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Table of Contents:

GAP Editors' Introduction

The story of the Global Affairs Program (GAP) at the Institute of Politics (IOP) began with a coffee shared by two college roommates in a café in Istanbul. Of the many things the two friends discussed that day, one stood out as something that would change the rest of their Harvard experience: the need for a program within the IOP dedicated solely to international relations and global affairs. With this goal, GAP was founded, and over the first three semesters of its existence, it grew from a small coalition without a formal structure into an official IOP program, now hosting a mentorship program, a weekly newsletter with 1,500+ subscribers, and nearly 20 academic and pre-professional events per semester, all of which are fully organized by a team of 40 passionate students from around the world. Most importantly, during this period, GAP became a hub for the collective intellectual exploration of some of the most pressing issues facing the world today, committed to preparing and giving voice to the next generation of global leaders.

Guided by this mission, GAP has continuously innovated in the programming and opportunities it offers its members and the broader Harvard community. The Global Affairs Journal represents a major milestone in this evolution. In this first volume, all six GAP Regional Teams—East and Southeast Asia, Europe, Central and South Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa—have published white papers based on original research. Each team focused on an issue central to its region, ranging from economic developments and political trends to major conflicts and uprisings. Together, these papers reflect GAP's commitment to student-driven scholarship and to engaging thoughtfully with the complexities of global affairs. We hope this Journal not only contributes to ongoing academic and policy conversations, but also serves as a testament to the power of undergraduate inquiry when given the space to flourish.

Erik Dalaker (H'27) and Sarp Nalbantoglu (H'27)

GAP Co-Founders & Co-Chairs

Assessing Broad Patterns of Economic Development within East and Southeast Asia

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Executive Summary

Economic development in East and Southeast Asia is driven by rapid digitalization, state-led industrial policy, and global value-chain integration, but each region faces distinct opportunities and vulnerabilities. South Korea's growth relies on manufacturing, R&D, and AI adoption, though demographic decline, weak SMEs, and falling foreign investment pose risks. Japan has stabilized inflation and expanded employment, yet shrinking demand, reduced public spending, and geopolitical tensions threaten future growth. Singapore remains resilient through its financial sector and trade networks, but faces rising cybersecurity threats and limited regional coordination. Indonesia benefits from expanding trade and a growing digital economy, though political instability, cybersecurity risks, and uneven infrastructure may hinder long-term progress. This paper provides an overview of these four economies in East and South East Asia, highlighting shared pressures and incentives shaping sustained regional development.

I. Introduction and Background

In the last 75 years, economies in East and Southeast Asia have experienced unprecedented growth. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the East Asia and Pacific region has grown from US$150 in 1960 to US$13,349 in 2024 (World Bank Group, 2024). East Asia is home to major hubs in the global electronics and manufacturing industries, while Southeast Asia's economic influence has expanded steadily. However, sustained economic development in the region faces mounting challenges, including those associated with digitalization and rising tensions in both international and domestic politics. This paper examines the economies of Japan and South Korea in the East Asia section and those of Singapore and Indonesia in the Southeast Asia section as case studies representative of their respective regions.

II. Escalating, Yet Flawed: Economic Development in East Asia

South Korea

Context. When investigating South Korea's economy following developments of state-sponsored industrialization in the period prior to Park Chung-hee's presidency, together with the ensuing labor-intensive manufacturing patterns later adopted during the 1980s and 1990s, it is imperative to note that South Korea currently exhibits substantial prominence and a high level of integration within manufacturing supply chains as well as its role within the broader global supply of technologies that are increasingly in demand (OECD, 2023; Kim, 2017). Moreover, predominant modern currents of Korean innovation have assumed a particularly critical role within semiconductor manufacturing, with government funding for research and development (R&D) efforts focused on chip production efforts alone comprising expenditures of higher than 36.4B South Korean Won during 2025 (Tsai and Li, 2025).

Emerging Developments and Growth Potential. Beyond an external demand for South Korean manufacturing, which has recently been heightened by challenges of reliability in dependence on technologies developed in Taiwan due to geopolitical challenges, there exists a substantial internal incentive within the South Korean government to prioritize both R&D efforts centered around innovation as well as domestic manufacturing jobs; such an incentive is characterized by government investment in public corporations engaging in such aspects of production steadily rising from 2% in 1999 to over 5% in 2023 (Globalen, 2025; Kim, 2022). Additionally, the existing risk-sharing model of innovation within South Korea has empirically established a striking precedent for corporations, small- and medium-sized enterprises, and would-be innovators to lower upfront capital costs for production, enhancing productive innovation cycles in a manner that has outcompeted nearly all comparable markets in pace (Lee, 2010). From the standpoint of AI adoption, which has been a crucial indicator for the necessity of economic development in an increasingly digitalized economy, South Korea has been a striking catalyst – over 80% of South Korean workers utilize such technology during their daily occupations, and, conversely, 70% of employers indicate a positive association between AI literacy and hiring rates. Therefore, it appears that South Korea is uniquely positioned to assume a central role in an evolving global economy in which innovation has emerged as a crucial metric for possibilities of success (International Monetary Fund, 2025).

Despite the many indicators pointing to the short-term strength of the South Korean economy, investigators have identified several factors that may comprise the feasibility of the current growth model if modifications are not undertaken. Specifically, South Korea's demographic imbalance is particularly crucial, as fertility rates and aggregate population growth have remained relatively low, with a projected value of 0.77 in 2026 and the lowest value among all OECD member states in 2020 (Lee, 2023). Therefore, the ensuing challenges placed on the shrinking young population of South Korea could be particularly influential in the coming decades provided that societal behavior and government incentives do not undergo significant modifications to reverse current trends (Hwang et al., 2023). Moreover, in a challenge shared by a large fraction of developing and industrialized nations alike, small and medium-scale enterprises (SME's) pale in both revenue and employment considerations when compared to the most powerful chaebols; thus, despite the existence of incentives to spur development from ground-up efforts that progressively increase in scale, such incentives have largely remained ineffective in establishing a sufficiently competitive economic framework from a macroeconomic perspective (Hwang et al., 2023). Additionally, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has declined in recent years, from 19.04 billion USD in 2023 to 14.7 billion USD in 2024, indicating that external support for domestic industries might necessitate a bolstered approach towards foreign policy (Lloyds Bank, 2025).

International Ramifications for Economic Development. From the standpoint of South Korea-U.S. relations, the precedent of U.S.-guided Korean FDI through the CHIPS Act, together with numerous R&D partnerships to guide complementarity within innovative policies (Manyin, 2004). Incentives for such partnerships are high, particularly given that a militaristic cooperative plan might allow for increased soft power projection against Chinese influence within Northeast Asia; therefore, the coupled effect of both technological and foreign policy-related incentives could bolster such an alliance (Lee, 2024). Despite the existence of one-off disputes between

U.S. nuclear energy firms and South Korean counterparts, particularly in the context of Westinghouse Electric Company (based in the U.S.) and Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power (KHNP), there exists substantial desire for alignment, particularly given the external incentives for cooperation in regards to technological development (Lee, 2024).

Moreover, it must be noted that South Korea remains within a tug-of-war, particularly since Chinese involvement within exports of South Korean-manufactured technologies; therefore, South Korea's economic viability remains tied to China's continued economic proliferation, albeit on a gradually lessening scale (Chua et al., 2025). Moreover, hedging possibilities could pose substantial challenges given increasing Sino-U.S. diplomatic friction, particularly given the comparatively small economic leverage exerted by South Korea in the broader three-body relationship (Chai and Kim, 2025). Finally, geoeconomic fragmentation and a broader decline in globalization poses a substantial challenge for South Korea in particular, specifically given the central role of exports in driving long-term economic prosperity (Chai and Kim, 2025).

Japan

Context. Japan's inflation rate remaining at a near-zero value during several decades, the International Monetary Fund has recently posited that inflation rates, per the headline Consumer Price Index (CPI), have finally stabilized at the 2% value established as a nominally beneficial value by the Bank of Japan (International Monetary Fund, 2025). Moreover, a rise in the proliferation of the labor market, coupled with an influx of consumer spending and corporate investment that has been strongly correlated with an increase in aggregate inflation rates, is likely to bolster labor opportunities across sectors, together with a particularly high possibility of emerging business growth (International Monetary Fund, 2025; Coface, 2025). It is notable that Japan has substantially outperformed all members of the G7 (except for the United States) when considering the average annual growth rate of real GDP per hour worked, demonstrating that labor productivity and broader efficiency is extremely high (Coface, 2025). Additionally, stabilization of job openings in comparison with job applications, together with a labor market that is substantially more balanced between service and manufacturing-related occupations, is expected to offer possibilities for long-term feasibility of dominant Japanese industries, particularly when placed in a comparative with South Korea (OECD, 2025).

Inhibitory Factors. When considering the challenges faced by the modern Japanese economy, however, it is notable that real GDP projections are nearly uniformly expected to decrease in average annual growth rates over the next few years, particularly due to concerns regarding the possibilities of risk aversion as well as a broad extrapolation of the existing decline in domestic demand (International Monetary Fund, 2025). Additionally, while FDI is expected to substantially increase progressively until 2030, any possible positive impact will likely be offset by a decrease in public expenditures to negligible values, as projected by the IMF. Moreover, substantial economic considerations may involve Taiwan Strait relations, particularly given recent antagonism between Japan and China as well as the intrinsic competitiveness for raw exports from Taiwan among both nations, implying that escalatory retaliatory behaviors may occur with non-negligible probabilities.

III. Strong Potential with Risks: Economic Development in Southeast Asia

Singapore

Context. Singapore has the highest GDP per capita in Southeast Asia (US$87,208.76 in 2023). Singapore's economy is relatively diversified: in 2023, 22% of GDP came from the wholesale sector, 19% from manufacturing, 14% from finance and insurance, 12% from business services, 10% from other services and the remaining from transportation, storage, construction, utilities, and ownership of dwellings (EDB Singapore, 2023). Singapore’s GDP growth forecast for 2025 has been upgraded from 1.5%-2.5% to around 4.0% by the Ministry of Trade and Industry in November 2025. This positive economic outlook has not been dampened by Trump’s tariffs on the region. In fact, frontloading by businesses gave a temporary boost to economic output in the first and second quarters this year, with private consumption remaining relatively stable due to a steady labor market and moderate inflation (Chang, 2025). FDI has continued to increase in the past few years (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2025): as of 2024, Singapore remains one of the largest sources of FDI into ASEAN, accounting for over US$115 billion in cumulative investment stock across member states (ASEAN Briefing, 2025).

Analysis of Developments: Tariffs, Digitization, and Regional Geopolitics. The Trump Administration has implemented a 10% baseline tariff on goods from Singapore. While this is lower than tariffs implemented on other ASEAN countries, sectoral tariffs pose potential challenges to Singapore's pharmaceutical and electronics industries, which together constitute 40% of Singapore's exports to the United States (Reuters Staff, 2025). However, Singapore is relatively well positioned to mitigate the impacts of American tariffs for two reasons. First, the financial sector is well equipped to capitalize on heightened volatility in markets. While volatility decreases demand for certain kinds of financial services such as IPO underwriting and M&A advisory (EY, 2023), it also increases demand for foreign exchange hedging, derivatives, and broader risk management instruments. Second, the Trump administration's tariff threats—even if implemented—are unlikely to cause immediate direct impacts on the remainder of Singapore's export sector: Singapore's main export partners in 2024 were China ($170 billion), Malaysia ($138.6 billion), Indonesia ($74.2 billion) and Thailand ($44.5 billion) (Singapore International Trade, 2023). While US tariffs may generate b trickle-down effects such as reduced spending or import capacity for Singapore's export partners, Singapore can partially mitigate these challenges. In fact, Singapore can capitalize on its diversified trade ties and unique position as a mediator: Singapore is an active member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and more than 25 bilateral free trade agreements (ASEAN Briefing, 2025b). On 16 September 2025, Singapore and 13 other small nations established the Future of Investment and Trade Partnership (FIT) (Ortega, 2025), which serves as a platform for nations to support open and free trade, strengthen supply chains, and promote FDI flows. Singapore's amicable diplomatic relations with many nations and advanced economies also imbues it with the necessary capacity to create new trade relations with markets in the rest of the world, circumventing reduced trade volume with the United States and countries overly reliant on exporting to the United States.

In 2024, the nominal value added of Singapore's digital economy reached S$128.1 billion, accounting for 18.6% of GDP, up from 18.0% of GDP in 2023 (IMDA Singapore, 2025). This is clearly reflected in the deepening of enterprise digitalization and AI adoption across both large firms and SMEs. Singapore faces two main challenges with respect to growing its digital economy. First, inherent to digitalization are cybersecurity threats. 2024 was marked by a surge in global and local cyber incidents, with significant increases across multiple threat categories (Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, 2025). In Q4 of 2024, Singapore was ranked the seventh most attacked country, reflecting its vulnerability as a major digital hub with dense data center infrastructure (Baker McKenzie, 2024). Second, while cybersecurity threats are transnational, effective regional collaboration has yet to materialize. Scam centers operate from developing nations like Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos (Naing, 2025), which are outside the jurisdiction of Singapore. However, since many developing nations prioritize developing digital infrastructure over protecting advanced systems, their cybersecurity priorities often diverge from those of more economically developed states such as Singapore. This misalignment contributes to uneven responses to cyberthreats and feeds into the broader pattern of geopolitical fragmentation within ASEAN, where countries are generally at different stages of economic development and pursue fundamentally differing strategic priorities. ASEAN as an organization is also not effective in resolving regional disputes and differences in interests; its foundational principles (non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, and informal diplomacy) have historically hindered ASEAN's capacity to take assertive and timely action in responding to internal political turmoil and complex geopolitical disputes. For instance, ASEAN has failed to resolve the Myanmar crisis (Kurlantzick, 2022), restore stability to the Thai-Cambodian border, and put an end to the South China Sea territorial dispute (Serey, 2021), continuing the historical trend of falling short in regional conflict resolution. Given the inherent deviations in interests and priorities, the lack of effective conflict mediation toolkits poses a serious problem for regional unity—a prerequisite for regional economic integration and domestic economic stability.

Indonesia

Context. Indonesia, with a population of approximately 283 million, is Southeast Asia's largest economy, with a GDP of $1.46 trillion USD in 2024 (International Trade Administration, 2022). Indonesia's GDP grew by 5.12% year-on-year in Q2 2025, an improvement from 5.05% recorded in the same quarter of the previous year. Preliminary figures indicated that the manufacturing sector accounted for 18.98% of Indonesia's GDP, making it the largest contributor to the nation's economy. This was followed by wholesale and retail trade (13.07%), agricultural, forestry and fishing (12.61%), construction (10.09%) and mining and quarrying (9.15%) (Statista, 2023). In 2023, the top exports of Indonesia were coal briquettes ($38.8B), palm oil ($24.8B), ferroalloys ($14.8B), lignite ($10.7B), and petroleum gas ($9.26B). The top destinations for its exports were China ($70.7B), United States ($27.9B), India ($24B), Japan

($23.7B), and Singapore ($15.8B) (OEC, 2022). FDI has increased from US$21.54 billion in 2023 to US$24.11 billion in 2024 (World Bank, 2024).

Analysis of Developments: Tariffs, Digitization, Domestic Instability. Indonesian exports to the United States are now subject to 19% reciprocal tariffs, with the exception of goods not produced in the United States such as palm oil, cocoa, and rubber (Strangio, 2025). On the other hand, U.S. exports to Indonesia are to be subject to 0% tariffs. Indonesia has also pledged to purchase US$15 billion of US energy products, US$4.5 billion of agricultural goods, and 50 Boeing jets (Baker McKenzie, 2025). Beyond growing Indonesia's trade deficit with the United States, these agreements risk flooding Indonesia's domestic market with imported products that could threaten local industries, especially SMEs that will struggle to compete with U.S. products with higher quality and lower prices (Yanuar, 2024). With regards to how Indonesia can cope with this shift in trade dynamics, Indonesia's strong trade ties with other countries suggest that the impact of tariffs will not be too crippling: top destinations for Indonesian exports in 2024 were China ($70.7B), United States ($27.9B), India ($24B), Japan ($23.7B), and Singapore ($15.8B). Top import destinations were China ($62.7B), Singapore ($18.2B), Japan ($15.4B), United States ($11B), and Malaysia ($10.9B) (OEC, 2022). Indonesia has also been making progress on new regional trade agreements, including the Indonesia-European Union Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IEU-CEPA), which has undergone over 19 rounds of talks (International Trade Administration, 2022).

Indonesia's digital economy is projected to exceed US$130 billion by 2025, driven largely by e-commerce and fintech. As of early 2024, internet penetration has reached 79.5% with over 221 million internet users, supported by improved mobile broadband and expanding digital literacy (ITA, 2024). However, Indonesia has to confront two main challenges in its development of the digital economy. First, despite national efforts like the 2019 completion of the Palapa Ring project, internet access remains unevenly available. The digital divide is caused by various factors, including diverse geographical conditions, limited electricity resources, high bandwidth costs outside of Java, inadequate and unaffordable tools, and gender-based disparities. Inadequate infrastructure to support digitalization is especially serious in the 3T (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped) areas (Indonesia Civil Society of Digital Transformation Task Force, 2022). Second, cybersecurity and data protection remain pressing challenges. In June 2024, Indonesia's National Data Center fell victim to a sophisticated ransomware attack, bringing critical government services to a standstill. Bank Indonesia (BI) reported over 370 million cybercrime threats targeting Indonesia, alongside a 25% rise in anomalous cyber traffic in 2024 (Razak, 2025). Given that cyberattacks heavily compromise trust in the digital economy and the stability of day-to-day operations of governments and businesses, this remains an urgent issue that must be addressed.

Finally, Indonesia has to contend with the economic effects of domestic political instability. In August 2025, demonstrators took to the streets in many Indonesian cities, with several turning violent. Over 3,000 people have been detained, and at least 10 people have died (Kurlantzick, 2025). In November, thousands of residents in Indonesia's Riau province palm oil belt protested against the takeover of their plantations by the government's forestry task force (Reuters Staff, 2025). Ineffective implementation of populist policies and perceived corruption have fueled public frustration with the Prabowo regime: despite budgeting IDR306 trillion for the Free and Nutritious Meal (MBG) programme, the initiative has been poorly planned, linked to food poisoning outbreaks, and has placed considerable strain on government finances. At the same time, the government has substantially increased the defence budget, which was revised to IDR245.2 trillion by mid-2025, representing a more than 75% increase over 2024 and nearly matching the national social safety net budget (Wijaya & Jayasuriya, 2025). Consequently, the Indonesian rupiah is set to hit record lows, and the value of Indonesian stocks has already fallen (Bao, 2025).

IV. Steps Forward for the Region

a. Indonesia and Singapore

Domestic political stability remains the most important challenge that Indonesia has to overcome, as political stability has a positive and statistically significant impact in attracting foreign capital flow (Faruq, 2023). This has ripple effects on Indonesia’s efforts to digitalize and mitigate the effects of US tariffs and the global trade war: stronger domestic industries and a more even distribution of digitalization would undoubtedly be beneficial for Indonesians, both of which require resources.

The key tenet linking protests in Indonesia in the past few years is distrust in government institutions. While President Prabowo is still largely popular, the populace’s anger has been largely directed at members of the Indonesian National Police, House of Representatives and the military (Andreyka Natalegawa, 2025). It is no surprise that the set of demands released by a coalition of civil society organizations are focused on state reforms (*17+8 Tuntutan Rakyat - Bijak Memantau*, 2025). Prabowo has so far conceded to some of the demands (Muktita Suhartono & Wee, 2025), even cancelling a trip to China to negotiate with religious and political leaders. If Indonesia wants long term political stability, restoring trust in government institutions instead of violent crackdowns is likely to be the more effective solution (Jaffrey, 2025).

On the other hand, Singapore ranks as one of the most politically stable countries in the world (BTI, 2024). However, given the digitization of many businesses and government services and operations, cybersecurity is the most urgent challenge Singapore has to contend with to protect the integrity of government institutions and the growth of businesses (Cyber Security Agency Singapore, 2023). The strengthening of domestic infrastructure is critical; in this regard, the Singapore government has taken concrete steps to protect state infrastructure and support private businesses in shoring up cybersecurity, such as the Cyber Protect Programme which strengthens Small Medium Enterprises' cybersecurity defence, and the OT Cybersecurity Masterplan (IMDA Singapore, 2025).

The more difficult obstacle to overcome is the lack of regional coordination in tackling cybersecurity issues. Hence far, ASEAN programs have mainly focused on individual state capacity building, creating platforms for regional dialogue and information sharing (Brock, 2024). To tackle cybersecurity threats effectively, however, there needs to be a clear and comprehensive framework on incident response, digital forensics, secure data exchange, and policy harmonisation to minimize the amount of inconsistencies that cyber criminals can exploit in the region (Azmi, 2025). Considering that both Indonesia and Singapore have vested interests in strengthening the cybersecurity space in the region, given Singapore's resources and technological capabilities and Indonesia's political weight in ASEAN, Indonesia and Singapore have the power to jointly champion the development of region-wide standards and lead the establishment of a coordinated incident-response mechanism, serving as the dual anchors of ASEAN's cyber governance architecture.

b. Japan and South Korea

In a functional similarity to the discussion of Indonesian and Singaporean economies in the prior section, a critical tenet of further economic proliferation within Japan and South Korea – particularly given their newfound partnership extending to the executive level – involves the coupled expansion of domestic infrastructure alongside trade resiliency (Hernandez, 2026).

While both nations benefit from mature democratic institutions, trust in economic efficiency, supply-chain resilience, innovation pipelines, and international posturing are simultaneously critical to maintaining foreign investment and domestic innovation. In particular, Research and Development (R&D) and high-tech industries are pivotal drivers of growth (OECD, 2025) For instance, South Korea's semiconductor, biotech, and AI sectors have expanded rapidly, supported by targeted government subsidies and public-private partnerships (Tsai & Li, 2025). By contrast, Japan exhibits strengths across the areas of robotics, sustainable and renewable technology, and precision manufacturing, and therefore would analogously benefit substantially from coordinated R&D strategies and industrial policy frameworks (OECD, 2025). Consequently, such positive consequences extend not only to domestic economic success, particularly in labor force expansion and segmentation, yet simultaneously increased trading incentives due to the international perception of frontier-level Japanese innovation. It is therefore critical for both countries to engage in joint initiatives across industrial R&D, semiconductor supply chain resilience, and standardization of digital innovation (Akcigit *et al.*, 2018).

Such developments may also coevolve with cybersecurity resilience in a parallel to Indonesian innovation, allowing for security efforts to mirror adaptive and autonomous technologies. As machine-learning-based frameworks become increasingly incorporated into cybersecurity capabilities, particularly in the frequency and depth of emergent cyberattacks, such coevolved security development programs are both timely and uniquely critical (de Percy, 2025). Japan is currently engaging in efforts that aspire towards functionally identical objectives: the recent "Society 5.0" initiative seeks to integrate cyberspace and physical systems as a manner of counteracting existing labor shortages and enhance productivity through coupling retraining with expansion of the young workforce (Kawai, 2023). However, structural barriers to the implementation of such programs remain, especially given enduring bureaucratic institutions that stifle innovation in the cybersecurity space, while investment pressures simultaneously remain low. Therefore, the necessity of cooperation amongst South Korea and Japan in fueling such innovation assumes an increasingly essential role. Additionally, the South Korean legislature ought to consider efforts to improve the final concern of investment, particularly given the necessity of public-private partnerships in fueling cybersecurity defense considerations within analogous nations in the West.

V. Conclusion

Consequently, the detailed case studies of South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia presented above demonstrate that East and Southeast Asia are rapidly advancing from industrializing economies to emerging leaders of an increasingly fragmented global order. More specifically, state-led industrialization and digital strategies have provided these countries the opportunity to construct globally competitive manufacturing sectors, develop platform economies, and integrate into global value chains. Nonetheless, the foundations of that success—such as strong export industries and technological concentration—are now under new vulnerabilities as geopolitical tensions, tariffs, cyber insecurity, and other strategic risks reshape the economic environment. The Southeast Asia Policy Recommendations section establishes that managing these pressures in practice requires considerable effort. In Indonesia, for instance, long-run growth is heavily dependent on restoring trust in core state institutions so that foreign capital, domestic investment, and digital infrastructure may readily expand on a stable political foundation. In Singapore, while political stability and high state capacity are present, there is an increasing need for digital ecosystems and defense mechanisms that can keep up with the country's role as a digital hub.

When projecting into future estimates of economic proliferation, the key question remains the possibility of examining how nations in both East Asia and Southeast Asia may transform their digital and industrial capabilities into resilient, more inclusive development models. Turning inward, the next phase of development will depend on how these countries widen access to digital infrastructure and confront demographic and social vulnerabilities at home. As a region, this objective involves pushing ASEAN and related forums toward more concrete frameworks on cybersecurity, data management, and crisis management. In other words, ASEAN is in need of a more structured framework anchored by Singapore and Indonesia to help turn the region's digital capacities into shared security rather than risk. If governments succeed in adapting to cybersecurity risks and an evolving global order with higher geopolitical tensions, East and Southeast Asian nations are likely to remain global engines of growth, innovation, and production.

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Holding the Line: Mapping Europe's Security Horizons

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Executive Summary

This paper examines how Europe can enhance its defense and resilience in the face of shifting geopolitical realities and the erosion of U.S. security guarantees. It also explores three potential scenarios for the continent—halted military actions, continuation of hybrid conflict, and Russian full-scale invasion—considering how each would test Europe's capacity to coordinate, deter, and adapt. Drawing on policy documents, defense data, and scholarly work, this evaluation assesses the effectiveness of NATO and EU frameworks while identifying pathways toward greater strategic autonomy. The analysis culminates in practical policy options to enhance Europe's preparedness, unity, and ability to shape its own security horizon in an era of renewed geopolitical contestation.

I. Introduction and Background

In November, a major rail link in eastern Poland—a key corridor for military aid and logistics across Europe—was struck by an "unprecedented act of sabotage," according to the Polish Prime Minister (Wiener, 2025). That single event has been joined by multiple arrests of suspected saboteurs and the uncovering of intelligence-linked plots on Polish soil, marking a clear escalation of what officials call a “shadow war” beneath the threshold of open combat. In 2025, Europe faced a surge in cyberattacks, with government agencies, energy grids, and transport networks across multiple EU member states targeted.

FIGURE 2

Targets of Russian Attacks in Europe, 2022-2025

Source: CSIS analysis.

Hostile actions are testing the continent’s ability to detect, attribute, and respond to various types of aggression, which are illustrated by the graph produced by CSIS (CSIS, 2025). It is becoming increasingly likely that such operations are not isolated incidents, but rather part of a broader campaign aimed at undermining public confidence—identified by professor of military strategy and operations Tormod Heier as one of the weakest links in democratic societies (Heier, 2025 [interview])—thereby straining security resources and eroding Europe’s collective will to act.

With Europe’s frontline states under direct pressure, the illusion of safe rear areas is collapsing. Europe now stands on the threshold of a wider confrontation, as acts of sabotage, military provocation, and strategic pressure test not just national defenses, but the continent’s collective capacity to deter escalation, revealing how quickly regional instability could ignite a broader European conflict. Mapping Europe’s security horizons is a necessary reckoning because the battlefield is moving from eastern Ukraine to the entire European continent. More importantly, the crippling security scene and weak institutions encourage economic, military, and political attacks from Russia and China. Given their authoritarian systems, they can act unilaterally, which gives them a significant advantage in conflicts with Western systems and institutions.

II. Issue Description

Europe’s security challenge has evolved beyond traditional military threats to become systemic, multidimensional, and pressing. The erosion of U.S. security guarantees, the persistence of Russian aggression, and the expansion of hybrid tactics have left Europe navigating a new era of strategic uncertainty. According to Professor Heier, the prevailing uncertainty explains the 40% rise in defense budgets from European countries by 2025 (Heier, 2025 [interview]).

Despite rising defense budgets and renewed calls for European autonomy, coordination among EU member states and within NATO remains uneven. Critical vulnerabilities persist in supply chains, cyber defenses, energy infrastructure, and societal resilience against disinformation, reflecting the EU's decentralized security system and the United States’ capacity to act unilaterally in defense—an imbalance that directly exposes the structural gap between the EU and NATO (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025). Equally pressing is the erosion of public trust and institutional credibility under the weight of disinformation campaigns that exploit social and political divides within European societies. Europe lacks a cohesive, long-term framework to manage simultaneous crises—whether hybrid or economic—and to act decisively without excessive reliance on external security guarantors, such as the United States (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025). This was evident in the 2022 gas crisis, when member states prioritized national interests over a unified policy, resulting in separate national adjustments rather than a cohesive strategy (Frizzelle et al., 2022). The EU is not a unitary actor: while states such as Poland and Finland are concerned with active military threats from Russia, Western European countries prioritize other issues that disturb their states’ domestic affairs (Heier 2025, [interview]).

The central problem this paper addresses is how Europe can develop and sustain a coherent, collective defense posture capable of deterring aggression, mitigating hybrid threats, and preserving stability under three plausible futures: postwar reconstruction, ongoing hybrid conflict, and full-scale invasion.

III. Scenario I: Postwar Reconstruction

In the most optimistic scenario, Europe sees a negotiated end to active hostilities, with the war in Ukraine reaching a ceasefire and frontline combat largely coming to a halt. Then, the immediate military threat recedes and pressures on NATO ease. However, this scenario hinges critically on how the conflict concludes. Three outcomes are possible: a Ukrainian victory, a Russian victory, or a negotiated settlement. The Ukrainian grand triumph seems implausible given the events on the ground, as Russia advanced an average of 8.6 km² per day in September and October, while in mid-November, it rose to 17.6 km² (DeepStateMap, 2025). A Russian victory likewise appears unlikely, given that nearly one million Russian soldiers have been killed or injured since the start of the war (Edwards, 2025), key domestic industries are under severe strain (Prem, 2025), and Ukrainian strikes deep inside Russian territory have intensified. Therefore, the most plausible pathway toward postwar reconstruction is a negotiated settlement, such as the ceasefire proposal advanced by President Trump and his administration, which would involve freezing the front line and halting active hostilities (Jensen & Yasir Atalan, 2025). The terms of any ceasefire—who controls which borders, who monitors them, what guarantees are in place—will therefore shape Europe's security order for years to come (Marangé & Stewart, 2025).

What are the priorities for European policy in such a case?

Under these conditions, Europe's task is to transition from wartime footing to a peacetime posture without surrendering hard-won deterrence or coordination. More specifically, Europe will have to prepare for future conflict by supporting Ukraine, guaranteeing the deal, protecting other states in Russia's line of fire, and substantially increasing its own military capabilities and spending. Thus, Europe will have to do more, not less, to contain Russia and protect not only Ukraine, but also the European continent as a whole (Zuleeg, 2025).

Starting with the defense budgets, NATO's leaders have already agreed that a spending target even beyond the 2% GDP standard "is needed urgently" to remedy capability shortfalls (NATO Heads of State and Government, 2024). Thus, a prudent response would be to reallocate a peace dividend into modernization and resilience. As analysts note, if Europe invests rationally and coordinately, higher defence outlays can yield economic dividends by strengthening the

European defence industry (Hartley, 2025). Therefore, NATO should keep strong forward forces and regular exercises on the eastern flank instead of scaling them back. EU countries, utilizing tools such as PESCO and the Strategic Compass, should continue to increase their defence budgets and expedite long-delayed capability projects. Priority investments include modern air and missile defence, drones, cyber resilience, and rapid-response forces. The EU's new Defence Industrial Strategy, which aims for half of defence procurement to be joint by 2030 (European Commission, 2024), should be accelerated in a post-war period to build a shared supply chain and avoid duplication, while the members should work closer with each other, getting ready to counter Washington's role becoming more transactional (Marangé & Stewart, 2025).

Second, the EU and its partners should lock in stability throughout the continent. Policymakers should treat any ceasefire as merely a pause, not a solution. This means maintaining support to Ukraine and its neighbours even if direct fighting stops. EU leaders should work with Ukraine now on a "beyond the horizon" plan: assistance for reconstruction, continued military aid, and integration of Ukraine into European markets and institutions (Tenev, 2025). For instance, the EU Military Assistance Mission may need to deploy trainers and equipment into Ukraine to help Kyiv maintain control of its airspace and coastline (Gray, 2025). Europe should also bolster its own resilience against sabotage. Key infrastructure (energy grids, supply routes, undersea cables, etc) must be hardened, and NATO/EU exercises expanded to include cyber and information warfare defense. The war has shown that Russia wields disinformation and cyber operations aggressively, with experts emphasizing that "years—if not decades—of relentless hybrid warfare" should be expected (Tenev, 2025). EU agencies should therefore fund counter-disinformation campaigns, secure civilian communication networks, and expand the NATO Cyber Defence Centre to shore up networks.

Overall, although Scenario I appears to be the least likely based on current developments, it still requires planning for a cautious recalibration, rather than a relaxation. Europe can lower the risk of aggression, but many security challenges will remain. The EU, working hand-in-glove with NATO, should use this pause to strengthen cooperation, modernize forces, and prepare for hybrid contests. That way, the continent is not caught flat-footed if the "peace" proves only temporary or if new crises arise.

IV. Scenario II: Hybrid Warfare

The second scenario describes the continuation of hybrid threats. According to NATO's definition, hybrid threats combine military and non-military, as well as covert and overt, means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, the deployment of irregular armed groups, and the use of regular forces (NATO, 2024). Russia is known for its indirect operations in Europe, including interference in elections—for instance, spreading pro-Brexit content during the 2016 British referendum—cyberattacks, and manipulation of public opinion through social media (Gressel, 2019). After 2022, this has intensified, as Russian sabotage of European critical infrastructures has increased by 246% in only one year from 2023 to 2024. According to publicly available information, there have been 25 incidents of sabotage, espionage, and vandalism against NATO military infrastructure in the first five months of 2025 (Charlie Edwards, 2025). Moreover, there were multiple events of Russian military aircraft, along with drones, flying into European airspace (Reuters, 2025). In addition, more disruptive attacks involved anchor-dragging by Russia's "shadow fleet." One of such incident involved the Cook Islands-flagged Eagle S, which dragged its anchor and cut the Estlink-2 undersea cable in the Gulf of Finland, and the Chinese-flagged Yi Peng 3, which is suspected of having deliberately dragged its anchor to cut the C-Lion1 cable connecting Finland and Germany and the Arelion cable linking Sweden and Lithuania (Cooney, 2024). There have also been cases of cyberattacks, misinformation campaigns, and various other indirect threats (Newton, 2021).

According to Prof. Tormod Heier, the frequency of such incidents is likely to increase. As he notes, drawing on a quotation from Chinese philosophy, actors should "protect their own weaknesses and identify where their enemy is most vulnerable." A direct attack on Europe will not end well for Russia, as Europe's military potential is larger than Russia's, particularly when considering the combined forces of NATO and the EU, which have more active personnel, aircraft, and armored vehicles. Consequently, as Professor Heier argues, Russia is more likely to target Europe's points of vulnerability—most notably its civil society—rather than engage in direct military confrontation (Heier, 2025 [interview]).

Given that attacks have recently intensified, Europe needs to be prepared to counter such threats in the near future. For example, NATO has already stated that serious cyberattacks could trigger Article 5, acknowledging that online operations can have real-world consequences. Overall, deterrence against hybrid threats has become more prominent in NATO's strategy recently, as evidenced by the steps taken between the Wales and Warsaw summits, which laid the groundwork for countering hybrid threats (Colom Piella, 2022). Moreover, they began conducting joint exercises, such as Locked Shields 2025, hosted by the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. It is crucial that European countries, outside of the NATO alliance, are also invited to participate, thereby improving the overall continent's readiness. However, it is also important to show that any attack will have a response. International law permits non-forcible responses, including retorsions and proportionate countermeasures, in response to cyber wrongdoing. This may include disrupting hostile digital infrastructure, seizing illegal devices, restricting network access, and blocking unlawful transmissions, as long as the actions remain legal, proportional, and safe, allowing European countries to utilize them.

European countries also need to be prepared for more airspace violations, since it can be seen that as Russian attacks on Ukraine intensify, the number of foreign objects flying over the EU border increases. Thus, European countries need to invest in measures that help mitigate the impact of foreign drones on civil aviation safety. A safer approach combines layered detection with non-jamming countermeasures that preserve evidence for legal use. They should also consider allowing police or gendarmerie helicopter teams to operate with military sensor support, deploying compliant takeover tools or physical interceptors while maintaining a full chain of custody (Janjalia, 2025). Moreover, major maritime areas, especially ones that contain strategic infrastructural objects, need to be monitored extensively, using 24/7 surveillance and joint military patrols.

It is essential to recognize that the effectiveness of deterrence and the extent of the countermeasures needed will depend on how the aggressor perceives Europe's military capabilities and political will. Recent talks about a "response" (Efrat Lachter, 2025) are a good example, as they raise the stakes for Russia's potential attacks. There is a high chance that Russia will retaliate; however, the risk can be mitigated by acting strictly within the law and emphasizing safety, including no broad jamming near airports, no interdictions that violate the law of the sea, and no covert launches from allied territory.

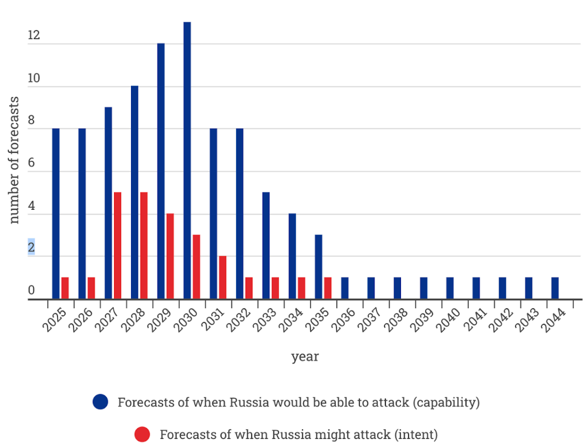
Meanwhile, turning to the impact on civilians—greatly emphasized by Professor Heier (Heier, 2025 [interview]) —Europe should focus work on its Civil Society Strategy, which was recently presented (Civil Society Europe, 2025). As long as citizens have confidence in their governments, the states are safe. Otherwise, adversaries might see it as an opportunity to fuel polarization and cause internal disputes, which could shatter the country's stability.

V. Scenario III: Full-Scale Invasion

The third scenario is certainly the most drastic: war between Russia and NATO. In recent years, rhetoric surrounding this particular scenario has blossomed, leaving military analysts speculating about if, when, and how Russia could invade. As has been previously discussed, the likelihood of this scenario is contingent upon the outcome of war in Ukraine. Yet, as peace plans start to emerge and diplomatic talks to halt the conflict seem ubiquitous, a real study of possible post-war outcomes becomes increasingly necessary.

Since January of 2024, Western intelligence services have been issuing warnings to the Western community: war with Russia is not an outlandish theory; instead, it could become a real possibility (Psaropoulos 2025). In late 2025, a top German operational commander, Inspector General of the Bundeswehr Carsten Breuer, warned that Russia would possess the capacity to launch a large-scale offensive against NATO by 2029 (Urbancik 2025). He stressed that Moscow is already capable of conducting a regionally limited strike, particularly along the Baltic frontier. In parallel, Russia has been rebuilding its land forces, expanding drone programs, and modernizing its nuclear arsenal, upgrading as many as 21 ICBM regiments. For many Western officials, like former Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, plans to grow active duty

Figure 1: Forecasts of when Russia will be able to attack and might attack



Source: Simon Saradzhyan, Belfer Center, Harvard University

forces by 50 percent to as many as 1.5 million troops demonstrate not only that Russia is manufacturing its capacity to invade, but also highlight its active desire to do so (Lunday& Fürsen 2025; Saradzhyan 2025). Therefore, while the Russian military does not currently possess the infrastructure necessary for a large-scale invasion, analysts posit that they are amassing the resources to do so. Indeed, according to a recent study by the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, the majority of leaders predicting an attack on NATO find it most plausible that Russia could or would invade around 2030. [**see figure 1]**

Joseph Fitsanakis, the assistant director of the Center for Applied Intelligence at Coastal Carolina University, an institution dedicated to teaching intelligence politics, describes the present moment as a "period of emergency" (Duty, 2025): the most overt phase of Russian military preparation against the West, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Hybrid attacks and instances of fighter and reconnaissance jets flying into European airspace (as they did in September in both Estonia and Germany) appear designed less as hybrid tactics for destabilization, and more to actively probe vulnerabilities in Western defenses. This pattern aligns with historical examples of Soviet and Russian war preparations: before the 2008 war in Georgia, for example, evidence suggests that Russia launched large cyber operations to degrade Georgian systems as well as to gather evidence (Psaropoulos 2025; Chincharadze 2024).

The likelihood of escalation also depends on the political context that emerges at the end of the Ukraine war. Several proposed peace deals, including the 28-point plan recently advanced by Washington, would restrict Ukraine's military capabilities, block its NATO membership, and freeze Russian territorial gains. Critics argue that such an arrangement would weaken deterrence, reward aggression, and give Russia time to rebuild its forces. The result could amount to what Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk called a "creeping capitulation" (Benson, Murphy, 2025). If Ukraine is left unable to defend itself and the West appears unwilling to project power into the region, Russia may judge that another offensive will encounter limited resistance.

There are a few plausible scenarios for Russian military intervention against NATO. One of the most widely discussed pivots around Estonia, which sits at a vulnerable intersection between St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad. Its 180-mile border with Russia presents opportunities for limited, rapid action. Analysts have pointed to recent incidents on the frontier, including armed individuals attempting to cross from Russia and the incursion of fighter jets into their airspace in September, as potential tests of NATO reactions.

Carlo Masala, a renowned professor of politics at Bundeswehr University, where he teaches future German military officers, asserts that a likely scenario involves a Russian move on the city of Narva, where a majority of residents are Russian-speaking. In the same way that Russia justified their aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia would likely wield propaganda to hail itself as a protector of "mistreated" Russian minorities abroad. Using hybrid warfare tactics to disunite NATO, Russia might count on the alliance hesitating to invoke Article 5 for such a small territory (Cole 2025). This moment of indecision could erode NATO's strength, specifically its credibility through unity. Instead, profound distrust would continue seeping through the alliance, effectively disarming it against the Russian threat.

Indeed, while Europe is depleting its arsenals in Ukraine, Russian preparations are already visible: military factories are running at wartime levels. New mechanized infantry, helicopter air assault and Navy divisions are likely being formed. Hybrid operations, ranging from sabotage to targeted disinformation, are continually testing European responses (Lunday 2025). In response, European leaders are trying to amass support for increased military spending (Saradzhyan 2025). At their 2025 summit in The Hague, for example, NATO members pledged to increase defense spending to 5 percent of GDP annually (The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2025). Unilateral efforts are also emerging: French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, recently unveiled a plan to reintroduce a form of military service (Gozzi 2025). Yet, Western intelligence officials warn that Europe remains insufficiently prepared. From disagreements on levels of military spending to restrictions on intelligence sharing and Washington's reticence to support the alliance, NATO's collective readiness remains subpar (Psaropoulos 2025).

In conclusion, the best way to avoid a full-fledged conflict is to prepare for it: only a unified front can persuade Russia that attacking would be too costly for them. That requires clear political will, increased military preparation, intelligence cooperation, and support for Ukraine. Without these steps, the scenario that once seemed unthinkable may edge closer to reality.

VI. Conclusion and Next Steps

Europe faces an imperative: translate political will and budget increases into coordinated, durable security capacity. Across the ceasefire, hybrid, and invasion scenarios, the priorities are consistent: strengthen EU-NATO planning and intelligence-sharing; prioritize interoperable procurement and common logistics; and harden critical civilian infrastructure, including energy, transport, communications, and undersea cables, against cyber and physical sabotage. Sustained material and diplomatic support for Ukraine should be framed as stabilisation, not charity, while reconstruction planning must begin now to avoid ad-hoc responses later. Equally important is rebuilding public confidence through transparent crisis management and targeted counter-disinformation measures that reinforce civic resilience. These steps are manageable, but they require sustained political leadership, clearer burden-sharing, and a willingness to adapt institutions that were designed for a different era. If policymakers act with realism and consistency, Europe can reduce its exposure to coercion and preserve strategic autonomy. If they do not, vulnerabilities will compound, and choices will narrow.

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Political Instability and Youth Mobilization in South Asia

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Executive Summary

Between 2022 and 2025, three South Asian nations, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, experienced the overthrow of their governments. Led largely by young people, these uprisings were a direct result of systematic corruption, socioeconomic disparity, and the deliberate exclusion of young people from positions of power. Through a comparative analysis of these three cases, this paper examines why and how young people mobilized, as well as whether or not their movements violated or upheld democratic norms. It finds that youth-led mobilization, while at times bypassing electoral channels, mostly functioned as a corrective force against authoritarian consolidation and revitalized demands for democratic reform across South Asia.

I. Introduction

South Asia, home to nearly two billion people (WPR n.d.), entered the 21st century as one of the most politically tumultuous regions in the world. Characterized by recurring institutional breakdowns and weak governance systems, the region encompasses some of Asia's most fragile states. The extent of this instability has been so severe that, within a span of just four years, three of its nations, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, have witnessed the overthrow of their governments in a violent and somewhat similar process.

In September 2025, the Nepali government was overthrown by a large-scale, youth-led anti-corruption movement, which significantly shifted the political trajectory for modern Nepal. Similarly, a year earlier, in 2024, the country's southeastern neighbor, Bangladesh, witnessed a similar political upheaval led primarily by students against discrimination, resulting in the overthrow of its then-ruling government and the end of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's long-standing autocratic rule (1996-2001 and 2009-2022). Earlier still, in 2022, Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa dynasty, ruling the government for nearly two decades (2005-2022), was ousted by massive public protests due to severe economic crises and consolidation of power in the hands of a single family (Komireddi, 2025).

Although the immediate causes of these political upheavals vary on the surface, the underlying factors are corruption and socio-economic inequality (Shahid 2025). Enabled by the actions of self-serving ruling elites who used state mechanisms to consolidate power, manipulate elections, and suppress opposition; corruption and socio-economic inequality have been the ultimate catalysts for the surge of recent uprisings in these nations. Specifically, with courts and law enforcement agencies hijacked by political elites, governmental institutions responsible for addressing the needs and demands of the many came to primarily serve the interests of the few. In all three cases –Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal –their respective governments not only failed to fulfill their basic responsibilities as public institutions but also reinforced inequality and societal fragmentation. The 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka and labor protests, especially among younger workers in Bangladesh are prime examples of public outrage in response to such government failures (HRW 2025)(Bhattacharya 2024)). All in all, it is reasonable to conclude that it was ultimately the consolidation of power in the hands of a few political elites in these nations that facilitated corruption, exacerbated socio-economic disparities, generated discontent among the public, and made state institutions vulnerable to opposition and collapse.

Finally, one of the most significant consequences of these systematic failures is their disproportionate impact on the younger populations of these nations. South Asia is home to the largest youth population in the world, with nearly half of its population under the age of 24 (Raiser 2023). Thus, in the face of recurring crises, this segment of the population has also remained the most impacted. With over one million young people set to enter the labor force in South Asia every month until 2030, rising levels of unemployment, limited access to governmental services, and a surge in poverty have become the primary factors for youth to mobilize against their respective governments. In fact, as will be discussed in the next section, the role of youth in driving political action and demanding institutional reform has been paramount across South Asia over the past few years. They have used digital platforms to organize mobilization, stood at the forefront of protests, and maintained a powerful voice in shaping post-crisis political developments. Therefore, in what follows, this paper will examine the role of youth in challenging political institutions for their mass corruption and inability to address socio-economic disparities. It will also explore the ways in which they organized their movements and briefly assess whether these movements remained within the boundaries of democratic practice. Finally, it concludes with concrete policy recommendations and asserts that, in the long run, these movements helped prevent the rise and institutionalization of authoritarianism.

II. Why The Youth Mobilized

- **Economic Frustration**

Economic marginalization has been one of the most prominent causes of youth mobilization across South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Each year, millions of young South Asians attempt to enter the labor market, with most failing to secure a job. Even among those who hold university degrees, employment has become a constant struggle, with many forced into either informal labor or jobs that do not correspond to their education or skills. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, the labor force unemployment rate for people aged 14–24 remains extremely high across South Asia, reaching 25.23% in Sri Lanka, 20.4% in Nepal, and 15.7% in Bangladesh, all higher than the world average of 13.8%. In fact, even as of 2024, around 40% of Bangladeshi youth are neither in education nor employed (Statista 2026). These numbers clearly show how unlike political elites, who massively benefit from patronage networks, corruption, and access to state resources, the younger and less privileged segments of South Asia's population have largely remained excluded from political and economic spaces.

Therefore, one of the major causes of youth mobilizations and uprisings in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal is the inability of their governments to provide secure jobs and establish an economic system that ensures the financial stability of their younger populations.

- **Political exclusion and Elite Dominance**

While youth make up the majority of the population in South Asia, they are largely absent from decision-making spaces. As a matter of fact, the average age of parliamentarians in most South Asian countries is estimated to be above 50 (IPU 2026), and many political parties are largely dominated by family dynasties and small elite networks (Das 2023). For instance, both major political parties in India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), are known for prioritizing loyalists and dynastic connections over new or independent voices (IPU 2024). Similarly, in Bangladesh, the rivalry between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), two of its most dominant political parties, has left little to no space for youth-led reform.

Thus, it is due to such exclusion and the monopolization of power by small elite networks that many young people in South Asia no longer see traditional politics as a space where real change can happen. Instead, they are forming new networks outside of party politics, such as student organizations, advocacy groups, and grassroots movements to challenge the status quo.

- **A Connected Generation**

Today's young South Asians have grown up in a world shaped by technology, where social media platforms, in particular, have made the spread of information faster than ever. From the Arab Spring to Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests and global climate activism, these platforms have enabled youth, not only in South Asia but across the globe, to read, watch, and learn about one another's past and present and draw inspiration from each other's experiences. In fact, being aware of the struggles of others has fostered global conversations around topics such as justice, freedom, and equality, ultimately connecting this generation more strongly than ever before. Therefore, this generation is more aware and willing to challenge entrenched power structures, demand transparency, and confront corruption than previous age groups, as seen in the cases of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

III. How The Youth Mobilized

- **Digital Spaces as Political Arenas**

Social media has been one of the main spaces for young South Asians to organize and express their views. Platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have consistently been used over the past few years to share information, expose corruption, and demand justice. In Bangladesh, the 2018 student-led road safety protests began when videos of a bus accident went viral (BBC 2018). Students used Facebook Live to demand accountability and quickly mobilized thousands across Dhaka. In Sri Lanka, the 2022 “Gota Go Home” movement used Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp to expose corruption and economic mismanagement, uniting people across class and religion and ultimately forcing the president to resign (Arulthas 2022). In Nepal, the “Enough is Enough” campaign that started in 2020 with online posts about government inaction during COVID-19 also evolved into nationwide protests demanding transparency and reform (Heaton 2020). These movements show how online spaces have become critical arenas for political participation across South Asia, particularly in contexts where formal dissent was not encouraged.

- **Technology and A New Political Identity**

Digital communication has created a new political identity among young South Asians. Today, many see themselves not just as voters but as active participants, influencers, and watchdogs. Using various social media platforms and methods, they have turned art and humor into creative tools for protest. As a matter of fact, during the Sri Lankan protests, drone footage of peaceful crowds became a global symbol of resistance, and in both Nepal and Bangladesh’s uprisings, the sharing of images and videos played a major role in bringing people together. Through technology, South Asia’s youth have built their own platforms for change. Their activism demonstrates that democracy is no longer confined to parliaments or political parties; it is happening online, in communities, and in everyday conversations.

- **Online Activism and Street Protests**

Online activism in South Asia has often led to street protests, making it possible to mobilize thousands of people within days. Through the use of hashtags, group chats, and viral videos, people have come together to challenge existing systems and demand reform. In fact, most youth movements built on the foundations of online activism have been decentralized, with no clear leaders or party control, which has helped protect activists from government pressure and allowed anyone interested in the movement to participate. Using this approach, youth organizers have also employed crowdfunding to support logistical needs such as signs, transportation, and legal aid. Governments have often responded to these efforts with arrests, surveillance, or internet shutdowns, frequently generating greater public sympathy and international attention.

IV. Democracy or Authoritarianism?

The three mass protest movements in South Asia (2022-2025) resulted in the overthrow of elected leaders in government. In all three countries (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal), it is evident that the protest movements were not a coup as they were decentralized civilian protests (Sharma 2025). Yet, it is crucial to ask: if these countries had established electoral systems, were these mass protest movements antithetical to the core values of democracy, such as accepting election results?

In the case of Bangladesh, some could categorise the July Revolution (2024) as “anti-democratic”. The protest movements bypassed established electoral channels by resorting to empowering unelected leaders, such as those from Students Against Discrimination (CNN 2024). They succeeded in removing an elected government (that took office in January 2024) through mass pressure. On the surface, it appears that the protestors ignored democratic channels. However, the democratic backsliding of Sheikh Hasina’s government (2009-2024) engaged in creating the conditions for mistrust in the democratic system, marked by extremely low vertical accountability (Luhrmann 2020). For example, the Awami League engaged in election rigging and the crackdown of the opposition, including 10,000 arrests in the lead-up to the 2024 Bangladeshi General Election (HRW 2023). The July Revolution was essential in redirecting Bangladesh's politics to a free and fair democracy that it had lacked for over a decade. The movement has and is likely to continue strengthening democracy, given its ousting of parties that engaged in unfair democratic practices (Reuters 2025). Moreover, there appears to be a strong commitment by the interim government leader, M.Yunus, to address protestors' demands for democratic constitutional reforms, including free and fair elections (AA News 2025). Although protestors violated procedural democratic norms (e.g. bypassing elections), they advanced substantive democratic shortcomings, such as in the July Charter (e.g. ending corruption and committing to prevent the rise of another authoritarian government) (Siddique 2025).

Similar to Bangladesh's protest movements, the anti-democratic elements of Aragalaya in Sri Lanka are evident from protestors storming the president's house (Davies 2022). The resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksha after threats to his property and life, rather than through elections or impeachment, is evidence of protestors placing little value on electoral channels to express dissatisfaction with the government. Unlike Bangladesh's rigged electoral system, Sri Lanka's is freer and fairer (EIU 2026). With direct, regular presidential elections, the vertical accountability of Sri Lanka can be judged as moderate-high. However, Aragalaya was characterised as being loosely organised and cross-ethnic (Senaratne 2023). The lack of leadership and direction of protestors to decide a leader following the resignation of Rajapaksha shows this was not a calculated attempt to be anti-democratic, but rather mass frustration at the government's failures to sustain the economy. With the socio-economic context of the protests being taken into account, Sri Lanka's political future can be evaluated at Huntington's fourth wave of democratisation, and it appears that Sri Lanka is headed towards democratisation over authoritarianism (Singh, Bawa, et al. 2024). Key evidence of a democratic shift is seen in the passing of the 21st Amendment that reduced presidential powers, regular elections including in July 2022 and September 2024, and the rejection of authoritarian governance in the 2024 election (DeVotta 2025).

The 2025 Nepalese Gen Z protests were arguably the most democratic of the three countries. Although taking a similar form to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in the way that the leading members of government were ousted, Nepal's movement prioritized democratic principles. For example, the loosely organised Gen Z protests featured democratic characteristics, such as the interim Prime Minister Sushila Karki being elected through a Discord server of over 160,000 members (Ray 2025). This signifies the underlying democratic ambitions of the mass protest movement, including the youth's preference for democratic decision-making.

Moreover, the contrast from pro-monarchy sentiment from the pro-monarchy movement in March 2025 shows that the Nepalese protests in September shifted the country further away from authoritarianist tendencies (Pandey 2025).

V. Policy Recommendations

Bangladesh:

- Strengthen the role of international observers in elections: post-revolutionary judiciary in Bangladesh has shown overreach, such as issuing a death sentence for the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and banning the previous ruling party, the Awami League (Mukharji, Arunday, et al. 2025). Bangladesh must avoid setting a dangerous precedent where certain parties are suspended, as this could lead to the validation of anti-democratic principles, such as expelling political opponents. Establishing stronger enforcement of international observers is crucial given the Awami League downplayed the criticisms of international observers in the 2018 and 2024 elections (Congress.gov 2025).

Sri Lanka:

- The 21st Amendment should be built upon by restructuring the central role of the president: limit the presidential function to ceremonial duties, transfer the power to appoint and dismiss the Prime Minister and cabinet to the parliamentary majority and elected MPs. Given that the Aragalaya protestors strongly opposed a presidential system that enabled authoritarianism by Rajapaksha, Sri Lanka should transition into strengthening its parliament while weakening the powers of the president to a ceremonial role.

Nepal:

- Given that Nepal has had multiple governments without the completion of a full term, constitutional articles should be amended to require votes of no confidence to feature a replacement for the Prime Minister.
- Digital freedom is crucial as it triggered the Gen-Z protests. A Digital Rights Act that requires transparent criteria to ban digital platforms must be created, with an independent, informed review before enacting limitations on digital platforms. Moreover, policymakers should avoid blanket nationwide bans on digital services.

- Economic reform is essential given the overreliance on remittances in the Nepalese economy. Nepal must diversify its economy to prevent brain drain and unemployment by subsidising textile exporters and developing its digital services sector.

Conclusion

South protest movements in South Asia are a combination of economic mismanagement, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies of elected officials. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal face a turning point in the democratization of their political systems and the integration of Gen-Zs' demands in the political and economic outlook of these nations. The three countries appear to be increasing their vertical and horizontal accountability in the electoral process. In order to strengthen long-term democratic outlooks, policymakers should prioritize transparency and accountability in economic policy, independent and fair judicial systems that oversee corruption and elections, and set guardrails for government authority in digital affairs.

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A State Within a State: Organized Crime & Governance in Latin America

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Executive Summary

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of organized crime in Latin America and its direct implications for democratic governance in the region. The discussion is organized around five key themes: (1) the relationship between organized crime and corruption; (2) the rise of populism as a result of state weakness exacerbated by criminal organizations; (3) the implications of militarized "war on drugs" approaches; (4) the impact of organized crime on vulnerable communities; and (5) the broader economic costs associated with criminal activity. Drawing on these findings, the paper recommends that Latin American states adopt a set of policy initiatives aimed at shifting from reactive to prevention-focused strategies. These include the establishment of independent prosecutorial units, strengthened civil service vetting mechanisms, expanded youth employment opportunities, and the adoption of a public-health-oriented model of violence prevention.

I. Background

On November 8, 2023, Ecuadorian Presidential Candidate Fernando Villavicencio was murdered at the hands of Los Lobos, a criminal and terrorist organization whose ultimate goal is to control drug trafficking routes through Ecuador (Cooney, 2023). Once considered one of the safest countries in Latin America, Ecuador saw its homicide rate increase more than fivefold in 2023, placing it among the three most violent countries in the region (Ritchie et al., 2025).

Ecuador's case shows the extent to which violence driven by organized crime erodes democratic institutions—in this instance, through political violence. Moreover, it illustrates that organized crime has become pervasive across Latin America, reaching countries that were previously isolated from the established epicenters of transnational criminal activity.

Ultimately, organized crime in Latin America is a symptom of a deeper plague in the region: weak states (Dammert, 2025). State weakness allows transnational criminal organizations to capitalize and consolidate, mainly due to a rising global demand for illicit goods. The transformation of Brazil's First Capital Command epitomizes this: what originally began as a prison-based cocaine distribution facility evolved into a multinational criminal enterprise that now dominates major strategic Brazilian ports critical to the global distribution of the cocaine market (Phillips, 2023).

The expansion, economic sophistication, and political infiltration of these transnational criminal organizations pose not only a security threat but also a fundamental challenge to democracy. As criminal actors capture state functions, intimidate political leaders, and infiltrate institutions, they corrode public trust, distort representation, and hollow out the rule of law.

II. Issue Description

According to the Global Organized Crime Index, Latin America has one of the highest rates of criminality across the world ("The Organized Crime Index," 2019). This issue causes significant losses for the region in social, economic, and governmental spheres.

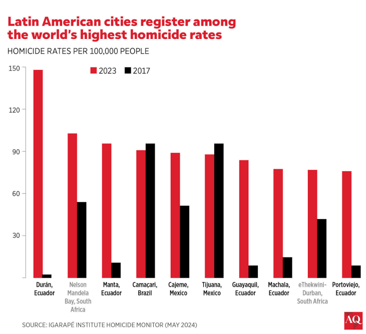


Figure 1: A bar graph from Americas Quarterly showcasing Latin American cities with the highest homicide rates.

Figure 2: A bar graph from UNODC showcasing Latin American cities with deficits in justice in comparison with other regions

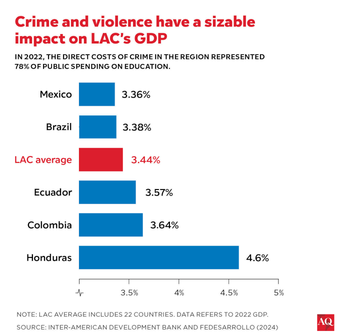


Figure 3:A bar graph from Americas Quarterly showcasing Latin American cities' GDPs

With organized crime posing a significant threat to governance in Latin America, impunity, political corruption, and violence have eroded state authority at the local, national, and regional levels.

Locally, the absence of state responsiveness leaves behind a dangerous power vacuum (Dammert & Sampó, 2025). Gangs sometimes control the provision of food and labor within local communities and levy taxes on residents to finance their operations. (Uribe et al., 2025). Nationally, in many countries in Latin America, organized crime has infiltrated state authority across all branches of government. Horizontal modes of accountability, such as separation of powers and state attorneys, have been found to collaborate with organized criminal networks to selectively apply the rule of law (Corrales & Freeman, 2024; Mia, 2024).

As organized criminal networks have grown in sophistication to operate internationally, they have eroded relations within Latin America. Major divisions have arisen over how policy around crime should operate (Ziemer, 2024). There has also been significant conflict with countries in the Global North, like the U.S. and Europe, as exemplified through the U.S. sinking of Venezuelan boats (Lucas, 2025). Furthermore, the rise of narcoterrorism has altered the structure of organized crime across Latin America, as domestic gangs increasingly collaborate with transnational drug cartels, intensifying violence and expanding the scope of illicit operations (Maria, 2023).

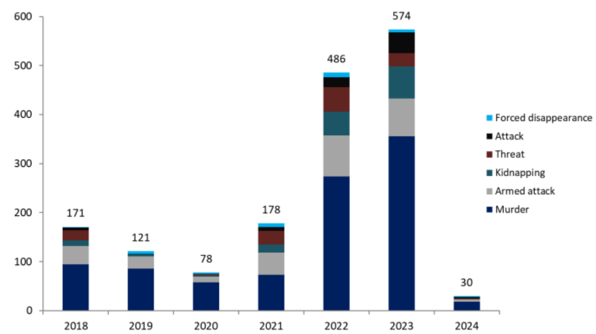
This paper employs the notion of a "state within a state" to illustrate how the vacuum of state authority has allowed for transnational criminal networks to expand their power within the hollow shell of the formal state. This has ultimately had detrimental effects on institutions, public safety, the rule of law, and economic security. If the issue of organized crime is not addressed, countries across Latin America are at a high risk of succumbing to the power of transnational criminal networks.

III. Analysis of Key Takeaways

Criminal Infiltration of Political Institutions

Organized crime causes corruption by infiltrating formal political systems. Local and national governments, as well as institutions, can be corrupted through campaign financing, political violence, bribery, and clientelism. Cartels in Mexico are able to infiltrate local governments to gain political protection and sway in directing law enforcement. According to a 2024 report from Integralia, there is widespread political violence aimed at preventing or promoting certain candidates over others (“Integralia”, 2024).

Graph I. Victims of political electoral violence at the national level, 2018-2024.
(Data Cívica)



Source: Prepared by the authors with data obtained from the project “Votar entre Balas” of Data Cívica.
Note: 2024 with cut-off date as of February 5

Additionally, the 2014 Ayotzinapa case is a perfect example of the corrupt collaboration between local governments and criminal networks in Mexico: municipal officials in Iguala collaborated with the Guerreros Unidos cartel in the disappearance of 43 students who had unknowingly boarded buses carrying hidden heroin shipments linked to the cartel (“WOLA”, 2017).

Another case study that exemplifies this phenomenon is the plight of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). After the end of the civil war in Guatemala, certain former military and intelligence networks turned into criminal syndicates and embedded themselves in the bureaucracy and judicial system (Panner et al., n.d.). In 2007, the United Nations and the Guatemalan government established CICIG, which subsequently prosecuted more than one hundred corruption cases and implicated thousands of individuals, including the president, vice president, and numerous members of Congress. However, despite these achievements, CICIG faced intense political backlash when its investigations reached sitting President Jimmy Morales. In response, his administration dismantled the commission in 2019. The closure symbolized both the reassertion of elite control and the fragility of anti-corruption gains in a state characterized by deeply entrenched criminal networks.

Rise in Anti-Establishment Populism

Widespread perceptions of political corruption and government ties with organized crime contribute to the rise of populist leaders, who successfully portray themselves as anti-establishment "defenders of the people." In practice, these leaders consolidate personal power, weaken checks and balances, and justify authoritarian measures as necessary to restore order and moral integrity.

Such a scenario is evidenced by Fujimori and the legacy of anti-establishment populism in Peru. In the early 1980s, Alberto Fujimori capitalized on Peru's crisis of governance, blaming the "old parties" as responsible and establishing his own legitimacy with anti-party rhetoric (Heuser, 2018). In 1992, Fujimori staged a "self-coup," dissolving Congress and suspending the Constitution. Power became concentrated in the presidency and the intelligence service, led by Vladimiro Montesinos (Heuser, 2018). During Fujimori's presidency, organized crime appeared to decrease, but evidence suggests that drug trafficking was in fact monopolized by the government under Montesinos' command. Yet by the 1990s, corruption scandals became too grand and authoritarian abuses eroded Fujimori's legitimacy. The Fujimori model established a populist template: invoke the language of moral renewal, dismantle institutions in the name of efficiency, and centralize authority under the guise of protecting the people (Heuser, 2018).

Today, 30 years after Fujimori's rise to power, Peru suffers a similar crisis of institutional decay as a result of the rise of organized crime in the country. As of 2024, more than half of Congress (67 of 130 members) was under criminal investigation ("Peruvians Long for a Bukele-like Strongman to Beat Crime," 2025). Meanwhile, a surging crime wave has deepened the sense of insecurity and government paralysis. As democratic trust plummets and fear of crime dominates public discourse, Peru risks repeating the cycle where populist leaders exploit citizens' legitimate frustrations to dismantle institutional checks in the name of restoring order.

Militarized Drug Policy and Insecurity

The state's militarized "war on drugs" approach often increases violence and human rights abuses, further perpetrating the insecurity that undermines democratic governance. Instead, prevention-oriented strategies, such as community policing and civic inclusion, strengthen democratic legitimacy. The comparative experiences of Mexico and Guatemala illustrate the tension between militarized and preventive models of security governance in the region.

In Mexico, following decades of escalating cartel violence, President Felie Calderon declared an all-out "war on drugs", making it the nation's top policy priority. This act was supported by the U.S.'s Merida initiative, and emphasized territorial control through massive military deployments (Kruijt, 2011). The outcomes, however, were very different. Instead of curbing violence, the militarization of law enforcement correlated with dramatic escalation in homicides, kidnappings, and disappearances. The city of Ciudad Juarez became emblematic of this failure: by 2009, its homicide rate reached 191 per 100,000 inhabitants. The federal deployment of 6000 soldiers failed to stabilize the city, leading to widespread reports of human rights violations (Krujit, 2011).

On the other end, Guatemala offers a gradual but notable example of how institutional strengthening and preventative social policies can reduce violence and improve perceptions of security (Taraciuk Broner, 2024). After the implementation of institutional and social reforms, such as the "Open Schools Program" and the Strategic Criminal Prosecution, the homicide rate fell to 17.3 per 100,000 in 2022 and 16.7 per 100,000 in 2023—the lowest in decades (Taraciuk Broner, 2024).

Organized Crime Wins Over Vulnerable Communities

The erosion of weak institutions leaves a power vacuum amid vulnerable populations that are then controlled by transnational criminal networks. In the face of a state that is found lacking in its social institutions, such as education and employment prospects, communities look to organized criminal groups to grant them such social services. As a result, a lack of opportunity, adverse circumstances, and economic gain are driving forces in the involvement of youth in organized crime.

Across Latin America, youth have become a primary target of violence. In Mexico, the Network for the Defense of Children reported that four children and adolescents disappear every day, with an estimated 30,0000 enrolled by criminal groups (Giacomello, n.d). In Ecuador, the number of homicides of children from 2019 to 2023 has risen by 640% ("UNICEF," 2024). Additionally, in countries like Brazil, people aged 15 to 29 have a death rate of 69.9 per thousand inhabitants (Diniz & McBrien, 2022). These skyrocketing levels of violence against youth demonstrate the extent to which the state has failed to protect vulnerable populations.

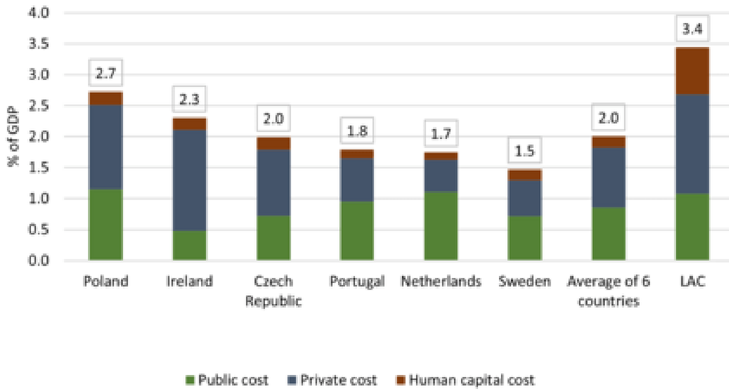
Due to lesser charges against minors for higher degrees of crime, this demographic is remarkably appealing for gang recruitment. In remote areas of Mexico, so-called “Escuelas de la Muerte” (“Death Schools”) have been discovered, where recruited youth undergo physical and psychological training to endure the operational tasks of the cartels (Diaz, 2025). These training sites exist in other Latin American countries to fulfill the same purpose. As a result, vulnerable youth taken under gangs’ wings become key actors in committing crimes such as extortion, assassinations, the recruitment of peers, and drug trade.

Economic Cost of Organized Crime

The fight against transnational criminal organizations has a significant impact on the economy of Latin American countries. These countries spend millions of dollars in security policies that seek to alleviate crime and violence. These expenditures strain already limited budgets, reducing funding allocated to social and public goods.

Mexico spent approximately 250 billion dollars in addressing organized crime, a sum that amounts to approximately 20% of its GDP (Cota, 2023). Other countries like Ecuador and Brazil spend approximately 1-5% of their GDP in addressing crime and violence (Estagio, 2018; “Ecuador Military Expenditure Percent of GDP,” 2023). Overall, Latin America has the largest percentage of its GDP attributed to crime expenditures, amounting to 3.4% of its GDP (“High Crime Costs Burden Latin America and the Caribbean,” 2022). Still, such spending on law enforcement, prison-building, and the military have not produced meaningful results in countries where organized crime is deeply entrenched.

Figure 4. Cost of crime and other expenditures in Europe and Latin America, and the Caribbean, 2022.



Source: IDB calculations based on available information sources and assumptions used for the Latin America and the Caribbean countries

IV. Policy Solutions

Effective responses to organized crime in Latin America depend on a fundamental reimagining of state security objectives. Traditionally, "repressive policies" have failed because governments set unattainable goals, such as eliminating drug cartels entirely, creating "drug-free" societies, or defeating organized crime once and for all. When outlining such vague ambitions, states ignore the adaptive nature and capacity of criminal networks, which respond to government pressure by shifting routes, changing tactics, or adjusting violence levels. As regional experts emphasize, states must think normatively about realizable goals: reducing homicides to measurable targets, reestablishing territorial control in specific areas, or diminishing criminal governance over vulnerable populations. Setting clear, intermediate objectives allows governments to track progress, allocate resources strategically, and sustain public legitimacy.

Policy Solution I: Independent Prosecutorial Units with Financial Crime Specialization

To address political corruption, criminal infiltration, and illicit economies, governments could establish independent prosecutorial units with statutory autonomy from political pressure, staffed by specialized prosecutors trained in money laundering, asset tracing, and financial crimes. Brazil's Operation Lava Jato (Car Wash) demonstrates the potential of this approach. Between 2014 and 2021, the task force obtained 280 convictions and recovered approximately

$800 million for the Brazilian state (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Guatemala's CICIG, operating from 2007 to 2019, achieved an 85% conviction rate across more than 400 cases, breaking up 60 criminal networks and implicating thousands of officials, including high-ranking government leaders (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2016; WOLA, 2019). The approach requires judicial independence reforms: tenure protections for judges, transparent case assignments, and performance metrics tied to conviction rates rather than political directives.

Policy Solution II: Civil Service Vetting

To further thwart political corruption and criminal infiltration, the state could implement comprehensive vetting procedures to remove corrupt and compromised officials from the police, judiciary, and intelligence services. Vetting focuses on integrity assessments examining financial disclosures, unexplained wealth, documented corruption, and criminal links. Honduras's police reform (2011-2017) screened over 5,000 officers, dismissing roughly 30% for corruption and criminal ties, while simultaneously raising salaries and improving working conditions to prevent future corruption (Dye, 2018, pp. 3–4). Vetting processes require due process protections, appeal mechanisms, and complementary institutional reform. Job security guarantees for honest officials and transparent career advancement are also imperative. Vetting combined with salary increases has the power to reduce corruption incidents and restore public confidence in institutions, essential to rebuilding democratic legitimacy undermined by criminal infiltration (de Arimatéia da Cruz, 2025).

Policy Solution III: Youth Employment and Vocational Training for Gang Prevention

Initiatives favoring youth employment through vocational training programs that target at-risk populations would help reduce the traction that criminal groups are currently finding in Latin America. These programs should offer job training, mentorship, and labor market placement for youth aged 14-29 in high-violence communities. Guatemala's Challenge 100 program rehabilitated gang members through vocational training and job placement; USAID-funded youth centers have served over tens of thousands of young people in Central America (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2018; U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, 2019). Programs should combine immediate income support (for example, in the form of conditional cash transfers during training), skills development aligned with labor market demands, and services addressing trauma and family instability. Implementation requires partnerships between vocational institutions, businesses, and civil society to ensure job placements are sustainable and that gang-affiliated youth have pathways to legitimate livelihoods rather than criminal recruitment.

Policy Solution IV: Public Health Model of Violence Prevention Through Community-Based Intervention

Governments should adopt a public health approach to violence prevention, treating violence as a contagious epidemic requiring systematic intervention. The Cure Violence model operationalizes this framework through five core components: (1) street outreach to at-risk youth; (2) public education campaigns changing norms about violence; (3) faith leader and community mobilization; (4) conflict mediation by trained violence interrupters; and (5) collaboration with law enforcement agencies (Cure Violence Global, 2025).

Evaluations in Cali, Colombia, documented a 47% reduction in homicides in the Charco Azul neighborhood and a 30% decline in Comuneros following program implementation (Cure Violence Global, 2025). In Trinidad and Tobago, the same approach generated a roughly 39% reduction in gunshot wounds requiring hospital admission (Maguire et al., 2018). These results, replicated across multiple Latin American cities, demonstrate that violence reduction does not necessarily require heavy-handed enforcement. Instead, interrupting cycles of retaliation, providing at-risk youth with alternatives, and mobilizing community stakeholders can achieve substantial reductions in violence.

V. Conclusion and Next Steps

Organized crime in Latin America has proven to be an insidious force undermining the stability of democratic states in the region. In this paper, we reviewed the different threats organized crime poses, summarized in 5 key takeaways: criminal infiltration of political institutions, rise of anti-establishment populism, militarized drug policy and insecurity, its impact on vulnerable communities, and its economic cost. At a time when democratic backsliding is on the rise, Latin American states must rethink the ways in which they combat organized crime in an effort to sustain peace and stability. Ultimately, this paper recommends that Latin American states shift from reactive militarized repression toward strategic, prevention-based governance that strengthens institutions, reduces violence, and restores public trust. The proposed policy solutions—independent prosecutorial units, civil service vetting, youth employment initiatives, and community-based prevention—illustrate how governments can pursue realistic, measurable goals that address both the structural and immediate drives of criminality. Collectively, these strategies represent a fundamental policy redirection from unrealistic repression to real security. By focusing efforts on harm reduction, institutional integrity, and community resilience, states will be able to sustain their legitimacy and protect their citizens as they build the capacity to respond to the greater threats that organized crime poses.

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Authoritarian by Proxy: Western Engagement with Al-Sharaa's Regime in Syria

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Executive Summary

Since December 2024 and the fall of the Assad Regime, the West's engagement in Syria, particularly the US and the EU, has aimed towards a stabilization of the country in the short term. Western actors have lifted sanctions, slowly reopened for diplomatic dialogue, and facilitated humanitarian aid. While these efforts have succeeded in providing temporary relief to the population, they remain insufficient to sustainably rebuild Syria. However, this paper aims to combine the existing-strategies with a new foreign direct investment (FDI) strategy: investments in shipping and trade, energy infrastructure, and digital transformation. Finally, instead of simple stabilization, an economic revitalization will give Syria the tools to rebuild autonomous and efficient institutions, as well as stimulate long-term growth in order to reintegrate into regional and global markets.

I. Introduction

Western states, chiefly the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union member-states, became active players in the Syrian crisis after the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and the descent into civil war that followed. Western policy blended diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and overt military assistance to selected Syrian opposition actors. The strategic backdrop to this involvement was the deepening role of Russia and Iran in sustaining the Assad regime, actively supporting its oppressive actions against the Syrian people (Oligie, 2019).

II. Issue description: What is happening in Syria? Why should we care?

What is happening

The Syrian uprising began in March 2011 as part of the broader Arab Spring, when peaceful protests demanding political freedoms and an end to corruption were met with violent state repression. Over the following decade, the conflict fragmented into zones of control divided among the Assad regime, Islamist factions, Kurdish forces, and foreign-backed militias. Massive external intervention, particularly by Russia and Iran, enabled Assad to survive periods of severe weakness. By 2023–2024, however, the regime's military exhaustion and economic collapse weakened its grip on Damascus. Coordinated rebel offensives and internal fractures within the regime's security structures ultimately allowed opposition forces dominated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to enter the capital in late 2024 and force Assad's departure. His removal ended more than five decades of Assad family rule but left a deeply fragmented political landscape and an unresolved contest over Syria's future (Adar et al., 2025).

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, the contested legitimacy of the interim authorities, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, raised questions regarding how the Syrian case should be addressed. Currently, there is no certainty that al-Sharaa will not turn into a new Assad, redirecting Syria away from a potential democracy back towards authoritarianism. Although Syria's election in October 2025, the first since the transition, brings hope for a brighter future, there are still concerns about whether al-Sharaa will incorporate extremist Islamic views with the new government (Gall, 2025). Al-Sharaa's background includes documented involvement with jihadist organizations (Factually, 2025). Thus, the West's help in placing more guardrails is critical to ensure inclusive democratic representation and economic sustainability (Schenker, 2025). Syria needs to receive in-kind help to recover from the long war. The European Union has already spent over €204 million in 2025 for humanitarian aid (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2025), while the United States has spent over US$42 million (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2025). Unfortunately, this is not an effective long-term solution. Studies on stabilization programs in Syria find that, unless aid is tied to governance reform and local administrative capacity-building, it fails to produce sustainable outcomes (McCurdy & Brown, 2021). Consequently, without institutional development and economic reconstruction mechanisms, humanitarian aid alone cannot support Syria's long-term recovery, and the country will remain vulnerable to backsliding or collapse.

Why it's important for the US and the EU

Recent regional dynamics require a more precise framing: The historical Russian and Iranian support for the Assad regime allowed both countries to grow their influence on Syria and push it further away from cooperating with the West. Syria is no longer the main priority, with the Kremlin focusing on its conflict with Ukraine and Tehran dedicating resources to its conflict with Israel. This has left an opening for greater Western engagement. In light of the new regime and weakened regional influence, the West can form the ground for cooperation, financial support, and investment, previously provided by Russia and Iran, all while fostering democratic and humanitarian governance systems in the country.

Another important player in Syrian politics is Turkey. It maintains ongoing military control over parts of northern Syria and has repeatedly targeted Kurdish groups, especially the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its core militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Multiple human-rights reports document abuses, displacement, and repression of Kurdish civilians by Turkish-backed factions in these territories in response to their call for autonomy (Human Rights Watch, 2024). While Turkey has shown support towards al-Sharaa's transitional government, it might reflect an interest in asserting dominance in the region and expanding Turkish influence over Syria. Therefore, not only will the West have to manage its own personal relationship with Syria, but it will also need to ensure that competing players do not gain a negative influence in the region. Effective Western engagement, therefore, requires navigating the retreat of Russia and Iran and the competing objectives of Turkey. Russia and Iran must be prevented from regaining power in the area, and Turkish expansion into Northern Syria should be restricted.

III. Current Strategy: Stabilization of Syria so far

Since the fall of the Assad regime, the primary strategy implemented by the United States and the European Union has been the semi-conditional lifting of sanctions. The West has pursued a combination of conditional and unconditional sanctions relief, prompting criticism that both the United States and the European Union have failed to fully leverage sanctions as a tool of political influence (Sayigh, 2025). When al-Sharaa rose to power, the first step taken by the United States to normalize relations with Syria was sending Barbara Leaf, the State Department's top official for the Middle East, to Syria and removing the US$10 million bounty on al-Sharaa (Salih, 2025). Furthermore, both the United States and the European Union have lifted many of Syria's previous sanctions since November 2024 (Votel & Lister, 2025). The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which consolidated many of the restrictions limiting Syria's participation in global trade, has been rolled back gradually following President Trump's executive order (Votel & Lister, 2025). The act, which barred Syria from entering the international banking system and investing in U.S. dollars, was mostly lifted after al-Sharaa met with President Trump in Saudi Arabia in May 2025, and is set to continue being repealed on a rolling six-month basis (Votel & Lister, 2025). Additionally, the U.S. has called for Syria to be included in the regional coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a method of ensuring the government's ability to not only maintain international legitimacy, but also to cement that Syria will not fall back into an Islamic fundamentalist regime (Djerejian, 2025). American troops have also maintained a limited presence in northeast Syria to assist the new authorities with operations against ISIS. The West has facilitated additional humanitarian and reconstruction aid following the removal of many sanctions, temporarily supporting Syria's basic needs (Djerejian, 2025). For example, in June 2025, the European Union not only lifted economic sanctions against Syria, but they also pledged assistance of €175 million towards reconstruction aid (European External Action Service, 2025). However, concerns remain that the European Union's policy statement lacks sufficient specificity to produce viable solutions within Syria (Sayigh, 2025).

IV. Challenges to Stabilization

The West's current strategy presents several challenges. First, the current allocated aid is only stabilizing Syria instead of helping the economy grow. As the country welcomes all possible assistance to rebuild its infrastructure, the current situation does not provide any perspective on a self-sustained economic activity (Sayigh, 2025). Therefore, humanitarian support needs to be accompanied by long-term investments. Additionally, the West still needs to consider the legitimacy of the new government, as discussed above. Ultimately, the West needs to correctly measure the influence it wants to hold over Syrian reconstruction. If the U.S and the EU do not put in enough effort, the other agents who strongly benefited from the previous regime might try to reproduce similar patterns with the new interim authorities and close the door to democratic state-building.

V. Proposed strategy: Economic Revitalization through FDI.

After years of unsuccessful Western attempts to resolve economic instability within Syria, there must be a new approach to address the country's internal policy issues. The reforms that the Syrian government will introduce should have the attraction of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as a final goal. Through FDIs, Western actors can work with Syrian policymakers to create mutually beneficial solutions that blend both stabilization and innovation. This section proposes an alternative strategy to move from humanitarian relief to long-term recovery through three distinct investments in physical infrastructure, energy solutions, and digital transformations, supported through private- public collaboration.

VI. Investment Strategy

Syria's Physical Backbone: Infrastructure

Syria's strategic position on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean makes investment into shipping infrastructure a key opportunity for Western backers. Though the country is lacking in many natural resources itself (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2015), Syria and the West should work to make the country a gateway to the rest of Asia. This opportunity would be beneficial to both Syria and its new Western allies, who, if successful, would stand to gain extremely profitable trade routes through Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East

(Martinez, 2025). Nonetheless, it is important to note that in order for the initiative to be successful, coordination with other regional actors, such as Lebanon, Turkey, and the Gulf, is crucial to ensure no conflicting or overlapping investment plans are taking place

Western countries like the United States should support Syria with the redevelopment of its two major ports: the Port of Latakia and the Port of Tartus. In doing so, the US will be able to complement the increasing Gulf interest in the area and, at the same time, reduce Moscow and Tehran's historic monopoly over the Syrian shipping industry by gaining a crucial Mediterranean trade route. With the termination of the Moscow-based firm Stroytransgaz's contract in the Port of Tartus (The Arab Weekly, 2025), and the decision to abandon the Russian naval base in the same port, there is an opportunity for Western powers to engage in negotiations with Al-Shara's government. This opportunity has already been capitalized on by the UAE, which, as of July 2025, signed a 30-year agreement to develop and operate in the Port of Tartus (Uddin, 2025). EU partners have been active in the Port of Latakia, with French shipping logistics firm CMA CGM signing a deal to invest over 230 million across several years in order to build a new infrastructure at the port (Reuters, 2025). Yet most recently, it was AD Ports group, another UAE-based firm, that purchased a 20% stake in the Port of Latakia (Saratsopoulou, 2025). As such, it is imperative that the US and other EU member states follow the lead of the Gulf countries and seize the opportunity to invest in Syria's ports.

Energy for Recovery

Investment opportunities are also abundant in the power and energy sector. Currently, Syria is suffering from an energy crisis, with citizens receiving only two hours on for every four hours off in many Syrian provinces (Baladi & Janbaz, 2025). The lack of infrastructure, coupled with extensive damage to the power grid during the conflict, compounded fuel shortages, causing many to go without power for most of the day. There is an opportunity to fill the energy vacuum in the form of Western energy investments, notably through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), a collaboration of the interim government with Western firms, encouraged by their own authorities, to work on public projects in Syria.

Already, US-based firms Baker Hughes, Hunt Energy, and Argent LNG have entered a coalition to capitalize on the vacuum in the market (Azhari, 2025). They are not alone in the market as in May, the Syrian government signed a memorandum of understanding with a consortium led by Qatar-based UCC Holding to introduce $7 billion dollars in investments into power plants across Syria (UCC Holding, 2025). These developments indicate a gradual opening of the internal energy sector to international collaboration, particularly in projects combining infrastructure rebuilding with technology transfer and local capacity development.

Beyond hydrocarbons, renewable energy presents one of the most promising frontiers for sustainable investments in Syria. With most regions receiving over 3,000 hours of sunshine annually, Syria has a strong potential for solar energy development (Weather & Climate, 2020). In fact, the country has already signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Saudi Arabian parties (Al-Harriet and Sakalko) to develop up to 300 megawatts of solar energy capacity across the country (PV Knowhow, 2025). This could be particularly significant in rural areas where conventional grid access is limited, and as such could serve to prevent asymmetric growth focused on major cities.

Digital Transformation

A long-term potential investment strategy involves the expansion and modernisation of Syria's digital infrastructure. The redevelopment of physical networks and potential for technological growth present an enormous opportunity for the West, and could be key to the country's long-term recovery. Syrians would gain access to global markets as well as a more inclusive job market, greatly stimulating the economy. For the West, partners gain new avenues for investment and greater streams of revenue. The collaborations would be transparent public-private partnerships with the Syrian government, aimed to update Syrian technology on cybersecurity and digital banking infrastructure while promoting local employment, given the current high unemployment rate of 13% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2025). Hence, these PPPs would contribute to the modernization of Syria and the inclusion of its citizens in global markets. Western governments could redirect a part of the aid already allocated to humanitarian aid toward subsidizing Western corporations that invest in Syria's digital transformation. For instance, if the EU reallocates 10-15% of the €204 million that it already provides in humanitarian aid, the Syrian government will receive €20-30 million, which can be invested into the rebuilding of targeted fibre networks (Kim, 2024).

Across the country, there is already widespread familiarity with both mobile and internet technologies despite power limitations. In 2025, nearly 80% of the Syrian population actively used mobile phones, with an increase of 7% between early 2024 and early 2025. The use of the internet is slow but steadily increasing, with a yearly growth of 4% yearly. The increase of median mobile internet download speed by more than 7% in 2025 also reflects a population willing to follow current technological trends and changes (Kemp, 2025). The popularity of events like *Hack for Syria* and SYNC *25* (Shanawani, 2025) highlights the desire for the country to step into the digital age. It is through investments in fibre-optic networks and telecommunications that Syria can lay the foundation for a digitally integrated economy. Upgrading national connectivity would not only improve internet reliability, but also serve to link citizens, institutions, and businesses. In turn, Syria will be able to rejoin global digital markets, while fostering internal innovation, transparency, and much-needed growth.

Ultimately, all three investments (Infrastructure, Energy, and Digital Transformation) contribute to long-term growth, which is critical to ensure a goal-oriented rebuilding and reinclusion of Syria within the international community.

VII. Challenges to These Approaches

a. **Competition from Non-Western actors.** Western states are not alone in recognising the potential for growth in Syria. Various Gulf States, China, Russia, and Iran all hold significant positions in infrastructure, such as ports (Al Amir, 2025), real estate, or initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (Newsroom, 2025). Western actors entering later in the redevelopment process incur reduced bargaining power.

b. **Political Instability.** Despite having a leader willing and able to work with external parties, Syria remains extremely fragmented. Across the country, competing authorities deal with intermittent security issues, including violence against ethnic minorities. Investments in infrastructure can risk exposure to unstable territorial control of the current interim authorities, with various groups controlling different regions, which poses reputational and financial challenges, limiting the potential for private investments. This heightened risk complicates the attractiveness of Syria for private investors, creating an additional barrier to development.

c. **Domestic Constraints.** Syria faces high unemployment rates of around 13% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2025), and an extremely unstable currency with the Syrian pound having lost 99% of its value since 2011 (Dalatey, 2025), thus investors should be wary of limited immediate economic returns. Furthermore, due to current infrastructure constraints, local partners may lack the financial capacity to buy into projects, limiting internal participation.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, current Western-led stabilization strategies in Syria have proven to be insufficient for a sustainable rebuilding of the country. Through FDI's, Syria can achieve a revitalization that transitions the aid landscape from a humanitarian-based process to long-term economic goals for better infrastructure. This paper proposes three distinct types of public-private investments as solutions for the current situation: Commerce, Energy, and Digital Transformation. For these to be effective, Western actors such as the EU and the U.S. must beware of competing powers' presence, whose past involvement has not consistently served the interests of the Syrian people.. In return for their help, Western institutions gain a new ally and trade partner in the Middle East with a crucial geographic position. Ultimately, by pairing stabilization and innovation in Syria, the West can prevent the country from backsliding into authoritarianism and, hopefully, create a durable prosperity.

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The Future of African Development: Africa in a Multi-Polar World

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Executive Summary

Development stands on the precipice of a changing world, in which Africa must choose its next steps carefully. As the global order is increasingly shaped by interest-based power and economic influence, developing countries face transformational shifts in development financing. Reductions in foreign aid are forcing international development mechanisms to adapt amid heightened uncertainty, polarization, and shifting donor priorities. At the same time, African nations face mounted pressure to lead the financing of both immediate and long-term development, particularly in addressing shortfalls in food security, healthcare, and education. Most importantly, progress towards African economic sovereignty is reshaping both regional and global power dynamics, as traditional leaders in development financing, including the United States and China, step back from this role. Thus, it becomes imperative that international development institutions and financing structures reinvent themselves to better serve the interests of African states. In an increasingly power-driven global environment, Africa's approach to development financing must reinforce economic sovereignty while recognizing the continued importance of international cooperation. This includes investing in intercontinental trade, reducing brain drain by strengthening domestic employment opportunities, and promoting effective political leadership and role models at all levels.

I. Introduction and Background

While Africa's future appears to be on an upward trajectory, with an average life expectancy rising by more than half and a total population doubling over the last thirty years to 1.5 billion inhabitants, the continent still lags behind other regions of the world economically (McDermott, 2025). Twenty-two African countries are now classified as low-income by the World Bank and 24 as lower-middle-income (Cilliers, 2025). When using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a metric for development, Africa has failed to significantly improve in areas like food systems, jobs and social protection, and energy access. Only a third of the target goals show adequate progress (Musau, 2025).

Africa's exponentially increasing population also strains resources. It is estimated that by 2050 a quarter of the world's population will be African (Paice, 2022). Per capita income growth has averaged just 1.1 percent a year for the past several decades and youth unemployment exceeds 25 percent (Ecofin Agency, 2025). In terms of hunger, 78 percent more Africans faced food insecurity in 2023 than 2015 and estimates of undernourishment also worsened by a staggering 55 percent. African development and resources will be strained considerably without major changes.

International actors are also turning away from African development. Reductions in official development assistance (ODA) from 2023 to mid-April 2025 have increased from 15 percent to 22 percent, or $41 billion to $60 billion United States dollars (USD), indicating that international aid is on a downward trend as well (McKinsey, 2025). Western countries in particular have tightened their belts; prominent donor countries such as the United States, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom have all slashed their budgets for foreign aid due to domestic economic challenges (Guyson, 2025). The United States even dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), a move related to the current administration's efforts to freeze all U.S. foreign aid (Kates, 2025). For European countries in particular, concerns over the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine have played a role in redirecting their attention and their pocketbooks away from Africa (Merritt, 2024). Looking eastward, even China's strategic goals in Africa are beginning to shift. While limiting mineral extraction and their direct exposure to African governments, China is aiming to focus on the private sector and investment (Oxford Economics, 2025).

The combination of an increasing African population, worsening African livelihoods, and a decrease in international assistance raises the key question: What is the future of African development? What key actors will be involved, and what are their motives and strategies across the continent? Perhaps most importantly, how do African countries see the issue of their development and what is their plan moving forward?

African leaders have already begun to answer the latter question: at the 2025 annual meeting for the African Development Bank Group, Ivorian president Alassane Ouattara called for an emphasis on Africa's economic self-reliance (Yieke, 2025). Some researchers even posit that decrease in international aid might not be so harmful; in fact, acts like dismantling USAID could help foster African self-reliance (Fofack, 2025). Many African leaders, such as those from Ghana, Cameroon, and Nigeria see this as an opportunity to shift away from dependence on other international actors and instead focus on implementing and funding their own durable development efforts (Yieke, 2025; Ghebreyesus, 2025). Going forward, African countries should consider how they can support their own development infrastructure through both political decision making and economic policy refinement.

II. Problem and Issue Description

The current development financing structure was established following the Second World War to rebuild Europe, with three foundational pillars: The IMF for macroeconomic support, the World Bank for long-term development loans, and UN agencies to handle technical assistance and humanitarian work (Ali & Abbood, 2023). "Developed" countries promised that with enough knowledge and financial resources, they would be able to raise "developing" countries to their economic stature.

Dr. Gomez Agou, former senior representative to the IMF has pointed out that the international development architecture created in the 1960s was based on the idea that targeted external financing, combined with domestic reforms, would help accelerate growth and convergence between developing and advanced economies. Yet, despite progress in many areas, income gaps have in some cases widened over time. For example, while G7 incomes were roughly 11 times higher than those of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s, the ratio is estimated today at around 18. He explained that this underscores the need for continued reflection on how to promote sustained, inclusive growth in low-income countries (Agou, 2025).

Despite having a mission of poverty reduction, human rights remains a marginal issue within development finance institutions. Notably, the World Bank has no human rights code, and there are no accountability mechanisms or ways for employees to flag human rights issues. According to Dr. Galit Sarfaty, a professor of law at the University of Toronto specializing in international human rights, human rights are "quite a taboo topic" within the World Bank. On the ground, this had led to many cases of serious human rights abuses being committed in World Bank projects. These violations range from underrepresentation and environmental concerns to forced displacement (Sarfaty, 2025).

Why is this bad?

A dependent financial system with significant power imbalances also leads to exploitation. The US has long used its effective control over international financing systems to impose neoliberal policies, such as austerity measures, and Western-friendly laissez-faire economic policies (Yende, 2025). Much like the neoliberal reforms imposed by the West, China has been known to strategically use its Belt and Road Initiative to leverage high-interest loans and its unseen debt to possess critical trade hubs and ports in developing countries (Challaney, 2017). Gulf countries have also leveraged their monetary control. United Arab Emirates investment groups, like DP World and AD Ports Group, have taken control of important ports across the Horn of Africa in the name of improvement. Dar es Salaam is an example where the UAE has effective control to operate and "improve" the port for the next thirty years (DP World, 2023).

Why is it failing?

When today's global financial architecture was designed in 1944 at the Bretton Woods conference, there was no African representation there. Today, African countries still face high borrowing costs, debt distress, and limited fiscal space (Diagne, 2025).

The IMF has a quota-based voting system: votes are distributed based on financial contribution (International Monetary Fund, 2026). This skews the actions of the organization to benefit the interests of large, wealthy donor countries, like the US (Tricontinental Institute for

Social Research, 2025). This is often directly against the interests of the developing countries they seek to help, in the form of forced conditions attached to loans, such as austerity measures (Stiglitz, 2002).

The current system is based on the premise that Western, developed countries will always be able to supply the developing world with funding, but as recent trends prove, that is not always the case.

There is sometimes an expectation in public debates that the IMF is designed to solve the broader development challenges faced by African countries. Dr. Gomez Agou, Senior IMF Representative in Gabon, clarified that this is not the institution's mandate. He emphasized that the IMF's core role has always been to support the stability of the international monetary and financial system and to assist countries facing balance-of-payments pressures. He noted that, while the IMF can play a critical stabilizing role during periods of economic stress, long-term development outcomes depend primarily on domestic policies and on the work of institutions specifically designed for development, such as the World Bank and regional development banks (Agou).

III. Analysis of Factors and Case Studies

Healthcare

Africa has seen a dramatic reduction in foreign development funding and official development assistance (ODA) following the immediate pullout of United States Agency of International Development aid funding in 2025 (Gavin, 2025) (Sabow, 2025). The fluid climate of development financing has been influenced by a multitude of factors, most notably significant changes in foreign government spending for international development projects, heightened uncertainty amongst private sector investors amidst fluctuating global markets, as well as lack of clear communication between local, national, regional, and international development agencies. Importantly, the United States is projected to reduce aid funding the most – by nearly 56 percent compared to ODA levels in 2023 – while countries such as Japan and South Korea are increasing foreign ODA spending (Huckstep, 2025). Importantly, shifts to the modern development financing uncertainty have hardly occurred in a vacuum, and instead have been brought about by global shifts towards state economic self-interests, shifts away from fully cooperative multilateral economic, social, and political engagement, as well as increases in military spending by economically-developed countries. Although a discussion of the causes and drivers of shifting development models remains fundamental to comprehending the significance of the current moment, it is important to consider the local, national and regional consequences that are being experienced as a result of shifting development financing patterns. More specifically, this section will address the impacts caused by the changing nature of development financing in critical sectors of healthcare, food insecurity, and education.

Crucially, fragile healthcare systems "are highly exposed to reductions in foreign aid" in many African countries due to the high share of healthcare funding being sourced from foreign development partners, including other states and development agencies. Importantly, this dependency on foreign development funding in the healthcare sector stems from a potent neoliberal economic model enforced by Western donor countries in which economically developing countries are encouraged to invest into trade and manufacturing rather than social services, partly due to the advantage this brings to donor countries interested in cheaper manufacturing, mineral sourcing, and labor. Similarly, a discussion of the steps taken by national governments and regional actors to combat dramatic changes in development financing remains central to foreseeing the future of economic sovereignty and regional development cooperation amidst changing international funding plans.

Firstly, recent years and months have shown dramatic reductions in foreign aid funding, specifically seeing a 44 percent reduction in ODA between 2022 and future fiscal years, seeing a reduction from $39 billion to $22 billion USD (Sabow, 2025). In this view, ramifications of these significant financing shifts in a critical sector are being felt, namely vital healthcare "programs are already experiencing disruptions" in completing critical deliveries of medical supplies as well as in the acquisition of the necessary healthcare materials and funds necessary to support functioning healthcare systems. For example, McKinsey reported that in 2023 the United States accounted for 29 percent of global healthcare funding, while European countries and NATO allies and multilateral actors such as the Asian Development Bank, African Union, World Bank, and World Health Organization contributed 16 percent and 40 percent, respectively. Evidently, the overdependence on multilateral organizations and global economic powerhouses such as the United States has made African nations vulnerable to immediate shocks in these structures and funding practices. Moreover, not only do health systems in many African countries depend most heavily on multilateral funding from global donors, but they are projected to be forced to reckon with the most severe underfunding of 20% foreshadowed by reports from the Center for Global Development (CGD) amongst donor recipient countries.

Additionally, development assistance to health (DAH) is significantly vulnerable to changes in individual donor behavior due to the reliance on a small set of international and regional donors, such as the United States, European members of NATO, and the World Health Organization (Sabow, 2025). In 2025, an OECD report outlined notable reliance of Sub-Saharan African countries on select few donor countries, specifically outlining risks associated with significant reductions in healthcare ODA (OECD, 2025). For example, the report outlined that in 2022 major ODA contributors accounted for approximately 73% of total bilateral ODA in healthcare, with the United States accounting for 51% of that total. For instance, Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, South Africa, and Tanzania are highly sensitive to continuing reductions in healthcare directed ODA, as healthcare related ODA accounted for 25% of total bilateral aid received in the past 5 years. Importantly, McKinsey similarly reported that a significant share of countries with heavy reliance on health related ODA were also facing high levels of debt distress. The ramifications of dramatic reductions in ODA are projected to cause immediate human health consequences due to dependence of African countries on foreign medical supply manufacturing and distribution, namely in HIV/AIDS medication and treatment procedures (Okereke, 2025). For example, Nigeria is projected to miss out on nearly $600 million USD in annual health funding – accounting for nearly a fifth of Nigeria's annual health budget – as USAID dramatically reduces health system development financing, and as Botswana simultaneously risks losing a third of its HIV response preparedness financing due to similar reasons (Okereke, 2025).

However, it is important to recognize intentional steps taken by African states to nationalize healthcare providing services to ensure continued access to critical healthcare amidst significant reductions in foreign aid. In response to heightened awareness of the heavy reliance of African countries on external sources of critical healthcare financing, sub-Saharan African countries have become aware of potential detrimental consequences on the efficiency of essential healthcare practices caused by this overdependence. The Accra Health Sovereignty Summit in Ghana is a key example of regional and national initiatives attempting to restructure healthcare funding to prevent overdependency on foreign actors for providing such critical necessities. Set in motion in 2023, the Summit is emblematic of trending visions of African-led restructuring of healthcare systems, and wider development financing schemes, in an effort to ensure that overdependency on foreign ODA is minimized (WHO, 2025). Evidently, the success of this initiative lies in the African leadership that it is founded upon, in which decisions concerning African development are made by African elected political leaders and economic policy-makers. Moreover, questions of humanitarian assistance and aid as ODA in conflict settings have gained heightened attention following the USAID fallout in sub-Saharan African countries facing humanitarian crises. African countries receiving the highest levels of ODA tend to be experiencing humanitarian crises or social service pressures, such as in Nigeria, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Yade, 2025).

Food Insecurity

Sub-Saharan Africa is the most food-insecure region in the world (Kemoe, 2022). More than 307 million Africans, around 20 percent of the continent's population, face food insecurity and undernourishment. No region is spared, with East Africa in the most dire condition with over 69 million undernourished Africans. Among the most pressing reasons for this severe food shortage are climate change, violent conflict, and economic instability (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies).

Africa's food systems are especially vulnerable to shocks from climate change. Rising temperatures, inconsistent rainfall, and natural disasters are becoming more unpredictable as weather patterns across the world shift. However, Africa's agriculture relies predominantly on rain, which places Africa's food security at higher risk than other regions that are not as dependent on rain for crops (African Climate Insights, 2025). Furthermore, climate disasters are more common in Africa in the first place, as a third of the world's droughts occur in Africa, where countries like Chad face brutal flooding (Kemoe, 2022). The agricultural industries of low and middle-income countries in particular, which have less funding to spare for climate-conscious technologies and policies, will be hit the hardest.

Conflict is a major driver of hunger: approximately 82 percent of food insecure Africans in 2023 were in areas affected by conflict (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). Violence impacts food production and transport by disrupting crucial supply chains and transactions that provide food to markets and households. Food insecurity itself may also lead to increased violence through competition for limited food resources, which in turn continues a positive feedback loop of widespread hunger (Muriuki, 2023). Violence abroad, namely the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has also indirectly caused worsened food supplies in Africa by inciting a blockade which affected low-income countries most harshly (Bonnafont, 2025).

As global humanitarian aid funding diminishes, critical operations for supplying food to vulnerable areas in Africa are facing severe underfunding; thus, 13.7 million Africans already at risk could be pushed to even harsher levels of extreme hunger. Some of these programs in South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, and the DRC have been downsized: now, recipients either receive reduced rations or are cut off entirely. The UN World Food Programme expects to receive 40 percent less funding throughout 2025 (World Food Programme, 2025).

It is clear that Africa must find other options to address food insecurity without foreign development assistance. However, while this foreign assistance can be helpful in preventing famine in the short-term, it often fails to benefit African industries in the long-term. Foreign aid practices often prioritize profit and extractive practices, instead of looking to bolster existing local systems. Donor countries aim not only to provide necessary aid to recipient countries, but also to strengthen their own international reputation. As Nancy Rapando, Director of Global Government Partnerships at the One Acre Fund said, “While aid is beneficial, it should not dictate the system” (Mancinelli & Abraham, 2024).

Overreliance on food from abroad is pervasive in Africa; almost 80 percent of basic food consumed in Africa in 2020 was imported from outside of the continent. Relying on food imports can also increase government budget deficits because many African countries subsidize food imports. Moreover, relying on agriculture outside of Africa can also hinder the growth and foundations of agriculture within Africa, hurting farmers and any chance of self-sufficient food systems (Ngassam, 2025). When considering the harmful effects of climate change, violence, and supply chain shocks, Africa governments must prioritize establishing self-reliant agriculture systems that prove to be stable even in the event of unpredictable catastrophes.

Education

With a rapidly expanding youth population, Africa stands at a pivotal point in determining responses to urgent reforms needed in educational mechanisms and educational financing structures. With approximately 40 percent of the continent’s population aged 15 years or younger, it is imperative that shortages in teaching faculty, educational resources and facilities, as well as education policy-making are addressed in order to ensure accessibility to quality education for all youth throughout Africa (Saifaddin, 2024). As most recent data projections suggest, Africa will have nearly 600 million individuals part of the workforce, composed largely of youth groups.

According to the most recent UNESCO report on the state of education in Africa, while significant progress has been achieved in ensuring access to quality education – measured by the number of children attending primary and secondary schooling – step-backs in ensuring adequate education have caused international alarm (UNESCO, 2024). More specifically, while the total number of children in school has increased by 75 million since 2015, the number of “out-of-school children” has also seen an increase of 13.2 million, reaching 100 million affected youth in 2025 (UNESCO, 2025). Furthermore, lack of evidenced improvement in the quality of education – defined as consistent learning outcomes across schools – further worries donor countries and development financing institutions, seeing as the likelihood of the typical student in Africa having a qualified teacher and access to basic infrastructure and necessities is equivalent to students from 10 years ago (UNESCO, 2025).

Recent decades have witnessed alarming declines in African educational security, specifically facing significant teaching shortages, inadequate educational infrastructure, and ineffective political leadership at both the local and national levels (Nephitaly & Modupe, 2025). These critical challenges are placing more strain on national governments already tackling severe budget cuts from various social sectors as a result of reductions in foreign development financing. For one, sub-Saharan African countries are facing pervasive challenges, namely a teacher shortage of nearly 15 million trained faculty.

Dependency on foreign development aid in the educational sector is a critical vulnerability for African states. While aid allocated directly to education in African states has seen an incremental increase since 2021, this aid remains sourced from a select five major sources, namely the World Bank, France, the United States, Germany, and the European Union

(UNESCO, 2024). This reliance on a select few foreign donors has forced African countries to scramble to fill the gaps in education financing created by recent reductions in United States foreign development assistance spending. Thus, strengthening African educational institutions through internal funding and structural reforms led by African decision-making institutions is necessary to both ensure critical access to education for Africa's growing population, and to bring about restructuring of educational institutions to better serve visions of Africa tomorrow.

Importantly, foreign aid directed towards educational purposes, that is the amount of aid given to African institutions for the purposes of education, saw a dramatic decrease between 2020 and 2021 – primarily due to increased spending on domestic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic – and has since remained between \$4 billion and \$5 billion USD per annum (UNESCO, 2024). However, the dismantling of USAID in 2025 has once more forced a chasm in education financing in donor funding recipient countries. More specifically, the "abrupt cancellation" of a total of 396 education programmes across 58 states has the potential to cause long-term damage to these countries' workforces and increase youth unemployment (Walls, 2025). From a certain perspective, this offers the European Union the opportunity to take leadership in supporting African educational institutions in becoming self-reliant and self-directed.

Addressing over-reliance on foreign ODA in the educational sector demands a systematic lens shift that "reimagines education not just as schooling but as a holistic and ongoing process for the development" of the wider society (Nephitaly & Modupe, 2025). Thus, African governments must be supported in the short-term by viable educational financing options – such as through the African Union or the establishment of sovereign education funds or taxation schemes – and encouraged in the long-term to establish progressive financial institutions that prioritize education spending in primary and secondary schooling, foreseeing the benefits of literary and skills development for leading youth populations.

IV. Policy Options

Finally, it is important to consider policy recommendations intended strengthen African leadership in furthering economic and human development. In lieu of the significance of economic sovereignty for the future of African economic and human development that stands independent of foreign ODA, it is imperative that the next steps in economic decision-making are done by African leaders with their respective countries' interests, as well as those of the continent as a whole, in mind. More specifically, these policy recommendations center around furthering intracontinental trade, advocating for role models, promoting effective leadership, preventing brain drain, and adopting holistic success metrics for development.

Furthering Intracontinental Trade

Since the enactment of the African Continental Free Trade Area in 2021, intracontinental trade has noticeably contributed to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. By reducing tariffs and harmonizing customs and policies, international trade within Africa has the effect of boosting economic growth and development for all countries involved (Mene, 2025). Intracontinental trade allows countries to specialize in certain industries, allowing countries to benefit from comparative advantage. By introducing markets to international competition, furthermore, intracontinental trade promotes innovation and policies designed to encourage higher productivity, creating incentives that work towards sustainable development. Governments should work to continue reducing barriers to trade with other African countries and supporting growth within the continent in mutually beneficial agreements.

Advocating for Role Models

Africa should look to other examples of successful development in previously low-income countries. Namely, in Asia, where countries such as China and Japan saw rapid increases in GDP and quality of life under the guidance of strong leadership and effective development policies (Jullens, 2014). When these countries were promoted as role models of effective development, other Asian countries began to follow suit and enact similar policies.

Asian development serves as a relatively comparable path to Africa's future potential. Both regions suffer from the effects of colonization, however, Asian development has had some positive role models that became economically successful relatively quickly. African leaders and visible international organizations, like the IMF and the UN, need to focus on promoting successful examples of development within Africa in order to encourage other countries to follow suit and convince other leaders of the feasibility of self-reliant development. Some possible role models that have become economically successful within Africa include Rwanda, where the economy has exhibited strong growth with an average growth rate of 8.4 percent over the period 2022 to 2024. This economic success was largely driven by robust investment and growth in services (World Bank, 2025).

Promoting Effective Leadership

Political leadership is a highly influential factor in African economic development. For sustained long-term development, African leaders must strive to look to the future, not only to their next opportunity for reelection. Currently, some African leaders view development as an opportunity to implement projects that will strengthen their campaign over projects that prioritize long-term impact. Large airports, stadiums, and urban beautification projects are prioritized over improving schools and roads (Anochie, 2025). Through a more comprehensive, long-term perspective, though, African leaders can encourage development and further their own chances of reelection at the same time. Consecutive Afrobarometer surveys indicate a high level of disapproval of citizens towards their leadership based on unsuccessful development initiatives (Signe, 2018). By focusing on long-term development projects with the public's best interest in mind, leaders can win over their citizens by acknowledging their opinions and concerns.

Preventing Brain Drain

While Africa has the largest population of youth in the world, with 70 percent of sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30, it is critical that talent does not leave Africa. Currently, youth unemployment in Africa exceeds 25 percent (Ecofin Agency, 2025). If Africa is able to create more attractive job opportunities, a younger workforce can support booming economic growth (Rezaei, 2025). Currently, talent moves away from Africa in search for better workplace conditions, opportunities for professional growth, higher salaries, and more resources for enhancing career prospects (Kanyesigye, 2025). Governments should invest in training and education programs to enhance the younger workforce's skills and implement worker-oriented minimum wage policies. The effect is two-fold: investing in foundational aspects of the workforce not only directly improves productivity and efficiency, but also strengthens confidence in job prospects in Africa, encouraging youth to stay and contribute to their domestic economies.

Holistic Success Metrics

Development cannot be measured only through economic success and must also be considered in light of self-determination and human rights. Without local participation and enthusiasm, development projects and initiatives are doomed to fail. Crucially, countries with stronger levels of self-determination, the ability to make their own political and economic choices without international coercion, have historically been more successful in development. In Botswana, the well-managed diamond industry has brought prosperity across the country; in Rwanda, the government has invested in foundational programs like education and healthcare aimed at improving the well-being of their citizens (Odjo, 2024).

Regarding human rights, precautions against human rights abuses are not seriously considered in development projects. There are also many kinds of abuses that need to be considered; examples of violations include not only child labor and unsafe working conditions, but also the indirect effects of pollution and displacing local communities (Sarfaty, 2025). If governments and international organizations hope to produce beneficial development projects, they must include local participation. At the planning level, these projects should have local community members involved in some way. For example, development organizations and companies should incorporate advising committees made up of locals in their projects. Without local input, projects will not suit the needs of local communities, setting them up for failure.

V. Conclusions and Next Steps

Foreign aid and development assistance have entered a new era where former major donors, like the United States, are pulling back from prior aid commitments. The prior structure of development assistance, while sometimes helpful in the short-term, proved to cause overdependence on donor countries from the East and West, reinforcing imperial and colonial hierarchical dependencies. Especially in critical sectors such as healthcare, food insecurity, and education, fluctuating priorities from donors have exposed the fragility of the development financing mechanisms imposed upon economically developing African nations. Africa's population will only keep growing and development funding must keep up if further humanitarian crises like famine and shortages of medical supplies are ever to be resolved.

In the face of this shifting aid landscape, African governments are increasingly moving to become self-reliant in their own development. For the future, African countries should consider promoting economic factors like intracontinental trade and preventing brain drain. These countries should also look closer at the fundamental decision-making level and work to promote effective leadership and positive examples of African development. Furthermore, to ensure that development is not only focused on the economic results, but also humane ones, governments must establish human rights protocols for development protocols. As global shifts in political power and economic influence continue to disrupt traditional patterns of trade and dependence, Africa must take ownership of its next steps going forward.

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