

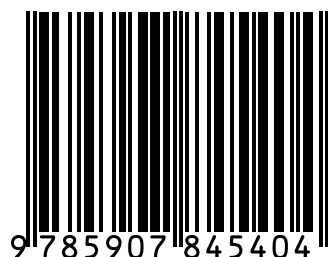


Culture of Confrontation: Patterns of Competition Among Great Powers in the 21st Century

Edited by Andrey Sushentsov

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Contents

3	Introduction
6	Germany: Multilateralism in an era of transition
7	France: Republican messianism and lost grandeur
10	Turkey: Going from zero problems with neighbours to zero neighbours with no problems
13	Arab countries: A strategy of dodging the conflict
15	Heroic flexibility of Iran
18	China's strategic restraint
19	India's offensive policy
22	Caution and resolve of South Korea and DPRK
24	Japan's pacifism
25	Avoidance of confrontation in Southeast Asia

Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War, many argued that the era of major wars involving regular armies had definitively become history. The US military campaigns in the Middle East in the early 2000s showcased a new format of armed conflicts involving high-tech operations by mobile combat groups with overwhelming superiority in the sky. However, the Ukraine conflict and the standoff over Taiwan have confirmed that the likelihood of a war between great powers appears more than real.

The modern-day military-political situation is characterised by propensity towards conflict involving wide use of dual-purpose technologies and means of cyber warfare. A significant number of regions around the world remain unstable. A deep insight into the mechanisms of international rivalry and the identification of patterns that the countries use to implement confrontation strategies are needed if we want to prevent the escalation of local crises into wider military conflicts.

Clearly, leading powers adhere to different patterns of rivalry. Some countries are focused on retaining the initiative and using pre-eminently offensive strategies which allows them to achieve the desired outcomes against a weakened adversary relatively quickly, but hinders success in extended conflicts. Such behaviour patterns are typical of the countries with island mentality, such as the United States or Britain.

Other countries prefer defence and positional strategy. They consciously cede the initiative to the opponent, allowing temporary tactical concessions, while accumulating resources and seeking to gradually exhaust the opponent's potential, which includes operations in its rear areas. Acting in this way, the positional countries, such as Russia and China, limit the adversary's ability to recover and, upon gathering enough resources, eventually inflict a strategic defeat on it.¹

The above dichotomy of maritime and continental countries is in no way universal. Countries' conflict behaviour patterns vary a lot. On the one hand, one can argue that each participant of international relations has its own unique model of confrontation. On the other hand, one can operate on the premise of a single model with many variations.

¹ Blagden D. W., et al. Sea Powers, Continental Powers, and Balancing Theory [with Reply] // International Security. 2011. Vol. 36. №2. P. 190–202.

In terms of methodology, the precise definition of the concept of confrontation becomes important. It is necessary to clarify whether this term refers exclusively to military-political confrontation or whether it lends itself to a broader interpretation to include economic, sociocultural, and civilisational dimensions. Differences between friendly countries and even allies can hardly be considered confrontation, but how can we then draw a line between conflict and conflict-free forms of interaction between countries?

It should be noted that the nation-specific culture of confrontation is not static time-wise, and countries that have lived through profound transformation show a drastic departure from earlier patterns of behaviour in the international arena. The foreign policy practices of Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire in the first half of the 20th century were fundamentally different from the foreign policy approaches practiced by modern Germany and Japan. Similarly, the foreign policy of modern-day Mongolia is a far cry from the strategy of the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan.

These and other examples demonstrate the diversity of conditions for forming confrontation patterns. They go far beyond national identity to include political and strategic culture evolution, formation and activities of political elites, the specificity of society, state, and the demographic structure, as well as concrete historical circumstances determining the country's choice of foreign policy strategy.

Notably, the understanding of the logic and the structure of a conflict escalation varies across confrontation cultures. The escalation ladder pattern proposed by American futurist Herman Kahn seemed universal and most fully describes, in fact, only the Soviet-American confrontation during the Cold War.² Moreover, even in this particular case, the American escalation ladder model envisaged significantly more intermediate steps between stages of political containment and a nuclear war. The United States showed a similar model of confrontation in other conflicts, as well, including in Ukraine.

Turkey is another case of distinctive conflict behaviour. Ankara's foreign policy is marked by assertiveness and provocative style. This can be seen in Turkey's actions in the Middle East and the South Caucasus, as well as in its interactions with key global players. At the same time, NATO membership is seen by the Turkish leadership not so much as a constraint on its foreign policy initiative, but rather as a tool for pursuing a pragmatic policy and beneficial engagement primarily with the United States.

² Kahn H. On Escalation. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1968.

The culture of confrontation inherent in the major EU countries goes far back in history to the pre-Westphalian era. Nevertheless, following the Suez Crisis of 1956, France and Britain de facto lost their status as active global players and assumed a position as second-tier great powers. Following World War II, Germany's economic potential no longer translated into comparable foreign policy influence. Declarations by French and German leaders in 2024 about them being willing to continue the confrontation with Russia without relying on US support made headlines, but many analysts argued they were just rhetoric to score electoral points.

China's culture of confrontation has deep historical roots as well, but it has not yet fully manifested itself in modern-day crises. One could argue that Beijing has a near-limitless patience, but it clearly does not extend to issues that are critical to the country, first and foremost, the Taiwan issue. The nature and consequences of possible Chinese response are debatable. It is possible that China's culture of confrontation will become one of the defining constants of 21st century international relations.

Iran, Israel, North Korea, South Korea, Latin American countries, and many other countries are engaging and unique cases of confrontation culture as well.

In the context of an emerging multipolar world, the nature, logic, and dynamics of various cultures of confrontation become one of the key issues when analysing international politics. Modern conflicts are increasingly shaped not only by traditional clashes of interest, but also by deep-seated differences in strategic thinking, political culture, and the way threats are perceived. This highlights the importance of comparative research into countries' confrontational behaviour, which can be understood as a set of complex, historically conditioned, and institutionally entrenched behavioural patterns.

The report presents a comparison of these patterns, identifying their structural characteristics and the factors contributing to their transformation. It examines rivalry practices in the strategies of Germany, France, Turkey, Arab countries, Iran, China, the Korean Peninsula countries, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries. The authors sought not only to document the empirical diversity of approaches to confrontation, but also to offer an analytical framework which can be used to understand these differences. Moreover, the report attempts to assess the stability of these patterns amid global technological, institutional, and ideological transformation, and how they align with the logic of the great powers' behaviour in the new strategic reality.

Germany: Multilateralism in an era of transition

World War II and Nazi dictatorship had a devastating effect on Germany's political culture. After 1945, political culture in both the western and the eastern part of the country essentially had to be developed from scratch. The accession of the GDR to the FRG during the 1989–1990 events marked a new stage in the positioning of a united Germany within the international system.

Germany's reunification at the peak of the “unipolar moment” shaped the German politicians and diplomats' outlook on foreign policy principles for decades to come. The West's response to the Soviet Union's weakened position during the 2+4 talks was retrospectively viewed in Bonn and later in Berlin as acceptable diplomatic behaviour provided the state was “on the right side of history”. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union, along with NATO and EU eastward expansion, seemed to validate these conclusions.

International crises, especially those involving military-political dimensions, were seen in Germany as anachronistic. Hence, Berlin's particular focus on developing multilateral formats and active engagement within the European Union and NATO.³ In 2021, the idea of multilateralism was conceptually formalised in the so-called White Paper on Multilateralism.⁴

The multilateral approach, as seen by Germany, is not at odds with the transatlantic vector of Germany's foreign policy, and principles of multilateralism can be effectively applied only to countries that share a particular set of Western values. These principles are applied differently, including through confrontational measures, towards other countries.

The concept of a historic turning point (German: *Zeitenwende*), proclaimed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in February 2022, imparted new significance to multilateralism in the context of resolving international

³ Gaskarth J., Oppermann K. *Clashing Traditions: German Foreign Policy in a New Era* // International Studies Perspectives. 2021. № 22. P. 84–104.

⁴ *Gemeinsam für die Menschen. Weißbuch Multilateralismus der Bundesregierung* // Die Bundesregierung. 2021. URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2590372/3978f55a3848e13200509b4a254fe126/weissbuch-multilateralismus-data.pdf>

crises.⁵ Restrictions on German arms supplies to conflict zones were lifted. The sweeping military reform launched in Germany aims to significantly expand the capabilities of the nation's armed forces for them to be able to address territorial defence and foreign operations missions.

Early parliamentary elections in 2025 gave a boost to Germany's increased foreign policy activity. At a meeting between Friedrich Merz and Donald Trump on June 5, 2025, the US president praised Germany for increasing military spending, adding that General Douglas MacArthur, who led Allied forces in the Pacific during World War II, would not have approved of Germany increasing its defence spending.

Germany is navigating a difficult path of internal transformation under new foreign policy conditions. To overcome its domestic challenges, Berlin needs bold, outside-the-box foreign policy moves, including in the sphere of confrontation. It is highly unlikely that the German government will opt for normalising relations with Russia. Reportedly, during the June meeting in Washington, Merz asked Trump to increase pressure on Russia, including through new anti-Russia sanctions, and expand military help to Ukraine. However, Trump did not make any promises to the German chancellor. Amid international political turbulence, Berlin will likely maintain its commitment to a multilateral approach in its transatlantic form, as the most viable tool.

France: Republican messianism and lost grandeur

France's foreign policy identity relies on the original idea of republican messianism aimed at promoting, on a global scale, the ideals of human rights, rational social and international order, tolerance, and humanitarian progress.

In line with these ideals, President Emmanuel Macron positions France as a mediator power for which multilateralism is the preferred way

⁵ Blumenau B. *Breaking with Convention? Zeitenwende and the Traditional Pillars of German Foreign Policy* // International Affairs. № 98(6). P. 1895–1913.

of pursuing national interests and aligning them with those of a broad range of international actors.⁶

At the same time, the self-perception of the French political elites is largely shaped by an inferiority complex of lost grandeur, a morbid fear of decline and loss of the status of a global power, as well as fears of diplomatic, and potentially military, defeat. The foreign policy identity of the Fifth Republic is based on anxieties, such as fear of repeating catastrophic defeats such as those suffered in the early days of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and in the initial months of the German offensive during World War II (1940). France's painful foreign policy failures in the past, such as its adherence to the policy of appeasement of Nazi Germany, are now forcing Paris to pursue a strategy of global presence, which is one of the main drivers behind France's involvement in international conflicts and, in the case of the Ukraine crisis, a preventive policy of containing Russia as a "potential threat to European security". The goal of that policy is to not let Russia win without getting drawn into a major conflict whether by acting as Ukraine's backer or, especially, as a co-belligerent.

Past experience also shows in the tactical steps of the French foreign policy.⁷ With the end of the Cold War, the Soviet threat disappeared, leading in 1995 to the abolition of universal conscription in favour of a professional compact high-tech army. The memory of the bloody battles of the early years of World War I (the Verdun syndrome), which claimed the lives of an entire generation of young Frenchmen, has made the preservation of human life the top priority for the French military in any conflict. This is why avoiding direct military engagement is more characteristic of the French tradition than deliberately provoking one. The strategy of multilateralism is important to Paris primarily as a means of containing the foreign policy ambitions of Germany – a formerly hereditary enemy turned one of its closest allies.

The bellicose rhetoric of President Emmanuel Macron and other French politicians stems from what might be called a diffusion of responsibility syndrome: France's foreign policy constrained by the EU and NATO has deprived contemporary France of a distinct vision for a grand foreign policy strategy and has narrowed the scope for independent

⁶ Macron E. Discours du Président de la République à l'ouverture de la conférence des Ambassadeurs. 29.08.2017. URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/08/29/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-l-ouverture-de-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs>

⁷ See, for example, Schivelbusch W. *The Culture of Defeat. On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. London: GrantaBooks, 2004.

diplomatic initiatives. Confrontation with Russia allows for bold military rhetoric while avoiding direct involvement in hostilities.

The US primacy has prevented Paris from expanding its influence in the Indo-Pacific and the Black Sea. Notably, in both arenas, France has faced countermeasures from its own allies: the United States and the United Kingdom in the Indo-Pacific, and Turkey in the Black Sea. French political elites interpreted these steps by their partners as a stab in the back.

Overall, amid growing global rivalry, the French establishment categorises countries outside the Euro-Atlantic community into following groups:

1. Friendly regimes that share a common system of liberal values (India, Japan, Israel (with some caveats) alongside a number of Latin American, African, and Asian countries);
2. Partners in the sphere of historical responsibility (former colonies that maintain privileged relations with France);
3. Alien powers, with which Europeans share few values, but where selective dialogue is still possible (e.g., China);
4. Threat-bearing countries, where confrontation takes on an existential nature (Iran, North Korea and, since February 2022, Russia).

At the same time, French political culture is not inclined towards the notion of irreversible enmity. The example of taming a hereditary enemy – Germany – which became a NATO ally and an EU partner demonstrates France's commitment and ability to seek inclusive arrangements, provided there are fundamental changes in policies and reciprocal gestures from the other side.

Such a reversal is all the more possible given that a significant segment of French society that is hostile to the pro-Atlantic ruling elite and nostalgic for the sovereign foreign policy of the Gaullist era, sees Russia as an example of resistance to US diktat and a defender of genuine sovereignty in both foreign and domestic policy. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that the French economy feels the pinch of US secondary sanctions and pressure linked to the joint EU-US policy of economic warfare against Russia. This disruption of national consensus contains substantial conflict potential which reduces the likelihood of France moving towards an open military confrontation with revisionist powers.

Turkey: Going from zero problems with neighbours to zero neighbours with no problems

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's foreign policy exemplifies the use of foreign policy tools to maintain internal legitimacy, to combat domestic opponents, and to mobilise the electorate. This is largely rooted in the populist tradition embedded in Turkish political culture. At the same time, Ankara's foreign policy course is marked by notable dynamism.

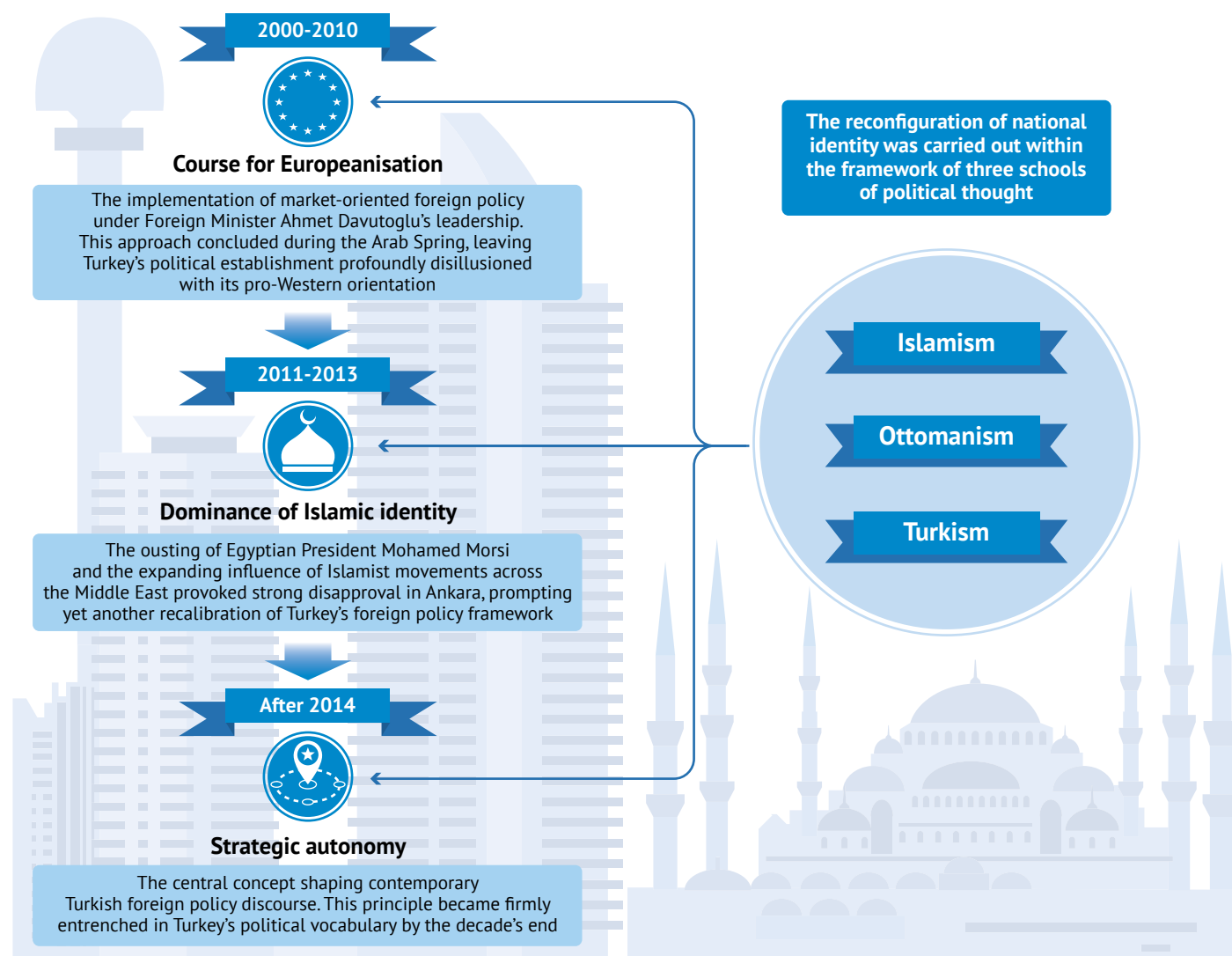
Modern-day Turkey's foreign policy has seen three successive stages. In the early 2000s, the country was in a phase of Europeanisation, pursuing a market-oriented foreign policy largely shaped by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. However, the onset of the Arab Spring brought this period to an end, leaving the Turkish political establishment deeply disillusioned with its choice of pro-Western course.

The next stage in Turkey's foreign policy transformation lasted until 2013 and was characterised by dominant Islamic identity. This phase came to a close with the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. The developments in Egypt and the rise of Islamist forces in the Middle East elicited a predominantly negative reaction in Ankara, prompting a revision of its foreign policy strategy.

Since the mid-2010s, the idea of strategic autonomy began to take hold in Turkish foreign policy discourse. In a short time, this concept became an imperative of foreign policy and a framework for clarifying the initiatives undertaken by the Turkish Republic's leadership.

The reconfiguration of national identity became the common thread running through all three phases of Turkey's foreign policy evolution. This process unfolded along three main dimensions, namely,

RECONFIGURATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A FUNDAMENTAL MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE TURKISH REPUBLIC



Islamic, Ottoman, and Turkic, each of which has gradually evolved into a distinct school of political thought: Islamism, Ottomanism, and Turkism, respectively. The specific combination and balance of these elements largely define the current state of Turkey's strategic culture and serve as a key to understanding its present-day foreign policy.⁸

⁸ Аватков В. А. Идеино-ценностный фактор во внешней политике Турции // Вестник МГИМО-Университета. 2019. № 12(4). С. 113–129.

The current phase is characterised by the dominance of Ottomanist ideas in foreign policy, tied in with a sense of messianism and a civilisational mission, which Ankara seeks to realise through concrete foreign policy actions. As a result, Turkey positions itself as an active international player in neighbouring regions, including the Middle East, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus. This transformation in foreign policy has led to the abandonment of the “zero problems with neighbours” doctrine in favour of a “zero neighbours with no problems” model. This approach forms the basis of Turkey’s new strategic and conflict culture, which focuses on hedging foreign policy risks.

Turkey’s hedging strategy was most clearly demonstrated during the Ukraine conflict, in which Ankara acted as a mediator. Even though the attempts to broker a comprehensive peace deal ultimately failed, the Istanbul talks in 2022 laid the groundwork for the Black Sea Grain Initiative (July 2022). By May 2025, the Istanbul negotiating platform became popular again, and the delegations returned to discussions on ceasefire terms, confirming Turkey’s status as the only NATO member recognized by both parties as an acceptable mediator.

Turkey’s position on Ukraine remains dualistic. Ankara supplied Ukraine with Bayraktar TB2 combat drones even before the onset of active hostilities and began supplying a naval variant of the UAV and armoured vehicles in 2024. These deliveries became a key export item for Turkey’s defence industry. At the same time, Turkey refused to join Western sanctions and maintained robust trade with Russia, thus keeping communication channels open and minimising the risk of Russia’s retaliation, particularly in matters of gas transit.

In its relationship with NATO, Turkey is acting just as pragmatically. By blocking Sweden’s NATO accession for nearly 20 months and tying ratification to US approval of F-16 fighter jet sales, Ankara clearly demonstrated its ability to use intra-alliance procedures as leverage. In January 2024, the Turkish parliament finally ratified the protocol on Sweden’s accession, after which Washington approved the fighter deal. However, unresolved tensions remain over Turkey’s purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems. Ankara continues to seek reinstating the F-35 fighter jet programme and lifting restrictions, offering its allies access to drone technologies and showing its willingness to control the straits in a manner that suits NATO’s interests.

Arab countries: A strategy of dodging the conflict

The term “Arab countries” is quite loose. In scholarly discourse, this category generally includes three sub-regions: North Africa, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula. Each of these regions has its own specifics of historical development, geopolitical dynamics, and specifics of foreign policy orientations.

The modern-day Arab world faces a set of structural crises, with food security being key among them. The emergence and escalation of these crises are conditioned by international economic circumstances. The events like the Arab Spring were largely provoked by rising global food prices, and most countries in the region failed to subsidise staple foods for vulnerable social groups.⁹ Even today, no Arab state has achieved food security, which increases their dependence on external markets. Consequently, any shocks destabilising global food supply chains directly impact Arab countries.

Water resources are an equally acute challenge for the Arab countries.¹⁰ The conflict potential pre-eminently lies in transboundary management of the Nile between Egypt and Ethiopia. This issue remains unresolved and creates a premise for humanitarian disasters and destabilises the water supply system across the region.

The identity of Arab countries in foreign policy historically rested on the ideas of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism. However, today these ideological currents are in crisis, influenced by the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the foreign policy practiced by specific Arab countries. Despite the declared priority of cooperation with Arab and Muslim countries in doctrinal documents, the actual policy demonstrates pragmatic adaptation, of which the role of the Arab League in initiating

⁹ Мельянцев В. А. *Кризис в арабском мире: экономические и социальные аспекты* // Мировая экономика и международные отношения. 2011. № 10. С. 73–83.

¹⁰ Филоник А. О., Исаев В. А. *Ближний Восток: вода и безопасность* // Азия и Африка сегодня. 2019. С. 14–21.

PROBLEMS OF ARAB UNITY



The region's most pressing crisis involves worsening food security conditions. Most states in the region have failed to provide subsidies for basic food products for vulnerable social groups



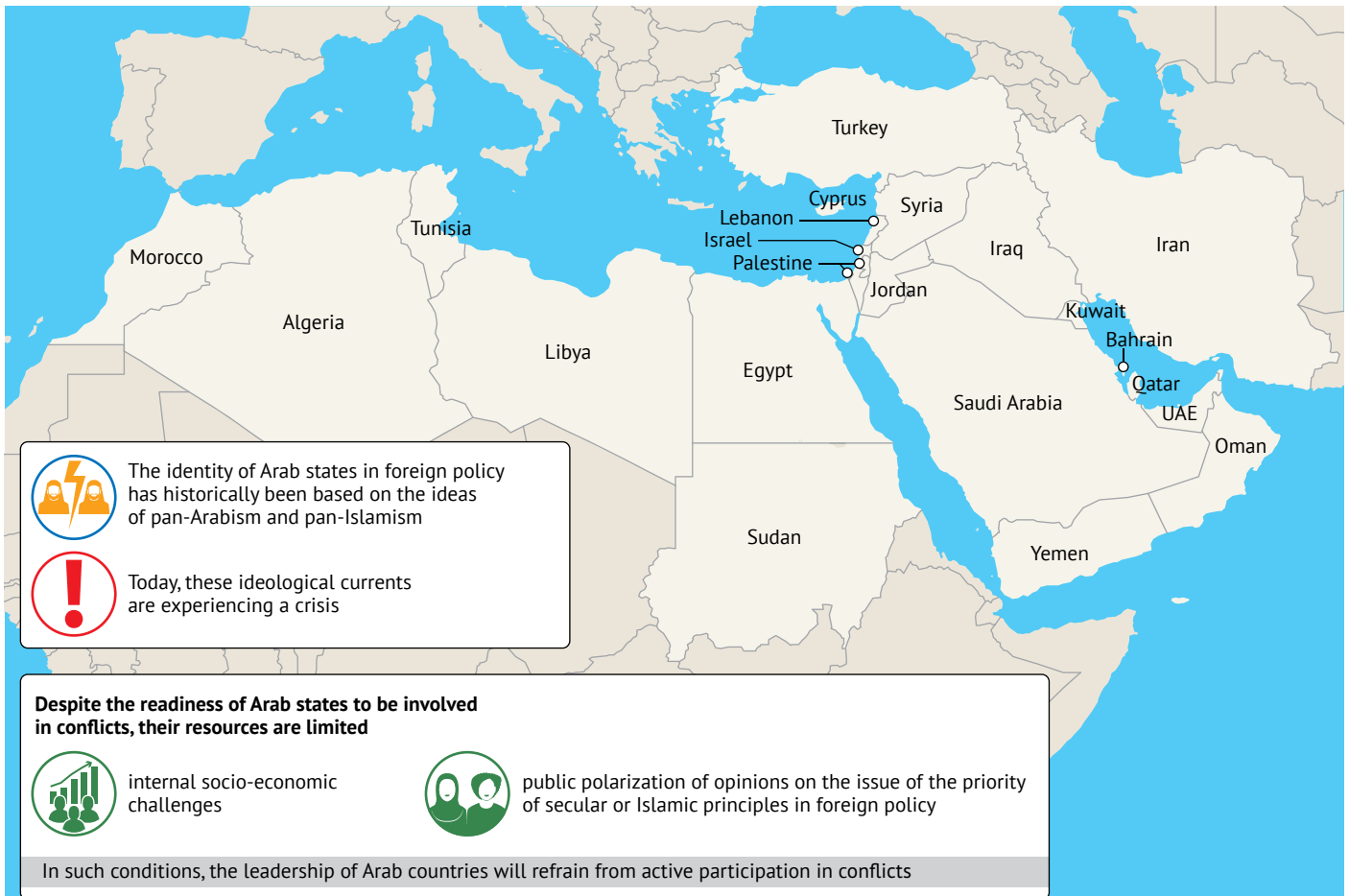
As a result, any shocks that destabilize global food supply chains directly affect Arab countries



The problem of water resources is no less significant for Arab countries. The conflict potential is primarily due to the transboundary management of the Nile resources between Egypt and Ethiopia



The unresolved nature of this issue creates the preconditions for humanitarian disasters and instability of water supplies for the entire region



intervention in Libya (2011), which catalysed the Middle Eastern destabilisation, is an example.

Despite the Arab countries' readiness to be involved in conflicts, their resources are limited for two reasons: first, these countries face internal socioeconomic challenges, which increases the need to

mobilise resources for expanding the national economic base (primarily, the tourism sector); and, second, the Arab countries experience societal polarisation regarding the pre-eminence of secular or Islamic principles in foreign policy. Considering these circumstances, Arab countries' leadership will avoid active involvement in conflicts.

The political crisis in Syria in 2025, culminating in unseating Bashar al-Assad and the arrival of interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa, made it clear how quickly state institutions can collapse amid internal instability. Amidst the crisis and cautious stance of most Arab governments, initiatives are taken over by non-regional players, such as Israel and Turkey. The role of non-state actors is also on the rise: Hezbollah scaled down its activity after the 2024 ceasefire, while Hamas continues hostilities. The Houthis (Ansarullah) significantly expanded the geography of their attacks to the Red Sea waters and established contacts with African armed formations, thus strengthening their role as an autonomous pro-Iranian player in the region.

Heroic flexibility of Iran

Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's foreign policy took on ideological guidelines that fundamentally changed the strategic trajectory of the country's foreign policy.

First, Iran adopted an equidistant approach to relations with the superpowers. The country sought to maximise its sovereignty and to avoid dependency on either of the two superpowers. Under the slogan *Neither East Nor West*, the new leadership proclaimed Iran a non-aligned power in a bipolar world and strongly condemned both the United States and the Soviet Union for their imperialist policies imposing liberal capitalist and socialist ideologies on weaker nations.

Second, the Muslim world was proclaimed the geographic priority of Iran's foreign policy, and the defence of the oppressed its core value. This intersection became the focal point for Iran's main regional conflict centred on the State of Israel, which, according to the Iranian authorities, had been unjustly established on the territory of Palestine, inhabited at the time predominantly by Arab Muslims.

At the same time, both strategically and tactically, Iran has consistently demonstrated its willingness to adapt its foreign policy course. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Tehran softened its hostile rhetoric towards its northern neighbour, and as tensions with Western countries grew, it adopted a new *Look to the East* policy. This strategic shift resulted in the conclusion of strategic cooperation agreements with China (2021) and Russia (2025).

In situations where Iranian authorities saw no way to achieve their ideology-driven strategic goals, they needed to substantiate to their own people the tactical decisions based on a pragmatic analysis of national interests. Thus, the concept of heroic flexibility emerged.¹¹

The earliest known mention of this term dates back to 1996. Addressing Iran's Foreign Ministry staff, the Supreme Leader stated as follows:

"Political Representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the world must be sharper than a sword, softer than silk, and harder than stone or steel. Foreign policy is a field of heroic flexibility that turns sharp when it comes to dealing with an enemy."¹²

In 2013, when Ali Khamenei granted an updated mandate to Hassan Rouhani's administration to negotiate on Iran's nuclear programme, he revisited this concept in his speeches before the Assembly of Experts¹³ and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹⁴ These speeches got the attention of both Iranian and international media. It was back then that the concept of heroic flexibility took on a concrete shape.

To ensure that diplomatic manoeuvring did not appear as a betrayal of the ideals and goals of the Islamic Revolution, the notion of heroic

¹¹ F. Mirarab. *Analysis of Heroic Flexibility as a Strategy for Islamic Resistance with Emphasis on Imam Khamenei's Thought* // Islamic Government. The Quarterly Journal of the Secretariat of the Assembly of Experts for Leadership, 25(3), 2020, pp. 77–100. URL: https://mag.rcipt.ir/article_133571.html?lang=en (in Persian).

¹² Meeting of Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Political Representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the Leader of the Revolution // Khamenei.Ir. 07.08.1996 (17.05.1375). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17885> (in Persian).

¹³ Statement at the Meeting with the Chairman and Members of the Assembly of Experts of the Supreme Leader // Khamenei.Ir. 05.09.2013 (14.06.1392). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=23810> (in Persian).

¹⁴ Statement at the Meeting with the Commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps // Khamenei.Ir. 17.09.2013 (26.06.1392). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=24033> (in Persian).

flexibility was legitimised through references to heroes of early Islamic history.

Iran's historical and religious discourse draws on the legacy of imams Hasan and Husayn, the second and third Shiite Imams. After their father – Imam Ali – died (he was killed by his own supporters for refusing to escalate war with the Umayyads), the two brothers chose opposite strategies in their quest for power in the caliphate. Imam Hasan, recognising the lack of popular support for the war, chose the path of negotiations and died as a result of a conspiracy, but preserved the lives of his followers. Imam Husayn refused to acknowledge his opponent as caliph and, along with a small group of companions, went to battle. Surrounded by the enemies, he did not surrender and died along with his followers. For fourteen centuries, Shiites have held mourning ceremonies commemorating his death.

Both imams are revered in modern Iran as symbols of sacrifice, and references to their examples in official statements serve as indicators of Tehran's position on matters of war and diplomacy. Hasan is the symbol of heroic flexibility, and Husayn is the embodiment of bellicose defence of Islamic ideals.

In March 2025, when Donald Trump issued an ultimatum-like proposal for negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme, the Iranian leadership cautiously accepted the offer, but refrained from invoking either of the above models.¹⁵ On one hand, believing in sincerity of American intentions to talk, and referencing Imam Hasan would have been naive; on the other hand, displaying defiant hostility by invoking Imam Husayn would have meant military escalation.

Three months later, without waiting for the next round of US-Iran talks, and in violation of IAEA and UN Security Council resolutions, Israel attacked Iran's nuclear and military facilities and carried out a series of assassinations targeting Iranian military officers and nuclear scientists. The United States joined in bombing nuclear sites, and then declared a ceasefire.

Following the end of what Trump called the 12-Day War, all three parties claimed victory over their adversaries, even though the

¹⁵ Магроев А. *Иран на распутье* // Коммерсант. 09.04.2025. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7641280>.

deep-running causes of the escalation remained unresolved, and differences only deepened. Iran, a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which had accepted IAEA inspections at its nuclear facilities, was subjected to an aggression by a state that had secretly developed nuclear weapons and refused to join the NPT, as well as by a state that can possess nuclear arms under the treaty and serves as a guarantor of its implementation. Having repelled the attack all by itself, Tehran is celebrating a bittersweet victory, but the strategic question of whether the nuclear negotiating process would resume is up in the air.

Iran's strategic imperative in conflicts remains unchanged. It is to resist its enemies. However, this does not rule out the use of the heroic flexibility tactic, which implies diplomatic concessions and adapting fighting methods while maintaining ideological antagonism towards hostile powers.

China's strategic restraint

For a prolonged period, China's foreign policy has been characterised by strategic restraint. Since the late 2000s, the idea of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" – an effort to overcome the legacy of the century of humiliation (1842–1949) – has taken centre stage. This paradigm has established an imperative of uncompromising defence of national interests and rejecting any infringement by foreign powers.¹⁶

Deciding on the status of the island of Taiwan is the key element in implementing the great rejuvenation strategy. Beijing views any statements regarding the island's independence as totally unacceptable and considers third-country support for such claims to be interference in China's domestic affairs. Official contacts between Taiwanese and

¹⁶ Зуенко И. Ю. *Есть ли у Китая внешнеполитическая идеология?* // Международный дискуссионный клуб «Валдай». 09.03.2023. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/est-li-u-kitaya-vneshnepoliticheskaya-ideologiya/>

foreign representatives are seen as a threat to territorial integrity, and any potential deployment of US forces to the island would constitute a *casus belli* that, according to Beijing's official position, would inevitably lead to a military conflict between the two powers.

Despite China's traditional image as a mainland power, its primary vulnerabilities lie at sea. The main source of threats is the United States, which interferes in China's internal affairs and seeks to contain its economic growth through trade wars. In addition to the Taiwan issue, structural conflicts in the South China Sea with active involvement of US allies, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines have remained unresolved.

Beijing demonstrates restraint in its choice of instruments to counter these threats, mostly limiting its actions to economic pressure on competitors.

The Chinese leadership advocates for a new type of international relations based on the principle of a community of shared future for mankind¹⁷, which envisions development in a conflict-free global environment. However, China reserves the right to use force in response to provocations that affect its vital national interests. Confidence in the country's technological and military superiority remains a major factor favouring taking decisive action when necessary.

India's offensive policy

India's confrontational culture, just like its foreign policy identity, took shape in the second half of the 20th century. After gaining independence in 1947, the country was united for the first time within its modern-day borders, incorporating southern territories of the Indian subcontinent that had remained outside the direct control of British India during the colonial era.

¹⁷ См.: Ломанов А.В. *Общечеловеческий Китай и абстрактный Запад* // Россия в глобальной политике. 2025. Т. 23. № 2. С. 207–226. URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/kitaj-i-zapad-lomanov/>

Ethnolinguistic heterogeneity became a major challenge to forging a cohesive Indian identity. Historically, for instance, there was no sense of commonality between Bengalis and Punjabis, two major ethnic groups whose cultural and linguistic differences proved significant.

In recent years, experts have widely agreed that India's national identity has finally crystallised, but still continues to evolve. This evolution is especially evident in the self-positioning of India's elite. The country has moved away from the colonial paradigm, in which English dominated even the academic discourse (resulting, among other effects, in the loss of Hindi proficiency among foreign Indologists). Today, the Indian elite have developed a clear awareness of their global competitiveness. Indian diplomats take an overtly assertive approach in all forms of foreign engagement, no longer waiting for approval from their foreign colleagues or partners.

In the new hierarchy of India's foreign policy priorities, material well-being outweighs ethical and regulatory concerns. The previous emphasis on moral values during the rule of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–1964) correlated with the country's limited capacity during the early postcolonial stage. As India's position has strengthened, it has demonstrated growing willingness to use force.

India's foreign policy balancing over the ensuing 75 years was also born out of elite pragmatism and has brought the country both political and economic benefits.¹⁸ For example, during the 1960s, the Soviet Union laid the foundations for India's heavy industry, while the United States, a Soviet rival, provided India with free economic aid in the amount of \$10 billion in today's money.

India's changing perception of its global role now complicates relations with the United States, since New Delhi expects Washington to recognise it as an equal partner. The Indian leaders believe, however, that China's rising influence is the key strategic challenge. Despite geographical proximity, the two civilisations are fundamentally different, which creates significant potential for confrontation. This mental distance is reflected in the fact that India lacks expertise on China, and China's Indology is not developed well enough, either.

¹⁸ Куприянов А. В. *Внешиполитические дилеммы Индии: на защите национальных интересов* // Международный дискуссионный клуб «Валдай». 02.11.2022. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vneshne-politicheskie-dilemmy-indii/>

TRANSFORMATION OF INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY



In the early stages of postcolonial development, an emphasis on moral value correlated with the limited capacity of the state



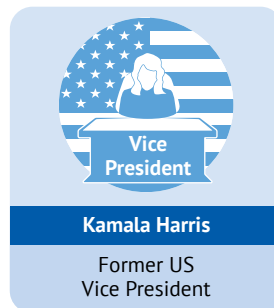
Sustainable economic growth: the country has maintained its leadership among the world's largest economies over the past decade (except during the COVID-19 pandemic)



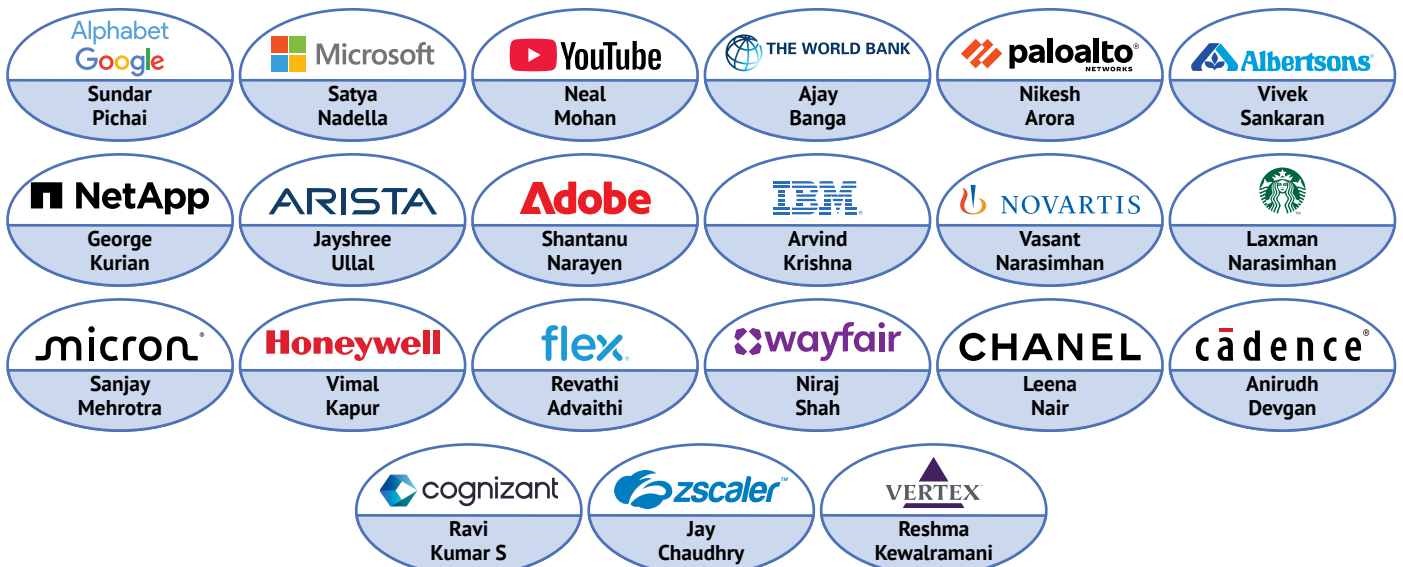
As its position has strengthened, India has demonstrated its willingness to use force

The Indian Diaspora Factor

People of Indian descent often occupy high, elite positions in the developed, English-speaking countries



Billionaire CEOs:



The Indian diaspora's balanced strategy of influencing political processes in other countries has helped consolidate its lobbying potential

Civilisational rift overshadows even their territorial disputes. India's political elite hold a clear view: conflicts with China over Tibet or Kashmir are not isolated issues, but rather indicators of a systemic crisis rooted in deep, mutual antagonism between the two nations.¹⁹

The assertiveness of Indian political elite relies on a number of objective factors, of which sustained economic growth is the most important one. Over the past decade (excluding the pandemic period), the country has maintained leadership among the world's largest economies in terms of growth rates. The Indian diaspora also plays an important role, boasting influential representation worldwide. Indian expatriates often hold high positions in Anglo-Saxon elites, such as former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Rishi Sunak and former Vice President of the United States Kamala Harris. A balanced strategy of influencing the political processes in other countries by the Indian diaspora contributes to consolidating its lobbying capabilities.

Caution and resolve of South Korea and DPRK

The foreign policy behaviour of North Korea and South Korea traditionally combines volatility and restraint. The dynamics of inter-Korean interaction are defined by a self-contradictory balance: readiness for escalation coexists with a pragmatic framework to avoid direct confrontation.²⁰ The Korean War (1950–1953) is rather a traumatic experience than consistent Korean behaviour. South Korea's foreign policy discourse relies on the concept of structural vulnerability expressed in the old proverb about a shrimp that has its back broken in a clash between whales. This narrative reflects not so much an underestimation of its own capabilities, but a realistic political view of the constraints imposed by structural rivalry of major powers. Historically, attempts to

¹⁹ Галищева Н. В., Рещикова М. С. *Индийско-китайские отношения. Борьба «тигра» и «дракона» за место под солнцем* // Международные процессы. Т. 19. № 4 (67). С. 104–122.

²⁰ Ланьков А. Н. *Корейский полуостров: пока стороны верят в силу* // Международный дискуссионный клуб «Валдай». 23.03.2023. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/koreyskiy-poluostrov-poka-storony-veryat-v-silu/>

revise the foreign policy status of the two Koreas have been few. For example, Park Chung-hee (1963–1979) attempted to implement the idea of Korea's great power status, appealing to examples of rivalry on equal terms with imperial China. The North Korean government constructs a similar discourse emphasising its role as a global politics subject despite the constraints of the international system.

The strategic paradigm of North Korea and South Korea can be described as a dialectical combination of resolve and caution. This strategy is made vivid by the dynamics of their actions in the context of the Ukraine conflict. Reports of North Korean troops being shipped to the combat area were accompanied by formally declarative statements from Seoul, which fact reflects instrumental adaptation to escalation risks while maintaining restraint. Despite limited military and economic resources, North Korea demonstrates high competencies of its diplomatic corps, allowing it to perform flexible manoeuvres in international relations. Pyongyang's strategy includes both demonstrating a confrontational strategy towards traditional allies and readiness to engage in a dialogue with purported opponents. A classic example is North Korea's policy during the Cold War era (1960–1980), when Pyongyang used growing differences between Moscow and Beijing to strengthen its own autonomy. After the end of the Cold War, North Korea also attempted to normalise relations with the United States, seeking to involve Washington in balancing its relations with China. Washington did not accommodate North Korea in that regard.

In turn, the Republic of Korea is integrated into the system of US strategic alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. Seoul is cognisant of its status as a peripheral actor amidst the global confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

The dichotomy of South Korea's foreign policy is manifested in its simultaneous participation in institutions aimed at containing China (for example, expanded interaction with the QUAD) and in demonstrating tactical autonomy, which many alliance partners find surprising.²¹ Minimising escalation risks amid competition between its main ally (the United States) and its strategic economic partner (China) remains a key challenge for Seoul.

²¹ Bowers I., Stålhane Hiim H. *Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas. South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula* // International Security. 2020/2021. Vol. 45. № 3. P. 7–39.

Japan's pacifism

Japan's current foreign policy positioning is shaped by the rise of conservative values that have gained popularity amid structural demographic shifts. Factors contributing to the country's demographic situation include the predominance of single-child families, low birth rates, and population aging. More than 30 percent of the Japanese are over the age of 65.²²

The conservative paradigm in foreign policy is reflected in the rejection of any radical actions. At the same time, cautious foreign policy does not contradict geopolitical ambitions: at the turn of the 2000s, Japan lobbied for reforming the UN Security Council, hoping to join it as a permanent member.

Foreign policy restraints are grounded in realism. Over time, Tokyo concluded that its alliance with the United States would not provide it with sufficient security. As Tokyo continues to search for external support, it is diversifying its partnerships, avoiding open confrontation with Washington while seeking to strengthen its standing in multilateral security institutions. Japan's policies have also shown a gradual departure from former taboos, such as the use of nuclear weapons and offensive arms. Recently, the country purchased Tomahawk cruise missiles.²³ Pacifism, once considered a central element of Japan's political culture, is losing relevance and is being replaced by moderate nationalism.

The most recent elections to Japan's House of Representatives revealed a decline in the influence of nationalist political forces with three major parties losing a significant share of the vote. A moderate centre-left party, which underwent a leadership change, was the main beneficiary of this electoral shift, and a right-leaning figure assumed control over the party.

Tokyo views the Ukraine conflict as a potentially precedent-setting event for the evolution of the military-political situation in East

²² *Popular Projections for Japan* (2023 Revision): 2021 to 2070 // National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. 2023. P. 4.

²³ Стрельцов Д. В. *Станет ли Япония «нормальной» страной?* // Россия в глобальной политике. 2023. Т. 21. № 3. С. 174–191.

Asia. According to this interpretation, any concessions to Russia could encourage China to take decisive action towards asserting control over Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, which poses a direct security threat to Tokyo. This strategic bid to prevent destabilisation in East Asia explains Japan's stated solidarity with Kiev.

Concerns over China's growing influence in the region also explain why Japanese companies have chosen to stay in Russia despite international sanctions. Moreover, unlike some Western countries, Japanese companies have maintained their involvement in energy projects in Sakhalin and the Arctic.

Avoidance of confrontation in Southeast Asia

National identity issues in Southeast Asia are not a foundation for choosing a confrontational foreign policy. Ironically, this is due to the region's colonial past. As a whole, the region is characterised by a culture that centres on avoiding confrontation.

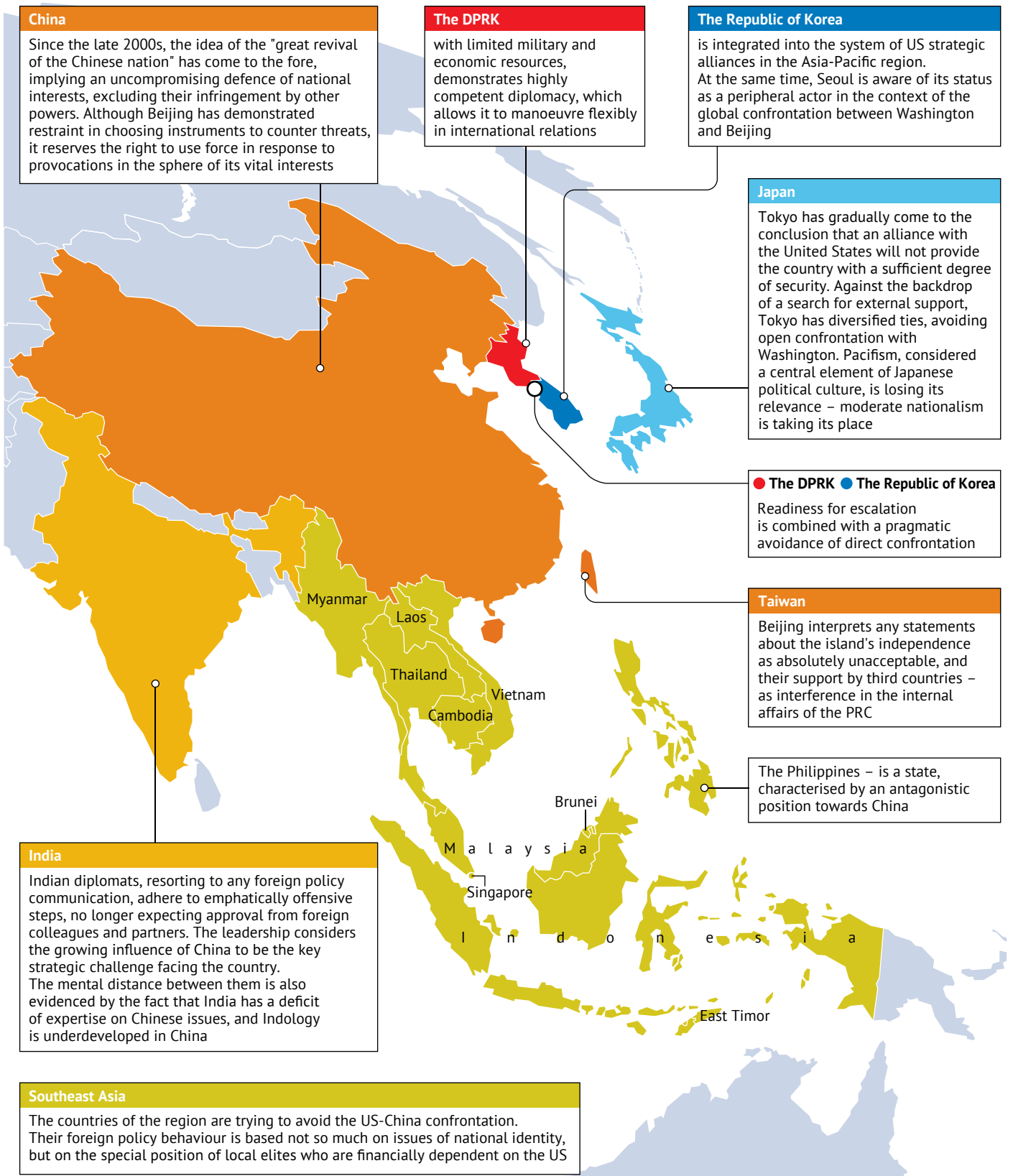
In his book *Imperial Alchemy*, Anthony Reid explains why national elites of the region's decolonised countries were forced to accept most of the borders established by the colonisers.²⁴ Even when they disagreed with some realities on the ground, national liberation movements primarily supported each other in pursuit of full and quick liberation from colonial powers, meaning that border issues were often of secondary importance.

The countries of the region, except the Philippines, seek to stay out of the US-China face-off. The Philippines is a country that might be described as an Asian Ukraine due to its antagonistic stance towards China.²⁵ However, its foreign policy behaviour relies not so much on national identity as on a particular stance adopted by local elites that are financially dependent on the United States.

²⁴ Reid A. *Imperial Alchemy. National and Political Identity in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

²⁵ Tiglao R. D. *US Intends PH to Be its Asian Ukraine* //The Manila Times. 17.02.2023. URL: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2023/02/17/opinion/columns/us-intends-ph-to-be-its-asian-ukraine/1879045>

PARADOXICAL ECONOMIC-POLITICAL BALANCE



An analysis of nationally driven patterns of confrontation reveals that each country develops its own strategic and conflict culture based on its historical experience, geopolitical location, and political system. There is not a single conflict escalation model that can be applied uniformly to all situations involving international tensions.

Understanding the logic and structure of escalation varies depending on cultural and strategic specifics of each country and the way it perceives external threats. Germany and France remain committed to multilateral formats of engagement; while avoiding direct military involvement, they are willing to confront those who reject their values. Following a dynamic and assertive approach, Turkey instrumentalises various aspects of national identity to achieve its foreign policy goals. India pursues a pragmatic foreign policy, balancing among different centres of power and prioritising its own welfare; the rise of China is a key strategic challenge for New Delhi. Due to their colonial past and the nature of their national identity formation, Southeast Asian countries adhere to a culture that prioritises avoiding confrontation, aiming to stay on the side-lines of the US-China rivalry. Recognising these differences is crucial for preventing unintended conflict escalation and for anticipating the actions of potential adversaries and partners.

Amid global technological, institutional, and ideological transformations, some patterns of confrontation exhibit relative stability, while others evolve or adapt through mimicry. For example, Japan's traditional pacifist model is undergoing changes influenced by demographic processes and a growing awareness of insufficient protection provided by the United States.

As a result of technological progress, particularly in the realm of cyberspace and the development of dual-use technologies, the nature of international conflicts is changing, affecting traditional state rivalry models. The emergence of multipolarity, the strengthening of regional organisations, and other institutional shifts have altered the conditions under which the countries have shaped their strategic cultures. Ideological trends, including the rise of nationalist sentiments in a number of countries, are also prompting adjustments in the countries' foreign policy approaches. In this new reality, confrontation strategies are no longer static, and countries are compelled to seek new forms of engagement as they adapt to evolving conditions of the international environment.

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