

Intelligence and security in a polarized world

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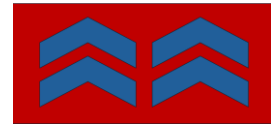


Introduction

In a more polarised and fragmented world, or what nowadays is often called a multi-aligned world, states have to address different kind of challenges within their own borders and outside them. No longer is the world comprised of uniform or coherent blocks of the West, its allies and its opponents as it was during the Cold War. Rather, global alliances change in response to shifting internal priorities and politics, reflecting the old saying: *There are no permanent friends, no permanent allies, only permanent interest*. These shifts bring about realignments that can be rationalised in a certain geopolitical, economic or social context, but also rapprochements that in a diachronic perspective are surprising in character, being themselves effects of or determining effects that can be characterised on a spectrum ranging from outliers to black swans. States are testing each others red lines not only in hot and frozen conflicts but also against old partners, turning in competitors or potential rivals.

In such a world, the concept of security that is central to the state changes, widens, becomes diluted. The current static view of the security concept has already started to change and will continue to do so. This transformation is a reality that at times precedes perception, speed or capacity of reaction, making it that more difficult for states to cover in a timely and comprehensive matter all aspects related to protecting their national security. Aspects of international security do not remain constrained to directly involved actors and their immediate vicinity, but have global reverberations in cascading or ripple effects. In this new world, traditional partnerships within the previous stable blocks are challenged by internal shifts, putting additional strains on efforts of addressing what once where shared challenges. This is what some call “the mother of all transitions periods”.

In a diachronic perspective, profiles of stability or predictability can be observed in the international behaviour of state actors, with some demonstrating consistent or linear patterns of behaviour, such as the UK, and others oscillating between sleeping giants or isolationism to being beacons and front bearers of democratic values, such as the US. With the changes brought forward by the new US administration, in terms of foreign policy and structural reforms in its national security apparatus, the role of the Western intelligence *establishment* is no longer resumed to the bearer of best and widest capabilities, but to the one of acknowledged culture, reputation, and constancy. It is therefore not by chance that Cambridge in the United Kingdom is the host of an international security programme, addressing security challenges in a global perspective.



While at Cambridge, one cannot help but observe the centrifugal effect that this historical place has in terms of global representation on the ground, proving a nursery for the leaders of tomorrow, the place for bonding and forging of global networks. This trend is also replicated in the security field, with expert views on global security perspectives being presented.

This 360° perspective that a state needs to have regarding its security is not only a reflection of the need to answer immediate threats to its own security, not should it be. Rather, it indicates the view that a certain state has over its role in the world, and its conscious assumption of that role. Maintaining this all-round perspective is no mean feat, requiring resources and constant calibration, posturing and negotiation. In time, this constant behaviour contributes to a certain reputation on the international scene. In the same time, not every state affords to have and maintain a 360° view of the threat landscape. This is not only dependent on capabilities but is also historically grounded and influenced by the imminence and degree of immediate threats (see the case of Ukraine).



Global focus points

As mentioned, the world is no longer divided in spheres of influence. Rather, countries are multi-aligned, which makes the international security landscape that more volatile. This can lead to antagonistic alliances. As showed in a previous report (Popa, 2025, b.) rapprochement to one country for defence reasons and to this country's competitor or even opponent for economic reasons is undesirable and creates an unstable situation.

The main present day focus points of international security discussed during the Cambridge security Initiative are highlighted in the map bellow. They admittedly reflect a West European perspective.

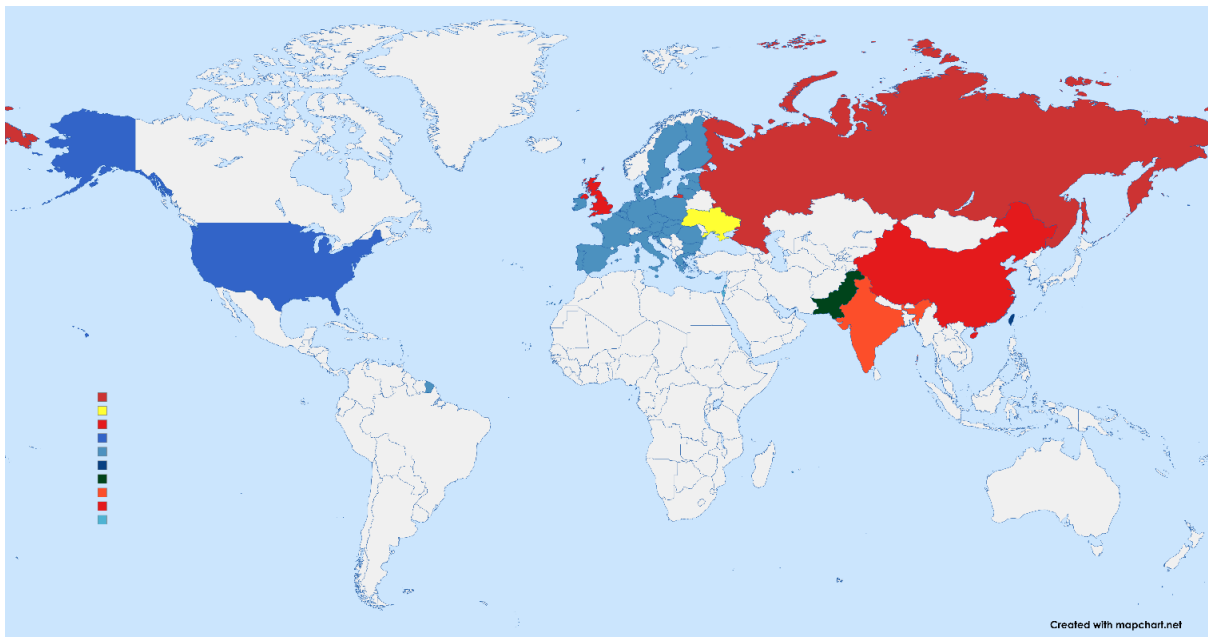
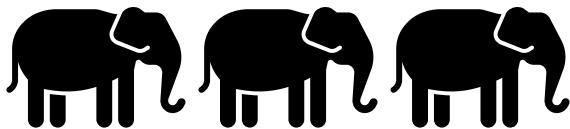


Figure 1. Global points of focus for international security as of July-August '25



The elephants in the [situation] room

- China – Taiwan
- Ukraine – Russia
- Israel and the Middle East



China and Taiwan

China's objective of achieving pre-eminence is not benchmarked synchronically against other state powers, but rather diachronically, against its own past.

The Taiwan question, although slightly disappearing from the mainstream attention in face of other braking international security crisis, such as Ukraine and Israel, remains a constant for the international security scene. Future possible scenarios around Taiwan vary in degree of probability of materialisation and include reintegration, peaceful assimilation, maintaining of the status quo or invasion.

The official discourse of the Peoples Republic of China on the Taiwan question is worded in terms of "reunification", with a 2049-2050 anticipated hard deadline for its materialisation. Different scenarios are put forward for the realisation of this "reunification", with soft approaches including economic and social integration in order to bring Taiwan gradually closer being abandoned in favour of more hard approaches. The shift towards more hard approaches is also influenced by anticipated external opposition and intervention in the matter. With a potential US pivot to the Indo-Pacific region and with potential increased support offered to Taiwan, congruent with the Taiwan Relations Act, the current signalling is indicating to China that the window of opportunity for an integration with rather limited external exercised and backed opposition is closing. The questions around the future of Taiwan are not a subject of interest limited to its immediate vicinity. Due to its role in the technological field and due to geopolitical interdependencies, a potential change in its status will have reverberations across the globe, sparking new tension points in international relations.

On a different matter, we observe that yet again the charismatic leader type is dominating the world stage. The leaders of three great powers – the US, China and Russia, are all actively shaping and consolidating their world image through personal strong characteristics, in order to enable power projection. Much as was the case with Hitler and the attempts to predict his behaviour by understanding his psychological profile (see the well known CIA profile made by Walter Langer) the psychological profile of the strong leader becomes vital for anticipating future behaviour of states where power is concentrated in the executive branch or around the individual role of the president or party leader. In systems where the leader is seen not only as the de facto executive of the state power but also as a leader whose legacy is shaped, lived and learned, the profile of the leader becomes not only instrument of analysis and prediction for external entities, but also a subject of study for the country's establishment in its whole. Not as often the case for Western leaders, Xi's way of thinking is a constant and structured subject of study for Chinese government officials. President Trump and President Putin present the same interest in terms of profiling, again due to the concentration of power and decision making capacity that they have, thus representing a point of focus for their own agencies having to know how to best brief the chief of the executive and anticipate internal and external policy positions, and for each others' agencies having to anticipate the competitors or opponents moves. Not the same can be said though in systems where the executive power is diluted.



Ukraine

The developments of the battlefield in Ukraine take place at remarkable speed, with combat lines changing from week to week. The war in Ukraine is a hybrid and asymmetric one and the two sides in the conflict are adjusting differently to the line of contact. With the adoption of drones by both sides, drones have become the bigger killer in this war, with lethality being reached faster. One way attack drones that make anyone a target are also more often used. The war is also observing the establishment of a “drone line of defence” in a 0-15 km perimeter. In response to these technological advances, Russia has developed drone hunting teams. Given the speed of advancement of the technology, it is anticipated that 2026 could see the deployment of drone swarms on the battlefield.

Armed conflicts at the moment present a mix of both high and low tech – true for the Ukraine and Israel contexts, with the by now popular saying about the war in Ukraine that we are fighting WW III in the technology space and WW I in the trenches. Defence procurement is the cornerstone for both the Ukrainian army and the members of the NATO alliance, since it has direct effect on the speed of decision and action on the actual battlefield. Not least, the Ukrainian army is shifting from patronage to merit based principles

Some analysts have mentioned that the war in Ukraine is a manifestation of president Putin’s war with the collective West, and is more about president Putin’s idea of Russia than about Ukrainian territory, as deconstructed in the speech labelled as “its not about Ukraine its about the Americans”. Most analysts agree that a ceasefire will not represent an end to the conflict in Ukraine and at any rate, a ceasefire would come if all available alternatives for Russia prove to be worse. The present developments on the diplomatic stage regarding the war are discussed in the final section. The internal situation in Russia also plays a role in the development of the fighting. It is anticipated that an acquiescent passive population would present less resistance to the incurred costs of the fighting. The mechanism of transfer of power, or lack thereof, is another point of concern for analysts looking at the internal developments in Russia.

Israel

The situation in and around Israel remains in flux, with observed escalations on the ground receiving bursts of media and international attention and the wide acknowledgement that in the Middle East cease fires usually don’t last. Israel also has the first mover advantage in its area of interest. Further reflections on the situation are presented in the final section.



Defence trends

We have mentioned that the present day battlefield sees a combination of World War III high tech and World War I low tech. More insidious than a third World War though is the new cognitive warfare currently manifesting itself often without being observed but de facto being experienced and most often fully understood in retrospect. Invasions are preceded or accompanied by more dangerous phenomena facilitating the envisioned objective, phenomena or means that include infiltration, political warfare and pre-positioning. These contribute to the build up of internal tensions that ultimately can culminate in manifest incursion.

The questions of nuclear deterrence and more states aiming at obtaining nuclear weapons are receiving more and more attention with discussion over differences in control capabilities being analysed: control over the nuclear capabilities being either under civilian control (as in India) or under military control (as in Pakistan).

Differences in legislation and regulation also have effects on defence capabilities, engagement potential and levels. For example, the definition of “imminent” differs between the UK and US understanding.

In the case of NATO countries, the assumed 5% increase in defence spending will most likely see a gradual increase. The much debated UK Strategic Defence Review (Popa, 2025, a) has been characterised as a statement of intent and not an indication of readiness or plan for rearmament. While this might be true, the UK remains a constant, reliable and reputable partner both in the intelligence and defence domains. One can easily attest to the general acknowledgement of this reputation by means of direct observations of behaviour and posturing of external actors in relation to British manifestations in the intelligence and defence fields, both home but most prominently abroad.



Closing remarks

States and their agencies are faced with both an increase in the level of threats and an increase in diversity of threats, thus requiring an increase in capabilities of addressing these threats, either in terms of human resources or technological advancement. Having a 360° view of the threat landscape requires simultaneous introspection and external orientation. This does not come down only to a question of capabilities or proximity of threats, but also to a question of a state's view over its own role in the world, its posture and best way of protecting its interests. On a macro scale, the international attention also reflects perceptions on the information landscape in a certain country and can be a reflection of attempts to change that landscape.

The Israel developments are determining divisions on the international scene and within national borders, making fault lines more pronounced, especially in societies already having an (albeit latent) polarised potential. The attention attributed to international security issues is an aspect that is again an indication of a state's view of its role on the global stage, notwithstanding the proximity of the matter at hand. From this perspective, the fact that the Dutch cabinet came back from the summer recess on the 7th of August '25 in order to specifically discuss the Israel - Gaza situation stands to show this assumed role, with the Netherlands being the largest EU investor in Israel. However, such involvement can backfire. From an ideological perspective, in a context where ideologies matter in extreme measure such as the Middle East, democratic rationalisation of costs of conflict and outcry don't stand. Some have said that pressuring Israel, for example with sanctions, is a way of virtue signalling. While the European West will continue to voice criticism on chosen means of fighting in the Middle East, its raised voice does little in terms of the outcomes it aims for. Outcry does not stop bombs, rockets or terrorist groups. And just like the boy that too often cried wolf, so too, outcries with weak backing on the battlefield or against the degree of the measures chosen by someone else for fighting against imminent threats do little to no service to the assumed cause.

One must observe another difference in perspectives streaming from the Israel – Palestine case.

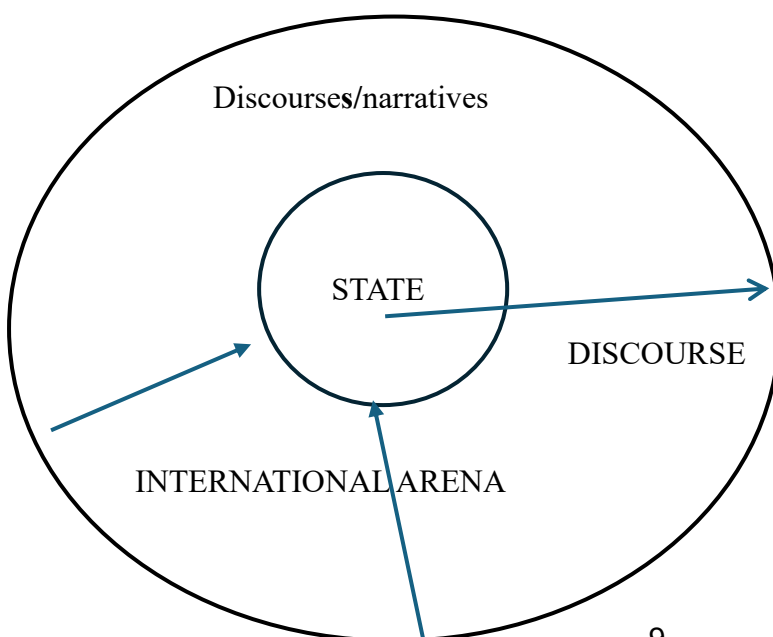


Figure 2. national and international discourse(s) through the lens of state interest



The international community engages in dialogue and diplomacy in order to appease wars between narratives and the international humanitarian law attempts to accommodate and reconcile colliding interests. The State, each state, puts its own interests and ultimately its own survival at the centre, and shapes its discourse, internal and external, around those interests. For every one state, its way of rationalising its interests and actions represents the assumed discourse, aligned with its purpose. The fact the international order does not agree with this vision does not intrinsically invalidate that State's position or interests.

Moreso, what is tolerable under the law differs even more between countries, thus underlying the observed difficulty and at times impossibility of alignment of perceptions under international humanitarian law, with authoritarian systems having both the capacity and the willingness to change legislation in order to reach objectives, if such change is needed in the first place.

Diplomacy is the long route for solving conflicts and at times it fails. The solution put forward today (12th of august '25) by international diplomacy for the war in Ukraine – that of a negotiation between Russia and the US in the absence of Ukraine, stands to show that. Moreover, it shows that loudly defending principles on public stages becomes a blunt instrument in time. Convictions loose their power if not backed by action.

With this in mind, and past lessons from history on how wars are temporary stopped or end, it becomes more evident that the interest of each state is what should dictate its actions, and international intervention or attempts of influencing those actions are a manifestation of different narratives and attempts at reconciling clashing moral principles, and do not represent a supreme moral truth. In this battle, principles and morals will be bend and cut short, leaving the question how moral is a principle that is respected only in its half? As I have made the case elsewhere (Popa, c.), it becomes the self proclaimed fallacy of the West to loudly defend morals on the international stage, and de facto end up by abiding to the realpolitik imposed by those with the force to do it.



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About the author.

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on defence trends, resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

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