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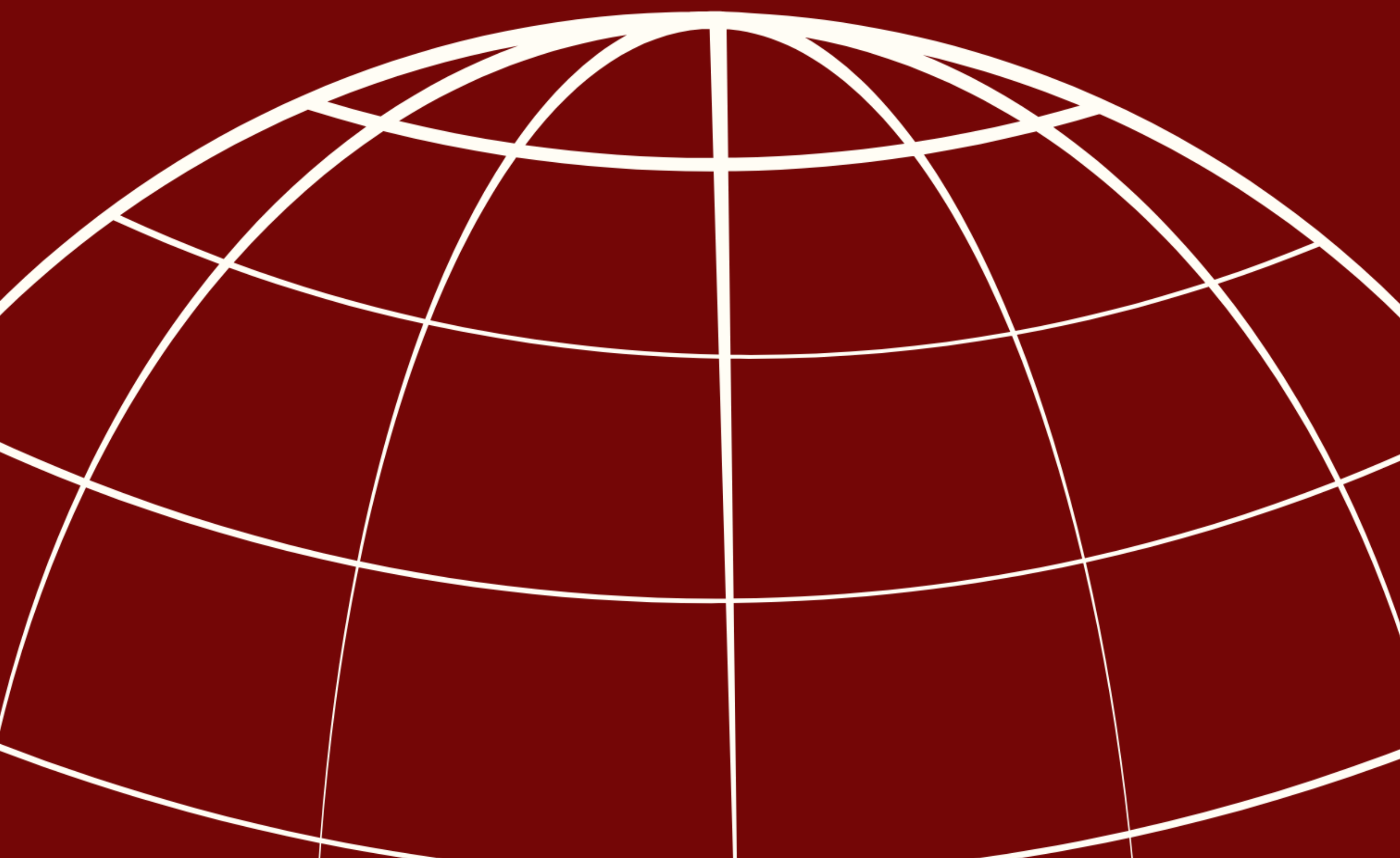

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Préface

Nous sommes ravis de vous présenter le troisième volume de Politika, la revue de premier cycle en affaires internationales et politiques. Depuis 2019, nous avons le plaisir d'offrir, chaque année, aux étudiant.e.s de premier cycle une plateforme de publication dédiée à la diffusion de leurs recherches. Cette initiative s'inscrit dans une démarche résolument pédagogique, tant pour l'équipe éditoriale, composée d'étudiant·e·s de premier cycle engagés dans un processus d'évaluation rigoureux et constructif, que pour les auteur.e.s.

Chaque article publié témoigne d'une recherche approfondie et d'un travail itératif. S'inscrivant pleinement dans les débats académiques contemporains, les contributions proposent des analyses pertinentes et nuancées de questions centrales, qu'elles relèvent de la politique nationale ou des relations internationales. Nous espérons que la lecture de ce volume saura enrichir votre réflexion et nourrir votre compréhension des enjeux actuels.

—Katanan Touré
Rédactrice en chef

Foreword

We are pleased to present the third volume of Politika, the undergraduate journal of international affairs and politics. Since 2019, we have had the pleasure of offering undergraduate students, each year, a publication platform dedicated to the diffusion of their research. This initiative is firmly rooted in a pedagogical approach, benefiting both the editorial team, composed of undergraduate students engaged in a rigorous and constructive review process, and the authors.

Each published article reflects in-depth research and an iterative scholarly process. Fully engaging with contemporary academic debates, the contributions offer pertinent and nuanced analyses of central issues, whether in domestic politics or international relations. We hope that reading this volume will enrich your reflections and deepen your understanding of current issues.

—Katanan Touré
Editor in chief

Équipe éditoriale – Editorial team

Beyond DEI: The Democratic Value of Diversity in Public Service

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Résumé
Les récents revers politiques à l'égard des politiques de diversité, d'équité et d'inclusion (DEI) ont ravivé le débat sur la valeur de la diversité dans la fonction publique. Ce texte soutient que la diversité dans la fonction publique est importante pour la gouvernance démocratique, car elle renforce la légitimité organisationnelle et améliore les résultats des politiques publiques. En s'appuyant sur la théorie de la bureaucratie représentative, il définit la diversité comme la représentation passive de groupes politiquement significatifs et mobilise sa conceptualisation de la représentation symbolique afin d'expliquer comment la représentation démographique renforce la légitimité et encourage la coopération citoyenne. Il retrace ensuite l'évolution des politiques de diversité dans la fonction publique au Canada et aux États-Unis, où des pressions externes ont conduit à deux conceptualisations différentes de cette notion. Enfin, il passe en revue des études expérimentales et observationnelles afin de démontrer que les bureaucraties représentatives sont perçues comme plus légitimes, indépendamment de leur performance, et que cette légitimité accrue améliore les résultats des politiques publiques en favorisant plus de coopération citoyenne et de coproduction. Il réfute également une affirmation répandue selon laquelle l'augmentation de la diversité diminuerait la légitimité perçue de la fonction publique auprès des groupes dominants. Ainsi, la diversité dans la fonction publique revêt à la fois une importance normative et instrumentale dans un sens largement utilitariste, ce qui met en lumière son importance dans un contexte où les politiques de DEI font face à une opposition croissante.

Mots-clés: bureaucratie représentative, diversité, fonction publique, DEI, représentation passive, représentation symbolique.

Abstract
Recent political backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies has renewed debate over the value of diversity in the public service. This paper argues that diversity in the public service is valuable for democratic governance because it enhances organizational legitimacy and improves policy outcomes. It begins by drawing on the theory of representative bureaucracy to define diversity as the passive representation of politically salient groups and leverages its conceptualization of symbolic representation to explain how demographic representation strengthens legitimacy and encourages citizen cooperation. It then traces the evolution of public service diversity policies in Canada and the United States, where external pressures led to two different conceptualizations of the concept. Finally, it reviews experimental and observational studies to demonstrate that representative bureaucracies are perceived as more legitimate independent of performance, and that this increased legitimacy improves policy outcomes by fostering greater citizen cooperation and coproduction. It also refutes a popular claim that increasing diversity decreases perceived legitimacy of the public service among dominant groups. In this way, public service diversity has both normative and instrumental importance in a broadly utilitarian sense, highlighting its enduring importance in a political environment where DEI policies face increasing opposition.

Keywords: representative bureaucracy, public service diversity, DEI, passive representation, symbolic representation.

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Introduction

Over the past few years, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies have been the subject of increasing debate. These policies are characterized by their proactive nature; they are designed to ensure that members of historically marginalized groups are adequately represented within an organization's ranks and feel welcomed within it. Broadly, they include targeted recruitment programs, training and mentorship opportunities for equity-deserving groups, preferential treatment in hiring and promotion competitions, and diversity training aimed at raising awareness on unconscious bias (Iyer, 2020, p. 2). In the public sector, American President Donald Trump's directive to end DEI policies in federal agencies has raised questions on the value of diversity in the public service (Basilio, 2025).

Amid this increasing political debate, this paper will argue that diversity in the public service is valuable in democratic societies because it strengthens public service legitimacy and improves organizational outcomes. These benefits can be conceptualized in both normative and instrumental terms. Diversity is normatively beneficial because representative institutions are perceived as more legitimate; it is also instrumentally valuable since it improves citizen cooperation and policy outcomes, reflecting a broadly utilitarian concern with maximizing public welfare. Drawing on the theory of representative bureaucracy, this paper begins by defining diversity and conceptualizing its impacts. It subsequently compares the evolution of diversity in the United States civil service and Canada's public service, highlighting key similarities and differences. Finally, it leverages empirical evidence to highlight the significant role diversity plays in improving public service legitimacy and outcomes in democratic contexts.

The Theory of Representative Bureaucracy: A Conceptual Framework

Scholars of public administration employ the theory of representative bureaucracy to highlight the benefits of bureaucratic diversity. First developed by Donald Kingsley, the theory is grounded in the assumption that the demographic composition of a bureaucracy matters (Fernandez, 2020, p. 4). It presumes that bureaucrats' social identities affect a bureaucracy's responsiveness, legitimacy, performance, as well as citizens' willingness to cooperate with bureaucrats as they carry out their responsibilities (p. 4). Public administration scholars apply this theory to argue that a representative bureaucracy is more responsive and legitimate in its exercise of political power (p. 145). As a result, the theory of representative bureaucracy provides a valuable framework for defining diversity in the public service and conceptualizing its benefits.

The theory's concept of passive representation offers a strong foundation for defining diversity. Coined by Mosher (1968), the term refers to the extent to which the demographic makeup of a bureaucracy "mirrors [that of] the total society" (p. 12). Scholars have since refined this definition, yet two conceptual debates continue today. First, academics vary in the ways they measure representation; basic representation and representativeness are the two dominant approaches in the discipline. Basic representation refers to the "extent to which a social group is represented in the bureaucracy, without regard for that group's representation in the general population" (Fernandez, 2020, p. 147). Contrastingly, representativeness considers a social group's representation in the bureaucracy relative to its composition within the general population (p. 148). The latter is more faithful to Mosher's initial description of passive representation as a mirror of society, since it considers the relationship between a social group's composition within a bureaucracy and its share of the population. A second conceptual debate lies in which social groups should be included in measures of passive representation. Although scholars focus primarily on race and gender, characteristics such as religious preference, veteran status, and sexual orientation also appear in the literature (Kennedy, 2014, p. 404). An emerging standard of review argues that a group's representation in a bureaucracy should be measured if its inclusion is politically salient in a particular society. Kennedy (2014) employs this approach when she argues that research on the United States civil service should assess race and gender representation, since political cleavages have historically formed along these lines. Similarly, Fernandez (2020, p. 7) highlights the importance of measuring the representation of linguistic minorities in the Canadian and Belgian public services due to the significant linguistic divides in these societies; for example, the cleavage between French and English-speaking communities in Canada. This approach to identifying which groups to include in measures of representation aligns closely with the theory of representative bureaucracy: ultimately, a group's degree of representation within an institution will only impact the latter's responsiveness and legitimacy if the former is politically salient in the given social context. Consolidating these elements, passive representation can thus be conceptualized as the degree to which a politically salient group is represented within a bureaucracy relative to its share in the general population. Given that scholars frequently use passive representation and diversity interchangeably (Fernandez, 2020, p. 165), this definition can also be applied to the idea of diversity in the public service.

A second principle of the theory of representative bureaucracy, symbolic representation, outlines two distinct benefits of public service diversity. Regardless of how a bureaucracy performs, scholars believe that passive representation improves both its legitimacy and outcomes. Two mechanisms describe the normative benefit of passive representation: increased legitimacy. On an individual level, the mirror image explanation emphasizes the role of identity congruence and shared experiences in improving citizens' interactions with the bureaucracy (Wang, 2025, p. 5). Engaging with bureaucrats who have shared social origins is believed to put citizens at ease, reassure them that their needs will be addressed, and create feelings of trust and legitimacy (Fernandez, 2020, p. 160). From a broader perspective, the institutional symbol of democracy explanation argues that, by embracing democratic values such as equity and inclusivity, passively representative bureaucracies increase their public legitimacy and support (Wang, 2025, p. 5). In this context, legitimacy is best understood as the perception that a government body has the legitimate authority to issue commands (Benton, 2020, p. 800). This perception increases an institution's credibility, public support, and levels of public trust. While this strengthened legitimacy is normatively valuable, it also facilitates a second, instrumental benefit of representation: improved outcomes. Symbolic representation theorizes that heightened trust and support for the public service increase citizens' willingness to participate in public programs, cooperate with the bureaucracy, and make behavioral changes which facilitate optimal policy outcomes (Fernandez, 2020, p. 160). In this way, representative bureaucracy reflects a broadly utilitarian ethos: it defends diversity not only on normative, democratic grounds, but also because it improves collective welfare by improving the effectiveness of public administration.

The Evolution of Diversity in the United States' and Canada's Public Services

Historically, diversity initiatives in both Canada and the United States emerged in response to external political pressures. However, the policies adopted in each jurisdiction differed markedly.

In the United States, policy changes to increase diversity in the civil service were introduced in response to two waves of political pressure applied by Black Americans. Initial political organizing in the 1940s drove the implementation of nondiscrimination policies, which increased representativeness by raising Black Americans' representation within the civil service. In 1941, Black leaders organized a mass rally in Washington, DC to protest racial discrimination in the civil service (Kellough, 2018, p. 260). Under the threat of a mass protest, President Roosevelt compromised with the organizers, issuing Executive Order 8802. The Order institutionalized non-discrimination as a federal hiring practice and established a Fair Employment Practices Committee to uphold this principle (p. 261). These changes significantly increased the ranks of Black bureaucrats in the civil service (p. 262), demonstrating the extent to which public mobilization influenced bureaucratic diversification. Twenty years later, the Civil Rights Movement further increased diversity in the civil service by giving rise to affirmative action programs. Protests and rioting against discrimination during this time created a sense of urgency around fostering equality; scholars believe this climate led to legislation and executive orders establishing affirmative action in the civil service (Fernandez, 2020, pp. 5-6; Kellough, 2018, pp. 262-263). These policies' scope extended beyond Black Americans: mandates for representation also applied to racial minorities and women. This inclusion reflected Civil Rights leaders' advocacy for broader social equality and consequently strengthened diversity in the civil service more broadly (Kellough, 2018, p. 264). In both waves, however, policy measures to increase civil service diversity were reactions to external pressures exerted by Black Americans.

Likewise, policies to enhance diversity in the Canadian public service responded to two waves of public pressure; these policies first increased linguistic representation and subsequently that of other social groups. The first efforts to diversify the Canadian bureaucracy followed the rise of Québécois nationalism. As nationalist sentiments grew in Québec during the Quiet Revolution, Francophones around the country became increasingly frustrated with the federal public service. Their frustration stemmed not only from what they viewed as inadequate French service delivery, but also from francophone underrepresentation within the institution's ranks (Lam et al., 2021, p. 109; see also Sandilands, 2021, p. 80). As a result, the federal government mandated the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to promote equality between Canada's two constitutionally recognized linguistic groups (Lam et al., 2021, p. 109). The Commission's recommendations were reflected in the 1969 *Official Languages Act*, which made the public service a bilingual institution. The Act guaranteed, for both English and French speakers, equal employment opportunities in federal institutions and the right to work in their preferred language—two changes which significantly improved the representation of francophones in the public service (p. 109). In this way, pressure from French Canadians increased the representation of francophones within—and thus the diversity of—the public service. Subsequent efforts to increase the representation of women, Indigenous peoples, peoples with disabilities, and visible minorities similarly stemmed from public mobilization. Amid growing demands by these groups for affirmative action to redress historical discrimination, the government formed the Commission on Equality in Employment (Agócs, 2014, p. 15). Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella, its commissioner, coined the term Employment Equity, recommending it as a mechanism by which to increase bureaucratic diversity. She described Employment Equity as a group of "employment practices designed to eliminate discriminatory barriers and to provide in a meaningful way equitable opportunities in employment" (Abella, 1984, p. 7). In the 1986 Employment Equity Act, the Minister of Employment and Immigration implemented this framework (Abella, 2009, as cited in Agócs, 2014, p. 22), encouraging the federal public service to increase the representation of "women, Aboriginals, persons with disabilities, and visible minorities" (Lam et al., 2021, p. 111). In the case of francophones and employment equity groups alike, external political pressures gave rise to increased representation of historically marginalized groups in the Canadian public service.

Although policies to make the federal public service more diverse were driven by political mobilization in both countries, these policies had markedly different mechanisms. In the United States, the affirmative action measures developed in response to the Civil Rights Movement set numeric targets for the representation of women and racial minorities. Timetables and conditional funding created strong incentives to attain these goals, and government agencies consequently understand them as quotas rather than goals (Hood, 2024, pp. 324-325; Kellough, 2018, p. 264). Contrastingly, the *Official Languages Act* and *Employment Equity Act* in Canada explicitly avoid being understood as hiring quotas. Rather, they recognize membership in an underrepresented group as a core element of merit rather than a means to increase representation (Lam et al., 2021, p. 112). Despite shared policy origins, the United States and Canada have evidently adopted two distinct strategies for promoting diversity in their bureaucracies.

Diversity: Increasing Public Service Legitimacy and Outcomes

Empirical evidence underscores the significant normative and instrumental value of public service diversity in democratic societies. As the concept of symbolic representation suggests, representation strengthens organizational legitimacy, which in turn improves outcomes by incentivizing citizen coproduction.

The normative importance of public service diversity in democracies is most evident in its impact on improving institutions' legitimacy in citizens' eyes. Two studies provide empirical support for the principle of symbolic representation, which argues that diversity lends bureaucracies democratic legitimacy by signaling that citizens' concerns are represented in decision-making structures (Gravier, 2013, p. 820). Riccucci et al.'s 2014 online survey experiment, for instance, confirmed the impacts of diversity on perceptions of public service legitimacy. Taking a hypothetical domestic violence unit of a police department, the authors randomly varied both the representation of women in the unit and its performance, which was measured through its arrest rates. To a highly statistically significant degree, survey participants perceived the more gender-representative domestic violence unit as fairer, regardless of whether it had a high or low arrest rate. Similarly, Theobald and Haider-Markel (2009) found that Black Americans are more likely to view police actions as legitimate when the police force is comprised of Black officers. In the case of personal searches, for instance, their Black survey respondents were "twice as likely to perceive a personal search as legitimate when conducted by a black officer" (p. 419). Both studies illustrate how representativeness within the bureaucracy improves its perceived legitimacy. Public perceptions of legitimacy play an important role in democratic governance; legitimacy fosters public trust, which contributes to institutional stability and public cooperation. The role diversity plays in strengthening legitimacy, and thus facilitating this stability and cooperation, therefore suggests that diversity has normative importance for democratic public administration.

Beyond these normative benefits, legitimacy—and by extension, diversity in the public service—is also instrumental; it improves bureaucratic performance by increasing citizen cooperation and coproduction. Riccucci et al.'s findings provide empirical support for the concept of symbolic representation, which posits that public perception that a government institution is legitimate makes citizens more likely to cooperate with bureaucrats in producing and delivering essential public services (2016, p. 123). In an experimental variation of gender representativeness in a hypothetical recycling program, they found that female participants were more willing to coproduce as the representation of women in the program's management grew. Where program management was presented as all-female, the number of women willing to practice light composting was twenty percent higher than when management was all-male, and thirty percent higher for heavy food composting (p. 127). These findings suggest that, as diversity within the public service grows and citizens view it as more legitimate, their willingness to cooperate with public servants grows. In democratic societies where participation in many public programs is strictly voluntary, citizens' willingness to cooperate with public servants is often an important contributor to program success. The benefits of citizens' willingness to coproduce are especially visible in law enforcement contexts, where stronger organizational legitimacy may increase citizens' willingness to report crimes or cooperate with investigations. For instance, more representative police forces may encourage members of marginalized communities to engage with law enforcement in cases where distrust might otherwise discourage reporting. Representation within the bureaucracy is therefore instrumentally valuable in democratic contexts: it improves organizational effectiveness by increasing citizen cooperation and coproduction. In this sense, diversity can also be understood from a utilitarian perspective, since this increased legitimacy, cooperation, and coproduction improves collective policy outcomes.

Some scholars challenge the idea that diversity within the public service is meaningful; they apply the theory of representative bureaucracy in reverse to argue that, by decreasing the passive representation of dominant social groups, diversity delegitimizes the public service in the eyes of the majority (Riccucci et al., 2017, p. 25; Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009, p. 421). This claim risks understating the theory's emphasis on representation as a function of a group's composition in a bureaucracy relative to its share of the general population. While it is true that the ranks of majoritarian social groups decrease as a public service becomes more diverse, it is important to note that they consequently become accurately represented as opposed to overrepresented. The principle of symbolic representation holds that this continual passive representation will sustain the perception of the public service as legitimate among these groups. Empirical research supports this argument. In their study of women's willingness to coproduce based on the gender representativeness of a hypothetical recycling program's management, for instance, Riccucci et al. (2016, p. 127) found that female representation in the program did not significantly impact men's willingness to coproduce. Similarly, Meier et al.'s (1999) study on student success rates found that increased representation of ethnic minorities among teachers did not harm white students' educational outcomes but rather improved them. In both studies, increased diversity in public service bodies did not adversely impact dominant groups' ability or willingness to coproduce. This stable capacity for coproduction demonstrates that increasing diversity does not decrease public service legitimacy among these social groups, as Riccucci et al. (2017) and Theobald and Haider-Markel (2009) argued.

Conclusion

Amid growing criticism of diversity in the public service, the theory of representative bureaucracy provides a theoretical lens for defining diversity and understanding its importance. In the United States and Canada alike, measures to increase diversity in the public service emerged in response to external pressures—yet these measures are fundamentally different.

Examining empirical evidence provides support for the concept of symbolic representation, highlighting the significant role of bureaucratic diversity in democratic societies. Studies show that representation is normatively valuable, as it legitimates the public service in citizens' eyes. Yet diversity is also instrumental, and broadly utilitarian: it encourages citizen cooperation and coproduction, improving bureaucratic effectiveness and collective policy outcomes. Particularly in a political context where policies promoting diversity face increasing opposition, these benefits highlight that they continue to play an important role in public administration.

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Leveraging the Climate Crisis: The Politicization of Water and the Case for Punjab

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Résumé
La gouvernance de l'eau dans le Pendjab indien et pakistanais est généralement analysée sous l'angle de la sécurité et des changements climatiques. Toutefois, la littérature existante aborde rarement la manière dont l'architecture constitutionnelle influence la capacité infranationale. L'objectif central de cette étude est d'examiner la capacité du Pendjab à gérer la sécurité hydrique, à répondre aux inondations, à développer des infrastructures et influencer les traités diffère entre l'Inde et le Pakistan, malgré leur histoire et leur écologie communes. Cet article vise à combler cette lacune dans la recherche en examinant les cadres constitutionnels et les stratégies politiques par lesquels les gouvernements nationaux et infranationaux négocient leur autorité dans des secteurs clés. Dans les deux pays, la répartition des pouvoirs législatifs et fiscaux affecte directement la capacité du Pendjab à gérer les systèmes d'irrigation, à répondre aux inondations provoquées par les changements climatiques, à mobiliser des ressources et à influencer les accords internationaux de partage de l'eau. À travers une analyse comparative des architectures constitutionnelles, des institutions intergouvernementales et des cadres conventionnels, cette étude démontre que l'eau constitue fondamentalement un enjeu politique pour les deux pays. Ainsi, en mettant en lumière la l'architecture fédérale, l'analyse souligne comment les structures institutionnelles influencent la gouvernance environnementale et révèlent des implications plus larges pour la responsabilité démocratique et l'équité régionale au sein de ces deux États fédéraux.

Mots-clés: Hydro-politique, Gouvernance de l'eau, Inde, Pakistan, Traité des eaux Indus, Pendjab.

Abstract
Water governance in Indian and Pakistani Punjab is generally analyzed through the lenses of security and climate change; however, existing scholarship does not often address how constitutional design impacts sub-national capacity. The central focus of this study explores how Punjab's ability to manage water security, flood response, infrastructure development, and treaty influence differ across India and Pakistan despite their shared history and ecology. This paper works to advance the research gap and examine the constitutional frameworks and political strategies through which national and sub-national governments negotiate authority across key sectors. In both countries, the distribution of legislative and fiscal powers directly affects Punjab's capacity to manage irrigation systems, respond to climate-induced flooding, mobilize resources, and shape international water-sharing agreements. Using a comparative analysis of constitutional provisions, intergovernmental institutions, and treaty frameworks, this study demonstrates that water is fundamentally a political issue for the two countries. Indeed, by highlighting federal design, the analysis underscores how institutional structures influence environmental governance and reveals broader implications for democratic accountability and regional equity in the two federal states.

Keywords: Hydropolitics, Water Governance, India, Pakistan, Indus Water Treaty, Punjab.

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Introduction

In both India and Pakistan, Punjab holds a unique position as a politically influential agrarian region, the source of national food security, and the site of one of the most strategically important water systems in South Asia. However, despite shared historical backgrounds, the outcome of Punjab's governance has diverged significantly across the two states. While India's Punjab has become increasingly constrained by central policy interventions in agricultural markets, water distribution, and infrastructure priorities, Pakistan's Punjab has often been criticized for exercising disproportionate influence over the central government, especially in matters of water allocation, resource access, and development planning. These contrasts raise an important question on how power relations between central and subnational governments shape governance in Punjab, and why India and Pakistan, despite similar histories and ecological challenges, have distinct patterns of provincial and territorial authority. This paper argues that the answer lies in constitutional design and political strategies through which central and subnational governments negotiate authority across key sectors. Specifically, central-subnational power relations in both countries directly structure Punjab's ability to manage water security, respond to floods, build infrastructure, access public resources, and influence international water-sharing arrangements.

Historical Context and Theoretical Framework

Understanding contemporary governance in both India and Pakistan requires situating current patterns of authority within the historical processes that produced them. The region's political economy, its incorporation into two distinct federal systems, and its significance to hydropolitics in South Asia have all influenced how power is negotiated and asserted between national and subnational governments. The modern irrigation economy of Punjab arose under British rule, when massive canal-colony projects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reconfigured the region into a site of agrarian extraction (Ranauta, 2021). Canal construction reorganized land use and created a consistent hierarchy of districts, privileging the central canal belts while leaving southern tracts relatively under-resourced, an asymmetry that continues today in Pakistan (Akhtar et al., 2021). Following the 1947 Partition, which established the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan, the division of the Indus Basin and the reorientation of river flows intensified structural inequalities. In Pakistan, the central state's reliance on Punjab as the political and military core entrenched a highly centralized approach to resource governance, later reinforced by the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), which concentrated hydrological planning at the federal level. By contrast, India's post-1950 constitutional decisions created a federal structure that placed water primarily within state jurisdiction. However, ongoing border tensions and national development strategies prompted the central government to intervene through mechanisms such as the Bhakra Beas Management Board and central flood-control schemes (Jain & Jacob, 1970). The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) further institutionalized the territorial division of rivers, placing asymmetrical pressures on the two countries. India retained greater autonomy over the eastern rivers of Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej, while Pakistan's dependence on the federally managed Indus system reinforced national-level control over provincial water planning (Sinha, 2021). In both Punjabs, these historical processes have left a legacy where water resources have become immensely politicized, and the institutional distribution of authority between national and subnational governments has become foundational to how water is managed and allocated.

In addition, the existing literature on federalism, resource governance, and political economy provides the necessary foundation for interpreting these dynamics. Scholars such as Daanish Mustafa (2007) and Naeem Abas et al. (2019) highlight the geopolitical and security factors that shape the IWT, emphasizing how national-level actors use water as a strategic resource to centralize decision-making authority. Their work is essential as it underscores how federal governments in both countries treat water governance as an extension of national security, limiting state and provincial influence. Moreover, studies on climate vulnerability and disaster risk, such as those by Muhammad Abid et al. (2016), Dilshad Ahmed and Muhammad Afzal (2022), and Gaurav Pakhale and Jyoti Nale (2023), demonstrate that local communities in both Punjabs face increasingly severe flood and climate-related disasters. However, these analyses generally omit the political and administrative structures that influence uneven adaptation outcomes across the region. Similarly, Ali Nobil Ahmad's examination of infrastructure in Pakistan's Southern Punjab (Ahmad, 2022) and Harinderpal Singh Bedi and Sandeep Singh's examination of water distribution in Indian Punjab (Bedi & Singh, 2021) offer valuable insights into subnational inequities. However, they treat these inequities primarily as technical or regional problems rather than outcomes of shifting power relations between central and subnational governments. Throughout this scholarship, Punjab often appears as an object of hydrological or climatic analysis instead of a site where federalism, resource politics, and subnational bargaining actively shape livelihoods and development pathways.

By bringing these works together, this essay contributes to the literature by examining how federal and subnational power relations promote different models of water governance on both sides of the border. By comparing the two Punjabs within a single analytical framework, the paper addresses several understudied gaps, such as the limited comparative analysis of Punjab across the India-Pakistan divide, the tendency of existing literature to prioritize national security over federal structures, and the lack of attention to how water-sharing and infrastructural decisions are made in state and provincial political economies. Indeed, while existing studies diagnose climate risk, infrastructural inequality, and interstate water tensions, they rarely express how these challenges are embedded in and exacerbated by multi-scalar governments. Hence, this essay aims to extend the scholarly debate by reframing water governance as a fundamentally political process shaped by intergovernmental power relations, bureaucratic authority, and subnational capacity.

Water Security and Power Relations

Water security in both Punjabs is shaped by scarcity, climate, and institutional pressures. Although India and Pakistan share the Indus River Basin and an agrarian legacy shaped by the Green Revolution in the 1960s, their water insecurity has been influenced by different governance structures. These differences reveal how centralized decision-making, subnational capacity, and intergovernmental relations shift the politics of scarcity. Understanding these undercurrents is important for analyzing how subnational units navigate uneven authority over natural resources.

Indian Punjab's water insecurity is shaped primarily by the rapid depletion of groundwater and federally imposed agricultural incentives. The Central Ground Water Board reports that over 75% of Punjab's administrative blocks are now classified as "over-exploited," with groundwater tables dropping in several districts (Fujita, 2021). This acceleration reflects the structural consequences of the Green Revolution, which incentivized paddy cultivation despite Punjab's semi-arid ecology. While state-level policymakers have attempted to impose crop diversification schemes, their authority remains limited by the centralized procurement model and the Food Corporation of India's minimum support prices, which reward water-intensive rice production (Gill & Nehra, 2018). This governance imbalance highlights a severe strain in Indian federalism, where states hold administrative responsibility for water management but lack fiscal and agricultural policy autonomy. This indicates a political, rather than a technical, barrier to water sustainability. Indeed, Punjab's water crisis reflects asymmetries in central-state power that constrain regional adaptation. Thus, the trajectory of water insecurity in Indian Punjab illustrates how environmental pressures are inseparable from federal political structures.

In contrast, Pakistani Punjab's water insecurity is rooted less in groundwater depletion, though it is worsening, than in its role within the canal-based irrigation system and interprovincial politics shaped by the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord (WAA). As a result of the agreement, Punjab receives a majority share of Pakistan's allocated Indus waters, a distribution perceived by Sindh, the southeastern and third-largest province, as structurally inequitable (Ranjan, 2019). Unlike India, where the conflict is between the state and the centre, Pakistan's water politics is contingent on intra-federation competition among provinces. This dynamic ultimately empowers Punjab as the largest and most politically dominant province. Scholars often focus on critiquing Pakistan's hydropolitics for their top-down, securitized framework that sidelines provincial governance; however, Amit Ranjan (2019) highlights how Punjab's political dominance fuels perceptions of inequity. Ranjan suggests that long-standing grievances in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa lead to federal water-sharing initiatives being interpreted as technocratic and an extension of Punjab's power. In this sense, Punjab's privileged position within Pakistan's federal system allows it to reinforce provincial hierarchies that shape how water disputes are politicized. However, these analyses rarely consider Punjab as a subnational actor limited by federal hydro-development agendas, revealing a crucial gap this paper addresses. Indeed, despite their political strengths within their respective nations, both Punjabs are forced to navigate the limits imposed by central governments, revealing that provincial power is not absolute, but contingent on federal intervention.

The divergent trajectories of water insecurity in both Punjabs matter because they reveal how federal structures, more than ecological or cultural factors, determine the political options available to subnational governments. An important point of comparison lies in the direction of dependence. Indian Punjab is structurally dependent on the central government for agricultural pricing, procurement, and subsidies, all of which determine groundwater extraction patterns. In this arrangement, New Delhi sets incentives while Punjab often bears the consequences. In Pakistan, dependence is inverted. As the dominant province within Pakistan's federal system, it exerts disproportionate influence over national institutions. However, it remains dependent on federal decision-making for major hydrological decisions such as dam operations, site development, and the interpretation of provincial rights under the Water Apportionment Accord. In this case, Punjab holds authority over distribution within the province but remains constrained in shaping overall national hydro-governance. In addition, the scale at which conflict arises is significant. For instance, in India, water conflict emerges in a vertical configuration between the state and central governments. Punjab's attempts to legislate on water conservation or crop diversification routinely confront constitutional and fiscal limits. For example, efforts to shift from paddy to maize stall because the central procurement system does not guarantee remunerative support prices for alternative crops (Singh & Singh, 2022). Thus, the conflict is embedded in a mismanagement between state environmental responsibility and central economic authority. In Pakistan, by contrast, the conflict is primarily horizontal between provinces and is mediated by federal institutions, such as the Council of Common Interests, which resolves power-sharing disputes between Pakistan's provinces. Here, disputes arise from water scarcity and uneven bureaucratic representation. The result is a multi-scalar conflict in which Punjab is simultaneously perceived as privileged by provinces like Sindh and constrained by federal priorities. These critical comparisons reveal that water insecurity in both Punjabs is a political outcome shaped by federal design, not just ecological crises. Indian Punjab's vertically constrained autonomy and Pakistani Punjab's horizontally contested authority demonstrate how federalism produces different pathways to the same structural vulnerability. In both cases, provinces and states confront the consequences of decisions made elsewhere, whether in New Delhi's bureaucracy or Islamabad's negotiation frameworks.

Flood Management and the Politics of Authority

Flood management in the two Punjabs exposes another dimension of how federal structures distribute responsibility and shape political capacity. Although both regions reside in the Indus Basin and face increasingly unstable monsoon seasons, the scale of flood vulnerability differs as each region is embedded in distinct federal arrangements. Indeed, floods in India and Pakistan have become a political event as much as a climatic one, and they communicate who makes decisions, who finances response and recovery, and who ultimately bears the burden of risk.

In India, flood governance reflects the broader pattern of central dominance over disaster management. In 2023, Punjab experienced intense rainfall above the normal seasonal average in parts of the state, submerging over 1400 villages across 19 districts (Bhageerath et al., 2025). Despite this high exposure, the state government exercises limited fiscal and regulatory autonomy during emergencies. The *Disaster Management Act* of 2005 empowers the central government to define guidelines, allocate funds, and set national priorities (*Disaster Management Act*, 2005), leaving states operationally responsible but financially dependent. Indeed, this legislation produces significant tension. Punjab is required to implement flood protection measures, such as embankment strengthening, river training, and early warning dissemination, but funding flows through centrally controlled government bodies like the National Disaster Management Authority (Gupta, 2020). The state's requests for post-flood compensation are generally evaluated by central committees, meaning that flood recovery becomes entangled in political negotiation. This regulation shows that environmental governance in India often reproduces central hierarchies, and flood management in Punjab exemplifies this by linking state vulnerability to federal oversight. The political economy of agricultural subsidies further restricts Punjab's ability to invest in long-term mitigation. Indeed, strong support for paddy cultivation, even in flood-prone districts, has incentivized land-use practices that exacerbate waterlogging and drainage inefficiencies (Dhaloiya & Singh, 2024). Subnational attempts to shift cropping patterns, improve canal drainage, or restore wetlands repeatedly confront the structural dependence on central government policies. In essence, the institutional makeup of Punjab positions the state as an implementer of federally shaped policies rather than an autonomous planner, limiting its ability to encourage integrated and locally focused flood-prevention strategies.

In contrast, flood management in Pakistan's Punjab operates through a different structure, where the province plays a dominant role but remains embroiled in national hydropolitics. In 2010, nationwide flooding impacted over 20 million people and overwhelmed nearly one-fifth of the country (Bashir et al., 2021). Later, during the 2022 floods, 2 million acres of cropland were destroyed, with the majority in Punjab, and nearly 33 million people were affected (Rose & Abedullah, 2023), highlighting the region's geographical and agricultural importance and the province's consistent vulnerability to flooding. Unlike in India, the province of Punjab in Pakistan takes advantage of significant administrative control over irrigation, river encroachment, and local infrastructure through the provincial Irrigation Department (Zakir-Hassan et al., 2023). However, it remains dependent on the federal Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) for major decisions involving reservoir releases and the operation of hydropower. This creates a multi-level governance system in which provincial flood protection depends on federal management, especially during monsoon surges. It can be argued that Pakistan's governance is influenced by a bureaucracy inherited from colonial rule, in which authority is concentrated in technocratic institutions with limited provincial accountability. Indeed, Punjab's dominance within the national bureaucracy allows it to influence major water decisions, but this influence is limited by federal authority in areas of national security and energy production. The 2010 and 2022 flood events demonstrate that reservoir releases can increase downstream flooding, yet these decisions lie beyond the province's exclusive jurisdiction, despite it bearing the burden. Provincial dominance, therefore, coexists with inherent dependence. Punjab influences federal policy more than any other province, but it cannot shape the national hydropolitical direction. This arrangement starkly contrasts with India's strictly vertical dependence but produces a similar outcome with limited subnational control over the environmental risks it must manage.

When juxtaposed, the two Punjabs expose how federal structures create distinct but parallel limits on provincial capacity. In India, the central government exercises financial and regulatory dominance, while in Pakistan, the centre exerts hydro-technical control. While the mechanisms differ, the effects are comparable, as each province or state faces a form of structural vulnerability rooted in the political organization that mediates climate risk. An essential comparison exists in the long-term planning of both countries. Indian Punjab's infrastructure needs are often slowed by its fiscal dependence on centrally allocated disaster funds, while Pakistani Punjab's capacity for long-term flood management is restricted by the national prioritization of dams and hydropower, illustrating security and energy agendas instead of provincial climate adaptation needs. In both cases, federal priorities displace subnational environmental imperatives. Finally, both Punjabs face a shared challenge as disaster management is treated as an episodic emergency rather than a structural governance issue. In India, this is rooted in a centralized approach that reduces state autonomy, while in Pakistan, it emerges from a federal-provincial entanglement in which national development priorities override localized risk management. These differences matter because they highlight policy variation and illustrate the central claim of this essay that climate vulnerability in both Punjabs is produced through political institutions that determine how risk is distributed across levels of government.

Infrastructure Development and Capacity

Infrastructure development is one of the most evident areas where central and state/provincial power relations influence governance outcomes in the two Punjabs. Examining infrastructure through a federal lens reveals that India and Pakistan configure state capacity in different ways. While Indian states, like Punjab, are constrained by fiscal and regulatory centralization, Punjab's dominance within Pakistan's federal bureaucratic and budgetary structures allows it to shape certain development trajectories. Infrastructure thus impacts how the balance of power between national and subnational governments is negotiated.

Infrastructure in India's Punjab is characterized by a high degree of dependence on central funding, especially under sponsored schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), the Smart Cities Mission, and the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) programs. While these initiatives have contributed to national progress, the decision-making power over project selection, contractor approval, and financial disbursement remains largely with New Delhi (Akram & Rath, 2021). As a result, state planning bodies have limited discretion in determining which infrastructural needs require more attention. This is particularly evident in irrigation infrastructure. Punjab's canal network is one of the most extensive in India but has deteriorated significantly over the past two decades. A study on the water crisis in Punjab and Haryana found that canal embankments and distributaries were in poor condition; however, proposals for reconstruction have been repeatedly stalled due to delayed approvals (Gill & Nehra, 2018). This imbalance between national and local priorities has crucial political implications. India is witnessing a reassertion of central control over development planning. Punjab's experience supports this assessment because, despite being one of India's most agriculturally productive states, its infrastructural expansion remains tied to central development models rather than state economic aspirations. The result is an ingrained reliance that reduces Punjab's ability to encourage long-term development or respond to emerging risks such as groundwater depletion or climate-induced agricultural crises.

Comparatively, in Pakistan's Punjab, the infrastructure dynamic unfolds through a nearly opposite structure. Instead of being limited by federal centralization, Punjab has historically benefited from federal resource allocation. Under the National Finance Commission Award and the Public Sector Development Programme, Punjab regularly receives the largest share of federal development funds, exceeding those of Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ranjan, 2019), illustrating both its population size and political weight in federal decision-making. This significant advantage has allowed Punjab to pursue major infrastructure projects over the past two decades, particularly in urban centers like Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Faisalabad. However, provincial leverage is not always equated with equitable development. Indeed, Punjab's development model often contributes to displacement, rural-urban inequality, and a concentration of public investment in urban centers aligned with political elites (Rehman et al., 2022). This model suggests Punjab's political leadership strategically directs infrastructure spending toward areas that strengthen existing power relations, creating a development plan that privileges metropolitan growth, while peripheral and agrarian districts receive limited investment. Indeed, this implies that even within the province, infrastructure is profoundly political and is shaped by elite incentives and electoral politics rather than regional need. Provincial control thus does not allow the province to align national priorities with climate-resilient or locally equitable infrastructure needs.

Comparing the two Punjabs illustrates that infrastructure reflects governance and reproduces inequities. In India, centralized development planning maintains provincial dependence, limiting Punjab's ability to achieve its own infrastructural goals. In Pakistan, Punjab is able to impact federal development strategies, but this influence can lead to uneven development within the province, especially along rural-urban divides. Though different, both systems promote infrastructure decisions informed by political hierarchies rather than local needs. Furthermore, an analysis can be made on how each Punjab accesses state capacity. In India, Punjab gains access to resources through compliance with and participation in central government programs, while in Pakistan, Punjab achieves it through political leverage and bureaucratic dominance. However, in both cases, infrastructural choices are not driven by environmental vulnerability or long-term development goals. Instead, they are catalyzed by political incentives embedded in federal systems. This contributes to how federal structures allocate resources and how development itself is actualized. In essence, infrastructure plays a critical role as a political tool, impacting state and inter-provincial inequalities.

Resources and Distribution

Access to resources is one of the most discernible markers of how federal structures shape uneven development in the two Punjabs. While infrastructure determines the physical networks through which resources flow, access determines who benefits from those networks. A comparative lens of India and Pakistan emphasizes that the national-subnational organization of authority in each country fundamentally affects the distribution of resources, creating distinct patterns of inequality rooted in political hierarchies. Consequently, both Punjabs offer a unique perspective on how federalism shapes everyday development outcomes.

Resource access in India's Punjab is inseparable from the political economy of agriculture. As one of the most significant contributors to India's national food procurement, Punjab is critical to national food security, and water access contributes directly to agricultural livelihoods. Approximately 99% of Punjab's cropped area relies on irrigation, with 72% from tubewells and 28% from canals (Satpute & Singh, 2024), demonstrating that access to water is evidently an issue about access to economic survival as well. State-level politics, including free electricity for tubewells, minimum support prices (MSP), and canal-restoration programs, allow farmers to draw water as a subsidized resource, reinforcing a political contract in which water access is mediated through electoral incentives rather than federal measures. These policies suggest that water distribution is embedded in a competitive economy in which state governments use subsidies to secure rural vote banks, especially among large landholding constituencies. In addition, this structure means resource access is tied to water availability and political will. Punjab can negotiate for federal funds through canal modernization programs while simultaneously distributing groundwater access through state subsidy regimes. This creates an environment in which water becomes a politically protected resource that voters expect, and politicians must deliver. In this sense, India's Punjab shows that when federal systems empower states with fiscal and administrative autonomy, water becomes a resource tied to political performance instead of political dependency. This allows for a contrast with Pakistan, where access to water functions as a hierarchical, federally structured privilege rather than an electorally negotiated entitlement.

In Pakistan, water goes beyond a natural resource to become a mechanism of political hierarchy. Unlike its Indian counterpart, water governance in Pakistan is administered primarily through federal and provincial bureaucracies shaped by Punjabi military and bureaucratic dominance. Since Punjab controls over half of Pakistan's irrigated land and receives a large portion of canal water allocations under the WAA (Bashir et al., 2021), water becomes a basis for institutional bias and aligns priorities with the province's interests. This system strengthens Punjab's position, while provinces with weaker institutional capacity and political leverage often find themselves unable to challenge decisions, promoting grievances over interprovincial equity. Furthermore, water is also distributed unevenly within Punjab. For example, Southern Punjab, despite being home to much of the province's cultivable area, receives disproportionately lower per-acre water deliveries compared to the canal-rich central districts (Akhtar et al., 2021). This disparity reinforces long-standing trends of patronage, where canal access historically flowed to politically influential *baradari*, or kinship, networks and large landholding families (Akhtar et al., 2021). Laws such as the *Canal and Drainage Act* formalize bureaucratic discretion, allowing irrigation officers to exercise authority over water flows, granting or withholding access in ways that reinforce elite primacy. The result is a political economy in which access to water is inseparable from class hierarchy. For instance, small-scale farmers are consistently disadvantaged, as seen in how tail-end water shortages have increased in some districts because the administrative structure allows upstream communities, who are often elites, to capture the majority of flows (Akhtar et al., 2021). The centrality of Punjabi bureaucratic control also means water is more easily mobilized as a national security issue than a developmental one, narrowing provincial autonomy and limiting equitable reforms.

The contrast between the Punjabs illustrates that water access serves as a diagnostic for federal design and political incentives. In India, decentralization and state-level electoral competition encourage governments to deliver water as a public good, even if environmental over-extraction remains a severe problem. Farmers can pressure the state for access, and the state has both the administrative autonomy and electoral motivation to respond. In Pakistan, by contrast, resource access is shaped by centralized authority and interprovincial hierarchies. Since Punjab's political dominance influences federal decisions, water becomes a tool of elite consolidation instead of a universally accessible developmental resource. Indeed, whereas Indian Punjab's inequalities are largely rooted in groundwater depletion and crop patterns, Pakistani Punjab's inequalities are based in political design, where canal water is abundant but selectively accessible. This comparison illustrates that similar ecological pressures can produce different distributive outcomes depending on whether a federal system incentivizes accountability or centralization. These patterns also demonstrate that the politics of water in both Punjabs is shaped by federal arrangements that either democratize resource access or reinforce hierarchies.

Water Sharing, Federal Constraints, and Subnational Exclusion

Water-sharing arrangements, particularly the Indus Waters Treaty, represent a pivotal dimension of Punjab's hydro-political landscape. While the treaty is formally negotiated between India and Pakistan at the national level, its practical implications are disproportionately endured by the two Punjabs, which are the site of key river networks and irrigation systems shaped by the treaty's allocations.

Despite being the region most affected by the 1960 partition of the Indus system, Indian Punjab played a limited role in negotiating the IWT, a pattern that continues today due to India's constitutional division of powers. Under Article 246 and the Union List, international treaties fall exclusively within central jurisdiction, preventing Indian states from formally influencing treaty negotiations (*Constitution of India*, 1950). As a result, Punjab's interests, especially its reliance on water from the Ravi and Beas rivers, have historically been represented through the central government rather than through provincial channels. This exclusion is significant because the IWT's allocation of the eastern rivers of Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej to India has placed heavy demands on Punjab's irrigation system. For instance, following the diversion of the Ravi and Beas rivers toward Rajasthan as part of the inter-state reallocation, Punjab has continued to lose the water it once depended on (Kumar et al., 2017). Furthermore, the construction obligations imposed on India, such as the Madhopur and Harike headworks, have required Punjab to shoulder infrastructural responsibilities without treaty-level influence. In effect, Punjab bears the operational and financial burdens while having no formal role in determining the allocation of its waters. This disconnect strengthens the deeply rooted grievance that the state executes federal commitments but cannot contest or renegotiate them. It is important to note, however, that despite institutional marginalization, Punjab retains some capacity to indirectly shape water-sharing outcomes. Through inter-state disputes, most notably the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal conflict, Punjab has exercised political pressure on the central government, delaying national-level infrastructure commitments related to treaty execution. The dispute arose from Haryana's demand for a share of Ravi-Beas water after its 1966 separation from Punjab, requiring Punjab to construct a canal, transferring water eastward (Gill, 2016). Punjab's refusal, grounded in its declining river flows, led to decades of litigation and political resistance, halting the canal's completion. In this sense, although Punjab cannot negotiate treaties, it can obstruct or reshape their domestic implementation, highlighting how subnational politics intervene in federal treaty obligations. This interplay indicates a tension between constitutional centralization and regional agency as the central government negotiates the treaty, but Punjab is burdened by the distributional and political consequences.

Unlike India, Pakistan's Punjab wields more substantial indirect power in shaping water-sharing policies due to its demographic size, economic influence, and bureaucratic dominance. Although Pakistan's Article 97 vests treaty-making power in the federal government, Punjabi bureaucrats and military officials have historically occupied central positions within the irrigation, water, and foreign affairs departments (Herring & Kennedy, 1979). This structural primacy ensures that Punjab's priorities are embedded in national water strategies, even without formal provincial authority. For example, Punjab controls the majority of irrigated land dependent on Indus waters and relies on canal inflows allocated under the IWT (Hasan et al., 2021). Therefore, its preferences regarding reservoir construction, like the Mangla expansions, sediment management, and seasonal flow releases, impact Pakistan's negotiating stance with India. This influence can be seen in Pakistan's frequent appeals to the Permanent Indus Commission over Indian hydropower projects like Kishanganga, a dispute largely driven by Punjabi agricultural and hydropower interests (Mallick, 2020). However, Punjab's power also generates internal tensions. Since other provinces, like Sindh, argue that water-sharing disputes with India are often leveraged to justify domestic centralization, Punjab is portrayed as the primary beneficiary of federal control. This illustrates that although Punjab can indirectly shape Pakistan's negotiations, it does so through federal channels and reinforces inequalities rather than promoting provincial autonomy.

The dichotomy of the two Punjabs demonstrates how federal structures shape the degree of subnational influence in international water governance. India's centralized treaty authority formally excludes Punjab from negotiations, but strong electoral accountability and inter-state mechanisms allow Punjab to influence implementation from below. Indeed, subnational resistance, like the SYL dispute or demands for revised allocations, forces the central government to renegotiate implementation, highlighting how democratic federalism allows states to indirectly shape treaty outcomes even when constitutionally excluded. In comparison, Pakistan's centralized but Punjab-dominant water bureaucracy gives Punjabi interests disproportionate informal influence, consolidating central authority. Indeed, provincial interests influence water-sharing at the expense of horizontal federal balance, contributing to perceptions of undue favour towards Punjab. Together, these differences show how subnational influence in international water treaties no longer remains an issue of constitutional inclusion but has now become a question of political structure. India's Punjab is excluded by law but empowered through electoral federalism, while Pakistan's Punjab is included informally but restricted by centralized authority that undermines provincial legitimacy. Thus, despite their shared geography and river systems, the two Punjabs experience water-sharing politics through fundamentally different federal logistics, influencing how each subnational government confronts water scarcity, climate stress, and interstate hydropolitics.

Conclusion

Both Indian and Pakistani Punjabs demonstrate that subnational politics fundamentally shape water governance. In India, Punjab's authority is constrained by a centralized federal system in which inter-state water allocation, especially the reorientation of the Ravi and Beas, has limited the state's ability to secure its own needs. Conversely, in Pakistan, Punjab's political primacy elevates it within the country, allowing it to shape water distribution through development strategies and indirect pressure on the central government. Across both contexts, the evidence shows that access to water is a reflection of power and is mediated by federal arrangements, subnational leverage, and negotiations over authority, demonstrating how multi-scalar governance structures shape water governance. However, the analysis also reveals limitations, as national-level hydropolitics tends to be privileged over the lived, uneven realities faced by those living in the region. Future research can build on this study by examining how federal and administrative structures affect marginalized populations in both countries, as these groups directly experience the impacts of state-centered water policies and inequitable access. Ultimately, Partition may have drawn the borders, but federalism has continued to decide how the waters of the Indus are allowed to flow.

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Collateral Legitimacy: Human Shields, Asymmetrical Warfare, and the Crisis of International Humanitarian Law

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Résumé
L’objectif de cet article est d’examiner comment la guerre asymétrique contemporaine — en particulier les combats urbains impliquant des acteurs non étatiques, les technologies de ciblage algorithmique et la figure contestée du bouclier humain — a engendré une profonde crise pour le droit international humanitaire (DIH). Comment ces évolutions de la guerre asymétrique façonnent, fragilisent et transforment la protection des civils dans les conflits modernes? En mobilisant une méthodologie qualitative et interprétative, l’article analyse la doctrine juridique, la théorie politique et des sources empiriques, notamment le rapport Goldstone de 2009 ainsi que des études portant sur la stratégie médiatique des Forces de défense israéliennes, afin de démontrer que si les conflits asymétriques intensifient effectivement les difficultés pratiques et militaires liées au respect du DIH, ils ne diminuent en rien les obligations juridiques et éthiques. Au contraire, la rhétorique du bouclier humain, les évaluations de proportionnalité et le ciblage algorithmique fonctionnent souvent comme des mécanismes de légitimation a posteriori qui occultent la responsabilité étatique à l’égard de dommages civils prévisibles, renforçant ainsi la nécessité de réaffirmer l’immunité des civils et de réorienter l’analyse vers ce que Roznai et Rubinstein qualifient de « proportionnalité proportionnée ». Les résultats démontrent que le respect du DIH dans les guerres asymétriques ne constitue pas seulement une exigence juridique, mais également un impératif politique et moral essentiel à la préservation des principes humanitaires et de la légitimité du pouvoir étatique.

Mots-clés: Guerre asymétrique, combat urbain, éthique contemporaine de la guerre, droit international humanitaire, protection des civils, ciblage algorithmique.

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to investigate how contemporary asymmetrical warfare — particularly urban combat involving non-state actors, algorithmic targeting technologies, and the contested figure of the human shield — has generated a profound crisis for International Humanitarian Law (IHL). How do these developments in asymmetrical warfare shape, undermine, and transform the protection of civilians in modern conflict? Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology, the paper analyzes legal scholarship, political theory, and empirical sources including the 2009 Goldstone Report and studies of the Israeli Defense Forces’ media strategy to argue that while asymmetrical conflict does intensify the practical and military difficulties of upholding IHL, it does not diminish the legal or ethical obligations. Instead, the human-shield rhetoric, proportionality assessments, and algorithmic targeting often function as post-hoc legitimations that obscure state responsibility for predictable civilian harm, heightening the need for a reaffirmation of civilian immunity and a reorientation toward what Roznai and Rubinstein describe as “proportionate proportionality.” The findings demonstrate that upholding IHL in asymmetrical warfare is therefore not merely a legal expectation but a political and moral imperative essential to preserving humanitarian principles and the legitimacy of state power.

Keywords: Asymmetrical warfare, urban combat, contemporary war ethics, International Humanitarian Law, civilian protection, algorithmic targeting.

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Introduction

The modern battlefield has increasingly unfolded not in open fields but in refugee camps, urban centers, and densely populated residential neighborhoods, with Gaza offering a clear contemporary example of how civilian space becomes militarized in asymmetrical war. Asymmetrical warfare, understood as conflict between actors who differ significantly in power, strategy, and organizational form (Arreguín-Toft, 2005), renders the traditional laws of war both operationally difficult and conceptually unstable, especially in a context of powerful state militaries and decentralized non-state actors. Amongst the most extreme implications of this shift in asymmetrical warfare is the erosion of the foundational distinction in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) between combatants and non-combatants. Since IHL continues to assert the sanctity and immunity of civilian life, its principles are routinely challenged by real-world military strategies and legal narratives that present civilian harm as an inevitable consequence of war and by-product of modern conflict.

This paper asks: How do States use human-shield discourse to justify civilian casualties in asymmetrical warfare, and what does it reveal about the fragility of IHL? Foundational to this dilemma is the contested figure of the 'human shield,' which functions as both a legal category and a rhetorical tool. Under IHL, the use of civilians to shield military objectives is prohibited, but the presence of human shields does not automatically erase civilian protection or absolve attacking forces of their obligations. While asymmetrical conflict undeniably strains IHL, this paper argues that such strain does not dissolve legal or ethical responsibility; rather, the use of human shields and the procedural rationalization of civilian deaths serve as a post hoc legitimation that obscure the continued responsibility of state actors to uphold humanitarian norms, even if it disadvantages them strategically.

Methodologically, this paper conducts a qualitative, interpretive analysis of legal scholarship, philosophical texts, and empirical fact-finding reports, treating them as normative and discursive evidence of how IHL is applied and rationalized in asymmetrical warfare. The analysis draws on philosophical and legal debates about proportionality, restraint, and self-defence, alongside empirical and media-focused sources such as the Goldstone Report and Shavit's (2017) analysis of the Israeli Defense Forces' media strategy. Through this combined theoretical and empirical approach, this paper argues that the discourse of human shielding and proportionality, as currently utilized, often functions not as a framework of restraint but as a license to kill with bureaucratic impunity.

Ultimately, this paper contends that IHL must be understood as a foundational constraint rooted in humanity, dignity, and civilian immunity. The challenge is not to adapt International Humanitarian Law to asymmetrical war by loosening its constraints but to enforce it more intensely, especially when it is inconvenient for militant state actors.

Strains on International Humanitarian Law in Asymmetrical Warfare

Contemporary asymmetrical conflicts, particularly those between state militaries and non-state actors such as Hamas or Hezbollah, have placed traditional laws of war under pressure. Yet this pressure should not be mistaken for the obsolescence of IHL. As Roznai and Rubinstein (2011) highlight in their essay "Human Shields in Modern Armed Conflict," the adjustment of IHL principles is necessary precisely to achieve greater protection for civilians. They argue that the current application of proportionality can shift responsibility from the shielding party to the impeded party, increasing civilian danger rather than reducing it.

Rather than declaring the principles of IHL outdated, Roznai and Rubinstein propose a reorientation of it that still preserves or realigns it back to its core commitments, suggesting that "we need a “proportionate proportionality.” Thus [they] propose that when the use of involuntary or unknowing human shields is part of a widespread or systematic policy, the measure of proportionality must be adjusted" (p.121). Their concept critiques conventional proportionality assessments that reduce moral judgment to a calculation of whether anticipated military advantage outweighs expected civilian harm. The authors argue that these traditional calculations and the reliance on them ignore how much more cumulatively vulnerable civilians are, especially those trapped in urban combat. This failure is more than procedural; when talking about war, it becomes moral. The roots of IHL are found in a Cold War era where nuclear deterrence and interstate war assume an equal grounding for military objectives and civilian costs, but this simply does not hold up in discussions of modern conflicts. According to Roznai and Rubinstein, proportionality must account not only for quantifiable outcomes but also for the structural vulnerability of the populations trapped in conflict-torn zones. Gaza illustrates this problem because civilian harm cannot be treated as an abstract numerical cost when residents are constrained by physical borders, denied meaningful evacuation, and exposed to bombardment from the air, obscuring and distorting the original intent of the principle of proportionality in IHL. Michael Walzer (2013) complements this critique and observation by highlighting the importance of moral clarity and how it must not be eroded in asymmetrical contexts. Walzer's essay, "Can the Good Guys Win?" responds directly to the claim that obeying the IHL puts state militaries at an intolerable disadvantage, as is a common belief amongst militant actors and policymakers. Walzer acknowledges that restraint is difficult in asymmetrical warfare but rejects the idea that violating humanitarian norms can be justified by strategic necessity. If States abandon the rules in order to win, they erode the very moral and political legitimacy that distinguishes them from the actors they oppose.

This emphasis on restraint as strength reorients the ethical debate; as Walzer insists, truly liberal States cannot credibly claim moral superiority if they throw away humanitarian norms at the first sign of strategic inconvenience. The real asymmetry, in this case, is not only that of firepower but of the moral burden since the dominant force does have the capacity to choose differently, even when the weaker, subjugated forces violate or cannot follow those norms.

Human Shield Discourse and Civilian Legitimacy

The figure of the human shield occupies a unique position in asymmetrical warfare because it functions simultaneously as a tactical accusation, a legal justification, and a form of moral absolution. Gordon and Perugini (2016) show that human-shield discourse does more than describe battlefield practices; it helps produce a political and legal framework in which civilian presence can be reinterpreted as enemy complicity. This process occurs through legal arguments, visual propaganda, and media framing, all of which can transform civilian proximity into a basis for suspicion rather than protection under IHL. For example, during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Israel claimed that Hamas embedded military assets within schools, hospitals, and homes. Because these claims were contested, their significance lies not only in their factual status but in how they were used to retroactively frame attacks on civilian sites as legally and morally permissible. As Gordon and Perugini (2016) argue, this logic shifts moral culpability onto the enemy while also altering how civilians are perceived: no longer as protected non-combatants caught in the crossfire, but as bodies incorporated into the enemy's strategy. This strategy is not without precedent. The 2009 Goldstone Report, a UN fact-finding mission on Operation Cast Lead, provides an empirical example of how human-shield claims were used to justify force against civilian infrastructure. The report concluded that many of these justifications from Israel lacked evidence and that the State's conduct went against proportionality and distinction requirements, and rather than clarifying the legal status of civilian deaths, the human shield claims were purposefully utilized to obfuscate accountability. This obfuscation is reinforced by what Shavit (2017) describes as the mediatization of military operations: the integration of media strategy into military planning itself. Her analysis reveals how the Israel Defence Force's (IDF) media strategy has been systematically integrated within their operational planning, highlighting how, from 2000 to 2014, the IDF evolved from a reactive media position to a proactive strategy where media acted as a central battlefield objective (Shavit, 2017, p.135). Human shield rhetoric now becomes not only a legal argument, but a public relations strategy and a narrative weapon deployed to secure legitimacy in the court of public and global opinion.

In this way, we can see how the figure of human shields operates less as an exception to humanitarian protections and more as a tool to systematically redefine civilian vulnerability as liability, paired with discursive transformations that undermine the ethical core of IHL. The legitimacy of state violence in asymmetrical warfare must not rest on narratives that obscure responsibility and are enabled by military strategy, legal reinterpretation, and media dissemination but on a truthful commitment to humanitarian constraints, even when inconvenient. This shows how the enduring power of IHL lies not in its tactical utilization but in its moral clarity; this is precisely the clarity that must be defended when in war.

Technological and Procedural Rationalizations of Force

These discursive shifts are reinforced by technological systems that normalize civilian risk through bureaucratic tools of calculation. In modern warfare, algorithmic tools and legal procedures can sanitize acts of violence by making civilian harm appear technical, manageable, and administratively justified. Brian Smith's (2021) essay, "Civilian Casualty Mitigation and the

Rationalization of Killing," critiques the United States's targeting procedures as a prime example of the ethical dangers of this trend. Smith (2021) argues that U.S. targeting policy can become ‘the perfect rationalization’ of international law, creating greater tolerance for civilian casualties (p. 51). Predictive models such as ‘Bugsplat,’ which are designed to estimate collateral damage before a strike, appear to reduce civilian harm. Yet they can also depersonalize moral decision-making by converting ethical questions into technical variables.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s concept of bureaucratic ‘thoughtlessness,’ Smith warns that pre-set criteria and simulations can replace moral judgment with procedural compliance. In this framework, targeting decisions are shaped less by moral reflection than by machine outputs that reflect the assumptions of their programmers. This produces moral evasion: civilian deaths are not directly intended, but they are rendered acceptable as calculated necessities. Rodin’s *War and Self-Defence* deepens this critique by questioning the philosophical foundations of self-defence and the assumption that military necessity can override civilian immunity. International law does permit States to defend themselves militarily; Rodin argues that this right must be bounded by the rights of others, and that the rights of civilians must not be harmed by foreseeable or preventable violence. As Rodin writes, “National defence is conceived in the full sense of the word as right — a consideration capable of asserting normative force against the consequentialist requirements such as those of peace and security, and presumably sometimes overriding them” (p. 118). This framing reinforces the idea that the justification for self-defence cannot be reduced to strategic advantage alone and must hold up a moral commitment to upholding human dignity, especially when deemed militarily necessary. Through Rodin and Arendt, then, a State's defence that commits acts that predictably violate non-combatant immunity cannot be morally justified as "self-defence." Together, Smith and Rodin reveal the central paradox of procedural warfare: the more refined its legal and technological systems become, the easier it becomes for legality to replace legitimacy and efficiency to replace morality.

Reassessing Proportionality as a Moral Constraint

The principle of proportionality in International Humanitarian Law is meant to ensure that military necessity is weighed against civilian harm. In practice, however, proportionality can become a mechanism for retroactively justifying civilian deaths rather than restraining them. What was meant to operate as a moral constraint can instead become a flexible standard shaped by the interests of powerful militaries. Roznai and Rubinstein’s (2011) concept of “proportionate proportionality” challenges current interpretations of proportionality by insisting that legal assessments must account for civilian vulnerability, not only military advantage. They urge that the proportionality assessments conducted must also consider not only the tactical military advantages of a strike but the cumulative vulnerability of the civilian populations that cannot escape the battle zone, find shelter, and those who are denied humanitarian relief. This shifts proportionality away from abstract ratios and toward the lived conditions of civilians who cannot escape the battlefield.

These views are echoed by Walzer (2013), when he explains "proportionality turns out to be a highly elastic principle" (p.435). He argues that the traditional context of proportionality tests is insufficiently anchored in any kind of moral restraint. Walzer’s point is that legality cannot replace moral judgment; intention, context, and civilian vulnerability must remain central to any assessment of legitimate force. Even if a State’s opponent disregards the traditional laws of war, a State’s own legitimacy hinges and relies on the maintenance of those constraints since there is no moral symmetry between restraint and retaliation, even in the face of asymmetry. The Goldstone Report illustrates how proportionality can function as a justificatory tool when operations are legally defended despite foreseeable civilian harm since its investigation found that many of Israel's operations, while legally defended through proportionality rhetoric, failed to meet authentic moral questioning and considerations. The report details various incidents where entire families were taken out in strikes on targets that yielded tactical gain; these attacks often occurred even when there were fewer harmful alternatives available. In these cases, the principle of proportionality was utilized but as an absolving framework instead of a moral limit, a way to claim legality despite foreseeable and predictable civilian deaths. This points to a deeper philosophical problem: the instrumentalization of International Humanitarian Law. Smith has shown how military institutions increasingly rely on algorithmic tools like "Bugsplat" and other predictive models to estimate acceptable and define what is the necessary collateral damage; these tools reduce the decision to kill to a program-based risk assessment, rather than grappling with the ethical stakes it calculates harm in percentages. As Smith (2021) highlights, "the attention paid to casualty mitigation procedures should not be evaluated independent of the results they produce" , but the operator does not decide; the algorithm does, rendering the moral cost as externalized and inhumane (p. 51). Rodin (2002) adds a further philosophical critique, arguing that self-defence loses moral force when States knowingly produce civilian deaths that are not strictly necessary for survival. A model of proportionality cannot treat civilians as expendable variables or necessary collateral in an equation of strategic calculus. These tools and their use suggest that proportionality if it is to remain an authentic, viable ethical standard, must be reconceptualized as a constraint rather than a balance sheet rooted in the human dignity of civilians, not merely the tactical attempts of the State. “Proportionate proportionality” is not a mere legal formula; however accurate, it is a manifestation of a moral philosophy of restraint, a framework that demands that States reconsider the logic of harm from the perspective of those who bear its costs, especially in a context of asymmetrical warfare.

International Humanitarian Law as a Political and Ethical Imperative

Although International Humanitarian Law is often treated as a matter of legal compliance, it must also be understood as a political and ethical imperative. Misunderstanding the deeper role of IHL in liberal democratic societies can hinder the maintenance and respect of humanitarian norms, but even under the immense pressure of asymmetrical warfare, it is not simply a legal requirement but a crucial aspect of humanity.

Walzer's moral vision of warfare insists that legitimacy derives not from success but from restraint. In asymmetrical conflicts, this restraint becomes especially important when States face actors who disregard IHL. This connects directly to the earlier problems of proportionality and human-shield discourse: when States use those frameworks to excuse civilian harm, they weaken the moral distinction they claim to uphold. The political credibility of liberal States rests on their ability to constrain power, not merely to exercise it. Shavit (2017) also provides a case study of how this moral credibility is often subverted by strategic communication in her study of the IDF since she charts a transformation in military doctrine where media narratives became integrated into tactical planning. From 2000 onward, Shavit (2017) argues that the IDF developed a mediatized military strategy, meaning that public relations and legitimacy campaigns became integrated into military planning rather than remaining external to it. The convergence of media strategy and military logic poses serious risks for IHL because it allows States to shape public perception while distancing legal legitimacy from ethical practice. If legitimacy is a matter of image rather than substance, then IHL is reduced to an unutilized prop that is only used rhetorically rather than operationally.

Such strategies also risk corrupting the public sphere itself; if citizens of democratic States are consistently presented with sanitized ideas and versions of war with human shield justifications, borderline legal justifications, and emotionally compelling propaganda, they may come to see mass civilian deaths as morally neutral or necessary events. This normalization of suffering, combined with algorithmic targeting and procedural thoughtlessness, threatens to erode the ethical foundations of liberal societies. Rodin's (2002) argument deepens this ethical claim: real moral judgment in warfare requires accepting disadvantage. A State must sometimes endure operational limits, suffer delays, or forego attacks because ethical legitimacy depends on restraint. As he notes, "when an attempt is made to justify the right of national defence, it is often done in consequentialist terms: namely, the right is given normative force through its role in deterring aggression and enhancing international peace and security" (p.116). This framing dangerously detaches state violence from its human costs; the State must be willing to lose ethically to win morally. This is not an easy position to sustain, but a necessary one. The collapse of IHL under pressure not only endangers civilians but also delegitimizes the State itself; what distinguishes a democracy from its illiberal counterparts is not only its laws but its commitment to them in moments of threats and stress. Upholding IHL is not a luxury afforded to stable times; it is the test through which moral and political values are tested. The moment a liberal democracy begins to use human shield arguments, targeting algorithms, and media narratives as shields for its own unrestrained violence, it steps into the very moral territory they are claiming to oppose.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, the rise of asymmetrical warfare has certainly not dulled or pacified the pertinence and relevance of International Humanitarian Law, rather it has only made ethical considerations around it more urgent. In contemporary conflicts, civilian immunity is increasingly reinterpreted through discourses of human shielding, procedural targeting, and legal abstraction. In cases like Israel's ongoing genocide against Gaza, it is evident that the civilian body and urban areas like neighborhoods have been transformed into both a battlefield and a battleground for legitimacy through firepower and public perception. States confronting decentralized militant actors often invoke necessity and proportionality, yet these justifications can function less as constraints than as tools of absolution. Through critical analysis of legal theory, empirical records, and philosophical inquiry, this paper has argued that those rhetorical and strategic practices end up helping constitute a dangerous erosion of moral clarity and international accountability.

At the same time, a common counterargument claims that when non-state actors embed themselves within civilian populations, States cannot reasonably be expected to maintain rigid humanitarian constraints because national security may override ideal moral standards. This argument logic parallels what Michael Walzer identifies as the dominant complaint of contemporary militaries: “if we fight according to these principles/laws/rules, we cannot win” (Walzer, 2013, p.433). Under these viewpoints, adhering to IHL becomes a strategic liability, a self-imposed handicap in conflicts where the insurgent forces may disregard certain rules entirely. Yet Rodin and Walzer show that when ethical obligations are treated as conditional, responsibility becomes obscured even under conditions of extreme danger. Treating civilian protection as optional does not resolve the asymmetry but rather entrenches it, enabling States to redeploy the vocabulary of necessity, proportionality, and human shielding to justify their expansive forces with minimal scrutiny.

Moreover, while the figure of human shields is often used as an excuse for civilian deaths, they instead end up revealing how States strategically can and will exploit their ambiguity in legal and ethical frameworks as attempts to legitimize their actions publicly and in court. As Rodin (2002), Walzer (2013), Roznai and Rubinstein (2011), Gordon and Perugini (2016), and Shavit (2017) suggest, legitimacy in warfare is not gained through tactical superiority but through moral consistency. The call for “proportionate proportionality” is therefore not a minor legal adjustment, but a moral reorientation toward humanity and dignity.

Upholding International Humanitarian Law cannot be seen as a strategic hindrance but rather as the very core of a truly liberal and democratic State's identity; to follow humanitarian law only when convenient is to abandon the essence of IHL altogether. In an era where legal discourse, strategic rhetoric, and media narratives are increasingly being deployed to rationalize rather than restrain violence, the enduring ethical powers of IHL lies in the collective refusal to normalize the treatment of human beings as a necessary collateral. The possibility of ethical conduct in asymmetrical war depends not on technological advantage, legal maneuvering, or narrative control, but on the refusal to abandon civilian life when protecting it becomes politically and militarily inconvenient.

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Responding to Chinese Pressure: A Comparative Analysis of Military Spending in Taiwan and Japan

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Résumé
Cet article examine les dépenses militaires de Taïwan et du Japon suite à l'intensification des pressions économiques, politiques et militaires de la Chine depuis 2012. Taïwan et le Japon, deux démocraties économiquement développées, étroitement alignées sur les États-Unis et dépendantes de ceux-ci, ont réagi différemment à l'accroissement de la pression chinoise, comme en témoignent leurs dépenses militaires. Via une analyse comparative de la nature de la menace chinoise à laquelle chacun est confronté, de l'alliance sécuritaire qu'il entretient avec les États-Unis, de son historique en matière de défense, ainsi que de la polarisation politique de sa politique intérieure, cet article explique pourquoi les dépenses militaires par habitant de Taïwan ont constamment dépassé celles du Japon depuis 2012. Grâce à cette analyse, ce travail conclut que les dépenses militaires plus élevées de Taïwan s'expliquent par la nature existentielle de la menace à laquelle il fait face, l'absence d'un accord de sécurité formel avec les États-Unis, un fort engagement historique envers l'autodéfense ainsi qu'un paysage politique intérieur fortement polarisé en ce qui concerne les relations avec la Chine. Les conclusions de ce travail démontrent que des facteurs à la fois politiques et historiques contribuent de manière significative aux chiffres et aux tendances contemporains des dépenses militaires à Taïwan et au Japon et permettent de les expliquer. Comprendre le contexte plus large des réponses de Taïwan et du Japon en matière de dépenses militaires est pertinent aujourd'hui, puisque la Chine continue de faire pression et de créer des tensions militaires avec ces pays.

Mots-clés: Taiwan, Japon, Chine, dépenses militaires, menace chinoise, alliance de sécurité, pacifisme, polarisation politique.

Abstract
This paper examines Taiwanese and Japanese military spending in response to increased economic, political, and military pressure from China since 2012. Taiwan and Japan, two economically developed democracies that are closely aligned with and dependent on the United States, have responded differently to this increased Chinese pressure, as evidenced by their respective military spending. Through a comparative analysis of the nature of the Chinese threat that each country faces, the security alliance each has with the United States, their respective historical defence orientations, and political polarization within their respective domestic politics, this paper explains why Taiwan's military spending per capita has consistently exceeded that of Japan since 2012. Through this analysis, this paper concludes that Taiwan's higher military spending per capita is due to the existential nature of the Chinese threat that it faces, the absence of a formal Taiwanese security agreement with the United States, a strong historical commitment to self-defence, and a domestic political landscape that is highly polarized as it pertains to relations with China. The findings of this paper show that both political and historical factors contribute significantly to and explain contemporary military spending figures and trends in Taiwan and Japan. Understanding the broader context of Taiwan and Japan's military spending responses is relevant today, China continues to exert pressure and create military tension towards each of these countries.

Keywords: Taiwan, Japan, China, military spending, Chinese threat, security alliance, pacifism, political polarization.

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Introduction

Since Xi Jinping assumed control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, political, military, and economic tensions between China and several of its regional neighbors in the South and East China Seas have increased notably. China's shift toward a more assertive and aggressive foreign policy in the region is responsible for this increase (Miura, 2023). Two countries that have been significantly threatened by this shift are Japan and Taiwan. Each country has responded differently to this aggression, particularly in regards to military funding. To better understand these responses and differences in military spending, this paper will first present Taiwanese and Japanese military budgets and allocations of resources. Taiwan and Japan also share several similarities, which makes this comparison reasonable. That said, among their differences is their military spending, defined here as all expenditure on armed, peacekeeping, and paramilitary forces, ministries involved in defence projects, and outer space military operations. This paper will get to the root of the discrepancy of the military spending between these two countries since 2012. This will be done through an analysis and comparison of specific factors. In particular, it tests the following hypothesis: Taiwanese and Japanese military spending is directly influenced by the nature of the threat that each country faces from China, its security alliance with the United States, its historical defence orientation, and the degree of polarization in its domestic politics. Through this examination, a better understanding of the difference in military spending between Taiwan and Japan, specifically as it pertains to Chinese aggression since 2012, will be achieved.

Budgets and Resource Allocations

Budgets and resources made available to the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have increased incrementally since China increased its assertive and aggressive position in the South and East China Seas in 2012. 2024 was a notable year; total military spending increased to $55.3 billion, which represented nearly 1.4% of GDP, a level that hadn't been achieved since Japan regained its independence from the Allies in 1952 (Liang, et al., 2025). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) military spending dataset, this translates to US$445.5 per capita and marks an overall increase of almost 12% since 2013 (SIPRI, 2025). These most recent increases are part of a larger scale plan put in place in 2022 by the Fumio Kishida administration which committed to gradually increase defence spending, which includes military spending, as well as additional defence-related costs such as veteran compensation, up to 2% of GDP over a five-year period between 2022 and 2027 (Shinomoto, 2025).

While these increases were announced by the Kishida administration, this investment plan has also been strongly supported by other Japanese leaders and decision-makers. For example, former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, as well as other Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members, have shown support for the 2% of GDP target for increased defence spending (Mulgan, 2022). More recently, newly elected Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, has also publicly communicated her desire to reach the 2% of GDP defence spending threshold, and to do so two years ahead of schedule, by the end of 2025 (Corben, 2025). This increase in spending will inflate Japan's defence budget to the third largest in the world, with only the United States and China spending more on defence (Nobukatsa, 2023).

This increased budget has been allocated across several areas. The most notable has been the increased investment in modernizing existing infrastructure, weapons, and systems. For example, as of 2023, "80% of the Self-Defense Forces' 23,254 facilities did not meet the Ministry of Defense's standards for resilience against enemy attack" (Boswinkel, 2024). This issue was addressed in the form of a $26 billion investment scheduled for 2023-2027, the goal of which is to improve Japanese resilience against enemy attack and to meet the standards set by the MOD (Boswinkel, 2024). In addition, Japan is investing significantly in modernizing the Japan Air Self-Defence Force (JASDF), reflecting its crucial role in the defence of Japan. It is allocating up to US$10 billion to acquire around 147 new fifth-generation F-35 stealth fighter jets from the United States, a deal that would give the JASDF access to the highest number of F-35 stealth fighter jets outside of the U.S. (Wong, 2019). Alongside this sizable investment, Japan is also investing in upgrading two of its existing aircraft carriers to accommodate these new F-35 stealth fighter jets (Wong, 2019). Japanese leadership also considers the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force as crucial in defending against and countering Chinese naval power and have consequently allocated significant investments to this branch of its military as well. The country plans to build a new line of "destroyers, submarines, and maritime surveillance vessels" with the end goal of improving its maritime awareness and response capabilities in the East China Sea (Bandara, 2025).

Similarly to Japan, Taiwan has also increased its military spending in response to China's increasingly aggressive and assertive posture in the South and East China Seas. In 2024, its military spending rose to $16.5 billion, marking a 1.8% increase from the previous year and an overall increase of 48% from 2015 (Liang, et al., 2025). This military spending represented 2.1% of GDP in 2024 (SIPRI, 2025). Additionally, Taiwan's per capita military spending also jumped; in 2024, it was US$708.2 per capita, a significant increase from the 2012 per capita figure of US$450.5 (SIPRI, 2025). These increases in investment reflect the significant importance afforded to the Taiwanese military over the last decade. Under the new leadership of President Lai Ching-te, elected in 2024, this upwards trend in military spending is likely to continue. While addressing the media in August 2025, he stated that Taiwan's defence budget is set to reach $31.27 billion (Lee, Blanchard, & Kao, 2025). This new value represents 3% of Taiwan's GDP, a defence spending threshold that hasn't been achieved since 2009 (Lee, Blanchard, & Kao, 2025).

Like Japan, Taiwan also seeks to modernize its military capabilities. Thus, it invests in new infrastructure and technology. However, the infrastructure and technology in which Taiwan is investing is different from that of Japan. Taiwan is focusing on acquiring predominantly asymmetric capabilities that are mobile, cost-effective, and mass-producible, such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (Toshitaka, 2024). While this sort of investment has taken the main focus, the Taiwanese have also invested in developing more traditional warfare hardware and systems. For example, the country's first ever indigenously developed submarine, called the *Haikun*, was introduced in 2023 (Shen, 2023). According to the Taiwanese Submarine Combat Capability Plan, the goal is to have a total of four *Haikun* submarines patrolling and defending the southeastern, eastern and northern waters around Taiwan by 2027 (Shen, 2023). Taiwan has also invested in upgrading its fighter jet inventory. Under the leadership of Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan presented an upgraded fleet of F-16 Viper fighter jets, and has pre-ordered a total of 66 more, which are to be delivered in 2026 from the United States' primary aircraft manufacturer, Lockheed Martin (Alkatiry & Triantama, 2024). These significant investments indicate that Taiwan has placed a high level of importance on developing and improving its military capabilities since China adopted its increasingly assertive and aggressive posture in the South and East China Seas.

In summary, while both countries have clearly placed a high level of importance on increasing their military spending in recent years, it is worth noting the glaring gap between the per capita military spending profiles of each country. As of 2024, Taiwan's military spending was US$708.2 per capita, compared to Japan's which was only US$445.5 per capita (SIPRI, 2025). This means that Taiwanese per capita military spending was around 59% higher than that of Japan's. This is a notable difference and not just a coincidence; Taiwan has outspent Japan in terms of per capita military spending every year since 2013 (SIPRI, 2025). The disparity is significant because it indicates how both countries have adopted fundamentally different responses to a shared security threat. What follows explains why two countries, namely Taiwan and Japan, that are dealing with the same threatening neighbor are responding in similar yet very different ways.

Similarities

To understand the differences, it is important to first understand the ways in which Taiwan and Japan are similar. Firstly, both countries are islands within geographic range of Chinese missiles and naval fleets, making them susceptible to a potential Chinese invasion. Secondly, they both formally recognize Chinese aggression as their respective country's primary security threat. This is clearly defined in both countries' primary formal defence documents. The most recent Japanese National Security Strategy, published in 2022, states that China's activities pose "the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan" (Government of Japan, 2022). As for Taiwan, the 2013 ROC National Defense Report similarly recognizes that "the PRC [People's Republic of China] remains the greatest threat to our national security" (Ministry of National Defense, 2013). The more recent 2023 ROC National Defense Report discusses the "ever-growing scale and intensity of PRC's intimidation against Taiwan" as well as its commitment to "staunchly defend" its sovereignty through a sustained "robust defence power" (Ministry of National Defense, 2023).

Japan and Taiwan are similar in other ways; both are democratically and economically developed countries. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2024 democracy index, Japan and Taiwan ranked as the only two "full democracies" in Asia (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). Economically, both have a relatively high level of income, industrialization and innovation. Since the turn of the century, Japan has developed into a global leader in electronics and technologies such as LED lighting systems and mobile internet (Holroyd, 2022). Taiwan also holds an important global economic role. As of 2021, Taiwan held the second-largest market share for global semiconductor production, with 26% of the share worldwide (He, Liu, & Lin, 2024). Consequently, each country's economic standing is impressive. As of 2024, Taiwan and Japan's GDP per capita adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity was just over $80,000 and just over $52,000 respectively (International Monetary Fund, 2025). This is particularly impressive when compared to the East Asian average of just over $31,000 (International Monetary Fund, 2025). These figures indicate that both countries are economically strong and have the economic capacity to dedicate to and sustain high military spending. This also indicates that the military spending gap cannot be explained by economics.

Demographically, Japan and Taiwan both face an important issue: they both have an ageing population (Evans, 2023). This often tends to force governments to shift spending from defence to social welfare-focused initiatives (Shi, 2024). However, this doesn't seem to be impacting either Taiwanese or Japanese military spending, which has continued to increase despite their ageing populations.

Finally, another similarity is that both countries benefit from United States security support. Japan produced its 2022 National Defence Strategy in parallel with the 2022 American National Defence Strategy with the purpose of facilitating and promoting coordination with the U.S. in the event of security threats (Hughes, 2024). In Taiwan, the de facto relationship with the United States is particularly important because the U.S. provides it with "advanced defensive arms sales and an ambiguous security guarantee" (Fell, 2018). Because U.S. support and reliance is central in both countries, its presence and influence are not a contributing factor to why Taiwan outspends Japan in terms of per capita military spending.

At first glance, Taiwan and Japan seem to be quite similar. They both identify China as their primary threat, both are successful democracies with prosperous economies, both are dealing with ageing populations, and both rely on the U.S. for security. However, a closer examination reveals several key differences between Taiwan and Japan and serves to explain the per capita military spending difference between them.

Nature of the Chinese Threat

While both Japan and Taiwan are experiencing Chinese aggression in the South and East China Seas, the nature of the threat faced by each country differs. In the case of Taiwan, the threat from China is direct, immediate, and existential. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) One China policy asserts unequivocally that Taiwan is a part of and belongs to mainland China (Chen, 2022). This position was articulated on the national stage by Xi himself when he stated that "The reunification of the motherland is a historical inevitability" during his New Year's speech in 2024 (Jack, 2023). Not only does the CCP consider the reunification of Taiwan with mainland China as inevitable, but it also considers it a necessity; it views the idea of an independent Taiwan as a national threat (Wagner, 2023). In fact, Taiwan finds itself in the precarious position where China views it as a rogue Chinese province that must be reunified.

To fulfil its political commitment to reunification, China has employed aggressive intimidation strategies, which have become more frequent and extensive since Xi came to power in 2012. These tactics have included military exercises in the South China Sea, the largest of which took place in 2022. These exercises were referred to as the "Joint Sword Exercises" and involved the deployment of upwards of 100 planes, along with 10 naval vessels (Gentry, 2025). These particular exercises continued in 2023 and 2024, during which three additional exercises, which also involved planes and naval vessels, took place (Gentry, 2025). While these exercises are a demonstration of Chinese power and military capability, they also represent an increased normalization of Chinese military activity around Taiwan and are likely to increase in scale and frequency in the future. The U.S. Defence Secretary, Pete Hegseth, has even gone as far as to claim that these military exercises are a rehearsal for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan that he believes "could be imminent" (Shichor, 2025).

While Japan is not facing an existential threat of annexation or invasion, it has also been experiencing threats and intimidation from China, the nature of which is different from those being carried out against Taiwan. For example, China has frequently employed grey-zone tactics such as intruding without permission into guarded Japanese Air Defence Identification Zones (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2024). China has also steadily increased its presence in and around the Senkaku and Diaoyu Islands, a controversial grouping of islands situated just north of Taiwan which were purchased by Japan and have been formally nationalized as Japanese since 2012 (Smith, 2013). In 2023, an unprecedented number of PRC vessels were active in the contiguous zone around the Senkaku and Diaoyu Islands, which China has historically claimed and continues to claim sovereignty over (Kosuke, 2024).

All of these points considered, the nature of the Chinese threats imposed on Taiwan and Japan, as well as the intended outcomes as articulated by Chinese leaders, suggest that Taiwan is investing notably more per capita in military spending because it has so much more to lose, namely its survival and continued existence as a sovereign state.

Security Alliance with the United States

The per capita military spending gap between Taiwan and Japan can also be explained by examining each country's security alliance with the primary ally of both, the United States. Japan signed a mutual security treaty with the U.S. in 1960, which formally obligated the U.S. to defend Japan in the event of an attack and allowed U.S. forces to use military bases in Japan ever since (Packard, 2010). In fact, as of September 2022, Japan was hosting around 54,000 American troops, the most of any country around the world (O'Dell, 2023). This treaty remains in place today and continues to play an important role in Japanese security; it guarantees American intervention and support in the event of a Chinese attack on Japanese soil. Japan's defence also leverages the United States' nuclear capabilities as a tool of deterrence against regional rivals, such as China (Kawai, 2022). This is highlighted in the Japanese National Security Strategy of 2013, which describes U.S. nuclear "extended deterrence" as central, alongside the "strengthening of its [Japan's] own defense capability" (Government of Japan, 2013). Thus, the Japan-U.S. defence partnership offers significant security guarantees and consequently relieves Japan of having to spend even more than it already does on its own defence.

Taiwan, on the other hand, has a very different relationship with the US; the two parties have yet to sign any kind of official security agreement. While the U.S. has historically supported, and continues to support Taiwan, especially in terms of procurement of arms and resources, it has never officially committed to defending Taiwan in the event of a military conflict with China; all military commitments from the U.S. have remained ambiguous and informal (Liff, 2022). Additionally, Donald Trump's second term as U.S. president increased this ambiguity and offered several hints indicating that the U.S. may be deprioritizing support for Taiwan. Trump has repeatedly downplayed the level of the Chinese threat against Taiwan. For example, he stated "I think we'll be just fine with China. China doesn't want to do that" when asked about a potential conflict in Taiwan (Attrill, 2025). Such ambiguous comments from the United States create even greater risk for Taiwan because they may be interpreted by China as a sign of hesitancy, which could, in turn, encourage an invasion (Attrill, 2025). Furthermore, in September 2025, the Trump administration also refused to send a military aid package worth over $400 million to Taiwan (Robertson & Nakashima, 2025). This decision indicates a waning of U.S. military support for Taiwan and has consequently increased distrust among the Taiwanese with regard to U.S. support. In fact, studies show that Taiwanese public opinion of the U.S. is deteriorating. According to a 2025 study conducted in Taiwan by the Brookings Institution, 46.7% of respondents believed that it was "unlikely" or "very unlikely" that the U.S. would intervene if China declared war on Taiwan (Nachman, Kim, & Yen, 2025). This represents an increase in distrust by over 10% from the previous year (Nachman, Kim, & Yen, 2025).

All of this clearly indicates that the security relationship between Taiwan and the United States heavily influences Taiwanese decisions regarding military spending. Compared to Japan, Taiwan is required to spend more on defence because it does not benefit from guaranteed American support.

Historical Defence Orientation

Another factor that deserves consideration when explaining why Taiwan spends more per capita on its military than Japan is Japan's pacifist ideology. This belief in and commitment to peace are central to the Japanese national identity and emerged largely as a result of the large-scale devastation experienced by the Japanese people after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Cai, 2008).

Pacifism in Japan has taken the form of laws, governmental policies, and fundamental principles, such as restrictions on exports of weaponry, anti-nuclear and anti-military principles, as well as childhood education that emphasizes empathy, peace, and learning from the past (Gustafsson, Hagström, & Hanssen, 2019). This anti-militarization sentiment is also explicitly communicated in Japan's constitution, which states that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, 1946). Japan's connection to pacifism has also largely influenced its 'timid' defence posture, which has been characterized by a long period of continuity and stability (Easley, 2017). However, several recent Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders have largely been in favor of reforming this section of the constitution (Ward, 2025). That said, they have faced notable backlash and opposition from the political left, which disputes reforming the constitution due to its strong commitment to Japanese pacifism (Ward, 2025). This constraint becomes clear when examining the prime ministerial tenure of Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), who claimed to be a pro-constitutional reform candidate, but failed to present a single attempt to formally reform the constitution during his mandate due to his fears of dividing the country (Ward, 2025). So, despite increases in military investment from 2012 to present, the political left's insistence of preserving the pacifist movement has hindered the LDP's desire to increase military investment more than it already has. This ideological divide means that endorsing strong military and defence reform would likely be politically costly for the LDP (Ward, 2025). So, the LDP has favored stability over escalation, and has tempered their increases in military spending. However, constitutional reform aside, Abe was able to implement other reforms like the creation of the National Security Council in 2013, which gave more executive power to the Prime Minister to make decisions on defence and security issues (Mulgan, 2018). The reforms implemented by Abe also had significant implications for limiting the influence of pacifism during the tenure of Fumio Kishida, Abe's successor. Kishida implemented the 2022 National Security Strategy, which marked a significant shift in defence posture, including the plan to increase spending to 2% of GDP as described earlier in this paper (Ward, 2025).

In stark contrast to Japanese society, which is grounded in pacifism, Taiwanese society is characterized by a strong historical public will for civil defence. For Chiang Kai-shek, the former leader of the Chinese nationalist government in Taiwan, the defence of the island became a priority in 1950 after having lost the Chinese civil war in 1949 and subsequently leading his forces from mainland China to Taiwan (Li, 2019). Defence became a priority at this time because China's army, the People's Liberation Army, became ready to launch an invasion of Taiwan (Li, 2019). Defence has remained front and centre since then. York W. Chen (2009) describes the Taiwanese defence posture over three distinct eras. During the era of "offensive defence", from 1949-1966, Taiwan increased its military personnel on its offshore islands and regularly launched assaults on Chinese coastal targets (Chen, 2009). Secondly, during the era of "forward defence", between 1966 and 1979, Taiwan's defence strategy involved the fortification of its offshore islands with both personnel and infrastructure (Chen, 2009). Finally, Chen (2009) describes the era of "defence-in-depth", from 1979 to 2000. During this time, a strategy influenced heavily by General Hau Pei-tsun was implemented and called for concentrating all forces and resources on the Chinese once they had reached the "water's edge", rather than committing naval and air capabilities over the Taiwan Strait. In contrast to Japan, defence has remained foundational in Taiwanese society and politics since 1950.

It, therefore, makes sense that a country with historical foundations of self-defense, Taiwan, spends more per capita on its military than a country whose historical foundation is against militarization.

Political Polarization

Another important difference between the two countries that affects military spending is their respective levels of domestic political competition. In Japan, one party, the right-leaning LDP, has dominated and continues to dominate the country's politics; it has governed every year since its founding in 1955, with the exception of two brief periods from 1993-1994 and 2009-2012 (Kuriwaki, Horiuchi, & Smith, 2025). The LDP's long-term dominance of Japanese politics and the dominant-party system that has consequently resulted, have led to a relatively low level of political polarization in Japan (Yin, 2024). That said, one opposition party that represented competition for the LDP and even won the election of 2009 was the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which was dissolved and reinvented in early 2016 (Smith, 2017). While the DPJ only held power for three years, it did have an important impact on the ideology of the LDP. Because the DPJ was a centrist party with relatively moderate policies, the LDP decided to shift its political position from a more conservative stance to a more centrist one as a means of–gaining centrist votes from the DPJ (Lee & Han, 2017). The LDP's shift to a more centrist ideology resulted in a more modest defence posture, which was subsequently reflected in Japan maintaining a modest pace of military spending increases.

In contrast, Taiwan has two very competitive political parties: the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). In terms of the traditional left-right measurement of political polarization, Taiwan's political polarization is low (Lee & Han, 2017). In terms of Taiwan's relations with China, however, the polarization between the DPP and the KMT is extremely high (Lee & Han, 2017). On the one hand, the DPP advocates for Taiwanese independence from China, while on the other hand, the KMT stands for deepening and increasing ties with China (Hioe, 2024). Consequently, tensions with China often increase when the DPP is in power, as was seen during the tenure of Tsai Ing-wen (Chen, 2025). The more confrontational approach of the DPP also correlates directly with increases in Taiwanese military spending. Since the DPP retook power in Taiwan from the KMT with the election win of Tsai in 2016, military spending per capita in Taiwan has increased from US$410.2 in 2016 to US$708.2 in 2024, marking an overall increase of over 72% (SIPRI, 2025). In comparison, military spending over the eight years of KMT leadership under Ma

Ying-jeou from 2008-2016 saw military spending increase from US$388.8 to US$410.2, marking an overall increase of only around 5% (SIPRI, 2025).

These figures indicate that the polarization of domestic politics certainly plays an important role in determining military spending in both countries. In Taiwan, there are two very competitive parties whose positions on dealing with China are polar opposites. This polarization causes military spending to fluctuate. When the DPP, which has an aggressive stance toward China, is in power, military spending increases. When the KMT, which has a cooperative and relationship-oriented stance toward China, is in power, defence spending either decreases or increases marginally. In Japan's dominant-party system, where there is a more consistently moderate and centrist stance with regard to China, political polarization remains relatively low. Consequently, military spending has also remained consistently moderate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that Taiwanese and Japanese military spending per capita differs significantly. Each country's spending is influenced by a variety of factors. The nature of the threat that each country faces from China is different in scope and implications. Taiwan is facing an existential threat, either annexation or invasion, or both. This is causing its military spending per capita to be very high compared to that of Japan. The nature of the threat faced by Japan is nowhere close to that of Taiwan. Taiwan must also be more self-reliant because it cannot fall back on ambiguous, informal American support. Japan, on the other hand, can rely on documented formalized American security guarantees; it is not forced to invest as much as Taiwan. Taiwan and Japan also view the Chinese threat from different historical political orientations. Japan's pacifism remains influential today in setting military spending, whereas Taiwan's historical commitment to self-defence, in combination with China's overtly expressed intention to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, has created an environment in Taiwan where the island's defence remains a priority. Finally, the dominant-party system in Japan has resulted in a political environment where polarization, especially as it pertains to China, is low. In turn, this has resulted in moderate defence spending. In Taiwan, where genuine political competition has created a polarized political arena with regards to China, defence spending is largely dependent on whether the DPP or the KMT is in power. As it turns out, the party that has held power the longest since 2012 is the DPP, which takes a strong stance on self-defence, resulting in higher military spending per capita.

For Japan, the future presents a complex strategic challenge. With China making increasingly aggressive moves in the South and East China Seas, Japan finds itself in the difficult position of determining how best to respond. On the one hand, its ties with the United States remain strong, and offer it protection. The current U.S. administration has, however, demonstrated a degree of unpredictability that has called Japan's dependence on the United States into question. At this point, the more pressing question, however, is the following: will this significant military spending pay off for Taiwan? The answer to this question is uncertain. What is certain is that Taiwan has invested significantly in strengthening its self-defence capabilities, in turn strengthening its ability to deter and resist a potential Chinese invasion. That said, China's commitment to the one-China policy remains firm. Combined with its rise to global military and economic superpower status, this presents an ongoing and serious threat to Taiwanese sovereignty. For this reason, continued investment in asymmetric defence capabilities is likely to play an important role in determining Taiwan's future.

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Balancing Shadows: How Realism Frames Power and Survival Across the Pacific

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Résumé
La concurrence croissante entre les États-Unis et la Chine est souvent présentée comme un conflit inévitable entre grandes puissances, alimenté par l'ambition, l'idéologie ou un supposé « piège de Thucydide ». Cet article remet en cause ces interprétations en appliquant le réalisme défensif aux relations contemporaines entre les États-Unis et la Chine. S'appuyant sur les travaux de Kenneth Waltz et de Robert Jervis, ainsi que sur des recherches récentes sur les transitions de puissance et la sécurité dans l'Indo-Pacifique, ce travail soutient que cette rivalité s'explique avant tout par une insécurité structurelle et des perceptions erronées mutuelles au sein d'un système international anarchique, plutôt que par une intention expansionniste délibérée. À partir d'une analyse qualitative fondée sur la théorie, la littérature secondaire et des cas empiriques — incluant les comportements d'alliance, le découplage économique, la compétition technologique et les dynamiques de sécurité régionale —, l'étude montre que les deux États privilégient leur survie et l'évitement des risques plutôt que la domination. Elle explique également que l'accumulation excessive de puissance est limitée par des pressions d'équilibrage, rendant une guerre de grande ampleur irrationnelle pour les deux parties. Les résultats suggèrent que les relations sino-américaines évolueront probablement vers une « paix froide » durable, marquée par une compétition sans conflit direct. L'article conclut que la prévention des conflits repose non pas sur la confiance ou la convergence idéologique, mais sur la retenue, la transparence, une dissuasion crédible et une coopération limitée dans des domaines non conflictuels. Ces observations contribuent aux débats plus larges sur la rivalité entre grandes puissances en montrant que la peur, la prudence et l'équilibre — plutôt que l'agression — façonnent la politique internationale contemporaine.

Mots-clés: États-Unis, Chine, relations sino-américaines, réalisme défensif, transition de pouvoir, sécurité indo-pacifique, paix froide, comportement d'alliance, découplage économique, compétition technologique, équilibrage, concurrence, piège de Thucydide.

Abstract
Growing competition between the United States and China is frequently framed as an inevitable great-power conflict driven by ambition, ideology, or a looming "Thucydidean Trap." This paper challenges such interpretations by applying defensive realist theory to contemporary U.S–China relations. Drawing on the foundational work of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervis, as well as recent scholarship on power transitions and Indo-Pacific security, this paper argues that the rivalry is best understood as a product of structural insecurity and mutual misperception within an anarchic international system rather than deliberate expansionist intent. Using a qualitative, theory-driven analysis grounded in secondary literature and empirical cases—including alliance behavior, economic decoupling, technological competition, and regional security dynamics—this paper demonstrates how both states prioritize survival and risk avoidance over domination. The analysis further explains why excessive power accumulation is constrained by counterbalancing pressures, making large-scale war an irrational outcome for both sides. The findings suggest that U.S–China relations are more likely to stabilize into a prolonged "cold peace" characterized by competition without direct conflict. The paper concludes that conflict prevention depends not on trust or ideological convergence, but on restraint, transparency, credible deterrence, and limited cooperation in non-zero-sum domains. These insights contribute to broader debates on great-power rivalry by highlighting how fear, prudence, and balance—rather than aggression—shape contemporary international politics.

Keywords: United States, China, U.S–China relations. Defensive Realism. power transitions, Indo-Pacific security, cold peace. alliance behavior, economic decoupling, technological competition, counterbalancing, competition, Thucydidean Trap

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Introduction

In a world defined by uncertainty, the United States (U.S.) and China's rivalry embodies the essence of power politics in the twenty-first century. Rising competition between these two states unfolds not merely through weapons or wealth, but through perception, fear, and the structures that govern survival (Fong, 2025). Realism offers a lens through which these tensions become clear. Rooted in the belief that the international system is anarchic—lacking a central authority—realist theory posits that states act above all to secure their own existence (Waltz, 1979). Within this logic, power is not an end, but a means of self-preservation. Using defensive realism, I argue the U.S.-China competition arises from structural insecurity and mutual misperception rather than offensive ambition, and that the prevention of conflict relies on restraint, transparency, and the cultivation of a stable balance of power.

Defensive realism examines great-power competition through direct logic. In an anarchic international system, the absence of central authority creates persistent ambiguity regarding other States intentions, persuading states to prioritize survival over expansion (Waltz, 1979). This uncertainty encourages worst-case assumptions, whereby even defensive measures—such as military modernization or strategic alliances-building—are interpreted as potential threats by rival states. The results are therefore a security dilemma: any actions taken by one State to increase one's own internal security invertedly reduces the security of other States, promoting reciprocal responses (Jervis, 1978). Over time, this dynamic produces balancing behavior rather than conquest, as states recognize that excessive expansion invites counterbalancing and increases vulnerability over safety (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). The aforementioned framework is applied in this paper in reference to U.S.–China relations to demonstrate how rivalry can emerge without aggressive intent and why restraint, rather than domination, remains the most rational strategy for both powers.

This paper employs defensive realism, following Kenneth Waltz's interpretation that states pursue security rather than domination (Waltz, 1979). It argues that the growing U.S.–China competition reflects a cycle of mutual fear and misperception, rather than a deliberate struggle for global conquest. Through this lens, China's assertive posture and the United States' reactive containment are best understood as defensive behaviors conditioned by insecurity (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978).

Empires in Reflection: The Rise of China and the United States Uneasy Gaze

Within the current international system, global powers are characterized by their capacity to project influence economically, militarily, and institutionally—

a statement which defines both the United States and China (Golub, 2013). Historically, after World War Two the United States has occupied a central role in the global economy, leading liberal institutions and promoting globalization (Golub, 2013). However, China's recent transformation into the world's manufacturing hub, its growing technological capacity, and its control over strategic territories—Macau, Hong Kong, and persistent claim over Taiwan—signal a shift in the global balance of power (Zhao, 2013).

Following the Century of Humiliation, for China, these developments represent essential milestones towards securing sovereignty and restoring national dignity (Zhao, 2013). However, United States policymakers perceive China's moves as expansionist, acting as a direct challenge to the established global hegemon (Golub, 2013). Nevertheless, defensive realism reframes China's actions as efforts to maintain survival under anarchy (Waltz, 1979). Waltz's theory further supports this claim by emphasizing that a State's primary motivation is security, not conquest (Waltz, 1979). Yet beyond material capabilities, the roots of rivalry lie deeper—in perception, culture, and history (Jervis, 1978; Zhao, 2013).

Defensive realism claims that rising powers do not automatically pursue expansion, nor do declining powers inevitably resort to preventive war (Waltz, 1979). Instead, states assess whether additional power enhances or undermines their security. For China, rapid growth increases visibility and threat perception, incentivizing caution rather than instigation to avoid premature counterbalancing by the United States and their allies. For the United States, containment strategies—such as alliance reinforcement and technological restrictions—reflect efforts to preserve relative security without triggering escalation. Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that excessive power accumulation often produces diminishing returns, as it invites external balancing that ultimately reduces security. Thus, both states face structural incentives to moderate behavior, even amid intensifying rivalry.

The Weight of Perception: Culture, History, and the Making of Rivalry

In "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma", Robert Jervis (1978) refers to a "security dilemma", where a State's defensive action will appear as offensive to other States; with regards to China and the United States, both States historically interpret each other's efforts in maintaining security as hostile intentions (Jervis, 1978).

Jervis' (1978) security dilemma is not the result of irrational fear or ideological hostility, but a structural consequence of an anarchic system in which intentions cannot be reliably verified. Even when states adopt defensive postures, others must evaluate these actions under conditions of ambiguity, leading rational actors to assume worst-case scenarios. In the U.S.–China context, Chinese military modernization aimed at deterring intervention near its periphery appears to Washington as an effort to revise the regional order. Similarly, United States alliance reinforcement in East Asia, intended to preserve economic stability, is perceived in Beijing as encirclement tactics. Defensive realism emphasizes that these interpretations are not products of misunderstanding alone, but of rational precaution in an environment where misjudgment carries existential risks (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

Escalating competition between the United States and China is a product of both structural, cultural and historical misunderstandings (Zhao, 2013). China's dynastic origin has entrenched a subconscious preference for homogenization, hierarchy, and internal unity within its political sphere and social behavior (Zhao, 2013). Suisheng Zhao (2013) explains, the emphasis on discipline and centralism, where power and decision-making authorities are concentrated to maintain national stability and control, is reinforced through a single party system, a tradition continued by Xi Jinping.

China's emphasis on regional supremacy and unity is not the result of malice but rather centuries of political continuity—patterns of rule that valued isolation and stability as safeguards against external interference (Zhao, 2013). In contrast, the American political culture was built on immigration, pluralism, and openness (Golub, 2013). According to Philip Golub (2013), America's economic and imperial ascent is linked to a self-concept of global participation, expansion, and universality. While China values internal order and regional self-reliance, the United States operates with outward openness, aiming for an essential role in global leadership (Golub, 2013). China's inward focus consequently appears threatening to the United States as it interprets China through its own liberal worldview. To Beijing, centralization ensures survival; to Washington, it signals authoritarian danger (Zhao, 2013).

Economic dynamics between China and the United States further amplifies misunderstandings. Historically, the United States global dominance was a result of strong domestic manufacturing, propelled by post-World War Two industrial capacity (Golub, 2013). However, as the United States Gross Domestic Product (GDP) vastly surpassed other States, industries moved abroad, and factories relocated to China—economic production thus became concentrated in the very State that the United States presently views as its chief rival (Stevens, 2022). Scholars further mark this transition, Friso Stevens (2022) noting that China's modern economic ascent reflects its ongoing "march to national rejuvenation" and its enduring memory of humiliation from the Opium Wars, motivating an obsession with national restoration. The United States perceives this as revisionism, while for China it is a return to historical equilibrium—a process of recovering its perceived rightful place in the regional order (Stevens, 2022).

Ideological divergence between capitalism and communism further complicates cooperation. The capitalist model followed by the United States prioritizes individualism and markets liberalism, whereas China's communist model emphasizes collectivism and a state-centered control model (Velez-Calle, 2015). As Andres Velez-Calle's (2015) study on cultural communication styles in international joint ventures finds, these contrasting ideologies make both political negotiations and business relations difficult. Velez-Calle's (2015) finds that significant cultural distance between collectivist and individualist societies leads to shortened contracts and heightened mistrust due to differing communication norms. The same principles are applicable to diplomacy, the two nations' opposing communication logic inhibits understanding (Velez-Calle, 2015).

Global alignments further mirror these cultural and ideological differences. Taiwan, South Korea and other liberal democracies maintain close partnerships with the United States. Conversely, China aligns with emerging powers like BRICS nations (Keukeleire & Hooijmaaijers, 2014). As Stephan Keukeleire and Bas Hooijmaaijers (2014) explain, such alliances promote alternative views of multilateralism that challenge Western norms of order and governance. China's growing influence in global cultural and heritage institutions underscores its effort to project soft power through preservation rather than domination (Xiang, 2019). As Yunju Xiang (2019) notes, China's leadership in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage reflects its desire to contribute to global cooperation and cultural continuity.

Viewed through the defensive realist lens, these dynamics indicate that United States–China rivalry is not a Thucydidean trap—a power transition bound to result in war—but a complex interplay of internal and external balancing behaviors (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). Each state acts in accordance with its own identity and insecurity: China's centralization seeks to prevent collapse, while the United States reacts out of fear of relative decline (Beckley, 2018). A cycle of misperception is maintained as both perceive the other's defensive responses as aggressiveness (Jervis, 1978).

A War Never Fought: The Cold Peace of the Twenty-First Century

While popular discourse often frames U.S.–China relations as a Thucydidean Trap, defensive realism challenges the assumption that power transitions inevitably result in war. Unlike offensive realism, which posits that states seek maximum power to ensure survival, defensive realism argues that excessive expansion increases vulnerability by provoking counterbalancing coalitions (Waltz, 1979). Both the United States and China possess strong incentives to avoid direct confrontation, as the costs of war—economic disruption, alliance fragmentation, and nuclear escalation—far outweigh potential gains (Zhou, 2023; Beckley, 2021). As a result, competition is more likely to stabilize into a pattern of rivalry without war, where both sides pursue relative security through economic, technological, and diplomatic means rather than military confrontation (Zeng, 2007; Hulvey & Vidyarthi, 2023).

A cold peace—a sustained period of strategic competition without direct conflict—is the most probable outcome of the U.S.-China rivalry (Zhou, 2023). As defensive realism contends, both States seek survival and stability rather than conquest (Waltz, 1979). Present day economic decoupling, technological isolation, and the restriction of cultural and academic exchanges already signal this trajectory (Zeng, 2020). Tariff disputes, reciprocal sanctions, and the construction of digital and informational walls are manifestations of mutual containment (BBC, 2024).

Recently BBC news has reported on China's growing indifference with the United States, reflecting an outlook that the nation can "look beyond Trump's America" and thrive through domestic self-sufficiency (BBC, 2024). Scholars have further noted how the United States and China are both building "digital walls," prioritizing information control and national technological autonomy over interdependence (Hulvey & Vidyarthi, 2021).

In a recent publication, Jinghao Zhou (2023) concludes that great-power competition is now the new normal of international relations. Zhou argues that neither state can return to pre-2016 patterns of cooperation; instead, the future will consist of "strategic competition through limited cooperation," (Zhou, 2023, p. 211) where engagement persists in constrained, transactional ways. Ka Zeng (2020) further observes how China's foreign trade policy has evolved under domestic pressures that prioritize national protectionism and internal stability over liberal integration, highlighting an additional economic dimension. The consequence is a parallel economic order—two great powers sustaining separate, competing systems of production, finance, and digital governance (Zeng, 2020).

Despite western fears of China's global dominance, the balance of structural advantages still favours the United States. According to Michael Beckley (2018), robust institutions, favorable geography, and demographic vitality are key during shifts in global power. Even while the economic gap is narrowing between China and the United States, the United States continues to have long-standing advantages in geography, innovation, and demographic diversity, whereas China continues to face an aging population, regional inequalities, and heavy dependence on export-led manufacturing (Beckley, 2018). Paul Kennedy (1987) similarly underscores that internal stagnation and over-exertion explain why great powers decline, and by those standards, the United States maintains its institutional resilience.

China's ambitions are additionally moderated by Confucian principles that temper expansionism with moral restraint (Lahtinen, 2019). Anja Lahtien (2019) explains that Beijing's pursuit of global respectability draws from the Confucian concept of harmony and self-cultivation rather than domination. Therefore, Chinese foreign policy would seek recognition as a great power without necessarily displacing the United States (Lahtinen, 2019). The outcome, therefore, is not a Thucydidean trap, but a long-term balance of fear and stability—a cold peace in which both states coexist within defined spheres of influence (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978).

From a defensive realist perspective, this state represents the inherent balance of anarchic international systems. To maintain sovereignty and autonomy, both states, motivated by insecurity rather than aggression, unite within themselves to preserve sovereignty and autonomy. The resulting dual rule system—distinct economic networks, competing institutions, and cautious diplomacy—demonstrates that rivalry does not always result in conflict. Instead, it ushers in a new era of coexistence characterized by competition without collapse, where fear maintains stability and survival supersedes ambition as the central logic of power behavior.

The Fragility of Peace: Strategies for Preventing Great-Power Conflict

Restraint, transparency, and cultural literacy are essential for prevention (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). Defensive realism posits that states can only achieve stability in the absence of a central authority through mutual recognition of limits and communication of objectives (Waltz, 1979). The United States and China must therefore establish formalized discussion methods that reduce uncertainty and prevent miscalculation—a condition Kenneth Waltz (1979) identifies as essential for minimizing the security dilemma. Clearing defensive postures and preventing escalation in areas like the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait can be achieved by confidence-building measures, including bilateral arms-control discussions, cyber rules, and maritime codes of conduct (Zhou, 2023).

Both states can seek limited structural cooperation in non-zero-sum fields, such as climate governance, global health, and disaster relief (Zeng, 2020). According to Robert Jervis's (1978) theory of the security dilemma, a State's ability to differentiate between offensive and defensive capabilities allows cooperation. Applying this logic, projects like collaborative research on clean energy or pandemic response can signal non-threatening intent while upholding core interests (Zhou, 2023). Even as strategic tensions rise, these "low-politics" exchanges can reduce hostility in "high-politics" domains and maintain open communication channels.

Furthermore, it is crucial for both states to acknowledge the impact historical and cultural influences have in shaping perceptions: the United States must recognize China's historical sensitivity to sovereignty, and China must realize that United States alliances in Asia are largely economic opportunities and deterrents rather than encirclement strategies (Zhao, 2013). Mutual distrust is decreased by building channels for language learning, cross-cultural exchanges, and track-two diplomacy (Velez-Calle, 2015).

Defensive realism asserts that peace is not the product of trust, but fear and prudence (Waltz, 1979). Deterrence and prudence become self-reinforcing when both powers internalize that direct confrontation would jeopardize their own survival (Jervis, 1978). The goal, therefore, is not harmony but equilibrium—preserving competition within predictable boundaries (Waltz, 1979).

The Edge of Equilibrium: Reflections on Power and Restraint

The U.S–China rivalry illustrates realism's enduring truth: that fear, not aggression, sustains the rhythm of international politics (Waltz, 1979). The anarchic system in which both powers operate fosters vigilance and punishes gullibility (Waltz, 1979). Their actions—tariffs, alliances, military posturing—are not driven by conquest but by anxiety over survival (Jervis, 1978). The cold peace that results may seem tense and unyielding, but it represents stability in its most pragmatic sense (Zhou, 2023).

The U.S–China case continues to offer key insight into understanding great-power competition, as illustrated by the defensive realist lens. By foregrounding insecurity, misperception, and the limits of power accumulation, realism reveals why growing rivalry does not necessarily culminate into war. Rather than attributing conflict to ideological incompatibility or ambition, defensive realism locates its origins in structural conditions that shape rational State behavior (Waltz, 1979). This insight carries broader implications: preventing war among great powers depends less on trust or shared values than on managing incentives, clarifying intentions, and maintaining credible deterrence within an anarchic system (Zhou, 2023; Fong, 2024).

Ultimately, realism does not promise harmony—it promises endurance (Waltz, 1979). In this enduring balance lies the quiet possibility of peace: imperfect, uneasy, but lasting. The architecture of fear, if tempered by restraint, can sustain not conflict, but coexistence (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

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