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Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan
and Uzbekistan as
“Mini-Middle Powers”

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What Do Meloni’s
Stability and Vannacci’s
Rise Say for the European
Far-Right?

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ANKASAM ANALYSIS

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as “Mini-Middle Powers”



Nodirjon MURODOV

The geopolitical significance of Central Asia and the South Caucasus has traditionally been interpreted through the influence of major powers in the region. Russia’s historical influence, China’s economic expansion, and the growing interest of the West and the United States in the region have reinforced the perception that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are objects of great-power competition. It is true that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan do not possess the same level of economic or military capabilities as Russia, China, or other major powers. However, at a time when competition in the field of artificial intelligence and the struggle for critical resources is intensifying, major powers increasingly need various assets possessed by these three countries. Energy resources, strategic geography, transportation routes, and expanding markets provide these countries with strategic leverage that extends beyond traditional indicators of national power. Therefore, rather than becoming middle powers in the conventional sense, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are developing as “mini-middle powers”[i], by transforming strategically important but limited assets into instruments of influence that major states cannot easily replace.

Following independence, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan possessed strategically important geography but had limited capacity to effectively capitalize on this position. Their economies and infrastructure had been shaped within the Soviet system. Railways primarily connected the region to the north, while pipelines integrated energy production into Soviet networks. Industrial supply chains were also largely structured around the Soviet market. Consequently, although these countries exercised sovereignty over valuable territory, a significant portion of their infrastructure remained dependent on Russia.

To transform this arrangement, the three countries pursued different strategies. Azerbaijan developed routes that bypassed Russia by utilizing its energy resources. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline has transported Caspian oil to the Mediterranean through Georgia and Türkiye since 2006. The Southern Gas Corridor subsequently connected Azerbaijani gas to European markets. As a result, Azerbaijan has become an important transit country through which other states can reduce their dependence on alternative routes.

Kazakhstan’s geographical position between Russia and China has made a complete strategic disengagement from Moscow and Beijing unrealistic. Astana has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy while developing economic relations with China, Europe, and the United States. Uzbekistan, meanwhile, followed a different path during the early period of its independence. Tashkent prioritized sovereignty and the limitation of external commitments. While this approach helped preserve political autonomy, it also constrained regional economic integration. After 2016, the administration of Shavkat Mirziyoyev began improving relations with neighboring countries, increasing trade, and opening the economy to the outside world. In a broader sense, this transformation can be understood as a gradual shift from protecting the region from external influence toward using geography as an economic asset.

Today, Azerbaijan occupies an important transit position connecting the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe. Kazakhstan combines its significant energy and mineral resources with a major land connection between China and the Caspian Sea. Uzbekistan, while having the largest population in Central Asia and one of the region's largest markets, is also located at the center of the regional overland transportation network. None of these countries possesses the comprehensive capabilities of a traditional middle power or great power. Nevertheless, their contemporary strategic significance derives not primarily from their overall scale, but from the concentration of resources, geography, and connectivity in specific domains.

The Azerbaijan–Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan triangle reveals an important transformation in Eurasian geopolitics: geographical significance is increasingly being converted into strategic autonomy and agency. Traditional measures of national power generally focus on factors such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), military capacity, population, and diplomatic reach. However, these indicators do not fully explain why a relatively small state can become strategically valuable to actors that are much larger than itself. The emerging concept of “mini-middle powers” provides an important framework for explaining the rise of these three countries as significant actors and for understanding the distinction between overall power capacity and functional strategic leverage. Mini-middle powers are states that cannot shape the international agenda as comprehensively as traditional middle powers, but possess significant leverage in specific areas such as energy, transportation, geography, regional security, mediation, or access to important actors.^[ii]

A mini-middle power does not need to possess comprehensive power capabilities in order to induce larger states to accommodate its preferences. Instead, it needs to be sufficiently strategically important to create incentives for those major states to maintain cooperation with it. The influence of mini-middle powers is therefore largely issue-specific, conditional, and relational. One of the most distinctive characteristics of mini-middle powers is the factor of “need.” The strategic influence of a mini-middle power increases when other actors need something that it can provide and that cannot easily be obtained from alternative sources. The importance of Azerbaijan's oil and natural gas resources becomes even greater when buyers are seeking alternative sources of energy. The Middle Corridor has also benefited from disruptions to trade routes through Russia. At the same time, governments along the route are aware that if commercial relations between the West and Russia are restored, some freight traffic could shift back toward northern routes. These countries will not be able to determine the conditions of the next international order on their own. However, actors seeking to shape the international order will often need access to their routes, resources, or diplomatic networks. The absence of cooperation from these countries will make it more difficult for major powers to achieve their objectives.^[iii]

The real significance of these three “mini-middle powers” lies in the interaction of their distinct and complementary sources of leverage. Azerbaijan functions as a transit power due to its energy infrastructure and its position between the Caspian Sea and European markets. Kazakhstan combines resource power with transit power through its natural resources and continental geography. Uzbekistan, meanwhile, offers market and demographic power through its economic scale, demographic capacity, and central position in Central Asia. In this context, strong cooperation is the factor that can make each country's strategic assets more valuable. An integrated network of functioning railways, ports, markets, energy infrastructure, and logistics hubs would make it more difficult to bypass individual routes. Therefore, one of the fundamental objectives of these states is to connect their respective national assets. If they succeed, the strategic value of the region will also change. Major powers will not merely compete over Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan; they will also have to cooperate and negotiate with them in order to gain access to the networks controlled by these countries.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan demonstrate how states with limited overall capabilities can achieve a higher level of strategic influence by focusing on assets valued by major powers. Azerbaijan's energy resources and transit position, Kazakhstan's natural resources and continental geography, and Uzbekistan's market size and demographic weight provide each country with a distinctive form of strategic leverage. The long-term influence of these countries will depend on the extent to which they can connect and make these advantages sustainable. While cooperation can increase the value of their individual positions, attempts to transform their functional significance into a regional hierarchy could strengthen tendencies toward diversification and weaken existing patterns of interdependence. The significance of these three countries does not stem from their ability to attain the same capabilities as major powers, but from their capacity to shape the conditions under which those powers must operate while pursuing their interests in Eurasia.

[i]. “Don't dismiss the mini-middle powers”, Financial Times, <https://www.ft.com/content/c2ee0910-ee7d-4a36-bf5e-697c7ade93a2>, (Date Accessed: 23.09.2026).

[ii]. Ibid.

[iii]. Ibid.



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

The European Union's New Security Approach: Institutional Transformation, Applicability and the Future



Prof. Dr. Murat ERCAN

The European Union's security approach has undergone a transformation in recent years, moving beyond the traditional understanding of defence as the threats facing Europe have diversified. The Russia–Ukraine war, hybrid attacks, cyber threats, sabotage attempts, and the increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles in the security domain have made it necessary for the Union to reassess its capacity for collective action in response to crises. One of the current manifestations of this transformation is the security proposals put forward by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her “State of the Union” address delivered at the European Parliament on 16 September 2026. In addition to preparing a new security strategy for Europe, von der Leyen proposed the establishment of a common emergency security protocol for incidents that remain below the threshold of an armed attack but threaten national security, as well as the establishment of a European Security Council. She also raised the issue of strengthening joint European investments in key supporting elements of defence, such as air and missile defence, strategic transport, space, and cyber capabilities.^[i] These proposals demonstrate that the EU's security approach is directed not only towards increasing military capacity, but also towards strengthening institutional coordination against hybrid threats, developing strategic capabilities, and reinforcing common response mechanisms among member states.

At the heart of this transformation lies a change in the nature of the threats facing Europe. While threats in the traditional understanding of security were largely assessed in terms of overt military attacks and conventional conflicts between states, today, cyberattacks, sabotage attempts, the targeting of critical infrastructure, disinformation and foreign interference activities, as well as security risks posed by unmanned aerial vehicles, can affect the security of states even without an overt military conflict or declaration of war. The European Commission also addresses its current security approach within the framework of this changing threat environment and draws attention to the increasingly intensifying hybrid threats facing Europe. The fact that certain threats can emerge below the threshold of armed conflict makes it necessary for security policies to be shaped not only by the capacity to respond to attacks that have already occurred, but also by the capacity to detect, assess, and manage threats in a coordinated manner. Within this framework, von der Leyen's approach points to the strengthening of a proactive understanding of security in European security policy, moving beyond an approach based on responding after a crisis has emerged towards identifying threats at an earlier stage, assessing them collectively, and developing a coordinated political response among member states.

Within this framework, the proposed Emergency Security Protocol stands out as one of the significant institutional innovations in the European security architecture. The mechanism's primary objective is to ensure that other member states can rapidly come together and formulate a common European response to threats that do not reach the level of a direct armed attack but seriously affect the national security of a member state. In this respect, the proposal envisages a consultation and coordination mechanism that can be compared with Article 4 of NATO. At the same time, it aims to develop a more systematic and coordinated political response at the European Union level to hybrid threats. The fundamental change here is that the understanding of security is no longer limited to responding to an armed attack that has already occurred, but also envisages collective action in response to cyberattacks, sabotage attempts, and similar hybrid threats. Such a mechanism aims to bring the differing threat perceptions of European states together within a common security assessment framework and strengthen political coordination in response to threats. Nevertheless, the mechanism's practical effectiveness will depend on the criteria used to determine which incidents trigger the protocol and on the capacity of member states to reach agreement on a common threat assessment.

The proposal for a European Security Council reveals the broader geopolitical dimension of this security transformation. In von der Leyen's approach, Europe's security is not addressed within a framework limited solely to the security of European Union member states; rather, a broader political security format is envisaged, in which countries holding important positions within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, such as Canada, Norway, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, could also participate. This approach demonstrates that the distinction between the institutional boundaries of European security and its geopolitical and strategic scope is becoming increasingly pronounced. Ukraine's emergence in particular as one of the potential participants in this structure reveals the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on the reshaping of the European security order. The inclusion of NATO member states such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Norway in this structure also reflects the EU's pursuit of extending security cooperation beyond the Union's borders. Nevertheless, how such a formation would operate in terms of the division of labour with NATO, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and other existing security mechanisms emerges as an important institutional issue. Therefore, the establishment of a European Security Council is not merely a matter of creating a new institutional structure; it points to a broader process that could bring the division of responsibilities, coordination, and authority relations among existing security mechanisms in Europe back under consideration.

Another important dimension of the new security approach is that Europe's defence capacity is not addressed solely in terms of weapons systems and military personnel. The Russia-Ukraine war has made the importance of supporting elements such as air and missile defence, strategic transport, air-to-air refuelling, space, and cyber capabilities more visible in terms of the effectiveness and sustainability of modern military capacity. These elements, defined by the European Commission as strategic enablers, constitute critical supporting capabilities that enable the effective use of military forces. Therefore, strengthening Europe's defence capacity is not limited solely to increasing defence expenditure or developing more weapons systems. It also requires the joint development of technological, logistical, and strategic support infrastructures that enable military capabilities to operate effectively. In this regard, the design of the European Strategic Enablers Instrument proposed by the European Commission in full alignment with NATO demonstrates that efforts to strengthen Europe's defence capacity are envisaged to be carried out in coordination with the existing NATO defence structure. Thus, the development of Europe's defence capacity is moving towards a more comprehensive approach based not only on increasing national military capabilities, but also on establishing critical supporting capabilities at a collective level.

This development also brings the debate on Europe's strategic autonomy into a new dimension. Strategic autonomy is understood not so much as Europe becoming a completely independent actor in its foreign and security policies, but rather as developing capabilities that can reduce its dependence on external resources and capacities in critical security and defence areas. Particularly at a time when debates concerning the role of the United States in European security are intensifying, Europe's move towards developing its own capabilities in areas such as the defence industry, intelligence capacity, space infrastructure, cybersecurity, and strategic transport reveals its pursuit of increasing its ability to act independently in the security domain. Nevertheless, interpreting Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy as a separation from NATO or the creation of a security structure alternative to NATO does not fully correspond to the existing policy framework. Indeed, the European Commission envisages that initiatives aimed at developing new strategic capabilities will be developed in alignment with NATO. Within this framework, the emerging approach reflects an effort to develop capabilities that would enable Europe to strengthen its own defence capacity, assume greater responsibility within the existing alliance structure, and rely more heavily on its own resources when necessary, rather than creating an alternative security system that would replace NATO.

One of the notable features of the new security approach is that the concept of security is increasingly acquiring a technological dimension. Cybersecurity, space systems, satellite technologies, intelligence infrastructures, and unmanned systems are moving beyond their role as elements supporting traditional military capacity and becoming fundamental components of strategic capability. This transformation increases the importance of the capacity to collect data, process data, and develop forward-looking projections based on the information obtained within security policies. The security capacity of a state or international organization is now associated not only with the physical military assets it possesses, but also with its ability to analyse data obtained from different sources in real time, classify threats, and accelerate decision-making processes.

Within this framework, Europe's new security approach demonstrates that the role of technological and digital capacity in the formulation and implementation of security policies is steadily increasing. Thus, security is becoming a multidimensional domain shaped not only by the quantity of military resources, but also by data, technology, and information-processing capacity.

This situation is particularly important in terms of the increasingly significant role of artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-support systems in security policies. The complex and multidimensional nature of hybrid threats may necessitate the simultaneous assessment of data obtained from different sources. Processes such as monitoring cyberattacks, analysing the movements of unmanned aerial vehicles, detecting unusual activities targeting critical infrastructure, and identifying disinformation networks require large amounts of data to be processed and interpreted within a short period of time. At this point, AI-supported analytical systems stand out as technological tools that can contribute to reducing the information burden faced by decision-makers and developing early-warning mechanisms concerning threats. Nevertheless, the use of algorithmic systems in the security domain also brings various problems, such as data quality, algorithmic bias, transparency, accountability, and false-positive results. Therefore, developing technological capacity alone does not guarantee an increase in the level of security; the institutional, legal, and ethical framework within which artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems will be used is also becoming one of the fundamental elements of security policy.

Within this framework, the new security architecture proposed by von der Leyen points to a more comprehensive transformation in the European Union's understanding of security, one that is not based solely on increasing capacity. This transformation is not limited solely to increasing defence expenditure or developing new military projects. At the same time, Europe's approach to defining and assessing threats, its decision-making mechanisms, security coordination among member states, its relations with NATO, and its capacity in critical technologies are being reconsidered. As the security domain becomes increasingly digitalized, data-processing capacity, artificial intelligence, cyber infrastructure, space systems, and strategic communication tools are becoming fundamental elements of Europe's future security architecture. In this direction, the security plan brought to the agenda in 2026 presents a more comprehensive approach aimed at strengthening the European Union's technological and security capacity alongside its economic and normative instruments.

The new security approach announced by von der Leyen reveals the European Union's effort to develop an institutional response to the changing international security environment. The proposed Emergency Security Protocol aims to provide faster political coordination in response to threats. The European Security Council envisages a broader framework for security cooperation extending beyond the Union's borders. The Strategic Enablers Instrument, meanwhile, aims to strengthen the technological and logistical infrastructure supporting Europe's defence capacity.

The implementation of these proposals, however, depends on various political, financial, and institutional conditions. First and foremost, member states need to reach agreement on the nature of threats and common security priorities. In particular, establishing clear criteria regarding the circumstances under which the Emergency Security Protocol will be activated is important for the mechanism's effectiveness. As for the European Security Council, its areas of responsibility and duties will need to be clarified in relation to NATO and other existing security structures. With regard to the Strategic Enablers Instrument, sustainable financing, joint procurement, and member states' implementation of the necessary capacity investments will also be decisive. The Commission's earlier preparatory work also emphasizes that strengthening Europe's security and preparedness capacity requires common and national responsibilities to be carried out jointly.

For this reason, the feasibility of the plan in question depends not only on the political will demonstrated by the Commission, but also on the member states' capacity for joint decision-making and resource mobilization. Differences in national priorities in the security domain, financing requirements, and the division of authority among existing institutions may constitute the main challenges in the implementation process. Conversely, designing the initiatives in alignment with NATO and carrying them out in coordination with existing European security mechanisms are among the factors that may support institutional feasibility. In this respect, the Commission's particular emphasis on full alignment with NATO for the Strategic Enablers Instrument is important.

In this respect, Europe's new security pursuit represents an institutional transformation process planned to be developed gradually, rather than a completed security architecture. Within this transformation, the understanding of security is not limited solely to military capacity, but also encompasses data processing, artificial intelligence, cyber infrastructure, space systems, and early-warning mechanisms. Therefore, the new approach demonstrates that the importance of technological capacity and data-driven decision-making processes in European security is increasing. Whether the plan will develop into a lasting security capacity will depend on the ability to sustain political consensus, financial resources, and interinstitutional coordination.

[i]. European Commission," 2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen", 16 September 2026,https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_1868, (Date Accessed: 21.09.2026).



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

US-Israel Alliance Relations in the Iran War



Başak ERTUNÇ

The United States and Iran's pursuit of a new agreement on the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and the lifting of the naval blockade targeting Iranian ports, alongside growing concerns in Israel during this process, may signal a deeper transformation in US-Israel alliance relations. Indeed, while figures close to Trump have sought to reassure Israeli circles concerned about a possible process of rapprochement with Iran, questions regarding the future of US support have also become increasingly visible within Israeli public opinion.^[i]

This situation reveals a structural tension between the transformation in the way the United States defines its role in the Middle East and the security identity upon which Israel has built itself for decades. When states' foreign policies are examined through the roles they assign to themselves and the ways in which other actors recognize these roles, the issue at the center of the current debate is not Iran, but rather how the United States defines itself and its allies, and how its allies perceive this recognition.

Since the post-Cold War period, Israel has positioned itself as Washington's closest strategic partner in the Middle East, a key component of the regional security architecture, and a balancing actor against Iran. This role is not merely a product of Israel's own self-definition; for many years, it has also been broadly recognized and supported by the United States. However, roles that are so deeply interconnected within a system cannot be sustained unilaterally. The continuation of a role attributed by one state to itself depends on other actors continuing to recognize that role.^[ii] It is precisely for this reason that the Trump administration's search for a basis for rapprochement with Iran can be viewed, from Israel's perspective, not only as a shift in diplomatic preference but also as a mechanism generating role conflict.

While Israel sees itself as an indispensable strategic partner of the United States, Washington increasingly appears to be acting on the basis of cost-benefit calculations and reassessing its regional engagements. This creates an incongruity between Israel's long-standing role as a "regional security actor backed by unconditional US support" and the Trump administration's adoption of a "more transactional approach to foreign policy." In other words, Israel's security concerns stem less from the strengthening of Iran than from the changing definition of the US role.

Viewed through the lens of ontological security, it is necessary to recognize that states seek not only protection from physical threats but also the continuity of their identities and their place within the international system. States' perceptions of security are often shaped not simply by their military capabilities, but also by how they define themselves and by how predictable their relationships with surrounding actors are. From this perspective, Israel's current anxiety stems less from Iran's military capabilities than from the fact that the US-Israel relationship is no longer as predictable as it once was.^[iii]

In other words, the government in Tel Aviv is confronting not so much the consequences of a potential agreement with Iran as the possibility that the United States may no longer perceive Israel in the same way as it did in the past.

Trump's approach, meanwhile, is shaped by a logic that differs from traditional American foreign policy reflexes. For Trump, foreign policy is understood largely not through ideological commitments or historical alliance loyalties, but through a balance of costs and benefits. Therefore, contacts with Iran should not be viewed solely as an effort to constrain its nuclear program. From Washington's perspective, the issue is also about reducing the military burden in the Middle East, containing regional tensions, and redirecting American resources toward areas considered more strategically important.^[iv]

This becomes particularly significant in light of the transformation in US global strategic priorities. In recent years, the identification of China as a systemic rival in Washington's foreign policy documents and strategic assessments has encouraged American decision-makers to reconsider prolonged and costly engagements in the Middle East. In this context, achieving a certain degree of accommodation with Iran can be viewed not only as an effort to promote regional stability, but also as part of a strategy to shift US attention and resources toward the Indo-Pacific.

However, it would be incomplete to interpret the Iran issue solely through the lens of great-power competition. Washington's pursuit of accommodation with Tehran also has a broader economic dimension that can be described as connectivity security. The crises experienced in recent years around the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb have demonstrated the vulnerability of global energy and trade flows. In particular, attacks in the Red Sea and pressure on maritime shipping have generated significant costs for global supply chains.^[v] Therefore, from the US perspective, Iran is increasingly becoming not a threat that must be contained, but an actor that must be managed in terms of the sustainability of global economic flows.

This situation makes the divergence between Israel's security priorities and US global priorities more visible. While limiting Iran's regional influence remains a fundamental objective for Tel Aviv, energy security, the openness of maritime trade routes, reducing global inflationary pressures, and preserving strategic resources for competition with China may have become more important priorities for Washington. Therefore, the divergence between the two countries should not be characterized merely as a difference in methods. Rather, it reflects a divergence in threat perceptions and strategic priorities.

In fact, this development is not unique to Israel. In the current international system, where multipolarity is becoming increasingly visible, the approach of great powers toward their allies is also undergoing transformation. Whereas security guarantees in the past were based on more enduring and predictable relationships, alliance relations are increasingly becoming matters for negotiation. As seen in the cases of Ukraine, Taiwan, and the Gulf states, US support is increasingly taking the form not of a fixed security mechanism but of an instrument reassessed in accordance with particular strategic calculations. When the Israeli case is considered alongside these examples, it can be argued that the US approach toward its allies is undergoing a structural transformation and is being sustained insofar as it remains compatible with global strategic priorities.

In conclusion, Trump's pursuit of accommodation with Iran represents much more than a security crisis for Israel. It demonstrates that the traditional US definition of its role in the Middle East is undergoing transformation and that, as a consequence, allied states are also being compelled to reassess their own identities. Israel's anxiety stems less from the strengthening of Iran than from the fact that Washington no longer defines Israel in the same way. Therefore, the debate taking place today is not merely a diplomatic disagreement over the Iran issue; it is part of a broader transformation in which the concepts of alliance, security guarantees, and strategic partnership are being redefined within a changing international system.

[i] Alexander Cornwell ve Benjamin Raab, "Trump allies defend him to Israelis anxious over Iran deal", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/trump-allies-defend-him-israelis-anxious-over-iran-deal-2026-06-22/>, (Date Accessed: 22.06.2026).

[ii] Sebastian Harnisch, "Conceptualizing in the Minefield: Role Theory and Foreign Policy Learning", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8(1), 47–69, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24909853>, ss.52.

[iii] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3): 341–370, 2006, DOI: 10.1177/1354066106067346, ss.346.

[iv] "Trump veers toward exit in Iran war but risks loom", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-veers-toward-exit-iran-war-risks-loom-2026-06-15/>, (Date Accessed: 22.06.2026).

[v] "Hormuz reopening to release wave of oil supply, depress prices", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hormuz-reopening-release-wave-oil-supply-depress-prices-2026-06-18/>, (Date Accessed: 22.06.2026).



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

The Geopolitics of Institutional Trust in Grey-Zone Competition



Kürşat İSMAYIL

The transformation that has taken place in the nature of interstate competition in recent years has increasingly called into question the traditional distinction between war and peace. Cyberattacks, disinformation activities, economic coercion, sabotage, interference with critical infrastructure, and the use of non-state actors have become instruments for constraining rival states' room for manoeuvre without resorting to direct military confrontation. In the international security literature, this phenomenon is generally discussed within the framework of the "grey zone" or "hybrid threats."

However, this transformation cannot be explained solely by the diversification of the instruments used by states. The more fundamental change lies in the fact that a state's domestic political and societal vulnerabilities have themselves become direct elements of international competition. While military capabilities, economic power, and geographical position remain important, public trust in institutions, the resilience of the information environment, and perceptions of the political system's legitimacy have also become factors affecting foreign-policy capacity.

From this perspective, one of the defining characteristics of grey-zone competition is that, rather than occupying an adversary's territory, it seeks to increase the costs associated with decision-making. In the case of an overt military attack, it is often possible to identify the perpetrator, the nature of the attack, and the appropriate target of retaliation with a relatively high degree of certainty. In cyberattacks, sabotage, or information operations, however, the problem of attribution is far more complex. It may not always be possible to determine quickly whether a failure at an energy facility is the result of a technical malfunction or sabotage, whether a cyberattack has been conducted directly by a state or through a proxy group, or whether a narrative spreading rapidly across social media is organic or the product of a coordinated campaign.

This ambiguity creates a significant strategic advantage for the attacker. The target state must protect its security while simultaneously taking into account the risk of escalating tensions through an excessive response. Grey-zone activities can therefore generate a political impact considerably greater than the physical damage caused by individual incidents.

In the European security environment, this trend has become increasingly visible in recent years. NATO has stated that Russia makes use of various hybrid tools, including sabotage, cyber activities, electronic interference, disinformation, and political influence operations. The fact that Alliance documents on resilience treat the protection of energy systems, transportation networks, telecommunications infrastructure, and digital systems as integral components of collective security is likewise indicative of a broader transformation in the understanding of security.

What is particularly noteworthy here is that defence is no longer conceived solely in terms of strengthening military capabilities. The ability of states to maintain essential services during crises, preserve the functionality of public institutions, and ensure continued public access to reliable information is also regarded as part of national resilience.

Security, therefore, has acquired a meaning broader than the mere protection of state borders.

Africa represents another major arena of competition in which similar instruments operate under different political and historical conditions. External influence struggles on the continent cannot be understood simply as an extension of great-power competition. The legacies of colonialism, patterns of economic dependency, differences in state capacity, security challenges, and crises of political representation directly shape the local environment in which external actors operate.

For this reason, the effectiveness of external intervention often depends less on creating new societal problems than on the capacity to exploit vulnerabilities that already exist. Studies published by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies show that disinformation campaigns across Africa have increased significantly in recent years. Although the visibility of Russia-linked networks is particularly noteworthy, local political actors have also made use of disinformation techniques in elections and domestic political competition.

It would therefore be analytically incomplete to reduce the problems of Africa's information environment solely to external interference. One of the principal factors enabling external actors to exert influence is low institutional trust. Afrobarometer surveys across the continent indicate that trust in parliaments, political leadership, the police, and judicial institutions remains limited in many countries. Economic inequality, perceptions of corruption, and problems relating to state capacity can further deepen this erosion of trust.

At this point, institutional trust ceases to be merely a sociological variable associated with domestic politics. When public trust in the state, media institutions, or electoral processes weakens, external actors may gain significant opportunities in the information sphere. A more visible relationship is therefore emerging between domestic political legitimacy and foreign-policy capacity.

The activities of Russia and China in Africa should not, however, be placed in the same analytical category. Russia-linked activities tend to feature more visible elements of disinformation, security relationships, and political influence networks, whereas China's approach has generally developed through longer-term and more institutionalized instruments. The presence of Chinese media organizations in Africa, content-sharing agreements, journalist training programmes, and public-diplomacy initiatives have all increased Beijing's visibility in the continent's information environment.

Yet the capacity to exert influence and the actual production of influence are not the same thing. Local media cultures, the degree of political competition, and public perceptions of external actors determine the extent to which externally generated narratives gain acceptance. Portraying African societies as passive spaces that can easily be manipulated by external actors therefore risks overlooking both local political dynamics and the agency of societies themselves.

One of the most important variables distinguishing the current period from earlier forms of information operations is the spread of artificial intelligence technologies. Artificial intelligence did not create propaganda or disinformation. It does, however, significantly reduce the cost of content production and enables large volumes of material to be generated rapidly in different languages and for different societal groups.

The European External Action Service, in its work on foreign information manipulation and interference, has noted the growing visibility of AI-assisted content generation. Synthetic images, artificial voice generation, and automated text systems are expanding the scale of information operations while making their detection increasingly complex.

The central problem here is not merely the spread of false information. The simultaneous circulation of large numbers of contradictory narratives can also weaken societal perceptions regarding which sources of information are trustworthy. The success of information operations, therefore, should not always be measured by whether a society has been persuaded to accept a particular narrative. Creating an environment in which people come to distrust all sources of information may itself constitute a strategically significant outcome.

This development demonstrates why institutional trust is becoming increasingly central to grey-zone competition. The sustained erosion of trust in state institutions or core information sources can affect not only the domestic political legitimacy of governments but also their capacity to implement foreign-policy decisions. From security agreements and economic policies to international sanctions and military cooperation, many foreign-policy choices require a degree of domestic societal acceptance.

However, the existence of threats arising from disinformation and external interference should not legitimize governments treating all criticism as the product of foreign influence operations. Such an approach may strengthen political control in the short term, but over the longer term it can damage the very institutional trust that is meant to be protected. OECD work on information integrity similarly emphasizes that transparent public communication, independent media, a pluralistic information environment, and accountable institutions are essential components of societal resilience against disinformation.

A strategy for responding to grey-zone competition must therefore have two dimensions. The first involves protecting critical infrastructure, strengthening cyber defence, uncovering sabotage networks, and identifying foreign information operations. The second requires states to reinforce the relationship of trust between themselves and their societies.

Ultimately, the meaning of power is expanding in the security environment of the twenty-first century. Military capability, economic resources, and strategic geography remain important for states. Yet societal resilience and institutional trust are also becoming fundamental components of the capacity to withstand external pressure.

The decisive question in the future of grey-zone competition, therefore, will not simply be which states possess more advanced cyber capabilities or more extensive information-operation capacities. The more fundamental question is which states will be able to preserve the legitimacy of their institutions, the reliability of their information environments, and the relationship of trust between state and society under conditions of external pressure. In this sense, institutional trust is becoming not merely a normative value associated with democratic systems, but a geopolitical capacity that directly affects the strategic room for manoeuvre available to states.



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

The India–Uzbekistan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership



Banu YAKUBOVA

On 29–30 August 2026, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Uzbekistan’s President Şevket Mirziyoyev, raising relations between the two countries to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. During the talks, the parties set a target of raising the annual bilateral trade volume to five billion dollars by 2030, while also agreeing to deepen cooperation in various fields, including defense and critical minerals. It was further decided to establish a new mechanism at the level of Foreign Ministers to coordinate bilateral cooperation at a high level and to monitor the implementation of the agreements reached.^[i] This mechanism reflects the parties’ determination to translate their political will into an institutional framework, to put planned projects and cooperation initiatives into practice, and to develop a more lasting and sustainable partnership.

The process of institutionalizing and deepening India-Uzbekistan relations dates back to 2011. Indeed, that same year, during President Islam Kerimov’s state visit to New Delhi, relations between the two countries were elevated to the level of a Strategic Partnership. Several documents were also signed during the visit, envisaging the expansion of economic and investment cooperation in various fields, including fuel and energy, information technology, textiles, pharmaceuticals, banking, and trade.^[ii]

During this period, India’s relations with Central Asia began to acquire a more comprehensive and institutional character at the regional level, going beyond the bilateral framework established with Uzbekistan. Indeed, on 12 June 2012, India launched its “Connect Central Asia Policy,” based on a vision of proactively developing political, economic, and people-to-people relations with Central Asian countries at both the bilateral and regional levels.^[iii] Another important step in the institutionalization of this process was the holding of the first India–Central Asia Dialogue in Samarkand in 2019. The first India–Central Asia Summit in 2022, in turn, elevated contacts between the parties to the leaders’ level and demonstrated the will to develop a comprehensive and lasting partnership.^[iv]

All these developments show that India’s approach to Central Asia rests on a two-track strategy that advances simultaneously at the bilateral and regional levels. Within this framework, New Delhi is, on the one hand, developing its bilateral relations and partnerships with the countries of the region, while on the other hand deepening cooperation through regional mechanisms encompassing Central Asia as a whole. The steady and gradual nature of this approach makes it possible to view the elevation of India-Uzbekistan relations to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as part of a broader and longer-term process of rapprochement.

Another element that stands out in this process is the continuity of dialogue. High-level visits, regular dialogue mechanisms, and summits demonstrate the importance India attaches to making communication and cooperation with Central Asia sustainable.

At this point, it becomes important to examine the main factors underlying India’s pursuit of deepening relations with Central Asia.

First of all, in addition to serving as a bridge to Eurasia, Central Asia occupies an important position as a geo-economic hub thanks to its rich oil, natural gas, uranium, and hydroelectric resources. These resources can contribute to New Delhi’s diversification of its energy supply. The region also holds strategic significance due to security threats emanating from Afghanistan, the lack of direct overland access to Central Asia, and the need for alternative connectivity routes. I

In addition, increasing its influence in the region enables India to develop its regional partnerships through multilateral platforms such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).^[v] Within India’s multidimensional approach to Central Asia, why Uzbekistan occupies a more prominent position is also a matter that warrants separate consideration.

First, Uzbekistan’s central location in Central Asia, its large population, and its importance in terms of inter-regional connectivity routes make the country a significant partner for India’s regional connectivity objectives. In addition, Tashkent’s adoption, since 2016, of a more open foreign policy focused on regional cooperation has created favorable ground for developing relations with India. Indeed, the two countries’ shared interests in connectivity, counterterrorism, energy, and trade further heighten the importance of the relationship, particularly in the context of regional security concerns stemming from Afghanistan.^[vi]

However, it is not sufficient to assess this rapprochement solely through the lens of India’s regional interests. The approach of the regional countries, and particularly of Uzbekistan, toward cooperation with New Delhi also plays a significant role in the development of India–Central Asia relations.

From Central Asia’s perspective, developing relations with India presents important opportunities for diversifying external partnerships. In addition, India’s capacity in fields such as healthcare, higher education, information technology, and engineering aligns with the growing needs of Central Asian countries. Cultural and people-to-people ties developed through initiatives such as Bollywood, educational opportunities, and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme also contribute to India being perceived as a more familiar and accessible partner in the region.^[vii] Taken together, these elements suggest that India stands out for Central Asia not only in terms of diversifying external partnerships, but also as a complementary partner capable of contributing to national development and capacity-building.

From Uzbekistan’s perspective, India is regarded as a reliable and promising strategic partner. Indeed, the fact that India’s achievements in digital technologies, software development, and entrepreneurship in particular were highlighted during Narendra Modi’s visit to Uzbekistan on 30 August 2026 shows the importance Tashkent attaches to developing mutually beneficial cooperation in these fields. The aim of expanding cooperation in various fields such as energy, critical minerals, health, and agriculture, together with the fact that four Indian universities are already operating in Uzbekistan,^[viii] demonstrates the multidimensional structure of relations between the two countries, spanning different fields. Viewed from this angle, the elevation of relations to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be characterized not merely as a change in diplomatic status, but as the transfer of already wide-ranging cooperation into a more comprehensive and institutional framework.

The progress and success of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will depend on the extent to which the agreements reached are implemented and on how far the parties can overcome existing structural constraints. In this context, the current level of bilateral trade and the connectivity problem stand out as two limitations. The fact that India-Uzbekistan trade volume stood at 598.1 million dollars in the first half of 2026,^[ix] 2 shows that significant progress will need to be made in the coming period to reach the five-billion-dollar target set for 2030. One of the main factors that could make achieving this target difficult is the connectivity problem. While the absence of direct overland access from India to Central Asia constitutes a fundamental structural constraint, and while Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) offer alternatives, India’s dependence on Iran’s transit infrastructure creates vulnerabilities in the face of sanctions and regional instability.^[x]

In conclusion, India-Uzbekistan relations, and India–Central Asia cooperation more broadly, have acquired a multidimensional character over the years. Given the parties’ determination to further develop their relations, it can be said that Uzbekistan may play a significant role in shaping the future of India–Central Asia relations in this process. Should the existing structural constraints be overcome and dialogue be sustained, the progress that India–Central Asia cooperation achieves could also open the way for new opportunities in terms of broader regional engagement.

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[ii] Anvar Umarov, “Uzbekistan and India establish strategic partnership”, Uz Daily, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/uzbekistan-and-india-establish-strategic-partnership/>, (Accessed: 12.09.2026).

[iii] “Keynote address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India–Central Asia Dialogue”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://www.mea.gov.in/speeches-statements?dtl/19791/>, (Accessed: 12.09.2026).

[iv] Ayusha Saini, “Decadal Review of India–Central Asia Relations: Assessing Strategic Intent and Structural Constraints”, Chintan Research Foundation, <https://www.crfindia.org/publications/research-article/decadal-review-of-india-central-asia-relations-assessing-strategic-intent-and-structural-constraints>, (Accessed: 12.09.2026).

[v] Ibid.

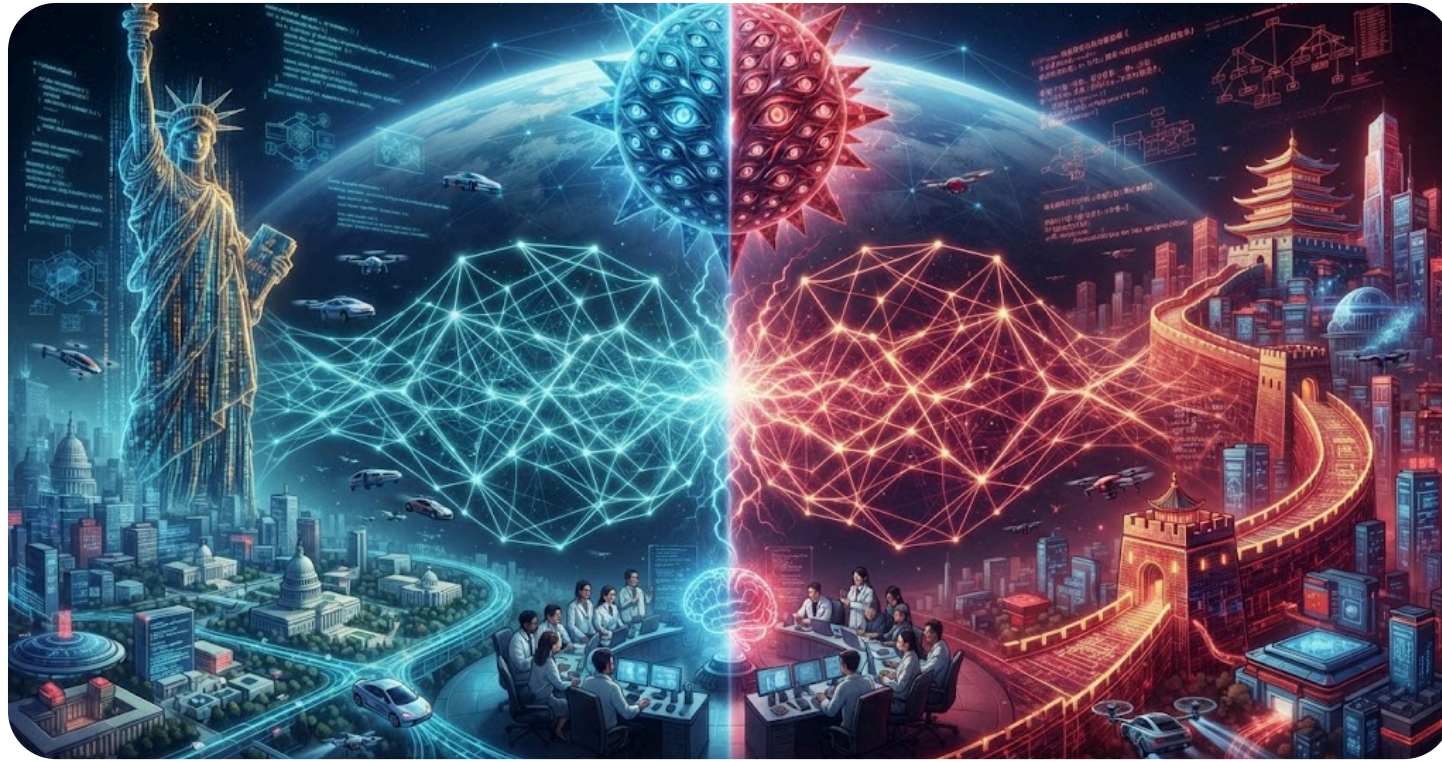
[vi] Rajershi Dharmendra, “Strategic Pivot Westward: The Importance of Uzbekistan From The Lens of Indian Foreign Policy”, EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, <https://eprapublishing.org/IJMR/strategic-pivot-westward-the-importance-of-uzbekistan-from-the-lens-of-indian-foreign-policy/20285>, (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[vii] Ayusha Saini, op. cit.

[viii] “Leaders of Uzbekistan and India outline outcomes of talks”, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/9553>, (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[ix] “Uzbekistan–India Cooperation in Figures”, National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, <https://stat.uz/en/press-center/news-of-committee/69973-zbekiston-va-indiston-amkorligi-ra-amlarda-4>, (Accessed: 13.09.2026).

[x] Ayusha Saini, op. cit.



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

The Knowledge Distillation Crisis in US-China Artificial Intelligence Competition



Zeynep Çağla ERİN

The exponential development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has triggered a structural transformation. This transformation is fundamentally changing the distribution of power in the international system of the 21st century, the geostrategic calculations of states, and the basic parameters of the global political economy. Huge increases in computing capacity, big leaps in data-processing algorithms, and the growing autonomous decision-making abilities of machine learning models have changed AI. It is no longer just a commercial area of innovation; it has become an essential part of national security and military-strategic deterrence. In this context, the ongoing struggle for hegemony between the two main actors of the global system, the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), has moved to a new and intense level of competition. This competition is shaped by the research, development, control, and supply-chain management of AI technologies. The conflict dynamics between these two states are the most current and concrete example of the security dilemma predicted by the classical realist paradigm, now reflected in the fields of cyberspace and advanced technology.^[i]

In the period from the end of the Second World War to today, the US has kept its position as the center of technological innovation. It has done this through its institutional infrastructure, huge research budgets, and clustering models like Silicon Valley. Within the framework of Hegemonic Stability Theory, the US has built its technological superiority as a guarantee of both its economic welfare and its military deterrence. On the other side, China has made it a state policy to become the world's leading AI innovation center by 2030. It has done this through large state-capitalism-based geoeconomic visions such as "Made in China 2025" and, especially, the "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" announced in 2017. This aggressive rise of China has been seen by policymakers in Washington as an existential threat to the US's technological hegemony and, therefore, to its national survival.^[ii]

This perception of threat prepared the ground for the "technological decoupling" policies that started with the Trump administration and became institutionalized under the Biden administration. At the center of this US strategy is the doctrine of "small yard, high fence." This doctrine includes a series of export controls and sanctions that aim to block China's access to critical technologies. This is especially true for the advanced semiconductors/chips and chip-manufacturing equipment that are vital for training AI models. The weaponization of chip supply chains has become the most basic geoeconomic tool used by the US. Through this tool, the US tries to slow down China's AI development, prevent its technological leap, and put its rival at an asymmetric disadvantage by creating a hardware bottleneck.

Faced with these hardware embargoes, China has been forced to grow its domestic innovation ecosystem in isolation. It has used the advantages of its huge internal market, state-supported R&D funds, and high data-collection capacity to do this. However, training leading AI models requires an enormous amount of computing power, and therefore hundreds of thousands of advanced GPUs (graphics processing units). Because of this, China has not been able to close this hardware gap completely with domestic production in the short term. This structural limitation has pushed Chinese technology giants and AI research laboratories toward alternative, asymmetric, software-based strategies that minimize hardware costs. In this context, the technique called "knowledge distillation" has stopped being just an ordinary machine-learning method and has moved to the center of a geopolitical crisis.

In AI engineering, knowledge distillation is the process of transferring the algorithmic abilities, reasoning processes, and knowledge of a "teacher" model to a much smaller, cheaper, and faster "student" model. The teacher model has billions of parameters, is trained on huge datasets, and is very costly to run (for example, ChatGPT-4 or Claude 3). At the technical level, this process is based on the principle of training the student model to imitate the outputs of the teacher model. This method is widely used in both academic and commercial circles in the AI community to improve model efficiency. However, the real cause of the crisis is not the method itself, but the way it was applied, its scale, and the strategic intention behind it.^[iii]

The crisis actually began on 8 September 2026, when the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the National Security Agency (NSA), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published a joint cybersecurity report (AA26-251A). This report claimed that China-based AI companies were carrying out "industrial-scale distillation" campaigns against the leading models of major US AI companies. This claim placed the issue directly in the category of a national security threat. According to the assessment of US intelligence agencies, these companies, acting under the protection of the Chinese government, have made the distillation technique a support mechanism and the backbone of all their AI development strategies. This situation has been described as the systematic and industrial-scale exploitation of US intellectual property.^[iv]

Companies named in the US report, including DeepSeek, Moonshot AI, Alibaba, MiniMax, StepFun, and Z.AI, allegedly pulled data of billions of tokens from the systems of US companies through millions of fake API requests. It is stated that, while doing this, Chinese actors set up gray-market API proxy networks called "transfer stations." They did this to get around the geographic restrictions and terms of service set by US companies, and used identity-hiding methods to avoid being detected. It is emphasized that DeepSeek copied the reasoning abilities of models like GPT-4 and Claude to train its own R1 and V3 models. In this way, it artificially reduced model training costs to only a few million dollars. Experts read this strategy as China's attempt to stop the effects of hardware embargoes through software copying.

This process, from Alibaba's Qwen models to the various coding and analytical models of MiniMax and StepFun, has been interpreted, from the US point of view, as a clear violation of intellectual property built through technological superiority and many years of R&D investment. The CISA report claims that Chinese companies have perfected their own models by collecting the best features of US models, and in this way have moved their AI development timelines forward by years. Among the countermeasures suggested in the report are: developing algorithms to detect suspicious distillation requests, sharing intelligence between AI companies, and giving misleading, fake answers to bots that try to access the systems in order to damage the architecture of Chinese models. These suggestions show that AI wars are no longer just a hardware race, but have become a sophisticated conflict that uses data poisoning and cyber deception strategies.

China's diplomatic and rhetorical response to these serious accusations is a classic example of the tactics that states use to build legitimacy in the international arena. On 10 September 2026, China's Ministry of Commerce published an official statement completely rejecting the US claims. It described them as "groundless," "without legal basis," and "a reflection of hegemonic arrogance."^[v]

At the center of China's defense argument is the concept of politicization. The Chinese side has argued that knowledge distillation is a neutral scientific practice used by everyone in the global AI ecosystem, and a natural part of open-source culture. It has claimed that the US has turned this technical process into a political weapon. Chinese officials have pointed out that Western, and especially US, AI companies have also intensively distilled Chinese-origin open-source models (for example, Alibaba's open-source models) both in the past and now. Based on this, they have accused the Washington administration of hypocrisy and double standards.

According to China's foreign policy discourse, the real aim of this US move is not to protect intellectual property rights. Instead, it is to protect its monopoly over computing power and data in the AI field, and in this way to prevent rising powers from taking part in the global innovation race under fair conditions. This discourse serves China's effort to present itself as an actor defending the technological development rights of the Global South, while presenting the US as a selfish technological imperialist.

The emphasis on inclusive sharing in the statement of the Ministry of Commerce spokesperson, together with its criticism that the US is blocking this sharing, points to a deep philosophical division about the nature of international technology regimes. The US securitizes strict copyright rights, data privacy, and closed systems in order to protect innovation. China, on the other hand, tries to gain legitimacy internationally by defending open-source development and the free flow of data.

China's statement also contains a clear threat of retaliation. It warns that, if the US uses distillation activities as an excuse to apply new sanctions, firm countermeasures will be taken. This keeps alive the possibility that the geoeconomic tension could turn into a trade war. The US accusation that Chinese AI companies are engaged in "industrial espionage" is a typical exclusionary reflex that declining hegemony has historically used against their rising rivals. In a similar way, in the 19th century, Britain's efforts to protect its industrial secrets were overcome by various methods by the rising American industry. Today, it is the US that is building similar walls to protect its own technological secrets, while China uses the gray areas of the cyber world to get around these walls.

As seen in the distillation crisis, there is no universal definition of what is legitimate scientific research and what is cyber theft. The US draws this line strictly, according to its own national security interests, while China adopts a more flexible interpretation. Global AI governance discussions carried out in platforms such as the United Nations (UN) or the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are being blocked because of bilateral crises like this one, and the process of building norms has reached a deadlock. The US knows that it cannot solve the AI security dilemma only within its own borders. For this reason, it is pushing key allies such as the European Union (EU), Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom to comply with the technology export controls and AI security standards that it has determined. The emphasis in the CISA report on effective information and intelligence sharing with allied countries is a clear sign that Washington is carrying out a global technological containment strategy against China. This situation is forcing actors like the EU, which are seeking strategic autonomy, to make costly choices between their economic interests and their security commitments, and this is further polarizing the international system.

This new cybersecurity issue is a reflection of the security dilemma in the military field. Today, artificial intelligence is the basic engine of autonomous weapon systems, intelligence analysis, cyberwar doctrines, and strategic decision-making mechanisms. Behind the US targeting of Chinese AI companies, there is not only commercial concern but also a deep fear of the technological advantages that these civilian companies could give to the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Therefore, the process that started as a distillation crisis has the character of a rehearsal for asymmetric warfare, in which states test each other's capacity to damage each other's cyber infrastructure.

Another structural effect is the philosophical transformation that the crisis has brought to the nature of AI research. Throughout history, the cumulative progress of scientific knowledge has been possible because ideas, theories, and methods influenced each other. The current stage of US-China competition aims to draw such sharp boundaries around the ownership of digital knowledge that this creates a risk of slowing down the pace of AI's evolution. The rise of techno-nationalism is sacrificing the potential of AI to solve global problems (climate change, pandemics, energy crises) to the geopolitical ambitions of states. The weaponization of mutual interdependence by both powers will, in the long term, create a zero-sum game that destroys the global common good.

In conclusion, the US is trying to protect its technological leadership by defending the borders of the ecosystem it has built, using data poisoning and cybersecurity firewalls. China, on the other hand, does not hold back from using any asymmetric tool, including distillation, to overcome the embargoes, close the technological gap, and prove its maturity as a global power. In the anarchic international system predicted by realist theory, the power struggle between these two giant actors over AI is not moving toward agreement, but toward deeper separation and the "Balkanization" of cyberspace. While the current channels of diplomatic dialogue remain insufficient to remove structural suspicions, technology keeps its central place as the most destructive weapon shaping the architecture of international security.

^[ii] "China-Based Artificial Intelligence Companies Conducting Industrial-Scale Distillation Campaigns Against U.S. AI Companies", America's Cyber Defense Agency, <https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa26-251a>, (Accessed: 10.09.2026).

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^[iv] "In Depth: AI Distillation in China Leaves U.S. Tech Giants at Odds", Caixin Global, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2026-09-10/in-depth-ai-distillation-in-china-leaves-us-tech-giants-at-odds-102483506.html>, (Accessed: 10.09.2026).

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^[vi] "Countermeasures warned over US actions on AI", China Daily, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202609/10/WS6aa1eda6e4b06d4aa055d361.html>, (Accessed: 10.09.2026).



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

The Three-Dimensional "Western Problem" and the Tectonic Fractures of the Global Order



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The international system is facing not merely a hegemonic transition but a structural crisis of identity and geopolitical existence. The current global uncertainty, threats, risks, crises, and scenarios of instability are often interpreted through a reductionist lens, primarily in terms of **U.S.-China competition**. Yet, at the heart of global turbulence lies what I have referred to in my previous studies as the **"Western Problem."** *The "Western Problem" concerns the internal decay of the power at the center of the system, the fragmentation of leadership, structural divisions, and a neurotic tendency to return to its historical codes.* In other words, the true generator of the systemic crisis is not the unstoppable rise of the East, but rather the West's own ontological, political, and geostrategic crisis.

The picture we face today is taking shape within a triangle formed by internal leadership struggles, deepening identity-based divisions, and the "Order of Controlled Chaos" generated by the reflex to refuse to relinquish hegemonic power. Indeed, today's world is debating whether the transatlantic alliance will experience a collective recovery or become engulfed within the very "Order of Chaos" it has created. **In this context, the Western Problem is crystallizing along three fundamental dimensions: internal leadership competition, ideological-structural fragmentation, and hegemonic resistance toward the East.**

New Leadership Struggles within the Transatlantic Matrix and the Recurrence of History

The consolidation of power within the West has historically never constituted a homogeneous structure. **History presents the First and Second World Wars as manifestations of a Germany-centered "Western Problem."** Today, a similar geopolitical genetic pattern appears to be awakening. **Berlin** made the European Union the principal instrument of its **"Policy toward the West"** for an extended period and embarked on a search for strategic autonomy from the United States, and even for leadership of the West. At the same time, within its **"Policy toward the East,"** it pursued a balancing strategy centered on Russia. However, the process that began with the war in Ukraine has broken this strategy to Berlin's disadvantage, once again pushing Germany into a position of strategic constraint.

London, meanwhile, having undergone a sharp geopolitical transformation in the aftermath of Brexit, has recognized the vulnerabilities of continental Europe and made a forceful return to the Anglo-Saxon axis.

In other words, the United Kingdom is repositioning itself as a global axis by taking advantage of continental Europe’s strategic paralysis. ***In this context, Britain is pursuing a more dynamic, less costly, and more aggressive “minilateral” power strategy through arrangements such as AUKUS, in contrast to the EU’s institutional sluggishness.*** This is shifting the intra-Western leadership struggle from the Germany–France axis toward competition between the Anglo–Saxon and Continental European blocs. More concretely, it is sharpening the struggle for leadership within the West between the traditional Anglo–Saxon alliance (the United States and the United Kingdom) and Continental Europe (Germany and France).

The division of leadership within the transatlantic matrix is undoubtedly paralyzing the collective West’s ability to formulate a common strategy during times of crisis. While seeking to preserve global hegemony, the West is unable to produce a homogeneous leadership architecture of its own; this, in turn, pushes the system into a spiral of **“multi-headed anarchy.”** In future projections, the gap between the United Kingdom’s aggressive minilateralism and Germany’s cumbersome continental hegemony will widen further. This will cause the single-centered structure of the transatlantic alliance architecture to collapse completely, fragmenting it into multiple, competing regional security enclaves.

Ideological Fragmentation and the Risk of Returning to Europe’s Historical Codes

The second and most dangerous dimension of the **“Western Problem”** is the deepening structural rifts among the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. In other words, it is the erosion of the liberal-democratic consensus and the ideological ghettoization of the West from within. What we face today is not a unified West, but fragile structures divided into the United States, the United Kingdom, and the EU, each of which is itself shaken by currents of micro-nationalism. The most dangerous aspect of this division is the regression at the level of values, which may be described as a **“Geopolitical Fracture of the Post-Enlightenment Era.”** ***Thus, this division is not merely an “economic” or “military” divergence; it is a fracture along “philosophical,” “ideological,” and “values-based” lines.*** While a profound philosophical rift is emerging between the Anglo-Saxon and Continental European axes, the rise of the far right, xenophobia, and neo-mercantilist tendencies across Europe indicates that the continent is rapidly distancing itself from the values of the Enlightenment. This risk of **“internal militarization”** extends beyond electoral success, shifting law-enforcement institutions and military establishments toward nation-state-centered reflexes.

Consequently, ***Europe is on the verge of a neurotic return to the tendencies toward fragmentation and periods of internal conflict embedded in its historical codes prior to Westphalia.*** In addition to the socio-political rifts intensified by the rise of the far right within the EU, Germany’s Zeitenwende initiative is creating a profound military-industrial division. Berlin’s expansion of its defense budget to enormous levels directly threatens Paris’s traditional leadership of “European Strategic Autonomy.” While France advocates focusing on European-made joint projects, Germany, citing urgent requirements, is opting for American F-35 aircraft and Patriot systems, thereby reinforcing the transatlantic link. This is making the Franco-German divide in the EU’s defense industry increasingly permanent and rendering the ideal of a collective European army impossible.

Europe’s philosophical and institutional disintegration is transforming the continent from a global center of power into a geopolitical zone of fracture. In this context, it would not be unreasonable to anticipate that the deepening Franco-German defense divide will leave the EU militarily dysfunctional, while the micro-nationalist wave fueled by the rise of the far right may, in the near future, push the continent toward the threshold of social civil-war dynamics, in addition to cross-border institutional conflicts and even a bloodless disintegration. In other words, the prospect of a transformation into hybrid internal conflicts driven by social polarization—or even a new “European Civil War” in which nation-states compete with one another—cannot simply be dismissed.

Hegemonic Resistance and the Uncertainty of the “Western Pacific”

It is impossible for the West, particularly the United States, which does not wish to relinquish its status as a global empire, to voluntarily hand over leadership to the East and China. ***Expecting the United States to implement the Soviet Union’s 1991 model of “voluntary dissolution” would constitute a historical fallacy.*** Rather than accepting its decline, the United States seeks to reconstruct the global system in its own favor by pushing the world toward controlled instability—in other words, by creating an “Order of Chaos.”

In the **“Western Pacific”** belt, the most critical theater of this strategy, the remilitarization of the two former Axis powers is raising the level of global military tension. In a possible China–Taiwan or South China Sea conflict, Japan and India appear likely to assume entirely different operational roles. **Japan**, having relaxed the constraints of its pacifist constitution, appears poised to become the United States’ primary logistical and military base in the region and to become directly involved in conflicts around the Taiwan Strait through intelligence, naval patrols, and missile-defense systems. India, by contrast, appears to be moving toward a role centered on imposing a naval blockade in the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, while avoiding opening a military front along its land border with China. In this context, New Delhi appears already to be implementing a strategy aimed at paralyzing China logistically by cutting its energy supply routes—avoiding direct hot conflict while providing the Western alliance with a critical logistical lever. ***Indeed, for India, the Pacific is emerging not as a means of serving the West, but as a lever through which to become an independent leader of the Global South under a doctrine of multi-alignment.***

Washington’s “Order of Chaos” in the Pacific may be regarded as a proxy global strategy that pushes its allies toward the front lines. In future projections for the region, Japan’s direct involvement in a hot conflict may become unavoidable, while India, by preserving the flexibility of its multi-alignment strategy, may ultimately reject demands for full military integration with the West and thereby generate a major operational vulnerability in the U.S.-centered containment strategy across the Asia-Pacific.

The East’s Reaction: The Future of Revisionist Organizations and the Eurasian Axis

The structural crisis generated by the “Western Problem” is directly catalyzing shifts in the balance and efforts toward cooperation within the Eastern bloc. ***The West’s fragmented appearance and aggressive efforts at consolidation have condemned Russia and China to a “forced strategic destiny.”*** Within the “Russia–China–India” balance, New Delhi’s position will determine the fate of intra-Eastern dynamics. As I examined in detail in my analysis titled **“From Rhetoric to Reality: The New Delhi Threshold—The Future of BRICS and Türkiye in the ‘Multi-Structured’ Deadlock of the Global Order”** the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS, emerging as alternatives to the Western-centered international system, are no longer merely economic and regional cooperation platforms. They are evolving into geopolitical shields against the West’s financial and military monopoly and into alternative centers of global governance. In this context, the “BRICS+” mechanism is shifting control of global commodity and energy markets toward the non-Western world. The SCO appears likely to evolve from a regional security pact into a collective Eurasian defense umbrella, while BRICS is expected to develop an alternative development matrix capable of rendering the Western-centered IMF and World Bank models ineffective. ***As the West becomes increasingly divided by its internal contradictions, the Eastern axis will fill this institutional vacuum through a rational and multipolar expansion strategy.*** Indeed, institutional consolidation along the Eurasian axis is structurally constraining the West’s sanctions power and financial hegemony. At this point, it is increasingly evident that BRICS- and SCO-led de-dollarization initiatives will capture more than half of global trade volume and, by dismantling the transatlantic-centered Bretton Woods system, divide the world into two clearly defined spheres of economic sovereignty and an irreversible multipolar financial architecture.

Conclusion

The picture we face today is an absurd paradox in which the West itself can no longer comply with the rules of the liberal system it created. ***The “Western Problem” is giving rise to a smaller but more aggressive Western bloc that seeks to survive through flexible, low-cost, hybrid mini-alliances capable of making decisions more rapidly.*** The world is caught between, on the one hand, a West that is fragmenting, becoming more authoritarian, and carrying the risk of returning to historical codes of warfare, and, on the other, a revisionist East that is drawing strength from this crisis but has not yet achieved full institutional integration of its own.

In the period ahead, the fate of the global order will be determined not by the pace of U.S.–China competition, but by how bloody or bloodless the internal processes of decay and conflict within the “Western Problem” become. ***In this new world, the sole path to survival and the preservation of sovereignty is the doctrine of “Strategic Autonomy,” embodied in concrete terms by India and Türkiye.***



ANKASAM ANALYSIS

What Do Meloni's Stability and Vannacci's Rise Say for the European Far-Right?



Gamze BAL

The government formed under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni in Italy in October 2022 surpassed the record of Silvio Berlusconi's second government by exceeding 1,400 days as of September 4, 2026, and became the country's longest continuously serving government after the Second World War.^[i] In Italy, where the average lifespan of governments is limited to 14 months and 68 different governments have been formed since 1946,^[ii] the longevity of the Meloni government constitutes an exceptional example within Italy's chronic government instability, while on the other hand, it demonstrates that the populist radical right in Europe can transform electoral success into a lasting governance experience. However, the fact that Futuro Nazionale, founded under the leadership of Roberto Vannacci after breaking away from Lega in February 2026, can find a response among voters despite the radical right being in power draws attention.

In this context, Meloni's governance experience is important in understanding under what conditions this development emerged. Because after taking the prime minister's seat, Meloni took on a broad responsibility ranging from Italy's economic stability to EU obligations, from the NATO alliance to public finance and the entire country's foreign policy. This governance responsibility reveals the limits of turning radical rhetoric into applicable policy. Indeed, research shows that while Meloni acts moderately and pragmatically in foreign policy, she preserves the important elements of her radical right line in domestic policy on issues such as immigration and culture wars.^[iii] Therefore, being in power does not eliminate Meloni's political line; it draws a mandatory framework for her that determines to what extent and with what tools this line can be implemented.

Vannacci's rise gains meaning exactly at the point where the boundaries of this framework are opened to debate. Because Futuro Nazionale does not bring an immigration and identity agenda that Meloni abandoned back into politics; it argues that the policies already pursued by the Meloni government do not go far enough. Vannacci even states that he offers the ideological clarity that the ruling coalition no longer provides.^[iv] Particularly in citizenship and immigration policies, Vannacci criticizes Meloni; he proposes increasing the residency period required for Italian citizenship to twenty years, making advanced knowledge of Italian a condition, and granting citizenship on the basis of belonging, which includes adaptation to Italy's cultural values.^[v] Additionally, he announces that returning a portion of the immigrants in the country to their countries of origin is one of the main political goals of Futuro Nazionale. While the Meloni government's priority is reducing irregular migration and border control; Vannacci makes a declaration of assimilation extending the debate from who can come to the country to which of those currently in the country will be accepted as part of the national community. Therefore, the Vannacci-Meloni divergence extends from the control of migration to how citizenship and national belonging will be defined.

A similar Meloni-Vannacci divergence is seen in the field of the EU and foreign policy. While Meloni maintains a national sovereignty approach but pursues a policy that defends Italy's interests within the Union; Vannacci advocates halting European political integration and transforming the EU into a more flexible organization of intergovernmental cooperation.

The divergence becomes even more apparent on the issue of Ukraine. While Meloni, despite her differences of opinion with the Trump administration, maintains support for Kyiv and Italy's position within NATO; Vannacci opposes sending weapons to Ukraine and wants relations with Russia to be redeveloped. These differences, ranging from immigration and citizenship to European integration and foreign policy, make it difficult to evaluate Vannacci simply as a harsher version of Meloni. In particular, his handling of citizenship with a more exclusionary understanding of belonging and his making reverse migration one of the fundamental elements of his political program transform Futuro Nazionale into an actor pushing the boundaries of the populist radical right.

Essentially, all these features can be considered at first glance as classical extreme right actor ideology. However, the fact that Futuro Nazionale was supported by a large voter base shortly after its establishment reveals a paradox that needs to be examined. In the SWG research published in early September, Futuro Nazionale rose to the position of the country's fourth-largest political force with 7.5 percent, leaving behind Meloni's strongest coalition partner, Forza Italia. However, Fratelli d'Italia maintains its position as the leading party with 26.8 percent.^[vi] This data shows that while Meloni's leadership and her party's voter support continue, Vannacci also reaching a significant vote potential in a short time demonstrates that two different political actors on the Italian right can find a response at the same time. Therefore, to understand Vannacci's rise, which cannot be explained as a natural consequence of Meloni's weakening, it is necessary to look at how he secures voter support.

It would be an incomplete assessment to consider Vannacci's voter response only through immigration and identity policies without adding the economy parameter. As a matter of fact, although the Meloni government has taken successful steps toward ensuring political stability, strengthening market confidence regarding public finance, and reducing irregular migration, the successes achieved do not eliminate Italy's long-standing economic problems. Even though real wages increased by 1.3 percent in the first quarter of 2026 compared to the previous year, they remain below the 2021 level. Moreover, while the increase in energy prices raises inflation, real wages are expected to fall by 0.9 percent in 2026.^[vii] In this environment, Vannacci approaches the rhetoric of immigration, security, and national identity not merely as a cultural issue, but also associates it with economic losses. In particular, by connecting high energy prices and economic decline with the Ukraine War, sanctions against Russia, and current foreign policy choices, he makes economic dissatisfaction a part of a broader sovereignty and national interest discourse.^[viii] Thus, alongside a harsher immigration policy, Vannacci offers voters a holistic explanation that economic loss, cultural change, and political insecurity are different consequences of the same problem. This explanation makes it easier for Vannacci to receive support from Lega and Fratelli d'Italia voters, as well as from segments that did not vote in the 2024 European elections, during a period when Meloni is strong.

The fact that Futuro Nazionale has started to create a second center of attraction in right-wing politics thanks to this support has not yet elevated Vannacci to a position that would pose a direct alternative to Meloni, but the support given to the party exceeding 7 percent in a short time constitutes a weight that cannot be ignored by the center-right in the upcoming elections. In this direction, the main problem for Meloni is how the division of right-wing votes will affect the election results if Futuro Nazionale competes outside the center-right alliance in the 2027 elections. In elections where the competition between the center-right and center-left is close, Vannacci competing as a separate political actor could cause Meloni's alliance to lose seats, especially in electoral districts where deputies are elected on a majoritarian basis.

On the other hand, including Vannacci in the alliance could also create a cost for Meloni. The harsh policies Vannacci advocates regarding immigration, the European Union, Ukraine, and Russia could change the current political line of the center-right alliance. Therefore, Meloni has to consider the possibility of Vannacci remaining outside the alliance and dividing right-wing votes on the one hand, and the risk of a potential partnership changing the political balances on the other. This dilemma opens up a sphere of influence for Vannacci beyond his vote share and transforms Futuro Nazionale into an important actor that must be taken into account in the center-right's electoral strategy.

Vannacci's rise is also a development that must be taken into consideration for the EU. Over the last four years, Meloni has been able to maintain institutional and international obligations and sovereigntist rhetoric in a balance in relations with the EU. Vannacci, on the other hand, directly opens the boundaries of this harmony to debate. The fact that rhetoric such as his EU approach, ending support for Ukraine, and developing relations with Russia turns into increasing voter support may cause Meloni to turn to a harsher line in EU policies in order to protect her voter base even if she does not form an alliance with Vannacci. Therefore, in the upcoming period, it is important for Brussels whether it will form a permanent voter base large enough to internally pressure the Meloni government's European policy.

This situation also brings a new dimension to European political debates. Vannacci's rise shows that evaluating the shift to the right in Europe as a one-way voter movement from traditional center parties towards the radical right is an incomplete analysis. As a matter of fact, the Italian example indicates that the institutionalization of the radical right in power does not end the radicalization dynamics in right-wing politics; rather, harsher and more exclusionary demands can gain strength around a separate political program. Therefore, the Vannacci case makes visible an important possibility regarding the new phase of the rise of the European extreme right. In the first phase, extreme right parties brought issues such as immigration, national identity, sovereignty, and multiculturalism to the center of the political agenda; in the second phase, some of these parties achieved electoral success. The development emerging in Italy, on the other hand, makes visible the possibility that the limitations brought by being in power may form the driving force of a new radicalization within the radical right.

As radical right governments are forced to limit their policies due to institutional and international requirements, actors who present these limits as compromise or inadequacy can mobilize voters with their harsher demands. In such a situation, competition can begin between the radical right acting with the responsibility of power and more radical actors who reject the limits brought by this responsibility. As a result of the competition, coming to power may cease to be a mechanism that ensures the moderation of the radical right and may turn into a ground that enables the emergence of harsher political objections. Therefore, Futuro Nazionale under the leadership of Vannacci does not only mean the rise of the extreme right for Europe; at the same time, it makes visible the risk that the restriction of the radical right in power could feed a new wave of radicalization.

In conclusion, the Italian example provides important data showing that the rise of the extreme right in Europe is not a linear process that is completed by coming to power. While Meloni's long-lasting government reveals that the populist radical right can transform electoral success into a lasting governance experience; Vannacci's rise in a short time shows that the institutional, legal, economic, and international boundaries brought about by being in power turn into a new source of organization for actors criticizing the government in right-wing politics. If this dynamic, which is in its initial stage in Italy, is seen in other countries as well, the institutionalization of the extreme right could point to the beginning of a new phase of radicalization, and this situation could turn into one of the dynamics determining the direction of the European extreme right.

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