

The framework conceptualizes the state as an integrated system in which institutional subsystems function interdependently. Dysfunction in one subsystem, such as economic instability, communication failure, or security imbalance, generates cascading effects across the entire system. Internal conflict is therefore understood as a product of systemic interaction rather than isolated institutional failure.

8.2. Political Pathologies as Systemic Drivers of Instability

The framework identifies corruption, extremism, and disinformation as core systemic disruptions.

- Corruption operates as a structural distortion that disrupts resource allocation and weakens institutional legitimacy.
- Extremism functions as an amplifying mechanism that intensifies polarization and accelerates conflict escalation.
- Disinformation distorts communication processes, weakening feedback loops and impairing decision-making capacity.

These pathologies do not operate independently; rather, they interact and reinforce one another, producing cumulative systemic instability.

8.3. Systemic Imbalance as the Root of Internal Conflict

Internal conflict is conceptualized as an emergent outcome of systemic imbalance rather than a reaction to isolated crises. When feedback mechanisms fail, and institutional coordination breaks down, imbalances accumulate and propagate across subsystems.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from event-based explanations of conflict to a process-based understanding of instability.

8.4. Resilience as Political Immunity

The framework introduces resilience as a central mechanism of systemic stability. Resilience is defined as the system's capacity to absorb shocks, maintain functionality, and restore equilibrium through adaptive processes.

Key components include:

- Institutional adaptability
- Redundancy across subsystems
- Social cohesion and trust

These elements collectively function as a form of "political immunity" that reduces vulnerability to systemic collapse.

8.5. Feedback Mechanisms as the Core Stability Regulator

Effective feedback loops are identified as the primary mechanism through which systems maintain equilibrium. When institutions accurately process and respond to societal inputs, the system adapts and stabilizes.

Conversely, disrupted feedback loops produce misalignment between policy outputs and societal demands, increasing the likelihood of instability and conflict escalation.

Integrated Analytical Insight

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that internal conflict should be understood as a systemic condition arising from the interaction of structural, functional, and dynamic factors. The "Human Body War" framework provides a conceptual model that explains how instability emerges, evolves, and can be managed through coordinated institutional response.

9. Discussion

The conceptualization of the state as a systemic organism offers an alternative to traditional approaches that focus on external threats or isolated political events. Rather than functioning as a purely descriptive metaphor, the "Human Body War" framework provides an analytical model that explains internal conflict as an emergent outcome of systemic interaction and institutional dysfunction. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from discrete events to relational dynamics among subsystems, emphasizing how instability develops through feedback failures, imbalances, and coordination breakdowns. Grounded in systems theory (Easton, 1965) and complexity theory (Jervis, 1997), the framework demonstrates that stability depends on the interaction of interconnected institutional components rather than the strength of any single institution.

The findings align with established theories of internal conflict, particularly Gurr's (2016) concept of relative deprivation, which identifies unmet expectations as a driver of unrest. However, this study extends this perspective by situating deprivation within a broader systemic context, where griev-

ances interact with institutional dysfunctions to produce instability. Similarly, existing research on corruption and institutional decay (Huntington, 1968; Nye, 1967) highlights the role of governance failure in destabilizing states. The present framework advances this literature by demonstrating how such dysfunctions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, rather than isolated causal factors. Thus, the primary contribution of this study lies in integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified model that explains internal conflict as a systemic condition rather than a single-cause phenomenon.

The concept of resilience is reinterpreted in this study as a systemic property rather than an institutional attribute. Drawing on resilience theory (Boin et al., 2010) and governance literature (Fukuyama, 2011), resilience is conceptualized as the capacity of the entire system to absorb stress, maintain functionality, and adapt through coordinated interaction among subsystems. This perspective challenges traditional assumptions that stability is achieved primarily through centralized control. Instead, the framework suggests that stability emerges from distributed coordination, adaptive feedback mechanisms, and institutional interdependence.

The framework has important implications for governance. Internal conflict is understood not as an isolated breakdown but as a symptom of deeper systemic imbalances. Accordingly, effective conflict management requires a shift from reactive intervention to proactive systemic regulation.

Key implications include:

- Strengthening institutional coordination rather than isolated reform efforts
- Enhancing feedback mechanisms to ensure responsiveness to societal demands
- Addressing structural inequalities that generate persistent systemic pressure
- These implications suggest that governance strategies should prioritize long-term systemic stability over short-term crisis containment.

Despite its analytical contribution, this study has limitations. The use of the biological analogy, while analytically useful, may oversimplify the complexity and diversity of political systems. Highly fragmented or hybrid regimes may not fully conform to the systemic patterns described in this framework. Additionally, as a conceptual study, the framework has not been empirically tested, which limits its immediate generalizability. Future research should apply this model to comparative case studies to evaluate its explanatory power across different political contexts. Further research could also explore emerging forms of systemic disruption, such as cyber threats, digital governance challenges, and climate-related instability. Examining how these new "pathologies" interact with existing institutional structures would provide deeper insight into the evolving dynamics of internal conflict. In sum, the "Human Body War" framework contributes to the literature by offering a systemic, integrative approach to analyzing internal conflict. It reconceptualizes instability as a dynamic interaction of structural, functional, and informational processes, rather than as a series of isolated events.

This perspective not only enhances theoretical understanding but also provides a foundation for developing more effective and sustainable governance strategies. This systemic interpretation is consistent with recent studies on the shifting behavior of states in complex international environments (Farag, 2025a).

10. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that internal conflict within states is best understood as a systemic condition arising from imbalances in institutional interaction rather than as a series of isolated crises. By introducing the "Human Body War" framework, the study provides a conceptual model that explains how internal instability emerges from the breakdown of coordination, feedback mechanisms, and functional balance among state subsystems.

The central contribution of this research lies in reframing internal conflict as an emergent outcome of systemic dysfunction, integrating structural, functional, and dynamic perspectives into a

unified analytical approach. This perspective highlights that political stability depends not only on institutional strength but also on the quality of interaction and coordination among institutions.

Key Analytical Insights:

- Internal conflict is conceptualized as a systemic process driven by feedback failure and institutional imbalance rather than isolated triggering events.
- Political pathologies, such as corruption, extremism, and disinformation, operate as interconnected drivers of instability that reinforce one another across subsystems.
- Resilience functions as a system-wide adaptive capacity that enables states to absorb stress, maintain functionality, and restore equilibrium.

Strategic and Policy Implications:

- Institutional Coordination: Strengthening coordination across governance, economic, and communication subsystems is essential to prevent fragmentation and systemic failure.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness improves the system's ability to detect and correct imbalances before they escalate.
- Resilience Building: Developing adaptive institutions, promoting redundancy, and fostering social cohesion are critical for long-term stability.
- Civic Engagement: Encouraging inclusive participation strengthens legitimacy and reinforces continuous feedback between citizens and institutions.

These implications suggest that effective governance should prioritize systemic balance and adaptive capacity rather than relying solely on centralized control or reactive crisis management.

Future Research Directions:

- Empirical Validation: Future studies should apply the proposed framework to comparative case analyses in order to test its explanatory power across different political contexts.
- Emerging Systemic Risks: Further research is needed to examine how new forms of instability, such as cyber threats, digital disinformation ecosystems, and climate-induced disruptions, interact with institutional structures.
- Contextual Adaptation: Investigating how the framework applies to diverse governance systems, particularly non-Western and hybrid regimes, will enhance its generalizability.

In conclusion, this study underscores that internal conflict should not be viewed as a random or external event but as a symptom of deeper systemic imbalances. By focusing on the health of state institutions, enhancing resilience, and fostering cooperation, states can better navigate internal stress and achieve long-term stability.

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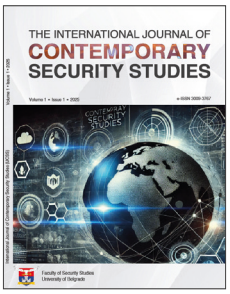
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Internet Fraud, Human Trafficking, and the Youth Question in Warri Metropolis: An Integrated Empirical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interrelationship between internet fraud and human trafficking among youths in Warri metropolis, Delta State, Nigeria. Guided by Routine Activity Theory, the research investigates how socioeconomic conditions — particularly unemployment and weak law enforcement — create environments that facilitate both offenses. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 389 respondents purposively sampled from identified youth clusters in Warri. Variables were operationalized at the ordinal level using Likert-type scales, and Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to test the hypotheses. Findings reveal statistically significant associations between unemployment and internet fraud participation ($r_s = 0.442$, $p < 0.01$), weak law enforcement and the prevalence of human trafficking ($r_s = 0.371$, $p < 0.01$), and digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment ($r_s = 0.491$, $p < 0.01$). The study demonstrates that both offenses share overlapping structural enablers, with digital platforms increasingly serving as a conduit linking fraud networks to trafficking operations. The conclusion recommends integrated policy responses addressing youth economic inclusion, digital literacy, and strengthened law enforcement. The study contributes an empirically grounded, integrated framework to the literature on cybercrime and trafficking in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS

Internet fraud, human trafficking, cybercrime, routine activity theory, youth, Warri Metropolis, and Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The twin phenomena of internet fraud and human trafficking represent two of the most pressing criminal challenges confronting Nigerian society in the twenty-first century. While these offenses have traditionally been examined in isolation, emerging evidence from law enforcement and academic scholarship suggests that they share structural conditions that simultaneously facilitate

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both, and that digital technologies are increasingly mediating the nexus between them (Ojedokun & Eraye, 2012; Europol, 2020). Warri metropolis, located in Delta State, Nigeria, offers a particularly instructive site for such an integrated inquiry, given its history of youth unemployment, its position as a commercial hub, and the documented prevalence of organized crime networks within its urban economy (Eboibi, 2019).

This study departs from prior single-offense analyses by constructing an integrated analytical framework that treats internet fraud and human trafficking not as independent phenomena, but as co-constituted criminal adaptations to shared structural conditions. Specifically, the study seeks to: 1) establish the relationship between unemployment and youth participation in internet fraud in Warri; 2) examine how weak law enforcement capacity contributes to the persistence of human trafficking in the metropolis; and 3) explore the degree to which digital communication platforms function as a connective medium linking fraud networks to trafficking operations.

The study is grounded in Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) as its primary theoretical framework, and employs a quantitative survey design to test three directional hypotheses. In doing so, it responds to gaps in the existing Nigerian literature, which has largely treated cybercrime and trafficking as separate regulatory and academic domains. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework; Section 4 presents the methodology; Section 5 reports the findings; Section 6 discusses the findings; and Section 7 concludes with policy recommendations.

Ayoola, Avenda, Ulo, and Olaniyi (2024) maintained that Internet fraud and human trafficking constitute two pervasive and increasingly intersecting forms of transnational organized crime that threaten the socio-economic stability and human security of Nigeria, with particular severity in urban centers such as Warri metropolis, situated as a strategic commercial and industrial hub in Delta State. Warri exhibits structural conditions characterized by high youth unemployment, entrenched poverty, and institutionalized governance deficits that collectively generate a criminogenic environment conducive to both phenomena (Omolaoye, 2023). Notwithstanding the implementation of legislative frameworks and institutional oversight aim to curb this crime, such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015, the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015, and the operations of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC, 2015) and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP, 2020)" these criminal activities has remained persist with remarkable resilience. This persistence suggests a fundamental misalignment between extant policy responses and the underlying aetiological drivers of the crimes (Kalanj, 2025; Petrović, 2025; Vidović & Beriša, 2025), thereby necessitating empirically grounded inquiry into the structural and institutional mechanisms that sustain them.

The escalation of internet fraud—colloquially designated "Yahoo Yahoo" among Warri's youth population in the Nigerian context— warrants particular scholarly attention. The proliferation of digital infrastructure and the democratization of internet access have substantially lowered the barriers to entry for cybercriminal engagement, rendering fraudulent activity an economically rational alternative for young people excluded from formal labor markets (Chikwendu, Oli, & Ohazulike, 2023). Beyond its direct financial harms, internet fraud inflicts significant reputational externalities upon the Nigerian state, eroding international trust and complicating legitimate economic transactions for citizens abroad (Tade & Aliyu, 2011; Ulo, 2023). Of greater concern is the emerging evidence that proceeds from internet fraud increasingly serve as venture capital for other criminal enterprises, notably human trafficking networks that exploit digital platforms for victim recruitment, logistical coordination, and the obfuscation of illicit financial flows (Ulo, 2025). This criminal nexus remains insufficiently theorized in the extant literature, particularly with respect to how localized economic precarity in specific urban contexts mediates the transition from cybercrime to trafficking-related activities.

Concurrently, human trafficking in Warri manifests through the city's dual function as both a transit corridor and a terminal destination within broader trafficking architectures. Traffickers systematically exploit the socio-economic vulnerabilities of marginalized populations—particularly women, children, and undocumented migrants—leveraging high poverty indices and limited educational attainment to engineer consent through deceitful employment propositions and spurious

promises of improved livelihoods abroad (Ayoola, Avenda, Ulo, and Olaniyi, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013). The digitization of trafficking operations has further compounded enforcement difficulties; the anonymity afforded by encrypted communication platforms and social media networks enables traffickers to circumvent traditional detection methods while maintaining coercive control over victims across jurisdictional boundaries. Despite the nominal existence of anti-trafficking statutes and institutional mandates, enforcement remains systematically compromised by resource constraints, inter-agency coordination failures, and, in certain documented instances, the complicity of enforcement personnel (Ramli, Nashril-Abaidah, & Ramli, 2025). The resultant climate of impunity not only perpetuates trafficking victimization but also signals to prospective offenders that the expected costs of criminal engagement remain insufficiently prohibitive.

The foregoing conditions generate a critical research imperative. Existing scholarship has tended to examine internet fraud and human trafficking as discrete phenomena, neglecting their operational convergence in specific urban ecologies and the shared structural determinants—unemployment, institutional weakness, technological affordances—that enable their co-occurrence. Furthermore, the empirical literature on Warri metropolis specifically remains sparse, with most studies privileging Lagos, Abuja, or Port Harcourt as primary sites of inquiry. Consequently, the mechanisms through which high unemployment propels youth engagement in internet fraud and how inadequate law enforcement capacity facilitates the perpetration of human trafficking remain inadequately specified for this context. This study, therefore, seeks to address these lacunae by investigating the relational dynamics between these structural variables and criminal outcomes in the Warri metropolis, to generate context-sensitive evidence to inform targeted policy interventions and institutional reform.

The general objective of the study is to examine internet fraud and human trafficking in contemporary Nigeria: A study of Warri metropolis. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the impact of high unemployment on youths' engagement in internet fraud in Warri metropolis.
2. Examine the impact of inadequate law enforcement in the perpetration of human trafficking in the Warri metropolis.
3. Explore the degree to which digital communication platforms function as a connective medium linking fraud networks to trafficking operations.

Based on the stated objectives, the study formulates the following research hypotheses to empirically examine the relationships between the selected structural factors and the identified criminal phenomena in Warri metropolis.

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between high unemployment and youths' engagement in internet fraud in Warri metropolis.
2. There is no significant relationship between inadequate law enforcement and the perpetration of human trafficking in Warri metropolis.
3. There is no significant relationship between digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment in Warri metropolis.

1.1. Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

A foundational challenge in this domain is the conceptual conflation of related but distinct phenomena. For analytical rigor, this study distinguishes among four related concepts. Internet fraud refers to deceptive schemes executed via digital platforms — including advance-fee fraud, romance scams, and business email compromise — that exploit victims financially without necessarily involving coercion or physical movement (Wall, 2007). Cybercrime, a broader category, encompasses any criminal act in which computer systems or networks are either the instrument or the target of the offense; internet fraud is therefore a sub-category of cybercrime (Broadhurst et al., 2014).

Human trafficking, by contrast, is defined under the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (2015) and the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, or coercion for exploitation. This definition explicitly requires three elements: act, means, and purpose. Cyber-facilitated trafficking, the fourth concept, refers to the use of digital platforms — including social media, encrypted messaging applications, and fraudulent online job advertisements — as instruments through which traffickers recruit, deceive, control, or commercially exploit victims (Latonero, 2011; International Organization for Migration, 2018). This study focuses primarily on internet fraud and human trafficking while acknowledging cyber-facilitated trafficking as the emergent interface between them.

Internet Fraud in the Nigerian Context

Nigeria occupies a prominent position in global cybercrime discourse, partly due to the international visibility of advance-fee fraud (colloquially known as "419" fraud) and its evolved successors (Smith, 2009). Scholarly work on the phenomenon has shifted from treating it as a purely individual moral failure to examining its structural underpinnings. Tade and Aliyu (2011) demonstrated that peer networks and perceived impunity play significant roles in the initiation of youth into internet fraud in southwestern Nigeria. Similarly, Adomi et al. (2004) found that inadequate regulation of internet cafés in Warri created low-risk environments for the commission of online fraud.

Importantly, recent scholarship has moved beyond descriptive typologies to interrogate the social conditions that sustain these activities. Ngo and Jaishankar (2017) argue that structural unemployment displaces the opportunity costs associated with criminal participation, effectively lowering barriers to entry into fraud networks. This insight is critically relevant to Warri, where youth unemployment rates have been estimated at above 40% in some assessments, and where legitimate economic opportunities in the oil sector have contracted sharply following production disruptions (Ibaba, 2011). Rather than merely summarising prior studies, this review identifies a persistent gap: the failure to link fraud participation empirically to co-occurring trafficking in contexts where criminal networks increasingly overlap.

Human Trafficking in the Niger Delta

Human trafficking in the Niger Delta region has been well documented at the descriptive level, with studies identifying Edo and Delta States as among the most significant source and transit zones in West Africa (Agbu, 2003; Okojie et al., 2003). Female internal trafficking for domestic labor and sexual exploitation, as well as male trafficking for forced labor on fishing vessels and in agriculture, represent the dominant patterns observed. Warri, as a major commercial node, functions as both a destination and a transit point for trafficked persons (NAPTIP, 2020).

Critically, the literature on trafficking in this region has paid insufficient attention to the role of digital enablement. Obokata (2006) identifies weak institutional capacity — including inadequate victim identification protocols and limited prosecution of traffickers — as a central sustaining condition. This aligns with broader critiques of law enforcement responses across sub-Saharan Africa, where anti-trafficking units are routinely under-resourced and susceptible to corruption (Iyanda, 2012). What is less theorized is how fraud networks are being repurposed for trafficking recruitment, a convergence that this study directly addresses.

Identifying the Research Gap

A systematic review of the available literature reveals that while both internet fraud and human trafficking have been studied extensively as separate phenomena in Nigeria, empirical work examining their structural convergence in specific urban contexts remains sparse. The present study addresses this gap by testing the hypothesis that both offenses are jointly sustained by common structural enablers — unemployment and weak law enforcement and by exploring the digital interfaces through which fraud networks increasingly intersect with trafficking operations in Warri metropolis.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Routine Activity Theory (RAT), originally formulated by Cohen and Felson (1979), as its primary theoretical lens. RAT posits that the convergence in time and space of three elements is a necessary condition for crime to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The theory's strength lies in its structural orientation — it does not require any assumptions about individual criminality, but instead focuses on the environmental and situational conditions that enable criminal acts.

In the context of internet fraud in Warri, motivated offenders can be understood as unemployed or underemployed youth who, facing limited licit alternatives, are drawn into fraud networks by peer associations and the perceived low risk of detection. Suitable targets are online victims — both domestic and international — identified through social engineering, often via social media platforms. The absence of capable guardianship is evidenced by the limited capacity of the Nigerian Police Force's cybercrime unit and the nascent enforcement of the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc). Act (2015), and the inadequacy of digital literacy programs that might make potential victims more resilient.

For human trafficking, the RAT mapping is equally productive. Traffickers constitute motivated offenders seeking profit through exploitation. Suitable targets are economically vulnerable young people, particularly women and girls, who respond to fraudulent offers of employment or educational opportunity, which are increasingly circulated through digital platforms. Capable guardianship is absent due to chronically under-resourced anti-trafficking units, permeable border controls, and community-level failure to recognize or report trafficking indicators.

Critically, RAT also explains the digital convergence between these two offenses. Online platforms reduce the spatial and temporal constraints that historically limited crime: a fraudster operating in Warri can simultaneously defraud a victim in Europe and recruit a trafficking victim in a rural Delta community, using the same digital infrastructure. The theory thus provides an integrated explanatory structure for both offenses and for the nexus between them, making it the appropriate lens for this study.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a cross-sectional survey design, which is appropriate for examining the distribution and covariation of variables within a defined population at a single point in time (Bryman, 2016). This design is suited to the study's objectives of establishing associations among unemployment, weak law enforcement, internet fraud, and human trafficking among youths in the Warri metropolis. The study population comprises young persons between the ages of 18 and 35 residing in Warri metropolis, the operational definition of "youth" adopted here in accordance with the National Youth Policy of Nigeria (2019), which sets the youth bracket at 15–35 years, with this study limited to adults aged 18 and above for ethical and legal reasons. While a precise census figure for this sub-population is unavailable, the 2006 National Population Commission census and projected growth rates estimate the total population of the Warri metropolitan area at approximately 680,000 persons, with youth (18–35) constituting an estimated 35–40%, yielding an approximate population of 238,000 to 272,000 (NPC, 2006).

A sample size of 389 was determined using the Cochran (1977) formula for proportions: $n = Z^2pq/e^2$, where $Z = 1.96$ (95% confidence level), $p = 0.50$ (maximum variability assumed), $q = 0.50$, and $e = 0.05$ (margin of error). This yields: $n = (1.96)^2(0.5)(0.5) / (0.05)^2 = 3.8416 \times 0.25 / 0.0025 = 388.16$, rounded to 389.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that respondents had either direct knowledge of, or exposure to, the phenomena under study. The rationale for purposive sampling, rather than a probabilistic approach, is grounded in the sensitive and stigmatized nature of the topic: random sampling in the general population would likely yield a high proportion of respondents with no knowledge of either offense, reducing the substantive utility of the data. Purposive selection criteria

required respondents to: (a) be between 18 and 35 years of age; (b) have resided in Warri metropolis for a minimum of two years; and (c) be identifiable through one or more community-based networks associated with digital entrepreneurship, informal commercial activity, or youth civic organizations. Participants were recruited from five key areas within the metropolis — Okumagba Layout, Ekure-de-Itsekiri, Effurun, Agbarho Junction, and the Warri Central Market environs — which were identified through preliminary fieldwork as zones of concentrated youth economic activity.

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers. The instrument comprised four sections: Section A captured demographic information (age, gender, educational attainment, and employment status). Section B measured perceptions of unemployment as a driver of internet fraud (8 items). Section C measured perceptions of law enforcement weakness as a driver of human trafficking (8 items). Section D explored awareness of digital platform use in facilitating both offenses (6 items).

All substantive items in Sections B through D were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), producing ordinal-level data. Composite scale scores were computed by summing item responses within each dimension. Internal consistency of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha: unemployment/fraud scale ($\alpha = 0.81$), law enforcement/trafficking scale ($\alpha = 0.78$), and digital facilitation scale ($\alpha = 0.74$), all exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70. The questionnaire was face-validated by three academic experts in criminology and sociology, and a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents outside the final sample.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarise demographic and scale data. Given that the composite scores are ordinal (summed Likert items), Spearman's rank-order correlation (rs) was selected as the appropriate non-parametric test for hypotheses involving ordinal variables (Field, 2018). This represents a deliberate departure from Spearman's rank-order correlation, which assumes interval-level measurement and normal distribution — conditions that cannot be reliably claimed for Likert-based composite scores in this context. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

4. Results

This section is based on the analysis and reports of the data to be translated into meaningful information that would allow for meaningful judgments and decisions; this will begin with the reporting of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by the testing of the various hypotheses that were generated for the study.

A total of 400 questionnaires were administered to the respondents; however, only 389 copies of the research instrument were retrieved, with 11 copies lost. This shows that 97% of the instruments were recovered and 3% lost. The analysis was therefore based on the figure of 389 retrieved questionnaires.

Table 1. *Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents. Source: Fieldwork, 2025.*

Variables	Categories	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	215	55.3
	Female	174	44.7
Age (years)	18–25	84	21.6
	26–30	105	27.0
	31–35	200	51.4
Educational status	Educated	285	73.3
	Uneducated	104	26.7
Employment status	Employed	143	36.8
	Unemployed	246	63.2
Total		**389**	**100.0**

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents who took part in the survey are shown in Table 1. The male respondents were 55.3 percent, and the female respondents were 44.7 percent. The age distribution of the survey participants shows that 21.6 percent are between 18 and 25 years old, 27.0 percent are between 26 and 30 years old, and 51.4 percent are between 30 and 35 years old. The respondents' educational status revealed that 73 percent were educated, and 27 percent were uneducated. The respondents' employment status revealed that 36.8 percent are in active employment and 63.2 percent were unemployed.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between high unemployment and youths' engagement in internet fraud in Warri metropolis.

Table 2. *Spearman's rho: Correlation between High Unemployment and Youths' Engagement in Internet Fraud.*

Variable	1	2
1. High unemployment	—	0.442**
2. Youths' engagement in internet fraud	0.442**	—

Note. $N = 389$. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

In Table 2, it can be observed that the Spearman correlation coefficient rs, *is* 0.442 and that it is significant at p = 0.01 (suggesting that as unemployment levels rise, there is a corresponding increase in the involvement of youth in internet-related fraudulent activities). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that unemployment is a meaningful predictor of internet fraud engagement. This shows a significant relationship between high unemployment and youth engagement in internet fraud in the Warri metropolis. This value reflects a 'moderate positive relationship', suggesting that as unemployment levels rise, there is a corresponding increase in the involvement of youth in internet-related fraudulent activities. This result aligned with the structural opportunity theory of crime (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and with prior studies (Tade & Aliyu, 2011; Ngo & Jaishankar, 2017). Unemployment drives youths to engage in internet fraud, as individuals rationalize and innovate ways to adapt to constrained structural opportunities, particularly in situations where economic regulation and digital governance are weak or poorly enforced. The data provides clear empirical support for the link between economic idleness and the prevalence of cybercrime in the region.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between inadequate law enforcement and the perpetration of human trafficking in Warri metropolis.

Table 3. *Spearman's rho: Correlation between Inadequate Law Enforcement and Perpetration of Human Trafficking.*

Variable	1	2
1. Inadequate law enforcement	—	0.371**
2. Perpetration of human trafficking	0.371**	—

Note. $N = 389$. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

In Table 3, the Spearman correlation coefficient rs is 0.491 and is significant at p = 0.01 (implying less than a 1% probability that this observed association is due to chance). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected. This can be interpreted to mean that there is a significant relationship between inadequate law enforcement and the perpetration of human trafficking in Warri metropolis. This coefficient indicates a weak-to-moderate positive correlation, suggesting that as law enforcement inadequacies increase, there is a corresponding rise in the incidence of human trafficking. This result aligned with Obokata (2006) and Iyanda (2012), who recorded systemic deficiencies in Nigerian anti-trafficking enforcement, including inadequate capacity for victim identification, corruption within enforcement agencies, and a failure to prosecute traffickers at rates that would constitute a meaningful deterrent. The data provides empirical evidence that gaps in law enforcement are a significant factor contributing to the perpetration of human trafficking in the study area.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant relationship between digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment in the Warri metropolis.

Table 4. *Spearman's rho: Correlation between Digital Facilitation and Trafficking Recruitment.*

Variable	1	2
1. Digital facilitation	—	0.491**
2. Trafficking recruitment	0.491**	—

Note. $N = 389$. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

In Table 4, the Spearman correlation coefficient rs is 0.491 and is significant at p = 0.01 (suggesting that the probability of this relationship occurring by chance is virtually non-existent). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected. This can be interpreted to mean that there is a significant relationship between digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment in the Warri metropolis. This result indicates a moderate positive correlation, implying that as the use of digital tools and platforms for facilitation increases, there is a distinct upward trend in trafficking recruitment efforts. This result corresponds with Latonero's (2011) and IOM's (2018) findings that internet fraud networks in the Niger Delta are being repurposed and extended into trafficking operations, with social media, encrypted messaging, and fraudulent digital job advertisements serving as tools of recruitment and victim management. The data provides strong empirical evidence that digital facilitation plays a critical role in the recruitment process of human trafficking within the study area.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study carry implications that go beyond the statistical associations reported. At a substantive level, they reveal how structural conditions in Warri metropolis create a criminogenic environment in which internet fraud and human trafficking are not coincidental co-occurrences but structurally co-produced adaptations to the same underlying social conditions.

The strong correlation between unemployment and internet fraud participation (rs = 0.442) is consistent with the structural opportunity theory of crime (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and with prior Nigerian studies (Tade & Aliyu, 2011; Ngo & Jaishankar, 2017). However, the Warri context adds specificity: nearly half of respondents (46.1%) identify as unemployed, and formal employment options in the oil sector are increasingly precarious. The displacement of opportunity costs that Ngo and Jaishankar (2017) theorize is not a marginal condition but a structural norm for the majority of urban youth. Critically, the data suggest that this is not simply a matter of individual moral failure

but of rational adaptation within a constrained opportunity structure — exactly what RAT predicts when capable guardianship (enforcement, economic regulation, digital governance) is absent.

The significant relationship between weak law enforcement and human trafficking prevalence ($r_s = 0.371$) similarly invites structural, rather than purely behavioral, interpretation. Obokata (2006) and Iyanda (2012) have documented systemic deficiencies in Nigerian anti-trafficking enforcement, including inadequate capacity for victim identification, corruption within enforcement agencies, and a failure to prosecute traffickers at rates that would constitute a meaningful deterrent. The Warri data affirm these deficiencies at a local level: respondents overwhelmingly perceived law enforcement as unable or unwilling to disrupt trafficking operations effectively. Importantly, this perception itself has criminogenic consequences — where impunity is perceived as probable, the deterrent effect of law is neutralized, encouraging new entrants into trafficking networks.

The third finding — the significant correlation between digital facilitation and significant digital facilitation ($r_s = 0.491$) — is perhaps the most theoretically novel contribution of this study. It provides empirical grounding for what has previously been argued largely anecdotally: that internet fraud networks in the Niger Delta are being repurposed and extended into trafficking operations, with social media, encrypted messaging, and fraudulent digital job advertisements serving as tools of recruitment and victim management (Latonero, 2011; IOM, 2018). This convergence demands an integrated policy response rather than siloed interventions targeting each offense independently.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Warri represents a case of compound institutional failure: the absence of economic opportunity, the failure of law enforcement, and the absence of digital governance create simultaneous pathways into both internet fraud and human trafficking. Policy responses that address only one dimension — for example, cybercrime prosecution without youth economic programming — are structurally inadequate to the complexity of the problem documented here.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated, through empirical analysis grounded in Routine Activity Theory, that internet fraud and human trafficking in Warri metropolis share structural enablers — principally unemployment and weak law enforcement — and that digital platforms increasingly serve as the medium through which fraud networks intersect with trafficking operations. These findings make a specific and bounded contribution to the Nigerian criminology literature: they establish, in a defined urban setting using verifiable quantitative methods, the co-constitution of two offenses that are typically treated in isolation.

The empirical evidence supports three targeted policy recommendations. First, the National Directorate of Employment and relevant state agencies should implement vocational and digital-skills programs specifically designed for 18–35-year-olds in Warri, reducing the structural push into fraud networks by expanding licit economic opportunities. Second, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and NPC should increase the resource allocation, training, and accountability mechanisms of anti-trafficking and cybercrime units operating in Delta State, directly addressing the impunity conditions identified by respondents. Third, digital platform regulation — including partnership with social media companies to detect and remove fraudulent job advertisements and recruitment content — should be accelerated, targeting the digital interface between fraud and trafficking documented in Hypothesis 3.

This study is not without limitations. The purposive sampling design, while appropriate for a sensitive and hard-to-reach population, limits the generalisability of findings to the broader Warri youth population, and further limits claims to national representativeness. Future research should consider mixed-methods designs that complement survey data with in-depth interviews with law enforcement officials, NAPTIP officers, and survivor-witnesses to deepen the causal analysis beyond structural correlation. Longitudinal designs would further allow examination of whether policy interventions targeting the identified structural conditions produce measurable reductions in both offenses over time.

7. Declarative Artificial Utilization

During the preparation of this work, the author used Consensus and ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5, 2025 edition) to enhance the clarity, technical precision, and academic tone of the manuscript. The tool was employed solely to source for related literature, refine language, improve logical flow, and ensure consistency with professional academic standards. After using these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited the content to ensure accuracy, analytical soundness, and compliance with ethical and scholarly standards. The author takes full responsibility for all content and interpretations presented in the published manuscript.

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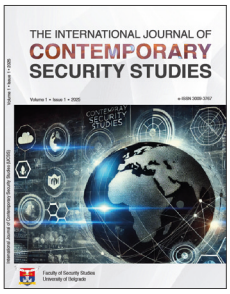
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Article

Revolutionary Identity and Nuclear Bargaining: How Symbolic Legitimacy Restructures Utility in Iran's Nuclear Program

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ABSTRACT

Conventional rationalist approaches assume that rising material costs should eventually lead to moderation, yet Iran's nuclear trajectory has remained marked by bargaining rigidity despite sustained sanctions and repeated diplomatic openings across changing economic and political conditions. This article argues that existing explanations are limited because they treat identity and legitimacy as external to strategic calculation rather than as constitutive of it. The study adopts a qualitative single-case design of Iran and uses process tracing alongside qualitative content analysis of leadership speeches, parliamentary debates, official policy statements, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, and key negotiation records from the early 2000s through the post-2018 sanctions period. The central research question is: why does Iran continue to resist nuclear compromise despite sustained sanctions and repeated opportunities for agreement? The findings show that nuclear policy is consistently framed through narratives of sovereignty, resistance, and revolutionary legitimacy, and that moments of escalation correspond more closely to the preservation of symbolic legitimacy than to shifts in material pressure alone. In this context, nuclear development functions not only as a strategic asset but also as a source of political legitimacy embedded within state authority. Concessions therefore impose symbolic and political costs that may outweigh anticipated economic gains. The article contributes to international relations and nuclear bargaining scholarship by developing the concept of identity-embedded utility, showing how symbolic legitimacy becomes internalized in strategic decision-making. More broadly, the findings suggest that coercive strategies centered primarily on material pressure may be less effective in ideologically grounded regimes.

KEYWORDS

Nuclear bargaining; revolutionary legitimacy; symbolic legitimacy; identity-embedded utility; Iran's nuclear program; coercive diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, Iran's nuclear trajectory has generated sustained confrontation within the global non-proliferation regime, despite alternating cycles of escalation and negotiated restraint.

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Material capabilities have expanded and contracted; inspection regimes have been strengthened and weakened; sanction pressure has intensified and partially relaxed. However, the dispute has shown a striking degree of persistence. If nuclear decision-making were primarily driven by shifting material payoffs, repeated rounds of coercion and diplomacy should have produced convergence toward compromise. The fact that they have no points to a deeper problem: existing explanations struggle to account for enduring bargaining rigidity under conditions where compromise appears materially rational.

This problem extends beyond the Iranian case. Explanations grounded in deterrence, coercive bargaining, and institutional design remain central to how scholars and policymakers interpret nuclear behavior. However, when these frameworks cannot explain persistence under extreme pressure, their analytical limits become visible. The Iranian case, therefore, raises a broader question about how we conceptualize state preferences and the sources of rigidity in high-stakes security disputes.

Existing approaches offer partial insights but leave an important gap. Rationalist models typically assume that preferences are materially grounded and stable, treating nuclear capability as an instrument of deterrence and bargaining leverage. Constructivist scholarship, by contrast, shows that identities and norms shape what states value and how they interpret their environment. However, these approaches rarely specify how identity directly enters strategic calculation. As a result, we lack a clear account of how symbolic commitments become embedded in decision-making in ways that systematically alter bargaining incentives.

This article addresses that gap by arguing that, in certain political contexts, identity can transform the structure of state utility itself. Rather than treating identity as an external influence on preferences, the argument developed here conceptualizes identity as internal to utility, restructuring what counts as a cost and a benefit within strategic calculation. In such cases, nuclear programs do not function solely as instruments of material security; they also serve as mechanisms of regime legitimation. Concessions, therefore, carry costs that extend beyond capability reduction, as they may undermine the ideological foundations of political authority. Bargaining rigidity, in this framework, reflects not a failure of rationality but a reordering of utility in which symbolic legitimacy becomes a constitutive component of payoff evaluation (Moshirzadeh, 2007). Under these conditions, rigidity emerges not from miscalculation or irrationality, but from a reconfigured payoff structure in which symbolic losses may outweigh material gains.

Empirically, Iran provides a particularly useful case because revolutionary legitimacy has remained central to state identity since 1979, and nuclear development has been consistently framed in terms of sovereignty and resistance (Abrahamian, 2008). This makes Iran a theoretically demanding case, as sustained external pressure would be expected to induce compromise under conventional materialist assumptions. At the same time, the argument is not limited to a single case. Similar dynamics may arise in other ideologically constituted regimes where strategic technologies become closely tied to identity and legitimacy.

Against this background, the central research question of this article is: under what conditions does identity embedding alter the composition of utility in nuclear bargaining, and how does this transformation generate persistent rigidity independent of material incentives? To answer this question, the article develops a theoretical framework that integrates insights from rationalist and constructivist approaches and then examines its empirical implications. In doing so, it contributes a mechanism-based account of how identity becomes operational within strategic decision-making, rather than treating it as a background or interpretive variable.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining a theory-guided case study with process tracing. This approach is appropriate for the research objective of explaining how identity-based factors reshape the internal logic of state decision-making—an issue that purely quantitative methods cannot adequately capture. The empirical analysis draws on material originally collected and

analyzed for the author's dissertation, which examined the relationship between legitimacy, identity, and nuclear policy in Iran.

The study focuses on the period from the early 2000s to the post-2018 sanctions environment. This timeframe is analytically significant because it captures the consolidation of Iran's nuclear program as a central political issue, multiple cycles of escalation and negotiation, and two major sanction regimes (pre-2015 multilateral sanctions and post-2018 unilateral re-escalation). It therefore allows for observation of variation in external pressure alongside relative continuity in discursive framing, which is necessary for assessing whether symbolic factors operate independently of material shifts.

Data are drawn from multiple primary and secondary sources, including leadership speeches, parliamentary debates, official policy statements, reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency, United Nations Security Council resolutions, and records of key negotiation processes such as the EU-3 talks and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). These sources were selected because they capture both discursive articulation and observable policy behavior across institutional and international arenas.

Data collection relied on systematic document analysis. Materials were purposively sampled based on three criteria: 1) relevance to major nuclear milestones and escalation points, 2) direct connection to sanction regimes or diplomatic negotiations, and 3) explicit engagement with themes of sovereignty, legitimacy, resistance, or national identity. Documents that did not meet at least one of these criteria were excluded in order to maintain analytical focus and conceptual consistency.

The analysis combines qualitative content analysis with process tracing. Texts were coded manually using a thematic coding strategy. Initial coding categories were derived from the theoretical framework—specifically, sovereignty, legitimacy, and resistance—while additional subcodes emerged inductively through repeated readings of the material. Coding proceeded in iterative cycles, enabling refinement of categories and consistency in classification across sources and time periods. To enhance reliability, previously coded texts were periodically revisited and cross-checked against updated coding criteria to ensure internal consistency. This iterative recoding process functioned as a form of intra-coder reliability control, reducing the risk of drift in interpretation over time.

Coding categories were operationalized using explicit criteria to ensure consistency across sources. "Sovereignty" was coded when texts referred to autonomy, independence, or non-subordination to external authority, including assertions of national rights in the nuclear domain. "Resistance" captured expressions of defiance, endurance under pressure, or rejection of externally imposed constraints, particularly in response to sanctions or diplomatic demands. "Legitimacy" was identified through statements linking nuclear policy to moral authority, revolutionary values, historical continuity, or the justification of political authority. "Symbolic payoff" was coded when discourse connected nuclear development to dignity, national pride, technological achievement, or ideological coherence—especially in contexts where such framing coincided with escalation, refusal to compromise, or reaffirmation of policy positions. Coding decisions were guided by the presence of these indicators in the text rather than isolated keywords and were applied consistently across institutional domains and time periods. This approach enabled the identification of patterned relationships between discursive framing and observable policy behavior.

All data were organized in a structured document archive, and coding decisions were systematically recorded to allow traceability between raw materials and analytical claims. Although no specialized qualitative software was used, manual coding was conducted consistently and transparently, with careful documentation of thematic categories and their evolution. Analytical rigor was further strengthened through triangulation across multiple types of sources. Official state discourse was systematically compared with international institutional reports and negotiation records, thereby verifying patterns across independent data streams and reducing the likelihood of single-source bias.

In addition, the longitudinal design of the analysis serves as a validity check by examining whether discursive patterns persist, intensify, or shift in relation to identifiable policy events and external pressures. Rather than relying on isolated observations, the study traces repeated co-occurrences between discourse and policy behavior, strengthening causal inference through temporal sequencing.

As the study relies exclusively on publicly available documents and does not involve human subjects, formal ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, attention was paid to responsible data use, including accurate representation of sources and careful contextual interpretation of political statements to avoid mischaracterization.

3. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section develops a three-layer analytical framework that connects rationalist bargaining models, constructivist critiques, and an identity-embedded theory of utility. It argues that existing approaches are limited in their ability to explain persistent bargaining rigidity under material pressure because they treat legitimacy and identity as external to strategic calculation. The proposed framework reconceptualizes symbolic legitimacy as an internal component of utility, reshaping how costs and benefits are defined in nuclear bargaining contexts.

3.1. Rationalist Nuclear Bargaining Models

Canonical approaches to nuclear bargaining conceptualize state behavior as strategic interaction among rational actors whose preferences are assumed to be stable and materially defined (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 1990). Within this framework, nuclear capability functions as a strategic asset that shapes the credibility of deterrence and bargaining leverage (Schelling, 1980; Waltz, 1996). Policy concessions become rational when the expected costs of sanctions or escalation exceed anticipated security benefits, producing outcomes driven by material cost–benefit calculations (Porel, 2025).

A key assumption underlying this approach is the stability of utility structures. Preferences are treated as exogenously given, and material incentives determine decision outcomes in a relatively consistent manner (Morrow, 1994). Mechanisms such as audience costs affect signaling credibility but do not alter the composition of payoffs themselves (Fearon, 1994). Under these conditions, sustained resistance in the face of severe economic pressure appears anomalous and is typically attributed to misperception or incomplete information.

However, empirical cases of persistent rigidity under escalating material constraints suggest that this assumption may not always hold. Where political authority is closely tied to ideological commitments, the structure of utility may be more complex than purely material models allow.

3.2. Constructivist Critique and Its Limits

Constructivist approaches challenge the assumption of fixed preferences by demonstrating that state interests are socially constructed through norms, identities, and intersubjective meanings (Katzenstein, 1996). From this perspective, what states value is shaped through historically embedded normative structures that define legitimacy and appropriate conduct. Identity is therefore not peripheral but constitutive of political action.

Despite this contribution, a limitation remains in explaining how identity becomes operational within strategic decision-making. Much of the literature shows how preferences are formed but offers less precision on how symbolic commitments translate into concrete shifts in payoff structures. As a result, material incentives often remain implicitly privileged in explanations of bargaining outcomes.

This limitation becomes particularly visible in high-stakes security contexts, where legitimacy, survival, and identity are tightly intertwined. In such cases, the analytical distinction between normative meaning and strategic calculation becomes difficult to sustain, as symbolic considerations may directly shape what counts as a cost or benefit.

3.3. Identity-Embedded Utility: A Theoretical Framework

This study advances a framework that reconceptualizes identity as an internal component of utility rather than an external influence on preferences. In revolutionary regimes, political authority is grounded in narratives of sovereignty, resistance, and autonomy, which serve as the basis of regime legitimacy (Halliday, 2005). Under these conditions, strategic capabilities can acquire meaning beyond their material function, becoming embedded in the state's ideological structure.

When nuclear technology is integrated into these narratives, it generates a dual payoff structure composed of material security value and symbolic legitimacy value. Through public discourse, institutional communication, and elite framing, technological development becomes associated with sovereign dignity and political independence (Hopf, 2002). Utility is therefore reconfigured to include both material and symbolic dimensions within a unified decision-making framework.

This transformation alters bargaining behavior. Concession is no longer evaluated solely in terms of lost capability but also in relation to its implications for ideological consistency and political authority. As a result, compromise may impose legitimacy costs that exceed material benefits, producing persistent rigidity even under severe economic pressure.

The causal mechanism underlying this argument unfolds through four stages. First, legitimacy anchoring occurs when political authority is rooted in revolutionary narratives centered on sovereignty and resistance (Halliday, 2005). Second, discursive embedding links nuclear development to these narratives through sustained rhetorical and institutional reinforcement, creating a symbolic association between technology and identity (Wendt, 1999). Third, symbolic payoff formation emerges as technological progress reinforces domestic legitimacy and elite cohesion, particularly under external pressure (Hopf, 2002). Fourth, utility restructuring occurs as symbolic legitimacy is integrated into decision-making, altering the hierarchy of strategic priorities and increasing the cost of concessions.

This mechanism operates not only domestically but also through interaction with external actors. International institutions interpret nuclear programs through normative frameworks of compliance and security governance, which may conflict with internal identity-based meanings (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This divergence can intensify rigidity by producing incompatible expectations across domestic and international arenas.

From this framework, three propositions follow. First, in regimes where legitimacy is grounded in revolutionary identity, strategically significant technologies acquire symbolic value within utility structures (T1). Second, the depth of discursive embedding increases the symbolic payoff of technological advancement while amplifying the legitimacy cost of concession (T2). Third, when symbolic legitimacy is integrated into utility, bargaining rigidity may persist independently of material constraints or the intensity of sanctions (T3).

Identity-embedded utility differs from several adjacent concepts in important respects. Unlike preferences, which are typically treated as exogenously given, identity-embedded utility refers to the internal composition of payoff structures themselves. It also diverges from accounts of symbolic or reputational costs, which are often incorporated as additional penalties within an otherwise material framework; here, symbolic legitimacy is not an additive cost but a constitutive component of utility. Similarly, while audience cost models conceptualize domestic pressures as external constraints on decision-makers (Fearon, 1994), the present framework treats legitimacy as internal to strategic calculation rather than as a constraint upon it. In this sense, regime legitimacy functions not merely as a source of preferences but as a structured element of what is being maximized.

The framework applies under specific scope conditions: legitimacy must be ideologically grounded, strategic technologies must possess high symbolic visibility, and identity narratives must be institutionally embedded. Where these conditions are absent, material incentives are more likely to dominate. The argument, therefore, does not claim universal applicability but seeks to explain variation in contexts where identity and sovereignty are structurally fused.

4. Research Design and Case Selection: Testing Utility Transformation

Iran presents a strategically compelling and theory-revealing case for testing the argument that symbolic payoffs can transform the utility structure of nuclear bargaining under conditions of extreme coercion. The country's nuclear trajectory combines several analytically important features: sustained external pressure, repeated negotiation opportunities, fluctuating technical capabilities, and yet a persistent pattern of policy rigidity. Within conventional rationalist frameworks, high material costs—arising from sanctions, economic contraction, and diplomatic isolation—should incentivize compromise in order to maximize expected utility (Waltz, 1996; Keohane, 2017). Under such conditions, material pressure is expected to produce accommodation as the costs of resistance increase. However, Iran's repeated refusal to accept materially advantageous agreements despite escalating costs constitutes a hard empirical puzzle. This divergence between predicted and observed behavior makes the case particularly suitable for testing whether utility transformation occurs through the incorporation of symbolic legitimacy into state decision-making.

The selection of Iran is therefore not incidental but theoretically motivated. It represents a "least-likely" case for the persistence of non-material explanations precisely because material incentives strongly predict compromise, yet resistance persists. If the argument holds in such a setting—where coercive pressure is both sustained and observable—it provides a demanding test of the theory. It strengthens the broader explanatory relevance of identity-embedded symbolic payoffs. At the same time, the case provides sufficient internal variation—across sanction episodes, negotiation rounds, and shifts in nuclear capability—to allow systematic evaluation of competing explanations.

The research design is structured to adjudicate between two distinct logics of state behavior. The first, material payoff responsiveness, predicts that escalation or compromise will track changes in external pressure, economic cost, or technical constraint. Under this logic, policy adjustment is expected when the marginal costs of resistance exceed its benefits. This assumption is consistent with broader nuclear policy frameworks that conceptualize state responses as adaptive to institutional and strategic constraints (Porel, 2025). The second, symbolic legitimacy payoff dominance, posits that state behavior aligns instead with moments of identity contestation, narrative reinforcement, and discursive emphasis on sovereignty and historical grievance, even when material incentives favor compromise. The central objective of the design is to determine which of these logics better accounts for observed patterns of nuclear decision-making.

To enable this evaluation, the paper specifies clear, observable implications for each logic. Evidence supporting the symbolic payoff argument is identified through the temporal alignment between heightened discursive emphasis on sovereignty, resistance, and normative entitlement, and concrete policy decisions such as escalation, negotiation stalling, or refusal of compromise. Crucially, this alignment must persist even under conditions in which material incentives would predict moderation. Conversely, if policy shifts consistently correspond to changes in sanction intensity, bargaining leverage, or capability constraints, the materialist explanation is strengthened, and the symbolic payoff argument is weakened.

Operationalization of key concepts is central to this design. Discursive embedding is defined as the extent to which nuclear technology is consistently framed in terms of sovereignty, resistance, and normative rights across institutional arenas. It is identified through the frequency, centrality, and repetition of these frames in leadership rhetoric, parliamentary discourse, and formal policy articulation. Symbolic legitimacy payoff refers to the reputational and ideological value derived from maintaining coherence with these narratives, particularly under conditions of external pressure. It becomes observable when decisions systematically prioritize narrative consistency over material gain. Bargaining rigidity is operationalized as the sustained refusal to accept materially advantageous agreements—including suspension arrangements, enrichment limits, or sanctions relief packages—despite rising economic costs. Finally, material incentive shifts are identified through changes in sanction severity, access to economic resources, and alterations in technological capacity, providing a baseline against which alternative explanations can be evaluated.

This design enables structured comparison within the case over time. Examining how discursive patterns, policy decisions, and external pressures evolve across key episodes allows the analysis to

assess whether nuclear behavior is more closely aligned with material cost–benefit adjustment or with the preservation of symbolic legitimacy. The focus is therefore not on isolated events, but on patterned relationships between identity narratives and strategic outcomes.

The scope conditions of the argument further clarify the boundaries of inference. The mechanism is expected to operate in contexts where legitimacy is ideologically grounded rather than procedurally derived, where strategic technologies possess high symbolic visibility, and where political survival is tied to maintaining narrative coherence. Under such conditions, symbolic payoffs are likely to become integrated into the utility structure, reshaping strategic calculation. By contrast, in settings where legitimacy is primarily electoral or where strategic programs lack public symbolic articulation, material incentives should retain explanatory dominance.

In this context, Iran provides strong analytical leverage. The persistence of bargaining rigidity despite sustained coercive pressure creates conditions under which the limits of materialist explanations become visible. Systematically testing whether identity-embedded symbolic payoffs account for this persistence allows the research design to rigorously evaluate utility transformation as an alternative framework for understanding nuclear bargaining behavior.

5. Empirical Findings: Identity-Embedded Utility in Iran

This section presents the empirical findings by tracing observable patterns in Iran's nuclear policy across institutional, discursive, and strategic domains. The analysis focuses on four dimensions: institutional structures of legitimacy, discursive framing of nuclear technology, escalation patterns, and negotiation behavior under sustained external pressure.

5.1. Revolutionary Legitimacy and Institutional Structure

The post-1979 political order in Iran is organized around a form of revolutionary legitimacy embedded in core state institutions and reproduced through their routine functioning. This legitimacy is anchored in the continuity of the 1979 revolution. It is reflected in constitutional arrangements that combine elected bodies with clerical oversight, particularly through the Supreme Leader's authority over strategic policy domains, including nuclear decision-making (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989). Institutional decision-making is concentrated in bodies such as the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which coordinates policy across executive, military, and advisory institutions.

Empirical records show that official policy documents and institutional statements consistently frame nuclear development in terms of sovereignty and national rights. For example, reports submitted to the International Atomic Energy Agency (2005; 2007) document Iran's continued emphasis on its "inalienable right" to nuclear technology under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Similarly, statements issued through the European External Action Service (2020; 2025) during negotiation cycles repeatedly reference Iranian positions grounded in independence and non-subordination in diplomatic exchanges.

Legislative activity reflects similar patterns. Parliamentary debates following United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1737 and 1929 (2006; 2010) include repeated references to national sovereignty, particularly in discussions of enrichment continuation and responses to sanctions. Records of Majles deliberations during these periods show that policy discussions on budget allocations for nuclear development and technological infrastructure were frequently framed in terms of independence and resistance to external pressure.

Judicial and security institutions also help shape the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Legal provisions concerning national security and political activity regulate how nuclear policy is publicly discussed, reinforcing consistency in official framing (Schirazi, 1997). This is observable in the alignment between executive statements, parliamentary debates, and official media outputs, where

similar terminology—such as "national rights," "resistance," and "independence"—recurs across institutional platforms.

Leadership speeches provide further empirical evidence of this consistency. Public addresses delivered in 2010 following the adoption of Resolution 1929, and again in 2018 after the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), repeatedly link nuclear policy to sovereignty and national dignity (Iran Primer, 2022). These references appear across domestic speeches, international forums, and official communications, indicating continuity across time and institutional settings.

Across these domains, the observable pattern is one of sustained consistency. Despite changes in administration—from Ahmadinejad to Rouhani to Raisi—and shifts in international conditions, institutional framing of nuclear policy remains stable. The recurrence of sovereignty-centered language across leadership discourse, parliamentary records, and policy documents indicates a coordinated pattern of institutional communication rather than isolated rhetorical variation.

5.2. Discursive Embedding of Nuclear Technology

Empirical material shows that nuclear technology in Iran is consistently framed through the language of sovereignty, independence, and national dignity across multiple communication channels. Leadership speeches, parliamentary debates, and state media outputs repeatedly present nuclear development as part of a broader narrative of political autonomy rather than as a purely technical program.

This pattern is particularly visible during key moments of international scrutiny. For example, following International Atomic Energy Agency inspection reports, official Iranian statements emphasized technological progress alongside references to independence and self-reliance (2007; 2009). Similarly, during negotiation phases documented by the European External Action Service (2020; 2025), Iranian officials consistently framed enrichment activities as expressions of national rights rather than technical compliance issues.

A shift in discourse is observable over time. During the early 1990s and late 1990s, nuclear development was more frequently described in terms of scientific advancement and modernization. However, by the mid-2000s—particularly after the referral of Iran's nuclear file to the United Nations Security Council—official discourse increasingly incorporated references to sovereignty, resistance, and external pressure (2006). Parliamentary debates following Resolution 1737 (2006) and subsequent sanctions measures show a heightened emphasis on independence and historical grievances.

The timing of discursive intensification aligns with periods of external pressure. After Resolution 1929 (2010), leadership speeches and state media coverage show a marked increase in references to "national dignity" and "resistance." A similar pattern appears after 2018, when the United States withdrew from the JCPOA (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2018). Statements issued during 2019–2021, coinciding with incremental breaches of enrichment limits, consistently paired technical developments with references to sovereignty and reciprocity.

State media reinforces this pattern by translating technical developments into narratives of national achievement. Reports on enrichment levels, centrifuge expansion, and facility development frequently emphasize independence and resilience. For example, coverage of enrichment increased to 20% in 2010 (Arms Control Association, 2010), and subsequent expansions after 2019 consistently framed these developments as indicators of national capability rather than as procedural deviations.

Across sources, a recurring empirical pattern is the co-occurrence of nuclear developments and sovereignty-centered language. References to independence and resistance regularly accompany announcements of enrichment expansion, inspection responses, and updates on negotiations. This co-occurrence appears across leadership speeches, parliamentary debates, and media outputs, indicating a consistent pattern of public framing across institutional domains.

5.3. Symbolic Payoff and Escalatory Behavior

Empirical evidence shows a recurring temporal association between external pressure and subsequent escalation in nuclear activity. Following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, Iran expanded enrichment activities to the 20% level shortly thereafter (2010). This shift occurred during a period marked by intensified financial restrictions and diplomatic isolation. Official statements released during this period repeatedly referenced legal entitlement under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and national sovereignty.

A similar sequence is observable after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018. Beginning in 2019, Iran implemented a series of incremental steps, including exceeding the 3.67% enrichment limit, expanding stockpiles, and deploying advanced centrifuges. In 2024–2025, enrichment levels reached 60% (Albright, Burkhard, & Faragasso, 2025). Each stage of escalation was accompanied by official statements referencing reciprocity, national rights, and responses to external non-compliance. Records from the European External Action Service (2020; 2025) document these phased developments alongside ongoing diplomatic exchanges.

Across both periods, discursive patterns intensify alongside technical escalation. Leadership speeches in Iran delivered in 2010–2012 and again in the post-2018 period consistently employed terms such as "resistance," "dignity," and "independence," reflecting the embedding of nuclear policy within sovereignty-based legitimacy narratives (Golmohammadi, 2018). Parliamentary debates during these periods reflect similar language, particularly in discussions of sanctions and nuclear policy decisions.

Additional patterns emerge when examining the domestic context. Periods of internal unrest—such as the 2009 post-election protests and the 2019 fuel protests—coincide with increased visibility of nuclear-related announcements. Public ceremonies marking nuclear achievements, including the unveiling of centrifuge advancements or enrichment milestones, increased during these periods, often accompanied by references to national pride and resilience.

The sequencing across cases shows a consistent pattern: the introduction or intensification of sanctions is followed by adjustments in nuclear activity, accompanied by increased frequency of sovereignty-centered language. Escalation occurs both during and outside formal negotiation periods, and technical developments often proceed in parallel with ongoing diplomatic engagement. Records from the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United Nations Security Council confirm that these developments span multiple reporting periods and institutional contexts.

5.4. Bargaining Rigidity under Material Incentives

Empirical records of Iran's nuclear negotiations show repeated instances where materially beneficial agreements were available but not sustained. During the 2003–2004 negotiations with the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), Iran agreed to a temporary suspension of enrichment under the Tehran Declaration and the Paris Agreement (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2004). These agreements included provisions for economic cooperation and recognition of peaceful nuclear rights. However, archival records show that the suspension was consistently described in official communications as voluntary and reversible, and negotiations collapsed in 2005.

Following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1737 (2006) and subsequent sanctions culminating in Resolution 1929 (2010), economic pressure increased significantly. Despite these constraints, enrichment activities expanded, including the initiation of 20% enrichment after 2010. Diplomatic records indicate that negotiation channels remained active, yet policy adjustments did not align directly with the intensification of sanctions. Official statements during this period continued to refer to legal entitlements and sovereign rights.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action represents a partial exception. The agreement provided sanctions relief and enabled limited economic reintegration (Valadbaygi, 2025). Official communications at the time emphasized the preservation of enrichment capability and national rights.

Following the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018, Iran implemented incremental departures from its commitments, including increases in enrichment levels and expansion of centrifuge use, while continuing negotiations with European actors.

Across these negotiation cycles, a consistent pattern is observable. Proposals involving suspension or limitation were frequently accompanied by public framing that emphasized sovereignty and dignity. Parliamentary debates and official statements often described such measures as conditional, temporary, or externally imposed. Media coverage during negotiation periods similarly highlighted asymmetries in obligations and rights.

The timing of negotiations, sanctions, and policy changes shows overlapping rather than sequential patterns. Periods of intensified sanctions—such as 2006–2010 and post-2018—coincide with ongoing negotiations and continued nuclear development. Reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (2025) and European External Action Service (2020; 2025) confirm that technical developments and diplomatic engagement proceed in parallel across multiple phases.

Taken together, the empirical record shows a repeated alignment among three observable elements: the availability of negotiation options with potential economic benefits, continued or expanded nuclear activity, and the persistence of sovereignty-centered discourse. This pattern appears across multiple time periods, sanction regimes, and negotiation frameworks, and is documented across institutional and international sources.

6. Discussion

This section interprets the empirical findings through the lens of identity-embedded utility, arguing that Iran's nuclear bargaining behavior reflects a reconfiguration of how strategic payoffs are constituted rather than a departure from rational calculation. It situates bargaining rigidity within a framework in which symbolic legitimacy is internalized as a component of utility, reshaping the meaning of costs and benefits in nuclear decision-making. The discussion then evaluates this interpretation against rationalist and constructivist approaches and examines its implications, scope conditions, and external plausibility.

6.1. Interpreting Identity-Embedded Utility

The empirical findings suggest that the persistence of Iran's nuclear bargaining posture is best understood as the outcome of an internally restructured utility function rather than a deviation from rational strategic behavior. Instead of treating preferences as fixed and materially grounded, the evidence indicates that symbolic legitimacy becomes constitutive of utility itself. Nuclear decision-making, therefore, reflects a form of rationality in which sovereignty, ideological coherence, and regime legitimacy are not external constraints but intrinsic components of what is being maximized. This interpretation departs from conventional accounts that attribute resistance to misperception or incomplete information, and instead situates policy continuity within a reconfigured payoff structure in which symbolic and material elements are jointly evaluated (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). What appears as disproportionate resistance under materialist assumptions is thus consistent with a different ordering of strategic priorities.

Across the empirical sections, a consistent pattern emerges linking institutional continuity, discursive framing, and observed bargaining behavior. Political authority is grounded in legitimacy derived from revolutionary narratives, which shape the conditions under which policy choices are evaluated (Halliday, 2005). Nuclear technology is persistently framed within sovereignty-centered discourse across institutional arenas, extending its meaning beyond technical or strategic utility (Wendt, 1999). Periods of intensified external pressure coincide with stronger symbolic articulation, suggesting that escalation reinforces legitimacy-based returns rather than undermining them (Hopf, 2002). At the same time, negotiation outcomes indicate that materially advantageous compromises are constrained when they are perceived to undermine sovereignty or dignity. Taken together, these

patterns indicate that symbolic considerations are systematically incorporated into strategic evaluation, shaping how costs and benefits are assessed in practice.

Interpreted in relation to existing scholarship, these findings both align with and extend prior theoretical approaches. Rationalist models correctly emphasize strategic calculation and the persistence of cost–benefit reasoning, yet their assumption of exogenously given preferences limits their ability to account for sustained resistance under escalating material pressure (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 1990). The present analysis supports the rationalist insight that actors respond to incentives but demonstrates that the content of those incentives extends beyond material factors. Constructivist approaches, in turn, have shown that identity and norms shape state interests, yet they often leave unspecified how these elements become operational within decision-making processes (Katzenstein, 1996; Ruggie, 2002). The findings here address this gap by showing that symbolic legitimacy enters directly into the evaluation of strategic options, thereby influencing observable outcomes. This perspective preserves the logic of rational action while redefining the components through which utility is constituted (Wendt, 1999).

Importantly, what appears as rigidity under materialist models is not evidence of irrationality but of a different internalization of costs and benefits. Once symbolic legitimacy is treated as an endogenous component of utility rather than an external constraint, resistance to compromise becomes consistent with the maximization of utility. This distinction clarifies that preferences are not simply influenced by identity but are structurally reshaped through it, producing a reordering of strategic priorities rather than a deviation from rationality.

This interpretation has broader implications for understanding bargaining behavior in high-stakes security contexts. Apparent rigidity—particularly the rejection of economically beneficial agreements—can be understood as consistent with utility maximization once symbolic legitimacy is incorporated into the cost structure. Concessions are evaluated not only in terms of capability or economic relief but also in relation to their implications for ideological coherence and regime authority. When symbolic losses exceed anticipated material gains, resistance becomes the rational outcome. This suggests that policy instruments that rely primarily on escalating material pressure, such as sanctions, may be less effective when they fail to engage with the symbolic dimensions of state utility. Analytical models that omit these dimensions risk underestimating the durability of resistance in ideologically grounded regimes (Fearon, 1995).

At the same time, this interpretation remains subject to important scope conditions and limitations. The observed patterns are most likely to operate in contexts where legitimacy is ideologically grounded, publicly institutionalized, and closely tied to visible strategic programs. They may not generalize to settings where political authority is primarily procedural or where strategic capabilities lack symbolic salience. In addition, the measurement of symbolic payoff relies on qualitative indicators derived from discourse and institutional alignment, which may introduce interpretive bias despite efforts at triangulation. Alternative explanations, including strategic delay or domestic political factionalism, cannot be entirely excluded and may interact with identity-based dynamics. These considerations point to the need for further research that systematically compares cases across different regime types and develops more precise methods for capturing symbolic components of utility. Expanding the empirical scope beyond a single-case analysis would allow for a more robust assessment of the conditions under which these dynamics shape international bargaining outcomes.

6.2. Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of how nuclear bargaining behavior is theorized across dominant approaches in international relations. Rationalist frameworks maintain that strategic interaction is governed by stable, materially defined preferences, in which actors adjust behavior in response to shifting costs and benefits under conditions of anarchy (Fearon, 1995; Schelling, 1980). From this perspective, sustained resistance under escalating sanctions is typically treated as anomalous, unless it is explained by imperfect information or commitment problems. The empirical patterns identified here partially align with the rationalist emphasis on strategic cal-

culation; however, they diverge in a crucial respect. Cost–benefit reasoning remains operative, yet the content of what constitutes "cost" and "benefit" is transformed through the incorporation of symbolic legitimacy. This indicates a limitation in conventional models, which assume that utility is exogenously given and materially anchored. The findings, therefore, extend rationalist insights by demonstrating that preference structures themselves may undergo endogenous transformation under specific ideological conditions.

Constructivist scholarship provides a closer point of convergence by emphasizing that state interests are shaped through identity, norms, and intersubjective meanings (Ruggie, 2002). The empirical evidence strongly supports the claim that nuclear policy is embedded within broader narratives of sovereignty and resistance, reinforcing the constructivist argument that meaning structures political action. However, a gap persists regarding how identity translates into concrete decision-making trade-offs. While identity is often treated as constitutive of preferences, it is typically analytically separated from utility itself. The findings address this limitation by demonstrating that identity does not merely inform what states value but becomes internal to how value is calculated. This shift from preference formation to utility composition provides a more precise account of how symbolic commitments generate observable behavioral outcomes.

The argument also engages with the concept of audience costs in strategic interaction. Conventional accounts conceptualize audience costs as reputational penalties tied to signaling credibility, often grounded in domestic political accountability mechanisms (Fearon, 1994). The evidence presented here suggests a different configuration. Political costs are not primarily derived from procedural accountability but from the maintenance of ideological coherence within a legitimacy framework. This implies that audience costs are better understood as functions of identity consistency rather than institutional sanction. Such a reinterpretation challenges the assumption that domestic audiences operate as external constraints on leadership and instead situates them within a broader ideological structure that shapes the definition of acceptable policy.

The study further intersects with securitization approaches, which emphasize the role of discourse in constructing security threats and legitimizing extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998). The findings are consistent with the view that language and framing are central to political action; however, they extend this insight by showing that discursive processes do more than justify policy—they reshape the incentive structure within which decisions are made. Nuclear technology is not only securitized but symbolically integrated into narratives of sovereignty, generating legitimacy-based payoffs that influence strategic choice. This suggests that securitization theory captures the discursive dimension of politics but does not fully account for how these discourses become embedded in utility calculations.

Taken together, these findings support a reformulation of utility as a composite structure that includes both material and symbolic components, while preserving the analytical value of strategic calculation (Hopf, 2002). More broadly, they provide a mechanism for integrating constructivist insights into models of bargaining, thereby addressing a longstanding divide between rationalist and interpretive approaches.

6.3. External Plausibility: Extension to North Korea

This subsection does not present a full comparative case study but rather a plausibility probe designed to assess whether the proposed mechanism travels beyond the Iranian case. The analysis is therefore interpretive and selective, focusing on whether comparable patterns emerge under similar ideological conditions rather than establishing causal equivalence across cases.

The comparison suggests that the first stage of the mechanism—legitimacy anchoring—is present in both contexts, albeit in different institutional forms. In North Korea, political authority is grounded in an ideologically consolidated system centered on sovereignty, autonomy, and resistance, articulated through the doctrine of Juche and reinforced through dynastic continuity. As in Iran, legitimacy is derived less from procedural accountability or economic performance than from adherence to foundational narratives of independence (Arslan, Mustafa, & Liaqat, 2025). This par-

allel supports the claim that identity-based legitimacy can constitute the conditions under which symbolic elements enter utility (Hopf, 2002).

Consistent with the second stage of the mechanism, nuclear capability is discursively embedded within these legitimacy narratives rather than treated as a purely instrumental asset. Periods of intensified external pressure, including the expansion of sanctions, were accompanied not by discursive moderation but by an intensified emphasis on self-reliance and external threat. This pattern suggests that coercive pressure may deepen rather than weaken identity-centered narratives, strengthening the symbolic dimension of nuclear policy (Buzan et al., 1998).

Evidence of symbolic payoff generation is also observable. Continued weapons development and strategic demonstrations occurred despite substantial economic constraints, producing not only deterrent signaling but legitimacy-based returns. Domestically, such actions reinforced regime credibility and elite cohesion; externally, they increased strategic visibility. These patterns indicate that nuclear capability carries symbolic value that contributes directly to the utility structure (Hopf, 2002).

The persistence of bargaining rigidity further supports the presence of utility restructuring. Offers involving partial denuclearization in exchange for material relief were repeatedly resisted, suggesting that concession is evaluated not only in material terms but also in relation to ideological coherence. Partial rollback imposes symbolic costs by undermining claims to sovereign resilience. In this sense, resistance remains consistent with utility maximization once symbolic legitimacy is internalized (Fearon, 1995; Wendt, 1999). In contrast, alliance-based nuclear governance structures—such as coordinated deterrence frameworks—prioritize strategic alignment and institutional interoperability over identity-based legitimacy claims (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025).

At the same time, important differences clarify the scope conditions of the argument. While the structure of utility transformation appears to travel across cases, its discursive content varies. Iranian nuclear discourse is often articulated through legal rights and sovereignty within an international normative framework, whereas North Korean discourse emphasizes existential threat and militarized self-reliance. These variations shape how external pressure is interpreted but do not alter the underlying mechanism (Ruggie, 2002).

A contrast with cases where symbolic embedding is weak further clarifies these boundaries. In Libya, nuclear development was not deeply integrated into regime legitimacy narratives, and external pressure led to the program's abandonment at limited internal cost. This suggests that symbolic embedding must be actively constructed; when absent, material incentives retain greater explanatory power.

Taken together, this plausibility probe indicates that identity-embedded utility may extend beyond a single case, while remaining contingent on identifiable ideological and institutional conditions. The analysis supports the broader claim that when legitimacy is anchored in identity and discursively embedded in strategic programs, symbolic payoffs become integrated into utility, shaping bargaining behavior under coercion.

6.4. Scope Conditions, Limitations, and Future Research

The explanatory leverage of this study depends on clearly specified scope conditions. The findings indicate that identity-embedded utility operates most strongly in contexts where political legitimacy is grounded in ideologically constituted narratives and institutionally reproduced across governing structures (Hopf, 2002). Under such conditions, strategic technologies acquire meaning beyond their instrumental function, becoming linked to historically embedded claims about sovereignty and resistance (Halliday, 2005). Where legitimacy is primarily electoral or performance-based, symbolic commitments are likely to exert weaker constraints, allowing material incentives to dominate decision-making (Fearon, 1995; Morrow, 1994). The argument is therefore conditional, with explanatory power dependent on the visibility and institutionalization of identity narratives.

Several limitations qualify the interpretation of these findings. The single-case design provides analytical depth but limits generalizability across regime types and geopolitical contexts. Alternative mechanisms—including strategic delay, bureaucratic politics, or shifting threat perceptions—may operate alongside identity-based dynamics and require further disentanglement (Fearon, 1995; Waltz, 1996). Methodologically, the reliance on qualitative discourse analysis introduces interpretive challenges. Although triangulation across sources mitigates bias, identifying symbolic payoffs depends on reading publicly available materials, which may reflect strategic communication rather than underlying decision-making processes (Hopf, 2002).

This introduces an important inferential limitation. Public discourse does not necessarily align with internal decision-making processes and may instead serve as strategic signaling to domestic and international audiences. As a result, the analysis cannot directly observe underlying preferences, and causal claims rely on consistent patterns across sources rather than direct access to elite motivations. This constrains the strength of causal inference and requires that conclusions be interpreted as probabilistic rather than definitive.

These limitations point to several avenues for future research. Comparative analysis across cases with varying legitimacy structures would allow for systematic testing of the scope conditions identified here. Extending the framework to other ideologically grounded regimes would clarify whether the mechanism operates consistently or interacts with context-specific factors. Methodologically, future work could combine discourse analysis with process tracing of internal decision-making records, where available, to strengthen causal inference. There is also a need to develop more precise operational indicators of symbolic payoff to enable more rigorous cross-case comparison.

The findings also carry implications for policy design. Strategies that rely primarily on escalating material pressure assume that increasing costs will induce compromise. However, when symbolic legitimacy is embedded within utility, external pressure may reinforce resistance by increasing the value of defiance. Under such conditions, coercive approaches may have diminished or counterproductive effects. More effective engagement would require recognizing the symbolic dimension of strategic programs and designing approaches that reduce the loss of legitimacy rather than focusing exclusively on material exchange.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that persistent nuclear bargaining rigidity in ideologically grounded regimes is best explained as a transformation in the structure of utility rather than a failure of rationality. In the Iranian case, strategic decision-making incorporates symbolic legitimacy as an intrinsic component of payoff calculation, such that sovereignty, resistance, and ideological coherence are evaluated alongside material incentives. Under these conditions, concessions impose legitimacy costs that can outweigh economic or strategic gains, rendering continued resistance a rational outcome within a reconfigured utility framework.

The empirical analysis shows a consistent alignment among legitimacy structures, the discursive embedding of nuclear technology, and observable policy behavior. Nuclear development is systematically framed as an expression of sovereign authority, while escalation and negotiation patterns correspond more closely to moments of identity reinforcement than to shifts in material pressure. The extension of this framework to North Korea further supports the plausibility of the mechanism beyond a single case, indicating that identity-embedded utility can generate similar patterns of resistance under conditions of external constraint.

The central contribution of this study is to show that symbolic legitimacy can function as a constitutive component of utility in high-stakes bargaining. This insight has important implications. Analytically, it calls for models of international bargaining to incorporate non-material payoffs into their understanding of strategic behavior. In practice, it suggests that coercive strategies based solely on material pressure may be ineffective when they reinforce identity-based narratives of resistance.

These findings are necessarily bounded by specific conditions, particularly when legitimacy is ideologically grounded and when strategically salient technologies are publicly embedded in identity narratives. Future research should extend this framework through systematic cross-case comparison and develop more precise methods for measuring symbolic components of utility. Such efforts would help clarify the conditions under which identity-embedded utility shapes strategic outcomes and refine its broader applicability in international politics.

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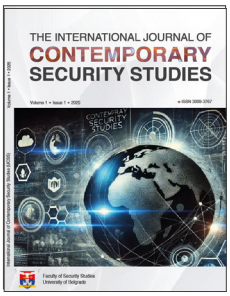
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Modern Technological Deficiencies in Criminal Investigation Architecture and National Security Crisis in FCT, Abuja

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the deficiencies of scientific technologies in criminal investigation methods and on the lack of successful prosecutions of perpetrators. Its main objective is to critically examine the limitations of modern scientific technologies in criminal investigation methods and the dangers of arresting offenders of the nation's most heinous crimes in Abuja. Several external variables, such as scientific innovations, digital surveillance, and institutional strategies, influenced the paper. To achieve this objective, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Abuja was identified as the location. The study used both primary and secondary sources to collect data. Primary data were collected through Likert-scale questionnaires, while secondary data were obtained from textbooks and online journals. Four hundred respondents were randomly selected from law enforcement agencies and youths in Abuja, of which 388 valid questionnaires were analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (PMCC). A few theories were identified and reviewed, and the Innovation Diffusion theory was adopted as the theoretical framework. It was adopted for its technological innovations in effective security. The data obtained were descriptively analyzed using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) as the analytical tool. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between technological innovation and national security crisis ($r = 0.44$, $df = 386$, $p < 0.05$), as well as a stronger significant relationship between digital surveillance and national security crisis ($r = 0.84$, $df = 386$, $p < 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the null hypotheses. The study recommends that policymakers note that effective investigation enhances prosecution, deters criminality, restores public confidence in law enforcement, reduces fear, and strengthens democratic governance. In this sense, technology-driven criminal investigation is not only a security imperative but also a developmental necessity.

KEYWORDS

Crime, technology, criminal investigation, national security, crisis.

1. Introduction

Security has remained one of the most pressing and complex challenges confronting the Nigerian state in the twenty-first century. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria has grappled with multifaceted security threats. These threats ranged from terrorism, insurgency, banditry, cybercrime, oil theft, kidnapping, transnational organized crime, to communal and ethno-religious conflicts.

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They have exposed the structural weaknesses of Nigeria's traditional security architecture. Historically, weaknesses relied on manpower-intensive, reactive, and analog methods of intelligence gathering and law enforcement (Alemika, 2021; Okoli & Lenshie, 2018).

Crime exists in every human society. According to a great criminologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), 'crime is an inescapable truth of human existence'. Therefore, scientific investigation may serve as an effective modern apparatus for social and criminal control (Popović-Mančević, 2025; Chukwunka, 2025; Metić, 2025; Cvetković et al., 2018). Fighting a security crisis cannot be complete without considering the contributions of science and technology to criminal investigation (Gehl & Plecas, 2016; Tong, Bryant, & Horvath, 2009).

The intersection of technology and national security has emerged as a foundational axis for contemporary security studies. In Nigeria, a complex socio-political environment was marked by insurgency, cybercrime, Fulani Bandits, Fulani Herdsmen, Islamic militants (Ansaru and ISWAP -Islamic State's West African Province), Boko-Haram, and organized criminality (Eke & Adeyemi, 2025). This has heightened the imperative to interrogate the role of emerging technologies in enhancing or undermining national security. In fact, technological adoption offers tools for surveillance, intelligence, communication, and threat disruption. However, empirical evidence indicates that Nigeria's security apparatus faces significant technological obstacles that hinder effective responses to security challenges (Eke & Adeyemi, 2025).

The history of criminal investigation efforts started in England and Western Europe in the 1750s. It is a systematic, thorough process of gathering and analyzing evidence to identify and apprehend perpetrators, to uncover the truth, and maintain social control. The criminal investigation proceeds to determine the value of the criminal law, identify the culprit, combine admissible evidence, and work with the prosecutors to bring the case to bear. The police forces are adapted and well-trained for the purpose. Naturally, they are expected to depart from the old-fashioned methods of policing and adopt the scientific contributions to criminal investigation. The investigation of crime is an important aspect of policing (McRory, 2014).

The criminal investigators perform an array of investigative functions. The function includes preventing, detecting, and arresting those responsible for crime. With specialized training in science and technology, every uniformed officer and investigator is expected to have the skills and knowledge to handle investigations into crimes. The skills, according to Gehl & Plecas (2016), include:

- Critical Incident Response
- Interpretation of Criminal Law and offense recognition
- Crime Scene Management
- Evidence Identification and Preservation
- Engaging Forensic tools for evidence analysis
- Witness assessment and interviewing
- Suspect questioning and interrogation
- Case preparation and documentation
- Evidence presentation in court (Gehl & Plecas, 2016; McRory, 2014).

According to Nossen (1995), there are six basic investigative techniques that criminal investigators rely on to investigate violations of criminal law in organized and white-collar crimes. These are (1) development of informants, (2) Undercover agents, (3) Laboratory analysis of physical evidence, (4) Physical and electronic surveillance, (5) Interrogation, and (6) Wiretapping.

In advanced countries, modern and innovative technology in criminal investigation includes Forensic Science- a scientific method of analyzing physical evidence; Digital Forensics- smartphones that recover evidence and track digital activities; Surveillance technologies- body-worn cameras that give visual evidence; Biometric Technologies-Iris scanning that helps identify persons, and Predictive policing- that analyzes potential criminal hotspots and activities.

Others include Digital Data Analysis-data from online activities that uncover evidence; Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning- tools used to identify patterns and predict potential criminals;

and Social Media Monitoring -tools used to track and identify suspects (Saxena & Kumar, 2021; Strom, 2017; Gehl & Plecas, 2016).

The development of technology in crime detection has led to the application of these methods to national security problems. The scientific process can detect substances and determine their presence. The technology enables the discovery, identification, collection, and testing of physical evidence that the human eye or hand cannot access. For example, the use of lasers and alternative light sources, scanning technologies, ballistics testing, gas chromatography, and even devices to measure voice quality and body responses (Morris, 2007; Casey & Schatz, 2011; Strom, 2017).

1.1. Literature Review in Line with the Objectives of the Study

In Nigeria, outdated traditional systems of criminal investigation are still in operation. This includes the eyewitness statement, Victim statement, Intelligence gathering, surveillance, Interrogation and interview, Border patrol, Oral evidence, photography, and crime scene investigation (Osterburg & Ward, 2010; Umeobika & Udegbunam, 2023).

According to Obioha (2019), 58,566 crime cases were reported from Abuja in 2016. Most of such cases were kidnappings. In 2022, the Abuja-Kaduna train was bombed, and 105 passengers were kidnapped and some gruesomely killed (Amnesty International,2025; Igiebor,2024).

The Islamic Insurgents are Fulani Bandits, Fulani Herdsmen, Ansaru, a jihadist militant group called ISWAP (Islamic State's West African Province), and the terrorist group (Boko-Haram). They are the group that poses threats to national security and causes substantial harm to citizens through their criminal activities (Orjinmo, 2021; Obiezu, 2023). They are characterized by a complex interplay of major internal threats to Nigeria's socio-economic development. This explains the rise in criminal activity in Abuja despite the presence of the government and its security architecture (Igiebor, 2024).

They inflict their mayhem through kidnapping and banditry. In 2014, 270 girls were Kidnapped in Chibok; 321 girls in Dapchi (2018);82 killed in Owo Catholic Church(2022); 287 Catholic students Kidnapped in Kuriga (2024); 102 Students abducted in Kajuru and Dogon Noma (2024); 44 People including the pastor were gruesomely killed in Yobe state (2024); 452 Women and Children of Internally displaced Persons (IDPs) hosting many Christians were abducted and killed in Borno state; and 160 people in Niger state were Kidnapped. These are just a few examples from this paper (USCIRF, 2024; Igiebor, 2024; Obioha, 2019).

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has promised the security and social welfare of its citizens as its primary purpose of governance; unfortunately, the national security crisis has had a critical impact on citizens' social grief and psychological pain. Overall, the reviewed literature establishes that technological innovation, digital surveillance, and institutional effectiveness are interconnected determinants of modern criminal investigation and national security management. This study, therefore, builds on existing empirical knowledge by examining how these variables interact within the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

Institutional strategies also influence the successful deployment of technological tools in criminal investigation. Studies emphasize that institutional capacity, training, legislative support, and organizational coordination determine the extent to which technological innovation contributes to national security (World Bank, 2022). Weak regulatory frameworks and inadequate maintenance culture have been identified as major impediments to the sustainable use of technology in Nigeria.

Digital surveillance constitutes another important objective of this study. Research indicates that surveillance technologies, including CCTV systems, geospatial intelligence, and electronic monitoring, enhance situational awareness and enable real-time response to criminal activities. Awotayo et al. (2023) note that ineffective data-sharing mechanisms and poor interoperability among Nigerian security institutions significantly undermine the effectiveness of surveillance.

In Nigeria, however, scholars argue that the adoption of technological innovation within law enforcement agencies remains limited. Olowonihi and Musa (2024) observe that inadequate integration of intelligence technologies and weak inter-agency collaboration undermine effective response

to emerging security threats. The reliance on traditional intelligence sources continues to restrict predictive and preventive security operations.

Empirical studies reveal that modern technological innovations such as digital forensics, biometric identification systems, artificial intelligence, and predictive policing tools have transformed crime detection and intelligence gathering globally (Strom, 2017; Saxena & Kumar, 2021). These technologies improve the reliability of evidence, reduce investigative delays, and enhance the successful prosecution of offenders.

This study examines the relationship between technological innovation, digital surveillance, institutional strategies, and national security crises in Abuja. Existing literature demonstrates that technological innovation plays a significant role in strengthening criminal investigation processes and enhancing national security outcomes.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite significant budgetary allocations to defense and security, Nigeria continues to experience escalating insecurity across its geopolitical zones. Conventional security strategies, characterized by roadblocks, patrols, checkpoints, and reactive military deployments, have proven largely ineffective in addressing complex, networked security threats. The persistence of terrorism, kidnapping, cyber fraud, and arms proliferation suggests a fundamental mismatch between Nigeria's security challenges and the tools deployed to combat them (Alemika, 2021).

One of the central problems confronting FCT, Abuja, is the limited integration of technological innovation into security planning and operations. While criminal and insurgent groups increasingly exploit digital communication platforms, encrypted messaging applications, satellite navigation, and cyber tools, many Nigerian security agencies still depend on manual intelligence processes, fragmented databases, and poorly coordinated information systems. This technological gap undermines intelligence gathering, evidence-based decision-making, and proactive threat prevention (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Furthermore, Nigeria faces serious challenges in cybersecurity and digital infrastructure protection. The country is a major target and source of cybercrime in Africa, with cyber fraud, data breaches, and digital financial crimes posing significant threats to economic and national security. However, institutional capacity for cyber intelligence, digital forensics, and cyber defense remains weak and unevenly distributed across security agencies (UNODC, 2023).

The absence of a comprehensive and integrated national security technology framework has also resulted in duplication of efforts, inter-agency rivalry, and poor utilization of existing technological assets. Surveillance equipment, biometric systems, and communication technologies are often procured without adequate training, maintenance, or interoperability, rendering them ineffective (World Bank, 2022). These challenges raise critical questions about the role, relevance, and effectiveness of technological innovation in strengthening national security in Nigeria, thereby necessitating a systematic academic inquiry into its importance and practical utility.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to critically examine the deficit of modern scientific and technological innovations in criminal investigation and security crisis in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja.

1.3.1. Specific Objectives

The study specifically seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between technological innovation and security in Abuja.

2. Assess the impact of digital surveillance technologies on security crisis management in the FCT.
3. Evaluate the role of institutional strategies in integrating modern investigative technologies for effective crime detection and prosecution.
4. Determine the effectiveness of modern scientific tools in criminal investigation compared to traditional, reactive policing methods.
5. Establish the relevance of Innovation Diffusion Theory in explaining the adoption of modern investigative technologies within Abuja's security system.

1.4. Theoretical Orientation

Within this theoretical orientation, two major theories are identified as the study's conceptual foundation. The first is Social Disorganization Theory, developed by Shaw and McKay, which explains how social instability, weakened community structures, and the breakdown of informal social control can contribute to crime, insecurity, and crisis-related vulnerabilities within communities. The second is Innovation Diffusion Theory, advanced by Rogers, which provides a framework for understanding how new ideas, technologies, and security-related practices are introduced, communicated, adopted, and spread among individuals and organizations. Together, these theories offer a useful basis for examining both the social conditions that shape security challenges and the factors that influence the adoption of technological or institutional responses to such challenges.

1.4.1. Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory arose from the classical Chicago School studies by Shaw and McKay (1942). Their basic aim was to explain why some groups, such as communities and societies, have higher crime rates than others, and therefore to question why some individuals are more likely to commit crimes than others. In urban areas, population density, along with racial and ethnic heterogeneity, produced anonymous relationships. These relations led to increased conflict, leading to a breakdown of shared cultural norms and understandings.

The main drawback of the social disorganization theory of Crime is that it dwelt more on crime causation than on methods to mitigate crime, which is the main thrust of this paper. Despite its limitations, it has contributed to the discourse by enlightening us about factors that lead people to commit crimes.

1.4.2. Innovation Diffusion Theory

The innovation diffusion theory was developed by Rogers in 1995 (Rogers, 1995). Innovation diffusion theory focuses on understanding how, why, and at what rate innovative ideas and technologies spread in a social system (Wani & Ali, 2015). The basic aim of Rogers was to explain change. He sees change as being primarily about the evolution or "reinvention" of products and behaviors so people become better fits for the needs of individuals and groups. Fichman (2000) defines diffusion as the process, usually the spread of ideas from one society to another or from a focus or institution within a society to other parts of that society. Scholars recognized that the Innovation spread rapidly based on five qualities that determine its success. 1. Relative advantage 2. Compatibility, 3. Complexity, 4. Trial ability, and 5. Observability.

The five factors examine how technology adoption influences its application in security crises. Relative advantage refers to whether the proposed security measure is clearly superior to existing practices. Compatibility assesses the extent to which the measure aligns with users' needs, workflows, and existing systems. Complexity focuses on whether the technology is difficult to understand or use. Trialability concerns the ability to test the technology without causing major disruption. Finally, observability addresses whether the technology's benefits are visible to the user or the organization (Rogers, 2003). These attributes shape how quickly and effectively new technologies or

practices are adopted by individuals and organizations. The Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT) is essential in information security because it bridges the gap between technological innovation and human adoption behavior by understanding how innovations spread or fail in organizations (Rogers, 2003). Security is often as much about behavior as it is about technology.

The weakness of the theory lies in its emphasis on innovative measures to control crime without explaining what causes it: there must be crime before it can be controlled. However, it has helped fill the gap left by the social disorganization theory: that is, while social disorganization theory dwelt on the causes of crime without offering measures to control them, Innovation Diffusion theory has filled the gap by furnishing us with measures to mitigate existing crimes.

1.4.3. Theoretical Framework

Having examined the two theories, the Innovation Diffusion theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for the paper. The justification for adopting it as the theoretical framework is that its thesis is more relevant to the investigation of crime, which this discourse focuses on. Thus, from the inferences of Innovation Diffusion theory, one may conclude that the introduction of modern tools of criminal investigation may help deter people from criminal activity.

2. Materials and Methods

The study used both primary and secondary sources in collecting data. The Primary source was collected through Likert scale questionnaires, while the secondary source was from textbooks and online journals. A quantitative descriptive survey research design, employing a correlational approach, examined the relationship between technological innovation, digital surveillance, institutional strategies, and national security crises in Abuja. The purpose was to determine the strength and direction of relationships**.** A random sample of 400 respondents was drawn from law enforcement agencies and youth groups in Abuja. Out of these, 388 were correctly completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 97%, which is considered adequate for statistical analysis and generalization. These were analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC). The major limitation of the research is that most respondents cannot communicate effectively in English. There were ethical considerations for the research, which the Research Ethics Committee of Social Sciences approved. Participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and right to withdraw at any stage. All the data were used solely for research purposes.

2.1. Limitations of the study

Despite the empirical contributions of this study, certain methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied primarily on Likert-scale questionnaires administered to law enforcement officers and youths in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. As with most survey-based research, responses were subject to self-report bias. Participants may have provided socially desirable answers, particularly given the sensitivity of issues relating to national security, institutional performance, and technological capacity. Law enforcement officers, in particular, may have been inclined to portray institutional strategies or technological use in a more favorable light to protect the organization's image. Similarly, youths may have responded based on perceived expectations rather than actual experiences or knowledge. These tendencies may have introduced response distortion, thereby affecting the internal validity of the findings. Although simple random sampling was employed, the study was geographically limited to selected law enforcement agencies in the Jabi District of Abuja. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions of Nigeria where security dynamics, technological infrastructure, and institutional capacities may differ significantly. Furthermore, while 400 questionnaires were distributed, only 388 were retrieved and analyzed. Although the retrieval rate was high (97%), excluding 12 responses may still introduce

minimal non-response bias. Additionally, a focus on specific security agencies may not adequately capture the perspectives of other critical stakeholders, such as intelligence analysts, policymakers, cybersecurity experts, and community-based security actors.

Another limitation relates to measurement validity. Constructs such as "technological innovation," "digital surveillance," "institutional strategies," and "national security crisis" are multidimensional and complex. While these variables were measured using Likert-scale items, the study did not employ advanced psychometric validation techniques, such as factor analysis, to confirm construct validity.

2.2. Test of Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between technological Innovation and National Security Crisis in Abuja (H_0).
2. There is no significant relationship between digital surveillance and the National Security Crisis in Abuja (H_0).
3. There is no significant relationship between Institutional strategies and the national security crisis in Abuja (H_0).

2.3. Data analysis

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (PPMC) was used to analyze the elicited data, using descriptive statistics to test the formulated hypotheses and examine the underlying relationships between the variables. Its application was based on several key assumptions. First, it assumes that the parameter has a normal sampling distribution. Second, it requires that the different groups included in the analysis are randomly selected. Third, it assumes that the groups are independent of one another (Adeleke, 2010).

2.4. Analysis of Demographic Data

The researchers prepared and distributed 400 copies of questionnaires; however, 388 copies were retrieved, constituting 97% proportion of the sample size (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage distribution of respondents by data-generating procedure. Source: Fieldwork (2025).

Respondents	Questionnaire Administered	Percentage	Questionnaire Retrieved	Cumulative Percentage
Police officers	200	50	200	51.55
Defense Officers	75	18.75	70	18.04
Paramilitary Officers	75	18.75	72	18.56
Youths	50	12.5	46	11.85
Total	400	100	388	100.00

The hypotheses were tested using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r). The level of significance was set at 0.05 with 386 degrees of freedom (df = N − 2 = 388 − 2 = 386). At α = 0.05 (two-tailed) and df = 386, the critical r-value is approximately 0.098.

2.4.1. Hypothesis One

H_0: There is no significant relationship between technological innovation and security crisis in Abuja
H_1: There is a significant relationship between technological innovation and security crisis in Abuja.

Statistical Output:

- Sample size (N) = 388
- Degrees of freedom (df) = 386
- r-calculated = 0.44
- r-critical (α = 0.05, two-tailed) = 0.098
- p-value < 0.001

Since the computed r-value (0.44) is greater than the critical value (0.098), the null hypothesis is rejected. The alternative hypothesis was accepted.

There is a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between technological innovation and security crisis in Abuja (r = 0.44, df = 386, p < 0.001). The result indicates that technological innovation significantly influences security outcomes in Abuja. The moderate positive correlation indicates that as technological tools like forensic science, artificial intelligence, biometric systems, and digital analytics improve, they tend to enhance how we manage national security. This finding supports the Innovation Diffusion Theory, which posits that the adoption of innovative technologies enhances organizational effectiveness. The implication is that technological modernization in criminal investigation strengthens intelligence gathering, crime detection, and the efficiency of prosecution.

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2.4.2. Hypothesis Two

H_0: There is no significant relationship between technological innovation and security crisis in Abuja

H_1: There is a significant relationship between digital surveillance and the security crisis in Abuja.

Statistical Output:

- Sample size (N) = 388
- Degrees of freedom (df) = 386
- r-calculated = 0.84
- r-critical (α = 0.05, two-tailed) = 0.098
- p-value < 0.001

Since the computed r-value (0.84) is greater than the critical value (0.098), the null hypothesis is rejected. The alternative hypothesis was accepted.

There is a statistically significant, strong positive relationship between digital surveillance and security crisis in Abuja (r = .84, df = 386, p < .001). The strong positive correlation demonstrates that digital surveillance plays a crucial role in strengthening national security. Tools such as CCTV systems, body-worn cameras, geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), and electronic monitoring systems significantly enhance crime detection and prevention. The strength of the relationship (r = .84) suggests that digital surveillance is one of the most influential technological mechanisms in modern criminal investigation. This finding aligns with empirical literature emphasizing the centrality of surveillance technologies in counterterrorism and anti-banditry operations.

2.4.3. Hypothesis Three

H_0: There is no significant relationship between technological innovation and security crisis in Abuja

H_1: There is a significant relationship between institutional strategies and security crisis in Abuja.

Statistical Output
- Sample size (N) = 388
- Degrees of freedom (df) = 386
- r-calculated = 0.76
- r-critical (α = 0.05, two-tailed) = 0.098
- p-value < 0.001

Since the computed r-value (0.76) is greater than the critical value (0.098), the null hypothesis is rejected. The alternative hypothesis was accepted. There is a statistically significant, strong positive relationship between institutional strategies and security crisis in Abuja (r = .76, df = 386, p < .001). The result indicates that institutional strategies significantly relate to national security outcomes. This suggests that inter-agency cooperation, policy harmonization, training, intelligence coordination, and legislative frameworks are critical determinants of effective security administration. Institutional modernization complements technological innovation, reinforcing the argument that national security reform must combine both structural and technological advancements.

2.4.4. The Clarifications of Variable Measurement

The methodological clarification shows that the variables were measured, structured, coded, and tested for reliability using the study design: a Likert questionnaire (n = 388) and Pearson correlation analysis. First, the Independent Variable (Technological Innovation) was measured using a 10-item Likert-scale instrument. Examples of the Items include:

- "The use of forensic technology improves criminal investigations in Abuja."
- "Artificial intelligence enhances crime prediction and detection."
- "Biometric identification systems improve suspect identification."
- "Digital forensic tools increase prosecution success rates."
- "Modern investigative technologies reduce investigative errors."

The responses were summed to generate a composite score. Higher scores indicate greater perceived effectiveness of technological innovation in criminal investigation. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) = 0.82. This indicates good internal consistency.

Second, the Independent Variable (Digital Surveillance) was measured using an 8-item Likert-scale instrument. Examples of the Items include:

- "CCTV cameras improve crime monitoring in Abuja."
- "Electronic surveillance enhances intelligence gathering."
- "Geospatial tracking improves law enforcement response time."
- "Social media monitoring assists in detecting criminal networks."
- "Digital communication interception strengthens security."

Responses were summed to produce a total digital surveillance score. Higher scores reflect a stronger perceived impact of digital surveillance on national security. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) = 0.86. This demonstrates high internal reliability.

Third, from the Independent Variable (Institutional Strategies), the institutional strategies were measured using a 7-item Likert-scale instrument. Examples of the Items include:

- "There is effective inter-agency collaboration in security operations."
- "Security agencies receive adequate technological training."
- "There is a clear national framework for technology integration."
- "Security agencies share intelligence databases effectively."
- "Institutional policies support digital security innovation."

Responses were summed into a composite institutional strategy score. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) = 0.79. This indicates acceptable reliability.

Four, from the Dependent Variable (Security Crisis), the Security Crisis scale was constructed using a 9-item Likert-scale instrument. Examples of the Items include:

- "Kidnapping incidents have increased in Abuja."
- "Terrorist activities pose serious threats to national stability."
- "Cybercrime threatens Nigeria's security."
- "Banditry contributes to public fear and instability."
- "Security agencies struggle to prevent organized crime."

The Coding Procedure is as follows:

- All items were positively worded toward crisis severity.
- Scores were summed to generate a composite crisis index.
- Higher scores indicate greater perceived security crisis.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) = 0.88. This indicates strong internal consistency.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings indicate statistically significant positive relationships between the independent variables and the Security Crisis in Abuja. The Pearson correlation coefficient between technological innovation and Security Crisis is 0.44, indicating a moderate positive relationship. In practical terms, r = 0.44 means that higher levels of technological innovation reported by respondents were associated with greater perceived effectiveness in addressing security challenges. The relationship is neither weak nor extremely strong; rather, it reflects a meaningful but moderate degree of association.

The correlation between digital surveillance and Security Crisis reflects a very strong positive relationship: higher reported levels of digital surveillance correspond to higher perceived national security effectiveness among respondents. The strength of this association suggests that, statistically, digital surveillance is strongly linked to national security indicators within the sampled population. Importantly, these findings demonstrate association, not causation. The results show that the variables move together in a consistent pattern. Other unmeasured variables, such as institutional capacity, political will, funding allocation, inter-agency coordination, or socio-economic conditions, may also contribute to the observed relationships.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed that the adoption of modern investigative technologies meaningfully strengthens Abuja's security architecture. This result strongly supports Rogers' (2003) Innovation Diffusion Theory, which posits that the adoption of innovative tools within a social system depends on perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability.

In terms of relative advantage, respondents perceived technological innovations (e.g., forensic tools, AI, digital analytics) as superior to traditional manual investigative methods. This aligns with Rogers' argument that innovations diffuse more quickly when users perceive them as superior to existing practices. In terms of compatibility, the findings indicate that technological tools are increasingly compatible with modern security demands, particularly in urban centers like Abuja, where technology is increasingly facilitating crime. In observability, the visible successes of forensic science, digital tracking, and predictive policing in other jurisdictions likely influence acceptance within Nigerian security institutions, and in trialability, the security agencies can pilot surveillance tools in specific districts before scaling implementation.

There is a statistically significant relationship between modern technological tools and national security outcomes in Abuja. Traditional, reactive, and analog security methods were found to be structurally weak and insufficient in addressing contemporary security threats. Overreliance on out-

dated investigative methods has contributed to blind spots in intelligence gathering and delayed response to terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and insurgency. Modern scientific technologies enhance evidence detection and preservation, crime pattern analysis, intelligence coordination, and the successful prosecution of offenders. There is heavy dependence on human intelligence (HUMINT), manual data systems, and reactive patrol strategies.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated empirically that technological innovation and digital surveillance are significantly related to security outcomes in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The findings confirm that the persistent security crisis in Nigeria is not merely a function of crime causation factors but is deeply connected to institutional and technological deficiencies within the country's criminal investigation architecture. The positive correlation established between technological innovation, digital surveillance, and security underscores the urgent need to reposition modern scientific methods in contemporary criminal investigations in Nigeria.

The importance of this study lies in its empirical validation of the Innovation Diffusion Theory within the Nigerian security context. By statistically establishing the relevance of modern investigative technologies, the study moves beyond theoretical assumptions. It provides measurable evidence that technological adoption is not optional but essential for effective security governance. It therefore contributes to criminological scholarship by bridging the gap between theories of crime causation and practical crime-control mechanisms in developing states.

Furthermore, this research expands the discourse on security in Nigeria by shifting attention from purely military and reactive strategies to intelligence-driven, technology-oriented investigative frameworks. In a security environment increasingly characterized by terrorism, cybercrime, kidnapping, insurgency, and transnational organized crime, reliance on analog and manpower-intensive methods is insufficient. The study reinforces the argument that modern security challenges require predictive analytics, digital forensics, biometric systems, artificial intelligence tools, integrated surveillance networks, and interoperable intelligence databases.

In conclusion, strengthening Nigeria's security architecture requires more than reactive deployment of security personnel; it demands a systemic transformation anchored in scientific innovation, institutional collaboration, ethical governance, and sustainable technological integration. By empirically establishing the nexus between modern investigative technology and security, this study contributes meaningfully to contemporary research on security governance. It offers a strategic pathway toward mitigating the security crisis in FCT, Abuja.

5. Recommendation

The paper therefore recommends as follows:

First, Nigeria's security agencies should provide a research foundation for future empirical investigations into the technology adoption of specific technological tools in criminal investigations. Second, there is an urgent need for security-sector reforms by Policymakers, legislators, and institutional heads. This could justify an increased budget allocation for technological infrastructure, cybersecurity frameworks, capacity building, and inter-agency digital harmonization. Moreover, third, policymakers should note that effective investigation enhances prosecution, deters crime, restores public confidence in law enforcement, reduces fear, and strengthens democratic governance. In this sense, technology-driven criminal investigation is not only a security imperative but also a developmental necessity.

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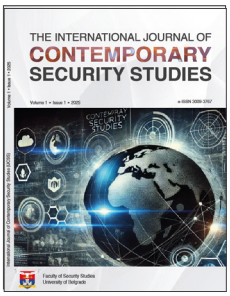
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The Clash Between AI-Driven Education and Traditional Learning in Bangladesh: A Mixed-Methods Study of Academic Integrity and Educational Security in Sherpur Sadar Upazila

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the clash between AI-driven and traditional education systems and its implications for inclusive educational outcomes in Bangladesh, using evidence from Sherpur Sadar Upazila. A convergent mixed-methods design was applied, integrating a student survey (N = 209) conducted across seven institutions with qualitative data collected from 32 stakeholders through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The empirical findings capture a critical period of educational transition, revealing significant tension between emerging AI-based learning practices and established pedagogical frameworks. Notably, 85.7% of the sampled rural institutions, or six out of seven, lacked student-level internet access, indicating a major infrastructural barrier to inclusive AI integration. The findings suggest that while AI-driven tools offer potential for personalized learning, their implementation is constrained by structural inequalities, institutional resistance, and uneven digital access. Data collected between February and October, 2025, indicate that this clash is rooted in divergent perceptions of instructional authority, technological readiness, and digital equity. By synthesizing stakeholder perspectives with quantitative survey results, the study provides a localized yet analytically scalable account of how AI-driven disruption challenges traditional educational delivery in developing contexts. The study concludes that achieving inclusive educational outcomes requires not only technological adoption but also targeted infrastructural investment, institutional adaptation, and policy support.

KEYWORDS

AI-Driven Education, Traditional Education System, Inclusive Educational Outcomes, Mixed-Methods Research, Bangladesh Pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Bangladesh's educational landscape has sparked a multifaceted academic discourse, highlighting a sharp contrast between technological advantages and systemic drawbacks (Tarannum et al., 2025). While educators recognize that tools like ChatGPT can streamline instruction and increase student engagement, significant concerns remain regarding the minimal effort required to produce results and the potential for misleading references (Rahman et al., 2025; Hasib & Islam, 2025).

Consequently, the transition is framed as a struggle to strike a sustainable balance between traditional learning principles and unavoidable technological breakthroughs (Islam et al., 2024). Institutional readiness is a critical barrier to this transition, as many teachers lack the professional training needed to use AI tools with confidence (Islam, 2024). At the same time, recent studies have highlighted varied opinions among instructors at national public universities (Ferdous et al., 2025; Huda & Khanum, 2025). There remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics play out in rural regional contexts like Sherpur. Furthermore, while e-learning is gaining popularity due to the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional methods, the introduction of AI has exacerbated concerns regarding academic integrity and the preservation of local values (Bhuiyan, 2022; Islam et al., 2024). The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) presents a paradox for Bangladesh. At the same time, the national strategy aims to embed AI in education to nurture a skilled workforce; the transition threatens job security and creates a gap between technical and ethical instruction (Pal & Sarker, 2023; ICT Division, 2024; UNDP & UNESCO, 2025).

Despite government mandates to update university syllabi, logistical hurdles such as high costs and technical "Concentration" issues continue to impede progress (Ministry of Education, 2023; Tahura et al., 2025). In this context, individualized support based on cognitive needs is essential, yet traditional education is still prioritized for its perceived benefits to student participation and mental health (Chanda et al., 2025; Jabin, 2025). This study aims to investigate the specific "Clash" between traditional systems and AI-driven pedagogy in Sherpur, Bangladesh, by employing a convergent mixed-methods design. By triangulating data from 209 students and 32 stakeholders, the research identifies how infrastructural gaps and policy failures affect digital equity. Thematic interpretation, guided by the "Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework", allows for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, although the study is limited by its regional focus and potential researcher subjectivity. Ultimately, this research recommends a balanced paradigm in which AI supplements, rather than replaces, human instruction, ensuring that future digital literacy remains culturally relevant and ethically grounded (Karmaker, 2025; Karmaker, 2026; Talukder & bin Ahsan, 2025). In this study, educational security refers to the protection of the integrity, fairness, accessibility, and ethical functioning of the educational process amid AI-driven transformation. From this perspective, the clash between AI-driven education and traditional learning is not only a pedagogical issue but also a question of academic integrity, digital equity, institutional preparedness, and the secure development of inclusive education.

2. Research Problem and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Research Problem

Although students in Bangladesh are rapidly adopting AI tools, the country's educational system remains heavily based on traditional assessment methods that are susceptible to AI-assisted plagiarism. The main issue stems from a threefold mismatch:

- Pedagogical Mismatch: AI promotes inquiry-based, personalized learning, yet the local system continues to prioritize the memorization and reproduction of content.
- Infrastructural Mismatch: While administrative offices across most institutions are connected, there is a significant lack of student-facing infrastructure. Our field research in Sherpur Sadar Upazila found that 85.7% (6 out of 7) of sampled institutions do not provide internet access

for students, with only one college offering limited connectivity restricted to certain departments. This prevents the majority of students from engaging with the AI-driven pedagogical changes.

- Institutional Mismatch: Most educators in Bangladesh have received minimal to no training on how to incorporate AI into their teaching, resulting in a culture of "fear and prohibition" instead of "guidance and integration."

As a result, AI may not enhance education in Bangladesh and could instead compromise academic integrity and deepen social inequalities.

2.2. Research questions

Given the exploratory and mixed-methods nature of this study, the original hypotheses are reformulated as research questions. This approach is more appropriate because the study does not rely on advanced statistical tests of causal relationships; instead, it combines survey data with qualitative stakeholder perspectives.

- RQ1: How does the use of AI-driven tools affect students' learning practices within a traditional, rote-learning-based educational system?
- RQ2: How do infrastructural limitations influence equal access to AI-driven education in Sherpur Sadar Upazila?
- RQ3: How does the lack of teacher training shape educators' resistance to AI integration?
- RQ4: How can academic integrity and educational security be strengthened in the context of AI-driven education?

These research questions guide the analysis of the pedagogical, infrastructural, institutional, and ethical dimensions of the clash between AI-driven education and traditional learning in Bangladesh.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a dual theoretical perspective to examine the evolution of the Bangladeshi education system. It begins with Constructivist Learning Theory, which establishes the traditional baseline by highlighting the importance of teacher-led facilitation and social interaction in classroom settings. Moving beyond this, the analysis incorporates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to scrutinize the recent AI-driven transformation, focusing on perceptions of usefulness and ease of use among both students and faculty. Additionally, the concept of the Digital Divide is introduced to contextualize the socio-economic disparities that influence educational access, particularly contrasting urban and rural regions in Bangladesh. Educational security is used in this study as an analytical concept to capture the protection of academic integrity, fair access to digital learning opportunities, ethical use of AI, and institutional responsibility in the educational process. In this sense, educational security connects the pedagogical clash between AI-driven education and traditional learning to broader concerns about digital equity, academic honesty, institutional preparedness, and the responsible integration of AI in education (Gajović & Cvetković, 2026; Karmaker & Cvetković, 2025; Cvetković & Šišović, 2024; Cvetković et al., 2017; Gajović et al., 2025; Dada, Mohammed, & Quadir, 2025; Dada, Mohammed, Mallam, & Ajayi, 2025; Onimisi, 2025; Metić, 2025; Miletić & Stojanović, 2025).

3. Literature Review

AI has been part of the Bangladeshi education system, spurring conflict with traditional education. Tarannum et al. 2025) explained that while educators emphasize the numerous advantages of employing AI, significant drawbacks remain. Supporting this, Rahman et al. (2025) opined that both teachers and students agree that they benefit from ChatGPT because it requires minimal effort

to produce results. Much of the current research focuses on higher education institutions in urban centers (Huda & Khanum, 2025); however, this study shifts the focus to the grassroots level in Sherpur to examine the 'Clash' in local institutional settings. Furthermore, Saleh et al. (2025) explained that most academics investigate emerging technologies to streamline instruction and increase student engagement; even those favoring traditional pedagogical approaches acknowledge the need to strengthen their technological competencies to adapt to contemporary educational demands. Institutional readiness remains a critical theme in recent scholarship.

Islam (2024) highlighted a significant need for institutional support and professional training to increase teachers' confidence in AI tools and to pinpoint factors that either facilitate or impede AI adoption. Similarly, Islam et al. (2024) emphasized the crucial need to balance traditional learning principles with digital outcomes to ensure Bangladesh's educational future is inclusive and sustainable. On the student side, Hasib & Islam (2025) noted that students find ChatGPT effective and helpful both in and out of the classroom, despite drawbacks such as misleading references and prewritten evaluations. The shift toward digital literacy and e-learning is also well-documented. Munni and Rafique (2023) examined the experiences of Bangladeshi English instructors with AI tools in collegiate settings, while Howlader et al. (2025) showed that ChatGPT's ability to respond immediately to student inquiries makes it a potentially transformational tool. However, its impact on university students remains debatable. Karmaker (2025) demonstrated how digital literacy can be a potent asset when paired with accessible infrastructure and culturally relevant programming.

Additionally, Sakib & Modina (2025) explained that, following the introduction of ChatGPT, Bangladesh has seen a significant increase in chatbot integration across tertiary academic and administrative processes. Refining language skills through technology is a key benefit cited by Al Mahadi (2025), who demonstrated how digital resources, such as interactive software, improve students' learning experiences. However, Islam et al. (2024) presented EFL teachers' perspectives that raise concerns regarding academic integrity and pedagogy. Disciplinary disparities also play a role; Ferdous et al. (2025) shed light on how generational differences affect technology adoption. This transition is framed by (Bhuiyan, 2022), who opined that e-learning is becoming more popular due to the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional methods, a sentiment echoed by Mojumder et al. (2025), who found subtle dynamics in students' experiences as they moved from online learning back to face-to-face study following the pandemic. Looking toward future frameworks, Karmaker (2026) intended to promote the ethical use of ChatGPT and AI literacy to empower academic communities. Talukder and bin Ahsan (2025) called for a balanced approach in which AI supplements rather than replaces traditional learning, and Tamanna & Sinha (2025) focused on safeguards to protect academic integrity. Identifying logistical hurdles, Tahura et al. (2025) identified "Concentration" and "Technological Issues" as major issues in online learning, while "Cost and Time" and "Flexibility" were critical in offline settings, and subsequently proposed a scalable paradigm fusing the adaptability of online platforms with the immersive advantages of offline learning.

The human element of this transition is explored by Bangulzai et al. (2025), who examined how emotional preparedness and digital fluency affect instructors' readiness to use AI. Amiri et al. (2025) explained that AI represents a radical change that prepares students for future unpredictability, while Chanda et al. (2025) noted that AI transforms higher education by providing individualized support based on cognitive needs. Despite this growth, Castro et al. (2025) explained that the emphasis has remained on traditional students, even as AI research has risen. Concerns regarding the displacement of traditional roles persist. Hasan et al. (2025) found that most teachers worry that students will use AI to circumvent conventional methods. To mitigate this, Hossain & Younus (2025) argued that schools can foster an environment in which AI is seen as an asset by boosting instructor competency. Karataş et al. (2025) demonstrated how generative AI tools such as ChatGPT can enhance curricular adaptation, yet Jabin (2025) opined that traditional education better ensures student participation and mental health.

According to Lee and Uddin (as cited in UNDP, 2025), institutional adaptations are required to integrate AI while preserving local values. This aligns with the UNDP (2025) report, which highlights that Bangladesh's national strategy aims to prepare students for a global tech economy. The ICT Division (2024) stated in the National Artificial Intelligence Policy (Draft) that a primary objec-

tive is to "nurture a skilled workforce... through embedding AI in education" (p. 5). However, Pal & Sarker (2023) indicated that the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has exacerbated unemployment, creating a paradox for an education system tasked with preparing students for a future that threatens job security. While the Ministry of Education (2023) reports that the UGC has mandated syllabus updates for 159 universities (p. 45), a disconnect remains. (United Nations Development Program and UNESCO, 2025) noted a gap between technical and ethical AI teaching, and (Vashishth et al., 2025) opined that while AI is revolutionary, it fundamentally changes the traditional educational experience in Bangladesh.

4. Policy and Digital Education Context in Bangladesh

This section presents secondary national and institutional data on AI adoption, student perceptions, institutional readiness, and the strategic and economic landscape of AI integration in Bangladesh. These data provide the broader policy and digital education context for interpreting the empirical findings from the Sherpur Sadar Upazila study area. They are not presented as original field findings of this study.

Table 1 illustrates a profound shift in Bangladesh's educational and economic landscape, characterized by a rapid transition from foundational digital literacy to a specialized, AI-driven "Smart Education" framework. This evolution, however, reveals a significant implementation "clash" across three critical dimensions. First, the economic-educational paradox of 2023, as highlighted by a2i research, establishes the national urgency for this shift; with 40% of the workforce (approximately 5.5 million people) facing displacement risks due to Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) automation, the curriculum overhaul is a defensive economic necessity rather than a mere pedagogical choice.

Table 1. Evolution of AI Adoption & Integration (2023–2025).

Year	Milestone / Metric Description	Key Data / Percentage	Key Evidence
2023	Initial Digital Strategy	40% of Workforce	a2i identified that 40% of the workforce (approx. 5.5 million people) face acute "jobless problems" due to 4IR automation.
2024	Student Adoption Peak	88% of Users	Rapid integration of AI into daily digital life among students for content creation and academic assistance.
2025	Government Readiness	62% of Users	The National AI Readiness (RAM) Report confirms 62% of mobile users now utilize AI specifically for online learning.
2025	Urban-Rural Divide	12.0% Gap	BBS data show that smartphone ownership (a key AI enabler) is 80.8% in urban areas vs. 68.8% in rural areas.

Sources: a2i (2023). Future Skills: Finding Emerging Skills to Tackle the Challenges of Automation in Bangladesh. ICT Division. Telenor Asia (2025). Digital Lives Decoded 2025: Building Trust in Bangladesh's AI Future. UNDP & UNESCO (2025). Bangladesh Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment (RAM) Report. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2025). ICT Access and Use Survey 2025 (1st Quarter).

Second, the data indicate a readiness lag between bottom-up adoption and top-down policy. While 88% of higher education students had integrated AI into their daily academic workflows by 2024, the 2025 National AI Readiness (RAM) Report shows that official government readiness and structured mobile learning stand at only 62%. This discrepancy suggests that students are navigating the "clash" through unguided experimentation, often outpacing institutional frameworks. Finally, the infrastructure barrier remains the most significant hurdle to equitable AI integration. The 12.0% Urban-Rural gap in smartphone ownership—revealed by the 2025 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data—proves that the "Smart Bangladesh" vision faces a geographical "clash." Without addressing the disparity between urban hubs (80.8% access) and rural regions (68.8% access), the

transition to AI-driven education risks exacerbating existing social inequalities rather than fostering inclusive growth.

Table 2 highlights a complex cognitive duality among Bangladeshi higher education students as they transition into an AI-augmented academic environment. This transition is primarily motivated by economic pragmatism, as evidenced by the 58.0% of students reporting "Early Career Anxiety" in 2024. This finding suggests that student adoption is not merely a pursuit of convenience but rather a strategic response to a labor market increasingly dominated by the requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Consequently, by 2025, generative AI (GenAI) has become a staple of academic productivity, with 65.0% of students leveraging these tools to synthesize complex literature and optimize examination readiness.

Table 2. Student Perception and Impact on Learning (2024–2025).

Year	Description	Percentage (%)	Key Evidence
2024	Early Career Anxiety	58.0%	Students report feeling unprepared for the AI-driven labor market and a lack of job security.
2025	Academic Performance	65.0%	Students use GenAI to summarize complex literature and streamline exam preparation.
2025	Interest in Tech-Pillars	59.0%	High student engagement reported with personalized AI-driven tutoring and skills platforms.
2025	Instructional Accuracy	42.0%	Students encountered "hallucinations" or factual errors in AI-generated academic content.

Sources: Institute of Informatics and Development (IID). (2025). Generative AI in education: Current state, future directions, and implications in Bangladesh. Presented at the CIES 2025 Annual Conference. Telenor Asia. (2025). Digital lives decoded 2025: Building trust in Bangladesh's AI future. (Data commissioned via GWI survey).

However, this rapid integration has introduced significant pedagogical friction, most notably in Instructional Accuracy. Despite high interest in "Tech-Pillars" like personalized tutoring (59.0%), a substantial 42.0% of students encountered "hallucinations" or factual inaccuracies in AI-generated content. This "accuracy gap" represents a critical juncture in the "clash" between traditional academic rigor and AI-assisted speed. For researchers and policymakers, these findings indicate that while AI significantly lowers the barrier to accessing information, it simultaneously increases the burden of critical verification on learners. Without institutional frameworks to address these errors, the current "Smart Education" model risks rewarding efficiency at the cost of factual integrity, potentially widening the gap between technologically proficient students and those with traditional analytical skills.

Table 3 identifies a critical structural "clash" within Bangladeshi higher education: the disparity between individual tool adoption and institutional governance. While the 80.0% "Teacher Workload Shift" indicates that educators are independently leveraging AI to optimize administrative efficiency—primarily for lesson planning and linguistic verification—this adoption is largely occurring in a vacuum. A staggering 87.0% "Faculty Training Gap" reveals that the vast majority of educators have not received formal pedagogical guidance from their institutions. This lack of structured training likely fuels the 60.0% Pedagogical Resistance observed among faculty, who express significant concern that unregulated AI use will erode students' foundational critical-thinking and creative capacities.

Table 3. Institutional Readiness and Barrier Analysis (2025).

Year	Description	Percentage (%)	Key Evidence
2025	Faculty Training Gap	87.0%	Educators reported receiving no formal institutional training or guidance on AI pedagogy.
2025	Institutional Strategy	50.0%	Only half of surveyed workplaces/universities have a formal AI policy or code of ethics.
2025	Teacher Workload Shift	80.0%	4 out of 5 educators use AI to save time on lesson planning and grammar checks.
2025	Pedagogical Resistance	60.0%	Faculty fear student over-reliance on AI will erode critical thinking and creativity.

Sources: Institute of Informatics and Development (IID). (2025). Generative AI in Education: Current State, Future Directions, and Implications in Bangladesh. UNESCO & UNDP. (2025). Bangladesh Artificial Intelligence Readiness Assessment (RAM) Report.

Furthermore, the 50.0% deficit in Institutional Strategy underscores a governance crisis. With only half of the surveyed universities and workplaces maintaining a formal AI policy or code of ethics, a "policy vacuum" has emerged. According to the UNESCO & UNDP (2025) and IID (2025) reports, this absence of a high-level framework forces educators to navigate complex ethical dilemmas—such as academic integrity and data privacy—without institutional support. Consequently, the "clash" in the Bangladeshi context is defined by a paradox: technology is ubiquitous in individuals' hands, yet institutional frameworks remain static, leading to a fragmented and high-risk educational transition.

Table 4 delineates the strategic urgency and the underlying systemic challenges of Bangladesh's transition toward an AI-integrated economy. The "clash" is first identified as an economic imperative; with a2i (2023) reporting that 40% of the workforce faces displacement due to 4IR automation, the government's response has been one of radical institutional standardization. This is evidenced by the University Grants Commission (UGC) 2024 mandate, which requires 100% of the nation's 159 universities to align their curricula with international ITEE standards. This move signifies a total departure from traditional academic autonomy in favor of a unified, "market-ready" technical education system.

Table 4. Strategic and Economic Landscape of AI (2023–2025).

Year	Description	Percentage / Metric	Key Evidence
2023	Economic Impact (4IR)	40% of Workforce	a2i research identified that approximately 5.5 million workers in five key sectors face displacement risk due to automation.
2024	Standardization Goal	100% of Universities	The UGC mandated that all 159 public and private universities align their ICT curricula with international ITEE standards.
2025	Government Readiness	62% of Users	The National RAM Report confirms that 62% of mobile internet users use AI-driven tools specifically for educational purposes.
2025	Digital Divide Gap	12.0% Gap	BBS data reveal a gap in smartphone ownership between urban (80.8%) and rural (68.8%) areas, affecting access to AI tools.

Source: a2i Program. (2023). Future skills: Finding emerging skills to tackle the challenges of automation in Bangladesh. ICT Division, Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology. https://a2i.gov.bd/publication/future-skills-report/, University Grants Commission of Bangladesh. (2024). Standard syllabus guidelines for computer science and engineering (CSE/IT) based on ITEE standards. http://www.ugc.gov.bd/, ICT Division, UNESCO, & United Nations Development Programme. (2025). Bangladesh Artificial

Intelligence Readiness Assessment (RAM) report. UNDP Bangladesh. https://ictd.portal.gov.bd/, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2025). Quarterly report on ICT access and use survey 2025-26 (1st Quarter). Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning. https://bbs.gov.bd/, Telenor Asia. (2025). Digital lives decoded 2025: Building trust in Bangladesh's AI future. https://www.telenorasia.com/digitallivesdecoded/bangladesh/

However, implementing this vision faces a significant readiness-equity paradox. While the 2025 National RAM Report indicates high individual engagement—with 62% of mobile internet users utilizing AI for educational purposes—the structural "clash" is exacerbated by a persistent 12.0% Digital Divide. According to BBS (2025) data, the disparity in smartphone ownership between urban centers (80.8%) and rural regions (68.8%) is a critical barrier to the democratization of AI tools. For a Q1/Q2 journal analysis, these findings suggest that while policy mandates are uniform across universities (100%), the capacity to realize these goals is unevenly distributed. This creates a risk where the "Smart Bangladesh" transition may inadvertently consolidate economic power in urban tech hubs while leaving rural workforces vulnerable to the very automation risks identified in 2023.

Table 5 illustrates a transformative period in the Bangladeshi educational sector, shifting from an era of "Minimal Integration" in 2019 to a "High Adoption" phase by 2024. Three distinct waves of technological assimilation define this trajectory. The first wave (2019–2020) shows a modest increase from 5–10% to 15–20%, largely catalyzed by the emergency transition to remote learning during the global pandemic, which forced institutions to move beyond traditional "Multimedia Classrooms" toward integrated digital platforms. The second wave (2021–2022) reflects a surge to 40–50% adoption, as the focus shifted from simple connectivity to personalized learning systems and automated administrative processing, aligning with the concluding milestones of the Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021.

Table 5. AI integration in educational institutions 2019-2024.

Year	Percentage of Educational Institutions Using AI Tools	Notes
2019	5-10%	AI integration was minimal; most institutions were not using AI tools.
2020	15-20%	Some universities and educational platforms started using AI tools.
2021	30-35%	AI applications like personalized learning and tutoring systems began to grow.
2022	40-50%	More widespread use of AI in institutions for administrative tasks and personalized learning.
2023	55-60%	Continued expansion of AI in education, including automated grading and AI-based content delivery
2024	65-70%	High adoption of AI-driven tools for teaching, learning, and administrative processes

Sources: Bangladesh Ministry of Education (2019-2024), UNESCO (2020-2024), Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021 and 2041 (Government of Bangladesh), Higher Education Institutions' Annual Reports (2019-2024)

The final wave (2023–2024) represents the most aggressive growth, reaching an estimated 65–70% institutional engagement. This peak is inextricably linked to the government's Smart Bangladesh 2041 roadmap, which shifted the pedagogical focus toward automated grading, AI-based content delivery, and 4IR readiness. However, for academic inquiry, this "High Adoption" metric highlights the core "clash" investigated in this study: the tension between the rapid pace of integrating technical tools and the slower pace of faculty training and ethical policy development. While the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Institutions' Annual Reports confirm the presence of these tools, the disparity between institutional availability (70%) and formal pedagogical training (as seen in Table 3) suggests that the adoption is currently "tool-centric" rather than "educator-led."

5. Methods

5.1. Study Area and Participants

The study was conducted in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, Bangladesh (25°00′ 0.00″ N, 90°01′ 0.12″ E), encompassing both urban and rural areas. This diverse setting enabled a comparative analysis of the Clash between traditional learning and AI-driven educational interventions across socio-economic groups. To capture the multi-dimensional nature of AI integration, a convergent mixed-methods design integrated a student survey (N = 209) from seven local institutions in Sherpur Sadar Upazila with qualitative data from 32 diverse stakeholders. These stakeholders included teachers from the sampled institutions, regional administrative officials, and university-level educational experts, providing a comprehensive view of the national-local pedagogical clash.

Between February 22 and October 26, 2025, respondents were recruited from seven urban and rural institutions through purposive sampling to ensure representation of multiple communities across five phases. Participants were selected through non-probability convenience sampling using a group-administered survey. To ensure data integrity, participants were provided with physical copies of the questionnaire and instructed to complete them independently and anonymously. This method was chosen to maximize the response rate and ensure that researchers were available to clarify any linguistic ambiguities during the session. All data collection took place in person at designated computer labs and training centers to maintain technical consistency. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (Approval No.: NAMC/01-02-24.00.04.00037), and all participants provided written informed consent prior to the study, with the IRB ensuring voluntary participation and data anonymity. The following protections were strictly enforced: all data were strictly anonymized at the point of collection, with no institutional or participant identifiers recorded. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no compensation was provided to avoid coercion. Audio recordings and survey responses were stored on encrypted servers with access restricted to the research team. The protocol also included specific authorizations to ensure accessibility accommodations for participants with disabilities.

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5.2. Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design that integrated a student survey (N = 209) from seven local institutions in Sherpur Sadar Upazila with qualitative data from 32 diverse stakeholders. These stakeholders included teachers from the sampled institutions, regional administrative officials, and university-level educational experts, providing a comprehensive view of the national-local pedagogical clash. This approach was chosen to triangulate statistical trends with lived experiences, providing a comprehensive view of how policy gaps, infrastructure barriers, and socio-economic factors affect digital equity.

5.3. Measurements and Procedures

Data collection was standardized at three sites: an urban computer training center, an urban school lab, and a rural college digital center. To ensure reliability and replicability, all participants used identical workstation configurations (Intel i3, 8GB RAM, Windows 10). The primary instrument was a 30-item survey (including 11 Likert-scale questions). Validity and reliability were established by adapting items from established digital equity frameworks and conducting a pilot test with 10 respondents (n=10) to ensure linguistic and conceptual clarity. Qualitative data were gathered through 17 semi-structured interviews and 15 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) using a standardized protocol of five core prompts. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated from Bangla to English for thematic analysis.

5.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 365. Analysis focused on Descriptive Statistical Profiling, calculating frequencies, percentages, weighted means, and standard deviations (SD). These metrics were used to identify the intersections between AI-driven education, traditional systems, government policies, and infrastructural gaps. Qualitative data were analyzed using manual thematic coding following the Braun & Clarke (2006) framework. The thematic interpretation was then integrated with the quantitative results to triangulate the findings.

5.5. Use of Secondary Contextual Data

To support the interpretation of the primary findings, this study also incorporates secondary contextual data from national and international reports on AI adoption, student perceptions, institutional readiness, and the strategic and economic landscape of AI integration in Bangladesh. These data were obtained from sources such as a2i, Telenor Asia, UNDP, UNESCO, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the ICT Division, and related policy documents. The secondary data are used only to provide the broader policy and digital education context for the Sherpur Sadar Upazila study area. They are not presented as original field findings of this study.

6. Results

This diagram serves as the empirical core for evaluating the ideological and operational friction between two competing educational paradigms: AI-Driven Education and the Traditional Education System. The points below explain the significance of the figure and the data it presents. It showcases the divergence of viewpoints regarding the structural "clash" that arises when algorithmic, AI-driven methods are integrated into longstanding academic frameworks. The data is temporally reliable, originating from a study conducted between February 22 and October 26, 2025. This period is important because it captures how respondents' perceptions evolved rapidly during a year marked by intense AI integration in global education. Additionally, the figure provides an empirical basis by categorizing "surveying facts" that differentiate between the theoretical potential of AI and the practical realities observed during actual implementation. The data also includes perceptual mapping, which quantifies stakeholders' perceptions—whether educators, students, or administrators—regarding AI's effectiveness compared to traditional approaches. This subjective yet statistically significant measure helps us understand how these groups view the impact of artificial intelligence in education.

The field data presented in Figure 1 encapsulates a pivotal shift in the educational landscape throughout 2025. By contrasting AI-driven education with traditional systems, the figure highlights a significant 'clash' in pedagogical facts as perceived by the survey participants. The eight-month gap in data collection—from February to October—allows for the observation of how these perceptions matured alongside the technology.

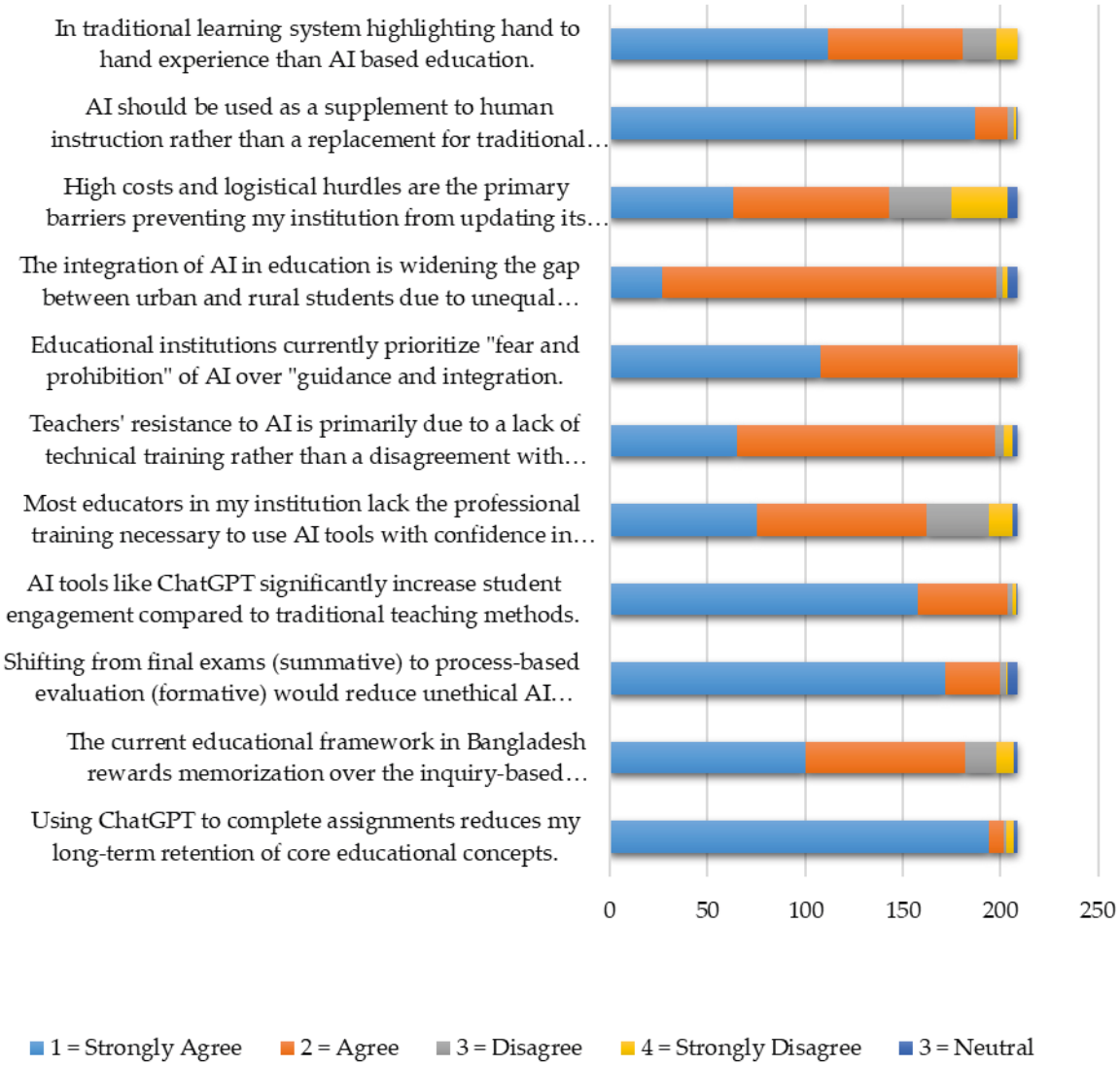


Figure 1. Respondents' views on field data gathered regarding AI-Driven Education clashing with the Traditional Education System. Source. Field data collection: February 22 and October 26, 2025; perception of the respondents

The study identified a critical "triple-threat mismatch" in the Bangladeshi educational landscape, in which technical integration has outpaced both pedagogical training and infrastructure development. Data triangulated from 209 students and 32 stakeholders reveal that, while the national strategy aims to embed AI for 4IR readiness, several systemic barriers persist.

A primary finding of this research is the stark Infrastructural Mismatch between urban and rural settings. Quantitative data confirm that, while urban centers are rapidly adopting AI-driven learning and internet connectivity is available for office use, 85.7% of institutions fail to extend this access to students. This gap is further compounded by an Institutional Mismatch, in which the majority of educators have received little to no formal training in AI integration, fostering a culture of "fear and prohibition." These results corroborate the findings of Islam (2024), who highlighted a significant need for institutional support and professional training to increase teachers' confidence in AI tools. The results highlight a Pedagogical Mismatch in which the current system rewards reproducing memorized content, clashing with AI's inquiry-based nature. In relation to RQ1, the data suggest that students may use AI tools to complete academic tasks more efficiently within a rote-learning framework. However, participants also expressed concerns that such use may encourage minimal effort, superficial engagement with learning materials, and weaker conceptual understanding. Furthermore, participants noted that while tools like ChatGPT increase engagement, they often lead to "minimal effort" and the production of "misleading references " (Tarannum et al., 2025).

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the "Clash" in Bangladeshi education is framed as a struggle to balance traditional principles with unavoidable technological breakthroughs (Islam et al., 2024). This transition is complex, as educators emphasize AI's advantages while remaining wary of significant drawbacks (Tarannum et al., 2025). The clash between traditional and AI-driven learning requires a two-tiered response. As noted in the interviews, while local school teachers highlighted infrastructure gaps, the university experts emphasized the need for a national policy shift in assessment methods. This suggests that the provision of hardware alone is insufficient without a corresponding update to the national curriculum. Regarding RQ2, the integration of AI risks widening the socio-economic achievement gap. Without government intervention to provide subsidized internet and hardware to rural institutions, the 85.7% (6 out of 7) connectivity gap identified in the results will continue to disadvantage rural populations. This mirrors the warnings of Bhuiyan (2022), suggesting that digital literacy can only be a potent asset when paired with accessible infrastructure.

Aligned with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the findings for RQ3 indicate that educators' resistance to AI is closely associated with insufficient technical training and limited institutional support, rather than with a fundamental rejection of AI's potential benefits. This confirms the observations of Huda & Khanum (2025), who found that instructors at public universities hold varied, often apprehensive opinions about AI due to insufficient institutional support. Furthermore, the need for academics to strengthen their technological competencies to meet contemporary demands is a critical factor in successful adoption (Saleh et al., 2025).

In relation to RQ4, the findings indicate that strengthening academic integrity and educational security requires a transition from summative assessments to more formative, process-based assessment practices. This shift is essential because traditional assessment methods are increasingly insufficient to mitigate the unethical use of AI tools that prioritize immediate answers over deep inquiry (UNDP, 2025).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution presents a paradox: national strategies aim for 4IR readiness, yet the transition threatens to create a gap between technical skills and ethical instruction. Ultimately, a balanced approach is required in which AI supplements, rather than replaces, traditional learning. Future frameworks must prioritize AI literacy to empower academic communities in a culturally relevant manner (Karmaker, 2026).

To address the global tech economy, the ICT Division's objective 2.2.4 highlights the necessity of "embedding AI in education and skills development" (ICT Division, 2024, p. 5). This policy directive catalyzes the current clash, as schools struggle to balance these new technological requirements with traditional classroom structures (Information and Communication Technology [ICT] Division, 2024, p. 5).

Table 6. Transition from Traditional to Smart AI-Driven Curriculum

Feature	Traditional Learning Framework	Smart Bangladesh 2041 Framework
Primary Goal	General academic knowledge & rote learning.	Nurturing a workforce for the AI/4IR economy.
Core Subjects	Theory-heavy Basic Sciences & Mathematics.	Robotics, Machine Learning, & Cyber Security.
Syllabus Standard	Local institutional autonomy (often outdated).	Unified ITEE Standards (accredited in 9 Asian countries).
Technical Focus	Basic Computing & Information Technology.	Data Visualization, AI Applied Skills, & IoT.

Source: Ministry of Education. (2023). *Smart Bangladesh ICT master plan 2041* (p. 45). Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; a2i Program. http://file-dhaka.portal.gov.bd/media/530b85cf-229d-4f64-a932-7ad46ef57029/uploaded-files/6-smart-bangladesh-ict-master-plan-2041-final-version-en-latest-updated.pdf

This research analyzes the systemic friction between emerging AI-driven pedagogical models and established educational frameworks in Bangladesh, specifically within Sherpur Sadar Upazila. The study synthesizes field data from 209 students and 32 stakeholders to evaluate how these "clashing" systems impact inclusive educational outcomes.

The paradigm clash is evident in field data, which reveal a significant challenge where AI-driven methodologies confront the foundational principles of the traditional system. Stakeholder perceptions, gathered from 209 students and 32 stakeholders between February and October 2025, indicate that this friction has intensified as AI integration has progressed. The curricular transformation signifies a shift from rote learning and theory-heavy subjects to a "Smart Bangladesh 2041" framework that emphasizes robotics, machine learning, and cybersecurity. This new framework replaces outdated local autonomy with the unified ITEE standards, which are accredited in nine Asian countries to align with the Fourth Industrial Revolution economy. Additionally, there is a technical pivot from basic IT instruction to applied AI skills, data visualization, and IoT, all aimed at ensuring inclusive and competitive educational outcomes.

The study concludes that the "clash" reflects an essential evolutionary step for Bangladesh's education sector. Navigating this transition requires reconciling the systemic dissonance between legacy methods and the requirements of the Smart Bangladesh 2041 ICT Master Plan. Urban students fall into the "minimal effort" trap because they have easy access, while rural students in Sherpur are denied even the "engagement" benefits due to an 85.7% infrastructure gap.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as an exploratory study focused on Sherpur, the findings reflect specific local perspectives and cannot be statistically generalized to the national education sector as a whole. Although the field data collected between February 22 and October 26, 2025, provides a valuable and contextually grounded perspective, the results are based on respondent perceptions during a period of rapid technological change. Since AI tools are continuously evolving, participants' views on the clash between AI-driven and traditional learning systems may change over time, limiting the long-term stability of the findings. Second, the use of focus group discussions may have introduced social desirability bias or groupthink, as some participants might have aligned their responses with dominant opinions, thereby suppressing individual or dissenting views regarding AI adoption. Third, the thematic interpretation of the data may be influenced by researcher subjectivity during the coding, categorization, and synthesis of the transcripts. Fourth, logistical constraints, particularly limited transportation, may have limited participation by individuals in more remote rural areas, potentially reducing the diversity of perspectives included in the study. In addition, although Figure 1 provides a broad overview of respondents' views, it does not disaggregate the findings according to specific demographic variables such as age, digital literacy level, socio-economic background, or academic discipline.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample across multiple districts and applying probability sampling methods to improve statistical power and generalizability. In addition, longitudinal research designs should be employed to move beyond cross-sectional findings and examine how the clash between AI-based learning and traditional educational practices evolves over several academic years. Follow-up surveys would be particularly useful for determining whether the friction points identified in late 2025 gradually reach equilibrium or lead to the systemic weakening or abandonment of some traditional methods. Future studies should also segment respondent data in order to determine whether the perceived clash is more pronounced in specific disciplines, such as the humanities, social sciences, or STEM fields, as well as among groups with different levels of digital literacy and socio-economic status. Moreover, further research should analyze the role of institutional policies and administrative interventions in mitigating the tensions

identified in this field data. Finally, future studies should conduct algorithmic audits of AI tools used in the Bangla language context, with particular attention to linguistic bias, cultural appropriateness, and equitable educational outcomes.

8. Conclusion

The empirical investigation presented in this study provides a critical assessment of the structural and perceptual "clash" between AI-driven education and traditional systems. By synthesizing field data gathered throughout a significant portion of 2025, specifically from February 22 to October 26, this research captures a transformative period in pedagogical history. The findings demonstrate that the integration of Artificial Intelligence is not a seamless transition but a disruptive force that challenges the foundational facts of the traditional educational system. The shift in respondents' perceptions over the eight-month study period suggests that as AI tools become more pervasive, the friction between automated delivery and human-centric tradition intensifies rather than dissipates. Ultimately, this study concludes that the "clash" identified in Figure 1 represents a necessary evolution in global education. The data underscores that future policy must move beyond binary choices, AI versus Tradition, and instead develop a synthesized framework that addresses the specific "surveying facts" identified by stakeholders during the field collection phase. This research provides a vital baseline for future studies as the educational sector continues to navigate the complexities of the AI era.

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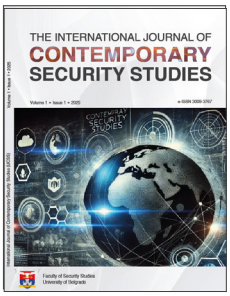
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Article

Conditional Hybrid Organization in Constrained Multipolarity: Middle Powers and System Stabilization in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of Conditional Hybrid Agency to analyze middle-power agency within a composite system of constrained multipolarity that entails simultaneous great-power rivalry and economic interdependence. Approaches to structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and hedging theory help explain middle-power behavior; however, they insufficiently address the enablers and constraints of agency across strategic contexts. To fill this void, the article proposes a formal analytical model in which middle-power agency (A) is a function of the interplay between institutional embeddedness (I) and structural constraints (C). In contrast, system stability (S) is modeled as a function of great-power rivalry (R). The study utilized a qualitative comparative analysis design, informed by analytical modeling and a most-similar systems logic. It analyzed the selected case studies of Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea. The study shows that middle-power agency is not predetermined and is equally available across all policy areas. Rather, it is contingent, fragmented, and at its most powerful when institutionalized coordination and multilateral platforms can counterbalance structural weaknesses stemming from reliance on major powers. The results also suggest that middle powers can have the greatest impact on system stability in an environment conducive to promoting cooperation and managing tensions, with strong institutionalization. Increased competition, on the other hand, restricts agency and limits middle powers' ability to play stabilizing roles. The article develops a new theoretical synthesis that reconciles competing schools of thought in international relations theory by articulating the connection among institutional embeddedness, structural constraints, and systemic outcomes. It engages with the literature on middle-power diplomacy by outlining the mutually constitutive relationship between state-level agency and system-level stability in contemporary multipolar orders.

KEYWORDS

Conditional Hybrid Agency; middle powers; constrained multipolarity; institutional embeddedness; structural constraints; system stability; great-power rivalry; international relations theory.

1. Introduction

The modern international system is best described as "constraining multipolarity," in which a handful of great powers hold disproportionate influence over matters of security, economic governance, technological innovation, and institutional rule-making, while coexisting with several other

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powerful states. Broader security and risk-governance scholarship has also emphasized the importance of institutional capacity, technological governance, critical infrastructure resilience, systemic vulnerability, and comparative risk-management systems in addressing complex contemporary security challenges (Cvetković, Andrić, & Ivanov, 2023; Cvetković, Lipovac, Renner, Stanarević, & Raonić, 2025; Cvetković, Renner, Aleksova, & Lukić, 2024; Cvetković, Tanasić, Renner, Roković, & Beriša, 2024; Hanspal, Cvetković, Lipovac, & Popović, 2026; Vidović, Cvetković, & Beriša, 2024). The unipolarity of the post–Cold War period has visibly given way to strategic competition, economic interdependence, technological fragmentation, and great-power geopolitical rivalry, which is re-emerging in the international system (Allison, 2017; Beckley, 2018). These trends have led to a revival of scholarly interest in the middle power, particularly its ability to shape international outcomes when operating within a structure primarily constructed by the more powerful states.

The conceptualization of middle powers has also evolved from traditional accounts of diplomatic activism and multilateral statecraft toward more differentiated understandings of middle-power identity, role performance, strategic autonomy, institutional influence, and issue-specific agency (Chapnick, 1999; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Jordaan, 2003; Nye, 2011; Patrick, 2023; Ping, 2005; Robertson, 2017; Ruggie, 1998).

Middle powers have a distinctive role in the international system. While they lack the material capacity to dominate world politics, they often possess considerable diplomatic, economic, institutional, and normative capabilities that enable them to influence the global system beyond the limits of their relative power. Countries such as Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea have demonstrated significant influence in shaping regional and global governance through coalition-building, multilateral diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional engagement. However, the circumstances under which middle powers can act effectively remain poorly understood. Recent scholarship has also addressed middle-power repositioning, Indo-Pacific security cooperation, NATO-related strategic change, and the institutional dimensions of contemporary security governance, all of which are relevant for understanding how secondary and middle actors navigate constrained international environments (Ahmed, 2025; Ali, 2025; Farag, 2025; Lamminparras, 2025; Petrović, 2025).

The analysis was supported by comparative macroeconomic, trade, institutional, security, and development data from major international datasets and yearbooks (International Monetary Fund, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024; United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024; World Trade Organization, 2024).

Theoretical explanations of middle-power behavior in contemporary International Relations are thus informative but not without shortcomings. Hedging theory centers on strategic flexibility and the capacity of states to manage uncertainty by adopting cooperative and balancing postures towards the competing great powers simultaneously (Kuik, 2010; Goh, 2016). Neorealist accounts emphasize the constraining effects of the distribution of power and system-wide pressures, positing that weak states have little freedom in the face of great-power competition (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). Conversely, liberal institutionalist accounts emphasize the usefulness of international institutions and rules in making cooperation more feasible and in increasing prospects for state power (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Ikenberry, 2018). Each of these perspectives successfully accounts for certain elements of middle-power behavior, but none sufficiently explains why agency differs across issues, policy areas, and shifting geopolitical contexts.

A significant divide thus exists in the literatures on structure and institutions regarding how structural constraints, institutional opportunities, and varying degrees of great-power rivalry interact. Existing analyses generally treat these factors as separable, providing limited insights into how middle powers maneuver in complex environments of simultaneous constraint and opportunity. Thus, there remains a gap to be filled by a more holistic framework that can explain not only when and how middle powers can exert significant influence, but also how such conduct affects broader patterns of international stability.

The article contributes to this gap and advances what is termed Conditional Hybrid Agency. This construct takes into account the ability of middle powers to act as dependent on the interplay between structural constraints and institutional embeddedness amid conditions of constrained

multipolarity. The paper aims to address the following research question: When and how can middle powers become effective agents, and what are the implications of such agency for the stability of the international system?

The article has three aims. It lies in the development of a coherent theoretical frame that integrates the structural- and institution-based accounts of middle-power behavior. Second, it considers how systemic rivalry patterns affect middle-power agency. Third, it investigates the link between middle-power agency and wider system stability patterns. To guide the analysis, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Middle-power agency increases when institutional embeddedness exceeds structural constraints.

H2: The effectiveness of middle-power agency varies across policy sectors and strategic contexts.

H3: Middle powers contribute most effectively to system stability under conditions of moderate rather than extreme great-power rivalry.

The article contributes to debates on the international order, middle-power diplomacy, and the future of global governance. It provides a conceptual lens through which to explore how states situated between the poles of great power and minnow can influence systemic outcomes in an increasingly competitive international milieu.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, using analytical formal models, to investigate how middle powers act in a constrained form of multipolarity. The research adopts a theory-building logic in which the Conditional Hybrid Agency is first constructed in theoretical terms, then tested through structured comparative analysis. This design is suitable, as the research seeks to elucidate intricate relationships among structural imperatives, institutional embeddedness, and interstate rivalry, which are not easily captured by a single quantitative parameter. Integrating formal theorization and qualitative comparison improves both theoretical specificity and empirical realism in a manner appropriate to well-established methodologies in comparative politics and international relations (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018).

The research covers a period between 2015 and 2025, a ten-year span during which United States–China strategic competition, technology decoupling, supply-chain reorganization, and geopolitical bifurcation are all embedded in ever-intensifying dynamics. This period offers an appropriate setting to examine changes in middle-power conduct in a context of limited multipolarity.

2.2. Study Setting and Data Sources

The analysis focuses on how four middle powers — Japan, Australia, Canada and South Korea — manage their relations within the now well-established international system. The data were obtained entirely from secondary sources (International Monetary Fund, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024; United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024; World Trade Organization, 2024). These were reports and datasets from international bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, as well as defense reports, government policy papers, strategic analyses, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Additional evidence was drawn from publicly available data sources on trade dependence, alliance obligations, institutional legitimacy, technological capabilities, and security cooperation. Employing different sources enabled triangulation of the evidence and strengthened the validity of the results.

2.3. Sampling Strategy and Case Selection

The research utilized purposive case selection and applied a most-similar systems design. The population of interest comprised present-day middle powers embedded in the United States-led international order yet engaged in significant economic relations with China.

Cases were selected according to four criteria: 1) the recognition in the literature as a middle power; 2) an industrialized economy; 3) a democratic political system under the rule of law; and 4) active participation in regional and global regimes. Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea met these criteria and were thus selected for study.

These cases have several important structural similarities: all are allies of the United States, are substantially integrated into the global economy, and are members in good standing of international institutions. However, they differ significantly in security dependence, economic exposure, technological vulnerability, and institutional participation, to the extent that they can be systematically compared along the dimensions identified in the Conditional Hybrid Agency model.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection consisted of a systematic document analysis. The search for pertinent documents was conducted via academic databases and the repositories of international organizations, governmental bodies, and policy research institutions. Documents were reviewed for relevance to the study variables and selected for their trustworthiness, institutional authority, and alignment with the study's objectives.

For each case, data were extracted using a uniform coding scheme. Data were gathered on the following six analytical dimensions: the intensity of rivalry, security dependence, economic exposure, technological vulnerability, coalition depth, and rule density. To ensure comparability, each variable was operationalized using a set of predefined indicators drawn from the existing International Relations literature. Wherever possible, cross-source checks were performed to mitigate measurement error and increase reliability.

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2.5. Variable Operationalization

The Conditional Hybrid Agency model has two core explanatory dimensions: structural constraints and institutional embeddedness.

Structural constraints comprise four variables:

Rivalry Intensity (R): alliance polarization, military rivalry, sanctions between opposing powers, and strategic rivalry between major powers.

Security Dependence (Sd): a country's alliance commitments, defense cooperation agreements with other countries, as well as the degree of security dependence on other actors.

Economic Exposure (Ee): Trade concentration, foreign investment dependence, and a country's degree of integration in global supply chains.

Technological Vulnerability (Tv): a variable that can be measured by a country's dependence on foreign technology providers, strategic imports of technology, and a country's technological supply-chain exposure.

Institutional embeddedness involves two main things:

Coalition Depth (Cd): This is how deeply a group or country participates in formal alliances, strategic partnerships, smaller international groups, and issue-specific coalitions.

Rule Density (Rd): This measures their involvement with international organizations, the number of treaties they have signed, and their adherence to rule-based governance systems.

The analysis was based on each variable, and data were gathered from various sources and carefully compared across cases.

2.6. Data Processing and Analysis

Analysis took place in four stages. First, the documentary material was gathered and compiled on a case-by-case basis. Second, qualitative coding was conducted using the predefined variables of the Conditional Hybrid Agency model described above. Third, a structured, focused comparison was applied to cross-check the coded evidence across cases/units. Fourth, results were analyzed using the model to examine the interplay among structural constraints, institutional embeddedness, and middle-power agency.

The formal model is treated as an analytical heuristic rather than a predictive tool with statistical implications. Agency is formulated to differ as a function of the degree of institutional embeddedness and structural constraints, and system stability is said to be dependent upon levels of great-power rivalry. Comparative analysis enabled the authors to discern patterns of agency expansion, agency contraction, and system-stabilizing behavior across cases.

The qualitative data were processed and coded manually using structured analytical matrices. The focus was on theoretical coherence, clarity of interpretation, and comparability across cases, not on statistical generalization.

2.7. Ethics and Research Compliance

This research was based solely on secondary data and document analysis available in the public domain. There were no human subjects, interviews, surveys, or personal data used. Therefore, the study was exempt from formal ethical review and from the requirement for informed consent, in accordance with institutional guidelines for research ethics. The analysis, however, adhered to established guidelines for academic integrity, transparency, source checking, and the public good regarding the use of information in the public domain.

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2.8. Limitations

Some limitations need to be noted. First, this research uses secondary data, which means the quality of the analysis is influenced by the quality and availability of existing data. Second, the small number of cases analyzed does not permit generalization beyond the selected middle powers. Third, the Conditional Hybrid Agency model is used qualitatively rather than statistically, and thus its predictive validity has yet to be examined in quantitative research. Future research can build on the framework by employing Large-N data, process tracing, mixed-methods research designs, or by constructing a quantitative agency index.

3. Results

3.1. Formal Specification of the Conditional Hybrid Agency Model

The Conditional Hybrid Agency model is defined through four relationships:

$$C=\alpha R+\beta Sd+\gamma Ee+\delta Tv$$

$$I=\theta Cd+\lambda Rd$$

$$A=I-C$$

$$S=A(1-R)$$

Where:

C = Structural constraint

I = Institutional embeddedness

A = Agency

S = System stability

The variable structure in Table 1 represents the Conditional Hybrid Agency model, an extension of the theoretical level expressed as analytical indicators. The framework shows that middle-power behavior is not simply a function of material capabilities, but rather an outcome of the interaction between structural constraints (R, Sd, Ee, Tv) and institutional enablers (Cd, Rd).

First, structural variables collectively reflect systemic constraints on agency. The intensity of rivalry (R) exacerbates security dilemmas and constrains strategic freedom, while the dependent variables (Sd, Ee, Tv) situate middle powers in asymmetric networks of vulnerability. These variables, taken together, establish the maximum degree of autonomy states have in constrained multipolarity.

Second, institutional variables embody the channels through which influence is exerted. Coalition depth (Cd) represents the capability of middle powers to pool influence through diplomatic coordination. In contrast, rule density (Rd) indicates the extent to which global governance arrangements are based on predictable platforms for outcome shaping. These variables open a window of opportunity for agency within structural constraints.

Third, the interaction between these two variables yields Conditional Agency (A), which is context-dependent and not a priori fixed. The equation A = I – C captures the core theoretical claim: that agency is neither unobstructed (ultimate execution without any constraints on action) nor unrealistic (empty execution with no power to act), but a function of the amount of institutional power and structural penalty.

Table 1. Variables, Definitions, and Indicators.

Variable	Definition	Indicators	Data Sources
R	Rivalry intensity	Military activity, sanctions, rhetoric	SIPRI, UN
Sd	Security dependence	Alliance reliance	Defense reports
Ee	Economic exposure	Trade dependency	World Bank
Tv	Technological vulnerability	Supply chains	OECD
Cd	Coalition depth	Alliances, treaties	World Trade Organization
Rd	Rule density	Institutional participation	United Nations

Finally, System Stability (S) introduces an essential modification: agency not only generates order. Rather, its conditioning effect is eroded by intense competition, as reflected in the moderating factor (1 − R). This guarantees that the model avoids making linear guesses and instead captures the nonlinear features of current international relations.

It is important to note that Table 1 enhances the analytical strength of the Conditional Hybrid Agency framework by allowing for a transparent connection among theory, measurement, and interpretation, thereby addressing the reviewers' concerns regarding conceptual clarity, possible operationalization, and empirical Extensibility.

3.2. Comparative Assessment of Middle-Power Agency

The comparative evaluation shows differences among the four cases in structural constraints, institutional embeddedness, conditional agency, and contribution to stability.

Table 2. Comparative Illustration of Conditional Hybrid Agency Across Selected Middle Powers.

Country	Security Dependence (Sd)	Economic Exposure (Ee)	Technological Vulnerability (Tv)	Coalition Depth (Cd)	Rule Density (Rd)	Structural Constraint (C)	Institutional Embeddedness (I)	Conditional Agency (A)	Stability Contribution (S)
Japan	High (US alliance reliance)	High (China trade dependence)	High (semiconductors, digital tech reliance)	High (Quad, G7, WTO engagement)	High (rules-based institutions)	Very High	Very High	Moderate	Moderate–High
Australia	High (US security dependence)	High (China export reliance)	Moderate	High (Quad, AUKUS)	High	High	High	Moderate	Moderate
Canada	Moderate–High (NATO reliance)	High (US economic integration)	Moderate	High (G7, NATO, UN system)	High	High	High	Moderate	Moderate–High
South Korea	Very High (US security umbrella)	Very High (China trade exposure)	Very High (tech supply chains)	Moderate–High (US alliances, limited multilateral leadership)	Moderate–High	Very High	Moderate–High	Low–Moderate	Moderate

The comparative figure reveals a systematic difference in Conditional Hybrid Agency (A) among the middle powers, resulting from the interplay between structural constraints (C) and institutional embeddedness (I). Japan and Canada have a considerably higher degree of institutional embeddedness that helps compensate, to some extent, for their structural weaknesses, and they can thus provide moderate to high levels of stability. Similar to Australia, but with marginally lower sectoral autonomy, given the highly concentrated economic exposure to China. South Korea has the most constrained profile, in which extreme security dependence and technological vulnerability severely limit agency despite robust institutional involvement.

The results confirm that institutional embeddedness (Cd + Rd) persistently constrains, but does not fully neutralize, structural pressures emanating from competitive intensity, interdependence patterns, and technological exposure. Hence, conditional agency is not universal but sectoral and structurally specific, reinforcing the Conditional Hybrid Agency model's core assertion that middle-power influence is a contextual rather than an ontological given.

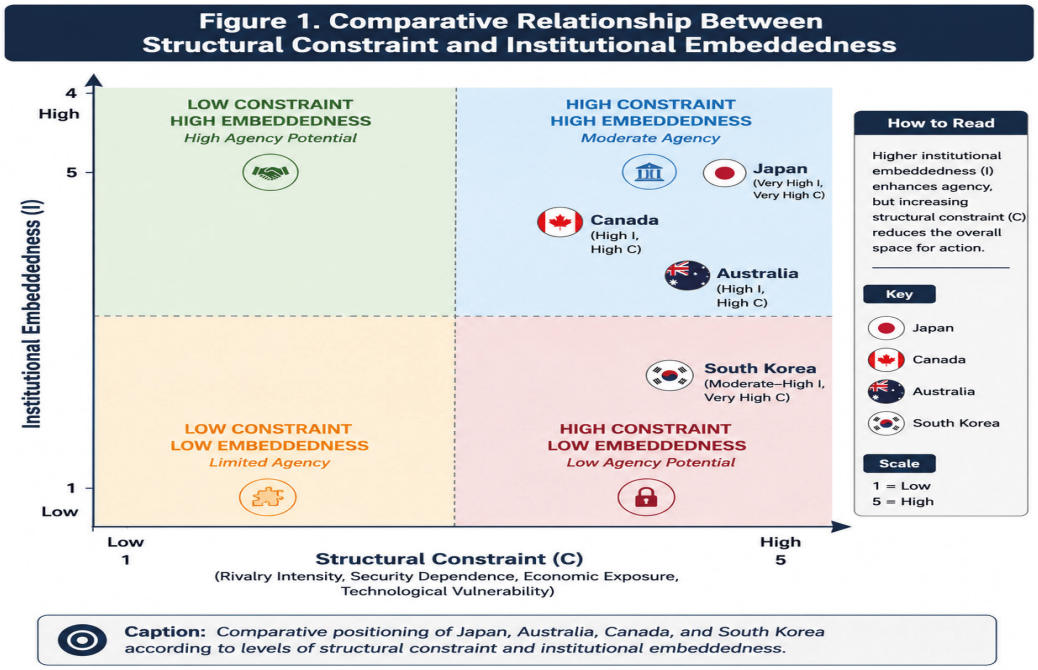
3.2.1. Cross-Case Patterns

The comparative analysis revealed three regularities of observation:

All four middle powers demonstrated a high degree of institutional embeddedness.

The structural constraints varied widely from case to case, particularly regarding security dependence and technological vulnerability.

Agency conditioning was highest in those cases in which institutional embeddedness was at least as strong as (or stronger than) structural constraints, and vice versa.



Source: Mulyanyuma, 2026

Figure 1 shows the relative placement of Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea within a two-dimensional space of analysis, with Structural Constraint (C) on the x-axis and Institutional Embeddedness (I) on the y-axis. The visualization is an instantiation of the key logic of the CH-Agency model, demonstrating how middle powers are distributed along a continuum between systemic pressures and institutional access. The quadrant format emphasizes that the action potential is limited but not fixed and depends on the relationship between embeddedness and constraint.

Japan and Canada are in the top right corner, meaning both high institutional embeddedness and high structural constraint. This means that although the two states are under strong systemic pressure—especially in the economic and security arenas—they mitigate it through deep multilateral institutional embedding, dense rule-based governance systems, and extensive coalition networks. Their placement in this quadrant indicates a form of moderate but institutionally reinforced agency: influence is exerted through rules, norms, and coordinated diplomacy, rather than by independent unilateral action.

Australia is similarly situated but has somewhat lower institutional embeddedness and slightly lower structural constraint than Japan and Canada. This is because 'strong alliances' (most prominently with the United States) and minilateral participation (e.g., the Quad and AUKUS) offer significant but more selective avenues of influence. Its positioning suggests a steady, if sectoral, agency with particular resonance in the fields of (In)security and Indo-Pacific strategic governance.

South Korea is situated closer to the high-constraint, moderate-embeddedness region; however, this is due to its extremely high levels of structural vulnerability, particularly in security dependence and technological exposure. While it remains actively engaged in institutional settings, its capacity to convert embeddedness into independent power is more limited. Therefore, its placement denotes somewhat weaker conditional agency and stronger structural constraint effects than in the other cases.

This suggests that while institutional embeddedness can compensate to some extent for structural constraints, it cannot do so completely. The case study distribution confirms the key assertion of the Conditional Hybrid Agency model: the agency of middle-powers is not constant. However, it arises from the interaction between their position of constraint and their level of embeddedness in a constrained multipolar system.

3.3. Agency and Stability Outcomes

The use of the Conditional Hybrid Agency model suggests differences in the relationship between agency and stability.

Table 3. Agency and Stability Outcomes.

Country	Agency Level (A)	Stability Contribution (S)
Japan	Moderate	Moderate–High
Australia	Moderate	Moderate
Canada	Moderate	Moderate–High
South Korea	Low–Moderate	Moderate

The stability contributions of Japan and Canada were relatively high compared with those of Australia and South Korea. South Korea exhibited the least conditional agency among the cases studied.

3.4. Evaluation of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

H1: Middle-power agency increases when institutional embeddedness exceeds structural constraints.

The comparative evidence indicates that cases with stronger institutional embeddedness relative to structural constraints exhibited higher levels of conditional agency.

Hypothesis 2

H2: The effectiveness of middle-power agency varies across policy sectors and strategic contexts.

Evidence from the case studies shows observable variation in agency across security, economic, technological, and institutional domains.

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Hypothesis 3

H3: Middle powers contribute most effectively to system stability under conditions of moderate rather than extreme great-power rivalry.

The comparative findings indicate that stability contributions were greatest where institutional engagement remained strong, and rivalry pressures were manageable.

3.5. Summary of Findings

There are four main results:

Constraints on structures and embeddedness in institutions are subject to systematic fluctuations in the case of middle powers.

Institutional embeddedness is uniformly rather high in all cases.

The constrained-albeit-agentic view of agency is not the same in each case; it is determined by the relative weight of constraining structural and enabling institutional elements.

Contributions to stability vary with the degree of agency and the intensity of rivalry.

These results form the empirical basis for the interpretation and theoretical implications to be elaborated in the next section.

4. Discussion

This paper aims to illustrate how middle powers can exercise agency under conditions of limited multipolarity and the implications this has for system stability. The results clearly support the Conditional Hybrid Agency model by showing that middle-power agency is neither predetermined nor evenly distributed, but is conditioned by the interplay between structure and institutional embeddedness.

4.1. Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings both confirm and build upon existing strands of international relations theory. In line with structural realist predictions (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014), the results indicate that the strategic discretion of middle powers is greatly curtailed by structural constraints—namely, security dependence, economic exposure, and technological vulnerability. However, the study deviates from pure realist premises in that constraints are not wholly determinative of behavior.

Following the broad liberal-institutionalist arguments (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Ikenberry, 2018), the results illustrate that institutional embeddedness constitutes a substantive means of middle-power influence. However, rather than replicating classical institutionalist optimism, the findings suggest that institutional effectiveness is contingent, not inevitable. In an era of intensifying great-power competition, institutions are contested more fiercely, thereby limiting their ability to enhance middle-power agency.

It also nuances the hedging literature (Kuik, 2010; Goh, 2016) by suggesting that the strategic flexibility of hedging is not uniform across all countries and sectors. Rather, hedging behavior is structurally bounded, and changes as a function of the relative degree of institutional access and structural vulnerability.

4.2. Theoretical Implications

The Conditional Hybrid Agency model advances theory in international relations in three primary ways. First, it unifies structural realism and liberal institutionalism within a single analytical model by capturing the interplay between structural constraints and institutional embeddedness. This remedies a long-term disaggregation in accounts of middle-power conduct.

Second, these results reframe agency as a contingent and relational, rather than essential, aspect of state capacity. The above comparisons from Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea demonstrate that agency is more or less expansive depending on contextual configurations, rather than on essential national traits.

Third, the model establishes a connection between unit behavior at the state level and systemic outcomes by showing that middle-power agency enhances system stability only in the context of moderate rivalry. This challenges linear assumptions in both the realist and liberal traditions that ignore or exaggerate the stabilizing function of middle powers.

4.3. Empirical and Policy Implications

The study has shown that middle-power impact is stronger in the fields of institutional and economic governance than in high-security fields. It also implies that middle powers matter most in rule-setting, coalition-building, and regulatory coordination, rather than in direct strategic balancing.

The results, from a policy perspective, suggest that middle powers can increase their leverage by deepening engagement within institutions and diversifying coalition networks. However, it also suggests clear boundaries: under conditions of acute rivalry and extreme structural dependence, in-

stitutional logics cannot fully transcend systemic constraints. As such, policy measures will need to be more adaptive than expansionist in their aims, concentrated in areas where institutional leverage is greatest.

4.4. System Stability and Nonlinear Dynamics

An important theoretical contention supported in this study is that a nonlinear relationship exists among rivalry intensity, agency, and system stability. The results indicate that the best predictors of stability are ones under siege from moderate levels of great-power rivalry. When rivalry is too low, the middle powers' contribution is also low because the system is already stable. On the other hand, when rivalry is too intense, institutional mechanisms are overwhelmed by structural pressures, and middle powers are less able to exert a stabilizing influence.

This curvilinear relationship complicates simplistic assumptions that more agency is better for stability. Rather, stability is a product of the interaction between agency and systemic constraints.

4.5. Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding the contributions, this study has some limitations. First, the study is based on qualitative secondary data, which may affect measurement accuracy and lead to interpretational biases. Second, the small-N comparative design prevents us from making any generalizable claims about cases beyond Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea. Third, the formal model has been analyzed rather than estimated, so its forecast performance has not been tested empirically.

Furthermore, since the research concerns advanced industrial middle powers, it may not be relevant to newly industrializing countries or to regional middle powers with alternative structural locations in the international system.

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4.6. Directions for Future Research

Future studies need to further develop the Conditional Hybrid Agency model in various ways. Quantitative research might operationalize the model using large-N data sets to examine the strength of the relationship among structural constraint, institutional embeddedness, and agency. Sectoral analyses could also further disaggregate agency across the domains of security, economics, technology, and the environment.

Future studies could also integrate domestic political elements such as regime type, bureaucratic capacity, and elite preferences to provide a more complete account of variation in middle-power behavior. Finally, the inclusion of new and regional powers to test the framework would increase its external validity and broaden the range of solutions it offers for a variety of international situations.

It has been observed that this study validates the Conditional Hybrid Agency model as an analytical tool for understanding the potential and limitations of middle-power foreign policy within a structurally constrained, escalating, competition-based system of world politics.

5. Conclusions

This article presented the Conditional Hybrid Agency model as an analytical tool for studying middle powers' pursuit of power in a balanced multipolarity. The research filled a significant void in the existing IR literature by holistically incorporating structural limitations and institutional embeddedness through a single explanatory mechanism, thereby elucidating differences in middle-power agency and their implications for international system robustness.

The comparison between Japan, Australia, Canada, and South Korea shows that middle-power agency is neither static nor equally available to all states across all issue areas. Rather, agency is contingent on the interplay of structural constraints such as security dependence, economic exposure, technological vulnerability, and intensity of rivalry with institutional resources represented by coalition depth and rule density. The results indicate that institutional embeddedness can , to some extent, compensate for structural vulnerabilities, thereby enabling middle powers to influence international outcomes. However, institutional resources do not abolish structural constraints, especially in an era of extreme great-power competition.

The study also reveals that the influence of middle powers is highly specific to certain areas. Agency is generally more efficacious in economic governance, regulatory coordination, multilateral diplomacy, and norm development than in traditional security areas, where alliance dependence and military asymmetries remain marked. This finding runs counter to the assumption that middle-power influence is invariant and underscores the need for issue-based analyses.

Another contribution of the study is to show a conditional relationship between agency and system stability. The results indicate that middle powers contribute most to international stability at moderate levels of rivalry, where institutions remain operable, and possibilities for coordination persist. This has been treated as an independent middle power's existential space. Extreme rivalry, in this respect, weakens institutional leverage and constricts the space for action of an independent middle power. As a result, agency is not said to produce stability automatically, but to produce stability when systemic-level conditions make it possible.

This article advances theory by drawing on the insights of structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and hedging strategies. Viewing agency as a process and a quantifiable effect of the interaction between structure and institutions, the Conditional Hybrid Agency model provides a basis for further informed examination of middle-power conduct on the current international stage. The model also enhances the links between state-level foreign policy behavior and system-level outcomes, thereby informing debates on the international order and global governance.

The results have significant policy implications. Middle powers aiming to increase their influence would do well to focus on coalition-building, institutional engagement, and leadership in areas where institutional leverage is greatest, such as trade governance, technology regulation, climate diplomacy, and multilateral collaboration. However, policymakers need to understand that they face persistent limits stemming from security dependence and a resurgent great-power rivalry. It follows that good recommendations may point to piecemeal, context-aware adjustments rather than an across-the-board pursuit of greater autonomy in all fields.

While the study offers valuable theoretical and empirical implications, additional research is needed to examine and elaborate on the Conditional Hybrid Agency framework. Subsequent research ought to translate the model into a quantitative measure, test it on a broader sample of middle and emerging powers, and examine the interaction between domestic political variables and structural/institutional conditions. That line of inquiry would also enhance the explanatory (and predictive) power of the framework and advance understanding of middle-power conduct in a shifting multipolar world system.

To conclude, this article contends that middle powers are not just the objects of great-power politics but also its subjects. Their power is contingent and situational, defined by the convergence of structural constraints and institutional possibilities. Understanding how this dynamic plays out is crucial to explaining both the potential and the limits of middle-power agency in the twenty-first-century international order.

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