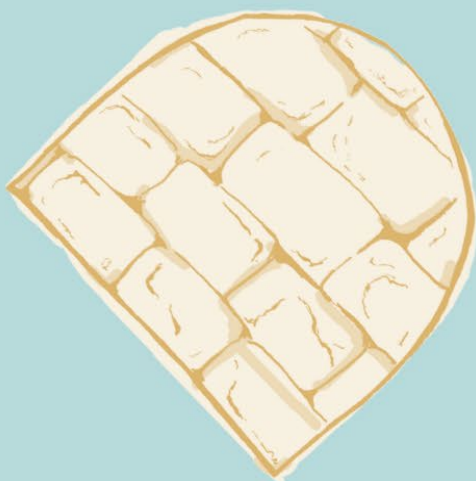
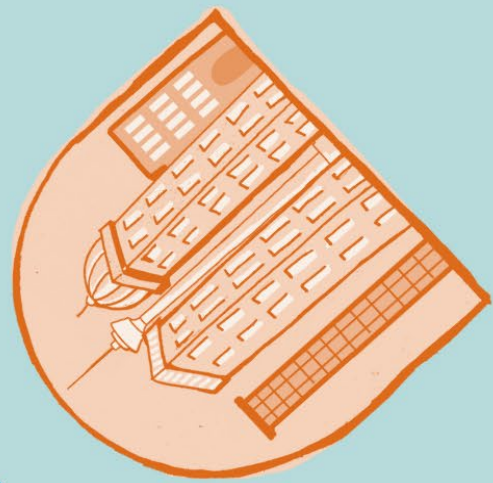


World at Crossroads: From **Scenarios** to **Action**



RESPACE Dialogue Input Series

Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Scenarios Summaries | 2 |
| USAID Shutdown - What is the Future of the Aid Industry?..... | 3 |
| Global Protest, Grassroots and Autonomous Civil Society | 5 |
| Dismantling of the Rules-Based World Order..... | 9 |
| Gaza War and Regional Turmoil in West Asia | 13 |
| US–Russia Talks Sideline Ukraine – Transatlantic Tensions..... | 15 |
| Nationalism Surges in Europe – EU Self-Reliance Being Tested..... | 18 |
| Escalating Conflict in DR Congo – Extractivism and Regional Intervention | 22 |
| Sahel Coups and Conflicts – Rift with ECOWAS and the AU | 25 |
| Greenland, Denmark & the United States: Sovereignty Showdown in the Arctic | 28 |
| Balkans in Flux – Serbia and Regional Civic Unrest..... | 31 |
| Geopolitical Dynamics in Asia: South & East China Seas, Taiwan & Regional Tensions..... | 35 |
| Politics, Economy & Civil Society in China, India and the Wider Region..... | 38 |
| New Leaders, Persistent Struggles: Latin America at a Crossroads | 41 |

Introduction

The four [RESPACE Scenarios](#) were developed to explore plausible futures for global collaboration for peace by 2035. A team of committed individuals, bringing together diverse experiences from across generations, geographies, cultural backgrounds, professions, and other dimensions of life, co-created the scenarios in 2024. They contain bleak outlooks for future global collaboration, as well as promising pathways that can be pursued in order to transform how we work together globally. The scenarios intend to inspire dialogue and ignite new ideas as they shed light on the challenges and opportunities shaping global collaboration for sustainable peace. By imagining these scenarios, we hold a mirror to the present and ask: How can we act today to shape tomorrow?

In this series of RESPACE Dialogue Inputs we turn this mirror around — focusing on events unfolding now and the implications they have on possible futures for peace and global collaboration. Viewed through the lens of the RESPACE scenarios, contemporary developments reveal that these futures are not merely hypothetical; they are already beginning to take shape around us.

Our hope is that these dialogue inputs will spark reflection, inspire conversation, and encourage meaningful action. We invite you to bring them into your meeting rooms, workshops, strategy sessions, dinner tables, and daily reflections. We also encourage you to apply the same format to explore other contexts, whether local, regional, or global. No issue is too small or too vast to benefit from this approach.

Each Dialogue Input follows a simple but powerful three-step model: (1) Summary, (2) Scenario Parallels/Contrasts, (3) Discussion Questions. Treat this structure as a tool for interrogating any topic — from a neighbourhood dispute to a geopolitical shock. First, capture what is happening. Next, place those dynamics beside the four RESPACE scenarios to surface resonances, tensions and blind spots. Finally, pose generative questions that invite the people who care about the issue to think ahead, collaborate and plan strategically. Using the model in this way helps connect the dots between seemingly distant scales: it shows how a local storyline can illuminate global futures, how global trends may shape a niche context, and where broader scenarios are already mirrored in day-to-day realities.

Each published Dialogue Input therefore keeps the same rhythm. We introduce the issue at hand, compare its dynamics to the RESPACE scenarios, and then offer critical questions tailored to different stakeholders. You can use the existing inputs or create your own — drawing on the [RESPACE Engagement Guide](#) or any participatory format that suits your purpose. Feel free to adapt an input as circumstances shift, audiences change or new evidence emerges. There is no single “right” answer when exploring what current issues might mean for future scenarios — but there are many good questions. We hope those questions lead to fruitful dialogue, challenge assumptions about possible futures and leave you eager to ask still more.

Disclaimer

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to May 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

Scenarios Summaries

Walls



In the world of Walls, nation states prioritise narrow domestic interests, retreating from broad international collaboration and increasing polarisation. They invest heavily in security and militarisation, addressing climate change and health crises within their borders rather than seeking global solutions. As resources and political support for multilateralism dwindle, states mostly use the system for power-based negotiations or unilateral actions. Military tensions dominate global headlines and national security strategies, while resource extraction from resource rich countries intensifies. Escalating wars lead to a multipolar and fragmented world, where strong authoritarian states control spheres of influence through military, economic and digital sabotage or warfare, and seek to deter others from interfering. Local civil society groups are subject to strict regulations, struggling to survive in this heavily securitised environment.

Maze



In the world of Maze, states come to once again appreciate international institutions as viable avenues to wield influence and gain access to resources, given multiple interconnected crises and increased public pressure. They start reinvesting in international collaboration as it adapts to diverse interests and contemporary geopolitical realities. Genuine efforts to reform the United Nations (UN) system ensue to enhance democratic governance and regional representation, aided by shifts in international affairs and the domestic politics of prominent member states. Reform efforts are, however, subject to many constraints and inertia in the system. They are also affected by the reluctance of traditionally powerful states to relinquish power. Nonetheless, reforms lead the UN to gain some new momentum, relevance and legitimacy. States and governments remain dominant in global governance, but greater inclusion of civil society and more support for locally led efforts softens hard geopolitics in multilateralism.

Bridges



In the world of Bridges, civic actors and social movements across different causes and localities recognise their interdependence and create stronger, well-resourced networks and infrastructures to shape global and local developments. State power is balanced by bottom-up democratic institutions and an increasingly autonomous civil society. Global collaborative action for sustainable solutions is driven by community-led and publicly owned media platforms, solidarity networks, and consideration of diverse and indigenous knowledges and worldviews. Narratives of change emphasise holistic perspectives, aiming to inform and foster shared identities across differences. The spread of a deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness between people, nature and governance systems—including land, sea and the environment—impacts domestic and global politics and leads to a paradigm shift in the global economy. While new collaborations form across sectors and interest groups, recognising a shared humanity, new foundations are added to a global architecture that seeks to create lasting peace.

Towers



In the world of Towers, the decline of liberal internationalism and Western dominance drives governments and civil society to turn to their respective regions in search of identity, partnership and support. This leads to increasingly assertive (sub)regional blocs that gain in strength and relevance. Faced with an intensifying climate emergency, governments, civil society and communities seek to address urgent challenges through effective intra-regional cooperation. This leads to progress on climate change, trade and sometimes conflict management. The extent, nature and manifestation of regionalism varies across regions, including the space afforded to civil society. Powerful regional actors tend to dominate the agenda and inter-regional competition increases, while global governance forums have lost legitimacy in resolving tensions. Robust international civil society networks are also absent, given a changed development landscape.

USAID Shutdown - What is the Future of the Aid Industry?

March 2025

Summary & Context

In early 2025, the returning Trump administration moved swiftly to gut the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). More than 80% of USAID programmes were terminated within weeks, with thousands of aid contracts cancelled as part of an America First review. This abrupt cutoff halted humanitarian operations worldwide, jeopardising life-saving food and medical aid in many conflict zones. The collapse of USAID is part of a

broader crisis in the aid industry: many traditional donors have been retrenching or redirecting funds. Increasingly, aid budgets are tied to domestic donor interests (such as hosting refugees or trade gains) rather than global need. This pullback in international aid raises alarms in humanitarian and peacebuilding circles, which see growing needs – conflicts, climate disasters, inequality – but shrinking support.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The USAID shutdown starkly aligns with the Walls scenario, where nationalist and isolationist agendas prevail. In Walls futures, governments prioritise military and border security over diplomacy or aid, and Western states withhold contributions to multilateral systems as ineffective and wasteful. The Trump administration view that foreign aid does not serve US interests – and its willingness to slash it – exemplifies this mindset. It contrasts with the Maze scenario, which imagines states reinvesting in multilateral collaboration and reforming global institutions (Maze pushes to strengthen, not dismantle, aid agencies). The aid cut also undercuts elements of the Bridges scenario: Bridges assumes

empowered grassroots and civil society networks, which might need to fill the void as government aid recedes. At the same time, this crisis could force some Bridges dynamics, as local actors mobilise to compensate for absent donors. Under a regionalist Towers lens (this scenario anticipates a similarly swift decline in aid), the US retreat might spur regional powers or coalitions to step up their own aid mechanisms; for example, African or Asian regional development funds. If no alternative emerges, however, this also risks leaving a vacuum. Overall, the USAID shutdown embodies a shift toward insularity (Walls), with grave implications for global peace efforts that depend on international aid solidarity.

Discussion Questions

- **For Civil Society:** How can NGOs and local peacebuilders adapt to a world of dwindling foreign aid? What strategies can help them sustain critical programmes when traditional donor support evaporates? For example, diversifying funding sources, forming South–South cooperation networks or mobilising community resources.
- **For Donors and Policymakers:** For officials in other donor countries (or multilateral agencies): What steps should be taken to mitigate the fallout of the USAID withdrawal? Should they increase their contributions to fill gaps or push for new funding models (such as pooled funds, philanthropy, or private-sector partnerships) to support peace and development? For policymakers: How can policy reforms ensure aid is more resilient to political swings in any one country?
- **For the Private Sector:** Can businesses and philanthropists help bridge the funding gap? For instance, would large corporations invest in humanitarian relief or conflict prevention as part of their corporate social responsibility, especially in regions where they operate? What incentives or collaborations could engage the tech, finance or mining sectors in supporting peace initiatives that were previously donor funded?
- **For Local Communities:** In aid-dependent regions, how are local communities coping with cuts in assistance? Could this crisis encourage more community-led initiatives and self-reliance? Or will it exacerbate suffering and instability before such bottom–up efforts can scale up? What traditional or informal support systems (local charities, diaspora remittances, mutual aid groups) can communities strengthen to reduce reliance on diminishing or fickle international aid?
- **For Activists and Advocates:** Does the dismantling of USAID signal a need to re-imagine the aid system altogether? How can activists use this moment to argue for decolonising aid and empowering local actors? Conversely, how can they pressure donor governments to recognise that global aid and peacebuilding ultimately serve long-term stability that benefits everyone? What narratives might convince sceptical voters that international solidarity is still in their national interest and, comparatively, costs rather little (in 2024, USAID accounted for 0.3% of all federal spending, which represents about 0.07% of the GDP)?

Global Protest, Grassroots and Autonomous Civil Society

April 2025

Summary & Context

Over the past year, waves of popular protest and grassroots activism have surged across continents – from city squares in industrialised nations to villages and townships in the Global South. Citizen movements have become a defining feature of global politics, driven by grievances old and new. A recent study shows that in 2023 alone, major protests erupted in 83 countries, including unlikely places such as China, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq, and even in traditionally stable societies such as Denmark and Norway. This underscores that no region is immune to public anger or civic energy. The triggers vary widely. Some protests target authoritarianism and demand democracy; for example, protests and acts of dissent in Iran despite crackdowns or pro-democracy protests in Sudan and Myanmar despite facing military violence. Others explode over economic pain and inequality: Think of the cost-of-living and fuel price protests in Nigeria and Kenya in 2024, or demonstrations in Pakistan over inflation and political rights. Industrialised Western countries have seen their share of unrest, too. Huge climate marches across Europe, cost-of-living protests in the UK and France, and in the United States, incidents of labour strikes and social justice protests.

A striking contrast lies in how these movements manifest and what they achieve. The Global South often protests about existential issues. Food and fuel shortages, corruption and poor governance, resistance against foreign interference. In many Western democracies, while disruptive, protests generally occur in contexts that allow freedom of assembly and media coverage; for example, environmental activists in Germany regularly lobby and litigate for greener policies. At the same time,

however, the suppression of pro-Palestine protests in several Western democracies is raising concerns about the erosion of civil liberties. For instance, in France, authorities temporarily banned pro-Palestinian demonstrations, citing potential disturbances to public order (but this was later overruled by the courts). In Germany, pro-Palestinian rallies were prohibited, and spontaneous demonstrations were forcefully dispersed by police. In the United States, universities face ongoing criticism for arresting and disciplining students involved in pro-Palestine protests, leading to debates over free speech and academic freedom. In contrast, protesters in authoritarian or conflict-torn states brave far greater risks. Mozambican activists protesting electoral fraud in 2024 faced lethal force from security services resulting in at least 110 deaths. Student protesters in Bangladesh demonstrating against the reinstatement of job quotas were subjected to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and mass arrests.

These differing conditions shape the strategies and resilience of movements. In the Global South, many protests are decentralised and fuelled by social media, as formal civil society groups are restricted. They may take creative forms – art and graffiti, or religious gatherings doubling as meetings to organise actions. While Western movements tend to benefit from established organisations (NGOs, unions) and get quicker access to global attention, they also struggle against complacency and fragmentation in societies where the sense of crisis is less acute. A notable trend is the cross-pollination of tactics. The 2019 leaderless protest methods in Hong Kong – using Telegram and laser pointers against cameras – inspired activists in Thailand. The 2020–2021 farmer

protest in India not only succeeded in reversing laws but also set an example of sustained peaceful encampment with which climate activists in Europe express solidarity.

Despite differences, grassroots movements in both the Global North and Global South share common threads: frustration with elites, the demand for dignity and voice, and increasingly, a global consciousness. Climate strikes, for example, see youth from Stockholm to Kampala rally behind the same science and slogans, although their lived realities differ. As we move forward, activists are learning to navigate a world of shrinking civic space (more governments passing anti-protest laws or surveilling dissent) and

digital battles (state-sponsored misinformation to discredit them or internet shutdowns during protests). The big question is whether these disparate sparks of protest can lead to lasting change. In some cases, they clearly have. Think of the 2021 protests in Colombia that paved the way for the election of a reformist government. In others, movements face stalemates or harsh repression. In 2020, the Belarus democracy movement was crushed and many activists jailed or exiled. Nonetheless, the persistence of grassroots activism, even under dire conditions, suggests that people's movements will remain a powerful force globally, continually adapting to their contexts.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The ubiquity of protests and civic movements strongly channels the Bridges scenario – a world of activated civil society forging connections across issues and borders. Indeed, the global protests of today exemplify how interdependence and stronger networks can shape events. For example, climate and social justice movements often coordinate internationally. Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future protests resonated on every continent, which reflects the Bridges emphasis on shared global identities and solidarity. We also see protests in the Global South increasingly leading the charge on issues such as inequality and climate justice, embodying the Bridges vision of empowered grassroots driving change from the bottom up. In contrast, the response to these movements often skews toward a Walls scenario. Many governments react with securitisation – from deploying troops and erecting literal or figurative walls against protesters, to passing laws that criminalise demonstrations. Such repression aligns with Walls futures in which states clamp down on civic space and see activism as a threat. The divergence between more permissive environments (Western democracies) and more repressive ones (authoritarian states) also mirrors the Towers scenario dynamic, whereby different regions have different civic space norms. In some regions (Europe, parts of Latin America), protest is an accepted part of political life (a legacy of democratic norms). In others (Middle East, China), protests are

forced to operate undercover or face exile – almost as if they are two separate towers of civic possibility.

Ideally, the Maze scenario would have global institutions responding to protest demands; for example, the UN or regional organisations mediating in response to mass uprisings or governments addressing transnational protest calls via policy changes (climate accords, anti-corruption conventions). There are some hints of this. Global outrage over police violence (Black Lives Matter) pushed even the UN Human Rights Council to discuss racism in 2020. Youth climate protests pressured governments into stronger pledges at COP summits. Overall, however, protesters themselves often express frustration that the maze of international diplomacy is not delivering results fast enough. The rise of grassroots movements is a big nod to Bridges – people power transcending boundaries. Yet the pushback they face can shove things toward Walls, if repression wins, or force activists to become more nimble – as in a Maze, navigating complex systems. The focus of many current Global South movements also highlights a crucial point. Whereas Western activists often operate in relatively safe civic spaces (though not without challenges and threats), their Global South counterparts are innovating under pressure and possibly pioneering the future of protest in a world that is increasingly surveilled.

Discussion Questions

- **For Activists (Global North and Global South):** How can grassroots movements in repressive environments sustain themselves and make an impact without the freedoms available in democracies? What creative tactics from the Global South can activists in the Global North learn from? For instance, the use of pseudonyms and secure apps by Sudanese protesters to evade surveillance or the community organising models from indigenous movements that have kept resistance alive for decades. Conversely, are there advantages that Global South activists see in Global North movements – such as fundraising networks or media outreach – that could be localised in their contexts? How can activists across borders support one another more concretely? For example, providing safe digital platforms, sharing legal aid resources or coordinating global days of action that protect those on the ground?
- **For International Donors and Human Rights Organisations:** Given the rise of spontaneous leaderless movements, how can traditional supporters of civil society adapt? Funding an NGO is one thing but how can a decentralised protest movement without formal structure be assisted? Should these traditional supporters of civil society even support these local movements, given the risk of delegitimising them as foreign-funded actions? What new forms of support are necessary? Maybe tech infrastructure – secure communication tools, circumvention of internet shutdowns. Or emergency funds for the legal defence of protesters who are arrested or detained. How can international actors ensure they are amplifying voices from the Global South, not drowning them out? For instance, climate philanthropy has been critiqued for focusing on Global North activists. How can that balance shift to empower youth in the Pacific Islands or Africa who are on the frontlines?
- **For Policymakers and Governance Stakeholders:** The prevalence of protests signals underlying issues that governments have failed to address. What mechanisms can policymakers create to more constructively respond to grassroots grievances? Should there be more institutionalised channels for citizen input – such as participatory budgeting, national dialogues or citizen assemblies? How can governments differentiate between legitimate dissent and security threats without defaulting to repression? In democracies, what reforms (police training, accountability for misconduct, right to protest laws) are needed to rebuild trust so that protests do not become the only outlet for people to be heard? At the international level, is there a role for diplomacy in protecting the right to protest? For example, should democratic nations form a coalition that offers observation or mediation when major protest movements erupt in any country to discourage violent crackdowns?
- **For the Private Sector and Tech Platforms:** Companies are increasingly drawn into protest dynamics – whether as subjects of protest (oil companies facing climate activists, sweatshop allegations sparking boycotts) or as platforms that enable mobilisation (social media, messaging apps). What responsibilities do tech companies have in protest contexts? For instance, when governments request internet shutdowns or want user data to track activists, how should companies respond in line with human rights principles? Could they do more to safeguard activists? Maybe by refusing to store data in jurisdictions prone to abuse or by amplifying credible information during protest crises to counter state propaganda. For businesses more broadly, how can they engage with the concerns raised by grassroots movements instead of seeing them as a nuisance? For example, can multinational corporations use their influence to urge governments to address the corruption and inequality that protesters highlight, recognising that stability is good for business in the long run? As part of their corporate social responsibility obligations, should companies support civic education and dialogue initiatives to help address the polarisation that often underlies waves of protest?

- **For Local Communities:** Protests are often depicted as mass gatherings in capitals but they are fuelled by local community frustrations and can have lasting effects back in those communities. After the banners are rolled up, how do communities carry on the spirit of protest to achieve practical changes in daily life? In villages that participated in nationwide protests for land rights, do they form local councils to negotiate with authorities on those issues? How do communities deal with divisions if not everyone supported the protest movement? How can they heal the rifts that emerge when a segment of society opposed the protests that another segment championed? Importantly, what alternatives to protest might communities consider for the future? Some movements evolve into political parties or cooperatives. Is that a path communities are taking? For instance, protest leaders in some countries later win local office or create development associations. By reflecting on these questions, local groups can strategise how to turn moments of street protest into sustainable civic power and social change, tailored to their unique cultural and political context.

Dismantling of the Rules-Based World Order

April 2025

Summary & Context

In the past months, a series of actions by major powers has accelerated the unravelling of the post-WWII international system. In Washington, the returning Trump administration moved to withdraw from multilateral bodies and agreements. In February 2025, President Trump cut off US engagement with the UN Human Rights Council and halted funding to the UN Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA), echoing steps from his first term. Trump has openly disparaged the UN as not well run and threatened to slash US contributions, despite US treaty obligations as the top UN funder. The retreat of Washington from institutions and norms – including reported plans to pull out of international legal frameworks and disregard adverse rulings – sends a signal that might makes right.

Other global actors are likewise chipping away at the rules-based order. Russia continues its war in Ukraine in defiance of UN General Assembly resolutions and an International Court of Justice injunction, using its Security Council veto to block enforcement. In late 2024, Moscow and Beijing deepened their strategic alignment, holding joint military drills and coordinating positions in international forums to counter the West. For its part, China has promoted alternative institutions and leadership of the Global South. At the BRICS summits in 2023 and 2024, Beijing and Moscow repeatedly backed the expansion of BRICS, bringing in new members such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and even Indonesia by 2025, hoping to reshape global governance away from Western dominance. The G77 (a bloc of 134 developing nations) and allies have pushed for UN reform. In September 2024, world leaders did endorse the Pact for the Future at a special UN summit, pledging to make global institutions more effective and inclusive.

Yet these commitments ring hollow as great-power rivalry and unilateralism intensify.

Multilateral institutions are paralysed or fragmenting. The UN Security Council is deadlocked by veto showdowns on multiple key global issues: Russia, China and the United States have all wielded vetoes to shield themselves or their allies. Russia on Ukraine. China on issues such as Myanmar. The United States on Israeli actions in Gaza. The impotence of multilateral institutions was glaring during the Gaza war in late 2024. Despite accusations of war crimes, the Security Council could not act, leading observers to ask whether the UN has outlived its usefulness.

Other pillars of the world order are under strain as well. The World Trade Organisation dispute system remains crippled. Some international arms control treaties have unravelled. Norms around human rights and democracy are eroding as authoritarian powers champion sovereignty over universal principles. In this void, ad hoc and regional alternatives have sprung up. Coalitions of the willing (contact groups or groups of friends) try to manage conflicts outside the UN framework. Regional organisations – the African Union, ASEAN, the Arab League, etc. – attempt to mediate crises on their turf, albeit with mixed success and often hampered by their own internal splits. Civil society networks and city alliances (for example, global climate action networks of municipalities) strive to uphold cooperation and norms from the bottom up. But without broad power backing, these efforts struggle to fill the gap left by a fractured world order. The net result is a drift toward a more unmediated anarchic international landscape, raising profound questions about the future of peace and global collaboration.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The realities of today starkly mirror the Walls scenario. In the RESPACE scenarios, Walls depicts a world of nationalist power plays, weakened institutions and rising conflict – exactly what we see as countries flout global rules. The retreat of the United States from the UN Human Rights Council and other UN agencies exemplifies the inward my-country-first mindset driving this shift. Similarly, the assertive moves of Russia and China to carve out spheres of influence – from Ukraine to the South China Sea – reflect a Walls-like landscape in which might trumps right and multilateral bodies are sidelined. We are effectively living through the downside of Walls: a multipolar free-for-all in which each bloc pursues its own interests, and international law is dishonoured in the breach. UN's inability to stop wars in Ukraine or Gaza despite horrific civilian tolls underscores how, in a Walls world, even gross violations of the UN Charter go unpunished. This fragmentation and drift toward every nation for itself is eroding the cooperative norms upon which peace and human rights have often depended.

In contrast, the current trajectory is the inverse of a Maze scenario. Maze envisions states reinvesting in multilateral cooperation and reforming global institutions to meet modern challenges. We did see a glimpse of Maze in the Pact for the Future – a pledge by all UN members to strengthen a rules-based, inclusive order. Those lofty promises have not translated into action, however. Instead of reinforcing the maze of international institutions to solve problems, key players are abandoning or attacking them. For example, Maze implies empowering the UN and international courts to address conflicts, whereas in reality the major global powers are actively undermining these bodies – from the United States shrugging off UN human rights mechanisms to Russia ignoring International Criminal Court warrants. The contrast highlights a missed opportunity. If world leaders implemented the cooperative spirit of Maze, the crises we face – wars, pandemics, climate change – could be tackled collectively. Instead, dismantling the rules-based system is making global problem-solving ever more elusive.

Elements of a Towers scenario are also emerging but in a distorted form. Towers imagines a future in which regional blocs and powers take on greater responsibility for peace and development, potentially filling gaps left by a waning UN. We do

see rising regionalism: the BRICS+ expansion and other Global South alliances can be viewed as new towers of influence. Likewise, organisations such as the African Union and ASEAN have tried to mediate conflicts in their regions when global diplomacy falters. In a positive Towers sense, one might hope these regional efforts will cooperate to uphold international norms. What is unfolding, however, is more competitive than cooperative – quasi-blocs forming East and West, and even regional groupings becoming arenas for rivalry. For instance, the idea of the Global South uniting to reform global governance has promise (for example, calls for more UN Security Council seats for Africa and new development banks) but this risks splitting the world into separate camps if it is framed as South versus North. The Towers scenario's hopeful vision of complementary regional problem-solving is only partly visible. More often, there are patchwork responses or power vacuums. A clear example is peacekeeping. If the UN cannot act in a conflict setting, ideally regional coalitions step in (as Towers predicts) but in places such as the Middle East or Eastern Europe, no effective regional peace mechanism has emerged, leaving conflicts to fester. In short, although some towers are rising, without coordination they may further fragment the international landscape rather than stabilise it.

Finally, world turmoil also tests the potential of a Bridges scenario. Bridges foresees empowered grassroots networks and civil society bridging divides when states fail. In the current context, as governments step back from global commitments, bottom-up initiatives have tried to fill the void. Humanitarian NGOs, city networks, youth climate strikers and transnational activist campaigns are working across borders to address issues such as climate action, human rights and peacebuilding. Notably, when the United States pulled funding from agencies such as UNRWA, local and civil society actors scrambled to try to prevent a humanitarian collapse. This self-reliance and solidarity speak to a Bridges ethos. Communities and NGOs cooperating internationally when states will not. The digital age also enables people's diplomacy – from global petitions to crowdfunding for disaster relief – reflecting an attempt to build bridges over walls. While these efforts are heartening, they face immense obstacles without state support. It is hard for NGOs to replace entire peacekeeping missions or for youth activists to enforce climate agreements

without government buy-in. The current reality is still far from a true Bridges world. Civic space is shrinking in many countries and activists often find themselves under attack by the very nationalist forces ascendant in the Walls trend. If there is hope, it lies in these emergent networks of cities, citizens and civil society

that continue to uphold cooperation and empathy across borders. They may be the scaffolding that prevents the complete collapse of international collaboration, keeping alive the idea – however faint – that a more Bridges-like global community could yet emerge from the current chaos.

Discussion Questions

- **For International Diplomats and UN Officials:** Given the breakdown in great-power cooperation, what creative strategies could multilateral institutions adopt to stay relevant? For example, can the UN and regional organisations form new coalitions (including middle-power states or regional leaders) to address conflicts that the Security Council fails to resolve? How might reforms such as curbing the veto, empowering the UN General Assembly or involving civil society in decision-making help bring multilateralism back from the brink? What immediate steps can UN agencies take to maintain critical services (peacekeeping, refugee aid, climate action, protection of human rights) when key states withdraw support?
- **For Government Policymakers (Mid-Sized and Global South):** In a world where superpowers flout the rules, how can coalitions of small and medium-sized countries uphold international law and norms? Should they band together more tightly – for instance, expanding the influence of groups such as the G77 or regional organisations to press for fairer global rules – or would that further polarise the system? What leverage do developing and non-aligned countries have to demand reforms (such as Security Council reform or new global financial rules) that make the world order more equitable? Conversely, how can they safeguard their own interests if the trend toward a lawless might-makes-right order continues? Is there a risk of being forced to choose sides? How can they resist this to instead maintain a more neutral or even a more peaceful?
- **For Civil Society and Activists:** With traditional diplomacy faltering, how can NGOs, peace activists and citizen networks defend global norms from the bottom up? What are successful examples of cross-border and translocal civil society action mitigating the absence of government leadership? For instance, city coalitions tackling climate change, international human rights campaigns or grassroots peacemaking across conflict lines. How can activists amplify these efforts without state backing? Would it help to create parallel people’s assemblies or civil society summits to hold leaders accountable to global values? Importantly, how can activists also counter the nationalist narrative that international cooperation undermines sovereignty? Are there ways to reframe global solidarity as compatible with, even beneficial to, local and national interests?
- **For Donors and Philanthropists:** As governments pull back from funding global public goods, to what extent can private philanthropies, foundations or even businesses step in? Can we see the rise of a parallel UN funded by billionaire philanthropists or corporate alliances to fight pandemics, support peacebuilding or aid refugees? If so, what are the pros and cons: Can private initiatives be a stopgap for international cooperation, and how would it be possible to ensure that they coordinate with one another and remain accountable to the people they serve? Should international donors prioritise sustaining grassroots movements and institutions (free media, civic education, conflict resolution NGOs) that uphold the ideals of a rules-based order at the community level, so that whenever political winds shift there is a strong foundation upon which to rebuild? What might a Marshall Plan for multilateralism look like, led by those willing to invest in keeping collaboration alive?

- **For Educators, Journalists and the Public:** How can we increase public awareness of what is at stake in the erosion of the rules-based order? Many citizens feel global treaties or UN debates are remote. So what compelling stories or evidence can educators and media use to illustrate the direct impact of those in people's everyday lives? For example, how UN paralysis on conflicts leads to real human suffering or how withdrawing from WHO and other health accords could harm everyone in a pandemic. In an age of misinformation and nationalist rhetoric, what role should independent journalism and academia play in demystifying global governance and championing the idea that cooperation is not a naive ideal but a practical necessity? Can we learn from history – such as the failures of the League of Nations – to engage the public in a dialogue about why imperfect international institutions are still better than none? Ultimately, how can pro-peace and pro-cooperation voices win hearts and minds against rising cynicism, building a constituency that demands leaders work together rather than tear down the fragile systems keeping global peace?

Gaza War and Regional Turmoil in West Asia

April 2025

Summary & Context

The Gaza war (often called a genocide) escalated into a broader regional crisis, sparking a full-scale clash involving Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah. By late 2024, Israel had expanded military operations beyond Gaza to make severe strikes on Hezbollah in Lebanon. This expanded conflict prompted dire warnings based on humanitarian concerns and fears of an Iran–Israel confrontation. At the same time, Syria underwent seismic changes. A lightning rebel offensive led to the fall of the Assad government in December 2024, with President Assad fleeing to Russia for asylum. The collapse of the Assad regime has reshaped alliances as various factions vie for influence in post-Assad Syria.

Amid this turmoil, US policy took an unconventional turn under President Trump. In early 2025, Trump publicly floated a controversial plan to relocate the population of Gaza and rebuild Gaza as a Middle East Riviera. On his social media platform, he suggested moving Gazans to “a good, fresh, beautiful piece of land” elsewhere, eyeing locations such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Puntland and Somaliland as possible destinations. Regional leaders reacted with outrage. Palestinians decried the plan as ethnic cleansing. Key Arab allies such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia unequivocally rejected any forced transfer of Gazans. Trump’s gambit strained the fragile ceasefire in Gaza, and while negotiations are stalled, attacks have resumed in Gaza and Beirut and Israel has issued a new forced displacement

order for residents in several areas in northern Gaza. Though he claims credit for brokering a truce, Trump’s rhetoric has grown belligerent, threatening to resume full force military action. Under Trump, the rhetoric of his government has shifted almost daily, vacillating between pledges to stabilise Gaza and threats to remove all the residents of Gaza.

At the same time, Middle Eastern diplomacy has seen an unprecedented twist. Long-time rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran forged a cautious engagement, moving beyond their China-brokered détente of 2023. In late 2024, Riyadh and Tehran conducted joint naval exercises in the Sea of Oman, with some indications of future drills in the Red Sea. In mid-March 2025, Iran, Russia and China also conducted joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman. The new Saudi–Iranian cooperation, including joint military drills and backchannel talks, signals shifting regional alliances. The two powers exchanged diplomatic visits, hinting at a broader front that could counterbalance US influence. This warming of ties – unimaginable only a few years prior – casts uncertainty on regional alignments. For example, Saudi Arabia put normalisation with Israel on hold, tying it to progress on Palestinian statehood including Gaza, even as it built new bridges with Iran. All these developments underscore a West Asia in flux: regional turmoil driven by war, regime change in Syria, great-power rivalry and the search for alternative frameworks for peace and stability beyond traditional US leadership.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

These developments echo a Walls scenario of heightened militarism and zero-sum nationalism. The expanded Gaza war and Syrian implosion reflect a world where states resort to force and international norms crumble – much as Walls futures in which wars escalate and authoritarian leaders seize opportunities. Trump’s unilateral plan for Gaza also exemplifies Walls dynamics in bypassing multilateral diplomacy in favour of imposed solutions. In contrast, a Maze future prioritises collective peace efforts. Imagine the UN or regional bodies taking charge of the reconstruction of Gaza rather than a great-power ownership scheme. Elements of a Towers scenario – regional blocs stepping up – appear as Middle

Eastern powers assert regional agency. The Saudi–Iran rapprochement shows regional actors crafting their own security arrangements, independent of Western diktats. Civil society voices, a cornerstone of Bridges scenarios, are muted in this turmoil, though not absent. In post-Assad Syria, thousands of women have protested to demand rights from the new rulers, a courageous grassroots push that channels Bridges energy. Overall, however, West Asia is tilting toward a Walls-like state of fragmentation and conflict, with only small glimmers of Towers (regional cooperation) or Bridges (local activism) offering hope against the prevailing chaos.

Discussion Questions

- **For Activists and Civil Society:** With wars and crackdowns sweeping the region, how can peace activists and human rights defenders maintain their work? What strategies can local NGOs or networks use to protect civilians and advocate for ceasefires amid heavy militarisation? For example, secret humanitarian corridors, digital campaigns, diaspora advocacy. How can civic groups in West Asia cooperate across conflict lines (Israeli, Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian activists together) to demand de-escalation and protection of human rights?
- **For Donors and Policymakers:** How should international agencies and donors respond to the humanitarian fallout in Gaza and Syria? Should they prioritise funding local relief and peacebuilding initiatives on the ground, even if governments are hostile? Or should they focus on high-level diplomacy to end the fighting? What policies can regional and global institutions (UN, Arab League, etc.) adopt both to address the refugee crises stemming from Gaza and Syria and to prevent forced population transfers? How can policymakers support the fledgling Saudi–Iran détente to reduce regional tensions rather than letting new proxy conflicts emerge?
- **For the Private Sector:** Given the instability, what role (if any) can businesses play in rebuilding war-torn communities and economies in Gaza or Syria? Can regional investors or companies be incentivised to invest in reconstruction and job creation in a way that promotes peace? For example, supporting joint Israeli-Palestinian industrial zones or rebuilding Syrian infrastructure with conflict-sensitive approaches. Conversely, how should companies manage the ethical risks? For instance, reconstruction contracts in Gaza that might entrench displacement if they proceed under Trump’s plan.
- **For Local Communities:** Facing violence and upheaval, how are local communities coping and organising? In Gaza, Syria and Lebanon, what community-led initiatives could help people survive and stay united (such as local ceasefire committees, makeshift schools or mutual aid for displaced families)? How can communities preserve social cohesion and resist hate narratives when external powers fuel sectarian divides? And how might they engage with new regional realities? For example, could Syrian communities leverage the Saudi–Iran rapprochement to press for peace in their areas?

US–Russia Talks Sideline Ukraine – Transatlantic Tensions

April 2025

Summary & Context

Amidst ongoing war in Ukraine, a dramatic diplomatic shift occurred. In February 2025, Washington and Moscow opened direct peace negotiations – pointedly without Ukraine at the table. A high-level meeting in Riyadh brought US and Russian officials together to discuss ending the conflict, representing a sharp break from the prior US stance of coordinating with allies and insisting on Ukrainian consent. During these talks, Russia hardened its terms, President Trump signalled willingness to make concessions and Pete Hegseth, the US secretary of defence, called it unrealistic for Kyiv to regain all lost territory. After the meeting, Trump expressed confidence a deal was possible, even boasting on his social media platform, ‘I have the power to end this war’, while brushing aside Ukraine exclusion by saying Kyiv ‘should have entered talks much earlier’.

European leaders and Ukraine reacted with alarm. Ukrainian officials vehemently rejected any outcome decided over their heads, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz insisted that there must be no decision without Ukraine in any peace settlement. EU members felt sidelined and betrayed. A transatlantic rift suddenly emerged, as the Trump administration

appeared to prioritise a quick deal with Putin over the wishes of its European partners and Ukraine itself. NATO unity appears somewhat strained by this unilateral US approach and European governments have begun openly discussing how to ensure their security interests are protected. In parallel with these political negotiations, the Trump administration has also shown interest in the substantial mineral resources in Ukraine, revealing an economic dimension to its diplomatic approach. In late February 2025, a contentious White House meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky highlighted US intentions to secure long-term access to critical Ukrainian minerals and hydrocarbons through a proposed reconstruction investment fund. This fund, which would leverage Ukrainian resource revenues to support reconstruction efforts, raises concerns due to its lack of explicit security guarantees or commitments on continued military aid. Zelensky’s hesitation over the terms of the deal and Trump’s transactional approach further strained US–Ukrainian relations, underscoring fears in Kyiv and among its European allies that US economic interests might overshadow Ukrainian and European security needs in upcoming ceasefire talks.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The dynamics of these US –Russia negotiations evoke the Walls scenario in full force. Rather than a cooperative values-based resolution, we see power-based superpower bargaining – exactly what a Walls world entails: states using international forums for zero-sum deals and dividing up their spheres

of influence. Sidelining a smaller sovereign nation (Ukraine) in deciding its fate is a hallmark of power politics that Walls anticipates. It also resonates with a fragmenting world order: the United States and Russia carving up an issue between themselves, while simultaneously undermining the multilateral

system and the trust of long-term allies. The European backlash – insisting on no negotiations without Ukraine – can be read in two ways. On one hand, it is a reassertion of principles more akin to a Maze scenario (which values inclusive rule-based multilateralism). On the other, the European move to stake out its own role could foreshadow a Towers scenario dynamic: Europe seeking greater autonomy in security decisions because the transatlantic alliance is in crisis.

Indeed, many in Europe (politicians and citizens alike) feel compelled to bolster EU defence and

diplomatic capacities given a United States that is both unpredictable and inclined to go its own way. This development contrasts sharply with Bridges scenario ideals, in which civil society and moral pressure shape peace processes. Here, Ukrainian civil society and global public opinion have been largely ignored as deals were floated without them. Instead of bottom-up peace, this is top-down realpolitik. Overall, this event aligns with Walls (great power deal making, unilateralism) and has elements of Towers (regional actors reacting to great-power dominance), while challenging and even actively undermining the cooperative ethos of Maze and Bridges.

Discussion Questions

- **For Ukrainian and European Stakeholders (Activists, Civil Society):** How can Ukrainian civil society and European peace activists ensure that any peace deal truly serves long-term peace and justice for Ukrainians? What avenues do they have to voice concerns on the international stage if the United States and Russia negotiate without Ukraine? For example, lobbying European governments to hold a firm line or using global media to highlight Ukrainian perspectives. More broadly, how can citizens in NATO countries influence their leaders to either support Ukrainian conditions or push for a just peace, depending on their views, in the face of great-power dealings
- **For Western Donors and Policymakers:** If Washington and Moscow move toward a deal, how should European policymakers react? Should they engage in the talks to insert European and Ukrainian conditions (acting as a counter-balance in negotiations)? Or should they focus on strengthening EU security autonomously in case a US–Russia détente undermines NATO unity? For which contingencies should donors plan? For example, scaling up economic aid to Ukraine if the United States reduces support as part of a deal or, conversely, preparing massive reconstruction funds if a peace is reached. And for Ukrainian officials: Is it wiser to reject any talks that exclude them or to quietly prepare a diplomatic strategy to avoid being isolated?
- **For Russian Stakeholders (Government Officials, Business Leaders and Public Opinion Shapers):** How should Russia leverage this direct negotiation with the United States to achieve a settlement that is domestically acceptable, economically beneficial and strategically secure? Given potential domestic pressures – such as public fatigue with economic hardship, demands from influential business leaders for normalised international trade and concern among security elites about NATO expansion – what considerations should shape the Russian negotiating strategy? How can Russian policymakers and opinion leaders communicate the outcome of these negotiations to Russian society in a way that addresses domestic concerns, manages public expectations and maintains internal stability, especially if concessions become necessary?
- **For the Private Sector:** Prolonged conflict versus an imposed peace: How does each possibility impact businesses and investors? If a rapid US–Russia alignment leads to sanctions easing, how might Western companies and financial institutions navigate re-entry into the Russian market amidst European objections? Conversely, if Europe resists a bad deal and the war drags on, what role can the private sector play in sustaining the Ukrainian economy or in enforcing sanctions on Russia? Are there ways businesses could support peace without appearing to chase profit? For instance, funding humanitarian projects or job creation in war-torn Ukrainian regions to stabilise them.

- **For Local Communities in Ukraine and Russia:** How are those most affected – Ukrainian families and communities near the front, as well as ordinary Russians – reacting to the prospect of a negotiated settlement? In Ukraine, do people prefer fighting on for full sovereignty or grudgingly accept a compromise to stop the bloodshed? How can local community needs (security, justice for victims, return of displaced persons) be addressed in any peace process? In Russia, could local discontent (mothers of soldiers, economic hardships) create pressure for peace from below? Would those voices even be heard in an authoritarian system? In essence: How can any high-level peace deal incorporate the voices of those who have endured the war and not simply serve the will of powerful leaders?
- **Beyond Great-Power Deals – New Peace Structures:** The fact that a conflict in Europe is being managed above the heads of the directly affected country and continent raises questions about the adequacy of current international systems. What alternative structures or processes could be imagined to handle such conflicts more inclusively and fairly? For instance, is it possible to envision a revitalised role for the UN or the OSCE, a new pan-European security conference (building on the Helsinki model), or even novel coalitions of middle powers and civil society leading peace initiatives? How could global collaboration for peace be respaced – moving beyond a cold-war style great-power bargain toward more equitable and sustainable arrangements that give all stakeholders a voice, including smaller states and non-state actors.

Nationalism Surges in Europe – EU Self-Reliance Being Tested

April 2025

Summary & Context

Across Europe, nationalist and right-wing populist forces are on the rise, reshaping the political landscape as of early 2025. In a year that saw numerous elections, far-right parties made significant gains. Notably, in the September 2024 general election in Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) – running on anti-immigration, anti-EU messages – won the largest share of votes and tried to position its leader, Herbert Kickl, as the head of government. The political landscape has evolved, however. Despite the initial FPÖ lead, a coalition government was formed in March 2025 by the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the liberal NEOS party, effectively excluding the FPÖ from power. Similarly, the February 2025 federal election in Germany resulted in a significant shift in the political landscape. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) achieved its best-ever result, securing 20.8% and becoming the second-largest party in the German parliament. The conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), led by Friedrich Merz, which also ran on an anti-immigration message, emerged victorious with 28.5% of the vote.

The results of the June 2024 European Parliament elections further underscore these nationalist trends, with significant gains for right-wing populist and EU-sceptic parties. The newly formed nationalist alliance, Patriots for Europe, saw a notable surge, securing an additional 35 seats compared to the previous cycle. Parties such as the National Rally in France and the AfD in Germany solidified their influence, reflecting an electorate increasingly critical of EU centralisation and migration policies. European discourse has shifted: EU countries are adopting tighter migration policies, from fencing

external borders to fast-tracking deportations. There is also growing reluctance in some quarters to extend generosity – even towards fellow Europeans, such as war refugees from Ukraine. Right-wing leaders often question collective EU decisions. For example, they criticise sanctions on Russia and the cost of supporting Ukraine, arguing for a more nation-first approach.

Alongside these political shifts, the EU is striving for more self-reliance in an uncertain world. The impetus for this is twofold: 1) Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain disruptions urged Europe to ensure autonomy in critical sectors (such as medical supplies, semiconductors, energy); and 2) The transatlantic crisis in confidence has Europeans worried that the United States, especially when led by President Donald Trump or a similar future leader, may not reliably defend European interests. Indeed, with Trump's return to the White House in 2025, EU discussions on achieving strategic autonomy have intensified. In March 2025, the EU unveiled plans for a massive €800 billion defence and security investment to strengthen European military capabilities and technological edge. Initiatives such as joint EU defence procurement, developing a European rapid deployment force and reducing dependency on US defence equipment have gained political momentum.

European leaders frame this as taking responsibility for their own security – describing challenges such as the Russian war on Ukraine as an existential challenge requiring Europe to stand on its own feet. This push for unity on external threats is complicated, however, by the internal divisions caused by nationalism.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, for example, frequently vetoes or opts out of EU consensus on issues from Russia to migration. In Italy, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni walks a fine line between her nationalist base and the need to cooperate at EU

level. The big question for Europe is whether it can remain cohesive in the face of these forces. Will the EU strengthen as a regional tower of stability or will its nationalist walls lead to fragmentation?

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The current European trajectory shows a tension between Walls and Towers scenario dynamics. The rise of anti-establishment nationalist parties aligns with the 2024 Walls scenario description: national populism and anti-establishment sentiments are shifting political discussion toward right-wing positions. We see this in how public debates on migration and sovereignty have become more hard line. Such parties also often exhibit democratic backsliding tendencies (for example, undermining judiciary or media independence, as previously seen in Poland or Hungary), which is very Walls – a slide toward authoritarian governance. This inward focus and scepticism of global cooperation (some even advocate leaving the EU or defunding international aid, as seen in campaign rhetoric) could weaken the role of Europe in multilateral peace efforts, a core concern of Walls scenario.

In contrast, EU pursuit of strategic autonomy reflects a key element of the Towers scenario: regional blocs fortifying themselves. In Towers, regions band together to fill the void of waning leadership, in this case US leadership. EU moves to boost defence spending and coordinate more closely can be seen as Europe taking charge of its destiny. This could possibly lead to a stronger EU able to act as a peace and security provider in its own neighbourhood; for instance, more EU-led peace missions or diplomatic initiatives. There is a catch, however. True Towers success requires unity in the bloc but Walls-style nationalism threatens that unity. Thus, it seems as if we have a Towers scenario on the outside and a

Walls scenario on the inside: Europe versus external dependence and Europe versus itself, respectively. The Maze scenario – with emphasis on reformist multilateralism – could partially describe EU efforts to maintain a rules-based order (the EU still champions values such as climate agreements, WTO rules, etc.) but Maze also assumes powerful states supporting multilateralism. If many EU members turn inward or Eurosceptic, EU abilities to be a multilateral leader diminish. For example, the more nationalist European Parliament after 2024 elections may stall EU climate or development policies.

A Bridges angle might note that despite governmental shifts, Europe has a vibrant civil society that often pushes back. In some cases, we see pro-EU citizens rally against far-right narratives such as the large pro-EU demonstrations in Poland in 2023 before the election there. Bridges encourages alliances of civic actors across borders to uphold democratic values. We do see transnational activism in Europe (for LGBTQ+ rights, environmental causes, etc.) trying to counter the far-right trend. Europe is, then, at a crossroads. One path reinforces Walls (fragmentation and nationalist us-first policies), another builds a democratic Tower (a cohesive regional power for good) and a third consolidates a fortress (a Tower uniting in anti-democratic and anti-immigration forces). At present, Europe is experiencing all three scenarios. How it balances these will not only significantly influence internal EU realities but also the prospects for global peace and collaboration.

Discussion Questions

- **For EU Policymakers (Balancing Unity and Nationalism):** How can the EU maintain a united external front while accommodating or countering internal nationalist pressures? For instance, as the EU invests in common defence – an idea that even sceptics such as Orbán cautiously support in principle – how do leaders ensure that countries do not either free ride or veto progress? What institutional safeguards might help strengthen the EU project and protect its values despite nationalist governments undermining them in some member states? For example, qualified majority voting on foreign policy or stricter rule-of-law conditions for EU funds to dissuade democratic backsliding.
- **For European Civil Society and Pro-Democracy Groups:** With xenophobic and ultra-nationalist rhetoric becoming mainstream in some places, what strategies can civil society use to defend core European values of democracy, human rights and inclusion? How can they better address the legitimate grievances that populists exploit (such as rural economic neglect or fears around immigration) without ceding ground to hateful or false narratives? Are there successful examples of community dialogues or public campaigns that have shifted attitudes and could be replicated across borders? Moreover, can civic actors across Europe coordinate to build a firewall to protect democratic norms? For example, jointly supporting independent media under attack or mobilising observers to guard electoral integrity where rule of law is shaky? Such cross-country solidarity (a Bridges trait) may be key in resisting an authoritarian slide in Europe.
- **For the Private Sector and Economy:** European businesses generally prefer stability and common rules (which the EU provides) but they also adapt to nationalist policies (such as local content rules or restrictions on foreign labour). How are industries responding to the rising nationalist climate? If Europe pursues strategic autonomy in tech and defence, that could mean large-scale opportunities for European firms. What role should companies play in this? For example, public-private partnerships to develop European alternatives to US technology. Conversely, if nationalist governments impose protectionist measures that fragment the single market or target some international investments, how will businesses react? Will they lobby harder for EU integration as essential for their profits or take another path? The private sector can also help bridge divides by investing in regions left behind, which are fuelling populism trends. Could corporate investment in poorer EU regions or in integrating migrants into the workforce help undercut nationalist us-them narratives? What are the opportunities and risks of the latter?
- **For Transatlantic Relations:** From a US perspective and NATO context: How can a Europe that is simultaneously more self-sufficient yet more internally divided be effectively handled or navigated? US policymakers might welcome Europe taking on more burden (as some US administrations have urged) but if key European states drift towards pro-Russia, pro-China or illiberal stances, this might complicate transatlantic cooperation. What dialogue or other mechanisms could keep the transatlantic alliance strong even if personalities such as Trump and various EU populists strain it? For example, should NATO evolve to accommodate a more autonomous Europe – maybe an EU pillar in NATO? And how can moderate European leaders work with more nationalist ones? Are there bargaining chips, such as offering those governments concessions on issues they care about, in exchange for closer alignment on big security questions?

- For Global Peace Initiatives:** Europe has historically been a champion of multilateral peace and development efforts. Collectively, the EU is the largest aid donor in the world and has been active in mediating conflicts; for example, in the Balkans and parts of Africa. If Europe turns inward due to nationalist politics or if it is preoccupied with its defence autonomy, what is the impact on global peacebuilding? Should UN agencies and international NGOs be preparing for a scenario in which European funding or engagement wanes? If this does happen, how might they diversify support? Perhaps by courting more engagement from rising powers such as India or regional organisations elsewhere. On the flip side, if Europe succeeds in bolstering itself as a cohesive regional power (Tower), could it take on more peace and security responsibilities? For instance, as a stronger EU role in conflict mediation in its own neighbourhood (Ukraine, Middle East) or in global issues (the climate–security nexus). Stakeholders should discuss whether a more independent Europe will step up as a partner in global governance (Maze/Towers synergy) or step back (Walls). How can that trajectory be positively influenced?
- For Local Communities in Europe:** How do these high-level trends manifest at the local level and what can be done there? For towns in Italy and Greece that have seen large migrant arrivals: How can local officials and civil society manage integration in a way that addresses local resident concerns and treats migrants humanely, defusing tensions that nationalists exploit? For economically left-behind regions (former East Germany, rural France): What community-led development or dialogue processes can help people feel heard and hopeful, so they are less susceptible to far-right radicalisation? In other words, what is the community peacebuilding approach in European societies? Can this consist of building bridges between the sides of the us–them narrative, whether the ‘them’ are immigrants, minorities or just people with opposing political views? The mid-term future of Europe may well be decided not only in parliaments but in town halls and village squares, where winning back trust and fostering a sense of common purpose can inoculate against the politics of fear and division.

Escalating Conflict in DR Congo – Extractivism and Regional Intervention

April 2025

Summary & Context

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is witnessing a dangerous flare up of violence that threatens to spiral into a broader regional war. In the mineral-rich eastern DRC, the rebel group M23 (a Tutsi-led militia) has resumed a major offensive. By early 2025, M23 had seized significant territory in North Kivu, in Goma, the provincial capital, and in Bukavu, the second largest city. There is mounting evidence that Rwanda has been covertly backing the M23 rebellion with troops and weapons. Analysts and UN investigators report that Rwanda sent between 3,000 and 4,000 soldiers into eastern DRC to support M23 operations, despite official denials from Kigali. Uganda is also deeply entangled. Ostensibly, Uganda has forces in DRC to fight other militants but UN experts say Ugandan troops have also aided M23 at times. The Congolese government is struggling to contain the rebellion and enlisted the neighbouring Burundi military, with thousands of Burundian troops crossing into the DRC to help Kinshasa fight M23. This influx of multiple foreign armies evokes the darkest days of the late 1990s African World War that took place on Congolese soil.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The situation in DRC closely mirrors elements of the Walls scenario – a world of intensifying conflicts and predatory power plays. In Walls, resource extraction from resource-rich countries intensifies and powerful states extend their spheres of influence via force. Rwandan interference in DRC, presumably

The humanitarian toll is staggering since the renewed fighting. At least 7,000 people have been killed in DRC (just since January, according to government estimates) and more than 600,000 civilians have been displaced from their homes. Many have fled repeated massacres and atrocities.

The main drivers of conflict are ethnic tensions and competition over the vast mineral wealth in DRC. Eastern Congo has huge reserves of coltan, cobalt, copper, gold and lithium – critical resources for global technology and green energy industries. These high stakes attract meddling by neighbouring states and even global powers (via proxies), all vying for influence over the minerals trade. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are faltering. A decades-old UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) is present but overstretched and under attack by local protests. Diplomatic agreements such as a Nairobi peace roadmap have repeatedly been violated. So far, sanctions and regional summits have not stopped the combat. The DRC conflict is thus at a perilous juncture, with intensified extractivism and regional rivalries pushing it toward a wider war.

for economic and strategic gain (access to minerals, regional dominance), exemplifies this dynamic. We also see the multipolar and fragmented world of Walls: multiple states (Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and DRC itself) engaging in a proxy war, with the international community largely unable to coordinate

a response. The failure of global governance tools – UN peacekeepers and sanctions – to resolve the crisis is also very Walls-like (global institutions are sidelined). Towers scenario themes are present in a twisted form. Towers envisions rising regional blocs and indeed we see regional involvement in DRC. Instead of cooperative problem-solving, however, it is competitive intervention.

The East African Community and African Union have tried to address the DRC conflict but their efforts are undermined by conflicting interests among member states. In a positive Towers interpretation, African-led solutions are to be expected. Instead, there is African-led escalation, which is a deviation. The plight of local communities and the impotence of civil society in this conflict zone underscore how far reality is from a Bridges world. There is little space for grassroots

peace initiatives when villages are being attacked and activists are in danger. In a Bridges scenario, it is possible to imagine that international solidarity movements or local community networks would spotlight suffering in DRC and push for corporate accountability for conflict minerals. In practice, those voices struggle to be heard amidst the chaos. Finally, a Maze contrast: Maze would involve robust UN/AU mediation and perhaps creative governance arrangements for resource sharing – none of which we see succeeding at present. Instead of reforms to manage the resource curse, we see exploitation fuelling war. In sum, the DRC conflict as of 2025 aligns with the worst aspects of Walls (violent competition over resources, regional power meddling) and represents a failure to realise the cooperative visions of Maze, Bridges or even the constructive side of Towers.

Discussion Questions

- **For DRC and Regional Policymakers** What diplomatic or political initiatives could de-escalate the conflict? Can regional organisations such as the African Union or East African Community be more effective peace brokers? For example, through an empowered envoy or peace conference that includes DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and local community representatives. What confidence-building measures (such as jointly monitoring border areas or verifiably withdrawing foreign troops) could be a starting point? Given the trust deficit, is there a role for neutral mediators from outside the region to facilitate a settlement? For example, the UN or other African states with no stake in Congo.
- **For the Private Sector (Tech and Mining Companies):** The minerals driving this conflict end up in smartphones, electric car batteries and other products worldwide. What responsibility do multinational companies have to ensure their sourcing of cobalt, coltan, etc., is not funding conflict? Could they enforce stricter supply chain audits or support initiatives such as certified conflict-free minerals from DRC? Moreover, could companies invest in local development (schools, health, alternative livelihoods) in mining regions to alleviate grievances? If companies simply boycott DRC minerals, that could hurt the livelihoods of local miners. What is the ethical way for businesses to respond in a manner that reduces violence?
- **For Civil Society and Activists:** Despite the dangerous environment, there are Congolese civil society groups and international NGOs working for peace – from church networks to human rights organisations. How can their efforts be bolstered? For example, can regional civil society (in DRC, Rwanda and Uganda) collaborate to demand a ceasefire or dispel the hate narratives that fuel war? Can global activists campaign for DRC similarly to how they've done for other crises? For example, a consumer awareness campaign about blood minerals akin to past blood diamonds campaigns. Also, how can media and activists bring more international attention to what is sometimes called a 'forgotten conflict', so that it becomes politically harder for neighbouring governments to continue a secret war?

- **For Local Communities:** Caught in a geopolitical storm, local communities in eastern Congo have often resorted to their own coping strategies. What role can traditional leaders, women's groups or youth initiatives play in mitigating conflict at the local level? For instance, are there examples of communities negotiating localised truces with armed factions to protect civilians or arranging safe zones? How can we support those grassroots peacebuilders? For example, through community reconciliation programmes, trauma healing or livelihood support that reduces incentives for young people to join armed groups. Importantly, how can local voices (farmers, displaced people, elders) be included in high-level peace talks so that any deal addresses on-the-ground realities and injustices that drive recruitment into militias?
- **For Global Powers (reflection):** Although not overt, global powers such as China, the United States and European states have stakes in the DRC outcome. China has large mining investments. Western countries talk of democracy and human rights, while also investing in the mining sector. What are the long-term implications if this conflict continues or worsens? Could it destabilise the wider Central African region – affect stability in Rwanda or Uganda? Might external powers become more directly involved, as occurred in Cold War-era Congo conflicts? Stakeholders should consider if a hands-off approach now could lead to a larger crisis later. And thus whether proactive diplomatic investment now is in the interest of everyone to prevent another regional war.
- **For All Stakeholders (Towards Alternative Infrastructures for Collaboration):** Given the clear inadequacies of traditional conflict resolution approaches (such as peacekeeping operations, sanctions and diplomatic summits) to sustainably resolve the cyclical violence in DRC, what kind of alternative collaborative spaces or infrastructures could be envisioned to address the deep-rooted drivers of conflict (extractivism, ethnic polarisation, regional competition)? How can diverse actors – including local communities, regional organisations, global civil society and private-sector stakeholders – begin immediately to co-create these alternative platforms or mechanisms? Specifically, starting now, what practical steps can each of these actors take to help move away from reactionary crisis responses and toward sustainable, inclusive and transformative peace infrastructures in the medium and long term?

Sahel Coups and Conflicts – Rift with ECOWAS and the AU

May 2025

Summary & Context

The Sahel region of West Africa has been experiencing a profound upheaval. In the past few years, a series of military coups swept through Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), toppling governments that were struggling against Islamist insurgencies. By late 2024, these three junta-led states had formed a tight alliance with one another, defying diplomatic pressure from their neighbours. Tensions with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) hit a breaking point. On 29 January 2025, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formally announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS, which the regional bloc subsequently recognised. This schism came after ECOWAS had sanctioned these regimes and even threatened military intervention, especially after the Niger coup, to restore constitutional order. The juntas accuse ECOWAS of being a tool of former colonial powers and failing to protect their countries from terrorism.

Many locals in Mali and Burkina have rallied in support of the juntas, viewing them as protectors of sovereignty – evidenced by public demonstrations in those countries cheering the departure of French troops. The three countries have proclaimed what they call a new ‘Alliance of Sahel States’ (also known by its French acronym, AES). This is essentially a

security and mutual defence pact among the coup governments. However, they have proclaimed an interest in economic integration and the creation of a common currency. The Togolese foreign minister recently indicated that there could be a possibility for Togo to join AES, which would provide them with sea access. AES governments have also sought closer relationships with global powers such as Russia, Turkey and Iran for partnerships, looking beyond their traditional French and American allies. The conflicts in these Sahel nations rage on. Militant Islamist groups (most linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS) control large swaths of territory and carry out frequent attacks on soldiers and civilians. The humanitarian emergency is dire. In 2024, roughly 10 million children across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were in extreme need of aid. Violence has displaced hundreds of thousands, disrupted farming and markets, and caused widespread food insecurity. The departure of Western forces (France ended its anti-terror operations and was told to pull troops out of Niger and Mali) and the entrance of mercenaries (such as the Russian Wagner Group in Mali) have reshuffled the security landscape without yet defeating the insurgents. In sum, the Sahel faces intensified internal conflicts and a breakdown of regional diplomatic relations, raising fears of growing instability that could spill into coastal West African states.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

Developments in the Sahel strongly echo the Walls scenario trajectory, especially regarding the fracturing of international cooperation and the rise of authoritarian rule. In a Walls-like fashion, the

post-coup governments are retreating from broader collaboration and rejecting external norms. The scenario text notes polarisation between former colonial powers and post-colonial states. It also

indicates many such states distancing themselves from the global governance architecture on the grounds of persistent disillusion. This is almost exactly what Mali, Burkina and Niger have done by quitting ECOWAS/AU frameworks and denouncing France and the UN. These regimes also prioritise military solutions and sovereignty above human rights or democracy – again matching the authoritarian tilt in the Walls scenario.

The creation of the Sahel alliance can be seen through the Towers lens: a new regional bloc born out of shared identity (Sahelian, anti-colonial) and the quest for self-reliance in security. The Towers scenario envisions stronger (sub)regional groupings stepping up as Western influence wanes. In the ideal Towers scenario, however, those blocs cooperate for stability. Here, the Sahel alliance is confrontational (positioning itself against ECOWAS, the AU and Western actors) and its effectiveness in solving problems is unproven. The situation is antithetical

to Maze. Instead of recommitting to multilateral governance, these states have broken away from it. It is also averse to Bridges. Civic space in these countries is shrinking; for example, the junta in Mali has cracked down on media and NGOs. Bottom-up peace efforts such as community dialogues with jihadists or local ceasefires struggle to gain traction when the governments themselves are pursuing all-out war and facing sanctions. Faint Bridges elements can be found in the pan-African solidarity rhetoric some of these regimes use – they claim to speak for the people’s anti-imperialist sentiments – but these are top-down juntas, not grassroots movements, so it rings somewhat hollow for now. Overall, the Sahel conflicts and ECOWAS rift align with Walls (authoritarian regimes, international norms breakdown) and partially Towers (new regionalism driven by anti-West sentiment), while representing a failure of the cooperative conflict resolution that Maze or Bridges would pursue.

Discussion Questions

- **For ECOWAS and the AU:** How should regional institutions deal with member states that not only undergo coups but then reject the institution itself? Is there a way to reopen dialogue with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to avoid a permanent rupture? For instance, can ECOWAS offer a pathway back (perhaps revised timelines for transitions to civilian rule or security assistance against terrorism that does not infringe sovereignty) that addresses the grievances voiced by the juntas? More broadly, do these events indicate a need for reform in ECOWAS and the AU? For example, to make them more responsive to the security concerns of Sahelian states or the perceptions of neo-colonial bias. Or should ECOWAS hold firm on principles even if it means a split, to deter future coups elsewhere?
- **For the Alliance of Sahel States Governments:** What is the long-term plan of Mali, Burkina and Niger under military rule? They face the same or worse security and development problems as before. Can their new partnerships with Russia and others truly substitute for cooperation with neighbours and Western donors? For example, if Wagner mercenaries help in the short term but commit abuses, does it actually weaken extremist recruitment or strengthen it? These leaders claim to be championing sovereignty but how will they deliver tangible improvements (peace, jobs, services) to their populations? What benchmarks should they set to judge if this new approach is working? For example, reduced violence in one to two years or successful offensives against insurgents, etc. Or is a rethink needed?
- **For International Partners and Donors:** Many traditional donors (in Europe and the United States) have cut off development aid and military training to these junta-led states, while humanitarians warn that civilians are suffering. How can the world balance not abandoning vulnerable populations with not legitimising coups? Is it feasible to route aid through local NGOs or the UN to bypass coup governments? Do these approaches ultimately get blocked by those governments? Also, what are the implications of these states teaming up with US rivals? Should Western countries engage more diplomatically to avoid ceding all influence? Could quiet diplomacy with the juntas prevent atrocities or at least keep some humanitarian corridors open?

- **For Peace and Security Actors:** With insurgencies still rampant, what innovative approaches might bring peace to the Sahel? The current trajectory is heavy militarization but past years show that a purely military approach has not defeated jihadists, who often embed in local conflicts and grievances. Could there be a role for dialogue with some extremist factions or community-level pacts that the new regimes might consider (even if quietly)? What about the role of regional powers such as Algeria or Chad: Can they act as intermediaries or contribute troops to an African-led peace enforcement mission that the Sahel governments would accept? In essence, what conflict resolution measures short of full counter-insurgency warfare might reduce violence? Can the new alliance leverage any of them?
- **For Civil Society and Local Communities:** In these Sahel countries, civic actors (human rights groups, journalists, village councils, women's associations) face a two-fold threat: jihadist violence and tighter restrictions from the military regimes. How can they navigate this space to help their communities? Are there examples of local negotiation with militants to spare villages or examples of civic leaders dissuading youth from joining extremist groups that could be built upon? What support do they need – perhaps legal protection, psychosocial support or discreet funding – from the international community to continue their work? Also, as these countries isolate from ECOWAS, civil society networks across borders (for example, West African scholars, NGOs spanning Ghana, Senegal, etc., and the Sahel) might become more important for sharing information and solidarity. How can those ties be maintained when official ties are cut?
- **For Activists and Pan-African Movements:** The narrative of resistance against imperialism that the Sahel juntas use does resonate with some publics in Africa, who are frustrated with how little progress (if any) years of Western security involvement has brought. Activists elsewhere (such as in Francophone Africa) have held rallies supporting the coups, seeing them as a reclaiming of sovereignty. Moving forward, how can activists channel this anti-colonial sentiment into something that directly benefits people's lives? Is there an opportunity for a third-way people's movement that is neither beholden to foreign powers nor to military authoritarians? For example, pushing for genuine self-determination through democratic means and local development. In the longer term, what will it take to address the root issues that gave rise to both jihadism and coups – such as extreme poverty, climate change impacts on farmers, ethnic marginalisation, corruption of prior regimes – so that the Sahel can move towards stability?

Greenland, Denmark & the United States: Sovereignty Showdown in the Arctic

May 2025

Summary & Context

In late 2024, as he geared up for the US presidential election, Donald Trump revived the old idea that the United States should own Greenland. A defence agreement between Denmark and the United States from 1941 had for decades secured a US military presence in Greenland. It even provided the United States with minerals necessary for constructing war planes during WWII.

After winning in November, Trump wasted no time. By January 2025, he declared Greenland a must-have for US security and vowed he would get it one way or another, even hinting at military or economic coercion. This shocking stance jolted Greenland and Denmark as two parts of the Danish commonwealth and alarmed European allies. The United States immediately began overtures. President-elect Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr, made a publicised private visit to Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, trying to charm locals with MAGA hats and promises – a move widely seen as meddling. Prime Minister Múte B Egede of Greenland quickly reassured citizens that the country is not for sale and their future is up to them, framing Trump's push as an assault on the self-determination of Greenland.

Trump doubled down in March, using his first address to Congress to invite all 57,000 Greenlanders to join the United States, with promises of safety and wealth. The overture fell flat. A January poll already showed that roughly 85% of the people in Greenland oppose becoming part of the United States. The Danish government, led by Prime Minister Mette

Frederiksen, has stressed that only Greenlanders can decide their own future. European leaders are similarly dismayed by Trump's aggressive tone, seeing it as a test of both Western unity and the sanctity of sovereignty. Would the most powerful NATO member really undermine the territorial integrity of a smaller ally? That once-unthinkable question is now being asked in Copenhagen and Brussels.

Facing this pressure, the leaders of Greenland moved to assert their voice. Egede called for elections according to schedule, with the 11 March 2025 vote becoming a de facto referendum on how to respond to Trump. Voters delivered a surprise outcome. The centre-right Demokraatit party, led by Jens-Frederik Nielsen, surged to first place (with around 30% of votes) on a platform of strengthening the Greenlandic economy and firmly rejecting US annexation. Close behind was the pro-quick-independence Naleraq party (with around 25% of votes), which welcomed US interest as leverage for more autonomy from Denmark, although even they opposed outright control by the United States. Crucially, no party campaigned to join the United States, while all foresaw the future of Greenland as an independent country. The message to Washington is clear: Greenlanders across the political spectrum reject any US takeover and insist on determining their future on their own terms.

During all this, the strategic attraction of Greenland has only been growing. Climate change is opening Arctic sea routes and exposing valuable resources

under Greenlandic ice – oil, gas and critical minerals such as rare earth elements. The location of the country is equally pivotal: it hosts a US military base at Thule (Pituffik), just 950 miles from the North Pole, a linchpin for missile defence and space surveillance. Washington argues it cannot lose Greenland, pointing to Chinese interest in Arctic ports and minerals. Indeed, Russia and China have been expanding their Arctic presence, heightening US urgency. Caught in this great-power scrum, the government of Greenland is walking a tightrope. Welcoming investment and cooperation but insisting on respect for its autonomy and environment. Egede even hinted that if the United States pushes too hard, Greenland might seek other partners as counterweights.

By late March 2025, tensions reached a boiling point. The White House announced a high-profile delegation visit to Greenland – with US Vice President JD Vance’s wife, Usha Vance, alongside top national security and energy officials – ostensibly to build partnerships and celebrate Greenlandic culture. The timing was poor and no invitation had been

extended by either Greenland or Denmark. In fact, both the outgoing and incoming Greenlandic leaders blasted the visit as a provocation during a sensitive government transition. Caretaker Egede refused to meet the Americans, calling the trip highly aggressive and saying he could no longer trust the United States after Trump’s annexation threats. Jens-Frederik Nielsen, then the likely next PM, likewise warned that Greenland must not be forced into a power game that they themselves did not chose.

Caught off-guard by the backlash, the US delegation insisted they were only there to learn and show respect. But the damage was done. Trust between Greenland and the US government was badly fraying. What began as an offhand remark to buy Greenland had escalated into a serious diplomatic showdown. It raised stark questions about the future. Could NATO survive one member effectively threatening the territory of another? How will Denmark, the EU and others uphold the principle of self-determination in this new era of power politics? And above all, what future do the people of Greenland see for themselves amid this tug-of-war?

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

Trump’s gambit in Greenland exemplifies a Walls scenario mindset: a powerful nation acting unilaterally to claim territory and security advantages with little regard for either the sovereignty of a much smaller population or international norms. His brazen insistence that ‘Greenland is ours’ echoes a might-makes-right ethos, drawing comparisons to Putin-style land grabs. This event also reveals the limits of such Walls thinking. Push back from Greenlanders displays Bridges dynamics of grassroots empowerment and solidarity. Instead of bowing to great-power pressure, Greenlanders across the political spectrum have united to defend their right to self-determination; notably, through a high-turnout democratic election the results of which firmly reject Trump’s offer. Civil society and indigenous leaders are amplifying their cause on the global level, framing the plight of Greenland as a fight against neo-colonialism. This surge of local agency and transnational support – classic Bridges traits – slows the momentum of Trump’s Walls approach.

The world response shows some Maze characteristics, along with limitations. Denmark and other allies are invoking the principle of self-determination (Denmark even appealed to the UN decolonisation committee).

Importantly, no country openly backs the US bid, indicating that global norms still hold sway. Formal multilateral action remains muted, however. Key actors such as the UN or the Arctic Council offer little beyond statements, illustrating how a determined superpower can sideline collective rules in a Walls-driven moment. Instead, the crisis shifts to the regional arena, reflecting Towers dynamics of bloc politics and realignment. Denmark is rallying support from the EU and NATO, while Washington frames its moves as vital security measures to counter the threats posed by China and Russia in the Arctic. NATO is also put in an awkward position: the most powerful member of the alliance is effectively threatening the sovereignty of territory under the protection of another member. Some Danish and European strategists consider the possibilities of courting other partners – for instance, boosting EU investments in Greenland or tacitly cooperating with China – if US pressure goes too far. This essentially means playing one big power off against another, which is a strategy fraught with danger. Caught in the crossfire, Greenland gains bargaining leverage by being so highly coveted but also risks becoming a pawn on a global chessboard.

The Greenland showdown is a vivid intersection of all four RESPACE scenarios. Trump's confrontational zero-sum instincts (Walls) have collided with firm local resistance and global censure, opening space for community empowerment (Bridges) and invocations of international norms (Maze), even as regional power plays intensify (Towers). The outcome remains uncertain. Will negotiation and respect prevail, leading to a cooperative solution (as a Bridges or Maze future envisions)? Or will great-power rivalry

harden, forcing Greenland to choose sides or risk its autonomy (a slide toward Walls or a harsh Towers split)? The choices made now by Greenlandic, Danish and US actors, along with other stakeholders, will set a precedent for how such disputes are handled in an era of renewed geopolitical competition. It is a test of core values in the 2020s – imperial ambition and security obsessions versus democracy, community agency and rule of law.

Discussion Questions

- **For Local Communities and Indigenous Leaders in Greenland:** How can everyday Greenlanders safeguard their rights, their land and their political priorities amidst a great-power tug-of-war over their land? What strategies will strengthen local resilience (economic, cultural, political) against outside pressure, while ensuring that any future agreements or developments truly benefit both the people and environment of Greenland?
- **For Danish and European Policymakers:** What approach should Denmark and the EU take to support Greenland self-determination without inflaming tensions – loudly internationalise the issue (for example, at the UN or the Arctic Council) or engage in quiet diplomacy with Washington? How can Europe stand firm against any attempt to coerce or purchase Greenland (perhaps via joint Arctic investments or security assurances), while preserving unity in the transatlantic alliance?
- **For International Peacebuilders and Multilateral Institutions:** How can international institutions (from the UN to NATO) step up to deter or mediate unilateral territorial ambitions by major powers? Do we need new global rules or agreements to address scenarios such as this? For example, clearer norms on buying/selling sovereign territory or protections for autonomous regions? What lessons does the Greenland standoff offer for preventing similar great-power disputes over vulnerable territories in the future?
- **For the Private Sector and Arctic Investors:** How can businesses with interests in Greenland responsibly navigate this volatile situation, so that investment supports local well-being and does not simply become a tool of geopolitical agendas? What risks do companies face if they get entangled in the United States–Greenland–Denmark clash? For instance, sanctions or reputational backlash. How could a more transparent community-focused approach to investment help mitigate those risks?
- **For Activists and Advocates (Indigenous, Human Rights, Climate and Peace):** How can activists galvanise public opinion and political pressure to affirm that Greenland is not merely a commodity to be traded by powerful states? How can this crisis be reframed as an opportunity to advance broader goals – from strengthening Indigenous sovereignty to protecting the Arctic environment? For example, pushing for an Arctic peace zone. What can civil society – in Greenland, Denmark, the United States and across the globe – do to challenge coercive tactics and turn the plight of Greenland into an inspirational moment that reinforces respect for self-determination over might-makes-right?

Balkans in Flux – Serbia and Regional Civic Unrest

May 2025

Summary & Context

In late 2024, an unexpected spark ignited the largest mass protest movement in Serbian history. On 1 November 2024, the roof of a newly renovated train station in Novi Sad catastrophically collapsed, killing 15 people and injuring others. Public outrage at this tragedy – seen as a symptom of deep corruption and cronyism – quickly spread. By early 2025, Serbia had been gripped by student-led protests for four months, starting with university blockades and silent candlelight vigils but growing into nationwide demonstrations. Tens of thousands of citizens, from students and professors to farmers and bikers, poured into the streets of Belgrade and other cities each week – at least 1,697 protests happened in March alone. They demanded accountability for the disaster and denounced President Aleksandar Vučić's increasingly authoritarian rule. The rallies in mid-March 2025 swelled to an unprecedented size: More than 100,000 people flooded central Belgrade in one gathering, the largest anti-government protest in modern Serbian history. Protesters waved Serbian flags and chanted slogans such as 'He's finished!' in a carnival-like display of unity, anger and hope. After 12 years in power, Vučić faced his greatest challenge yet from a populace fed up with corruption, media censorship and abuse of power.

The government response combined concession and intimidation. Under pressure, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević, nominally the president of Vučić's party, the SNS (Srpska napredna stranka; Serbian Progressive Party), resigned in January 2025. The Serbian parliament accepted his resignation in March, triggering a constitutional 30-day deadline to form a new government or call snap elections. This was a tactical move by Vučić to buy time and perhaps reset the political deck. Simultaneously, however,

authorities have tried to paint the protests as a foreign-backed plot. Vučić publicly labelled the efforts of the demonstrators as an imported revolution, insinuating without evidence that Western intelligence was behind the unrest. In the lead-up to the big rally in March, he warned of possible violence and had riot police and groups of black-clad government supporters (including notorious football hooligans) positioned in the capital. Minor scuffles occurred. At one point, protesters skirmished with riot police, throwing bottles and fireworks. In response, students immediately stopped the protest and asked people to leave so that the protests and the broader movement remained overwhelmingly peaceful and disciplined, avoiding the trap of provocation. The potential deployment and use of sound cannons against the protesters by the government led to international attention and many calls for a proper investigation into the incident.

Student organisers have stressed nonviolence and creative protest methods such as 15-minute silent blockades (symbolically honouring the 15 victims) in communities nationwide. The decentralised and grassroots character of the protests has made them hard to suppress. Universities have been occupied, local vigils have multiplied and social media has helped citizens coordinate despite a near-monopoly of pro-government media on the airwaves. As of 24 March 2025, Serbia stands at a crossroads. Either the regime yields to some reforms and holds elections under public pressure, or a crackdown and backlash may ensue. For their part, the protesters are determined that this is about more than one collapsed roof. It is about reclaiming democracy in a country sliding into autocracy.

These upheavals in Serbia are unfolding against a wider Balkan backdrop of political flux and frustration. Democratic backsliding and autocratic politics have been on the rise across the region in recent years. In Serbia, after being the minister of information under Milosevic regime (1998–2000), Vučić's rule since 2012 (first as deputy prime minister and minister of defence, then prime minister and now president) has steadily eroded checks and balances. Media freedom has declined, independent institutions have been packed with loyalists and opposition parties struggle under unfair conditions. Neighbours face similar issues. Bosnia and Herzegovina is paralysed by ethnic division. The hard-line leader of Republika Srpska is openly defying state authority and Western peace overseers. After a brief government turnover, in late 2023 Montenegro saw a coalition of pro-Serbian, pro-Russian parties take power, raising concerns about the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of the country. While more aligned with EU norms, North Macedonia and Albania battle their own corruption and reform fatigue. Throughout the Balkans, faith in liberal democracy has been shaken, a trend that is reflected in the streets of Belgrade, as well as in Skopje in response to a deadly night club fire.

A major sore point is the stalled EU accession process. Once seen as the anchor that would lock in democratic reforms and regional reconciliation across the region, EU membership for Western Balkans countries continues to recede over the horizon. Serbia has been an official EU candidate for more than a decade but talks have stagnated amidst mutual frustration. Brussels has criticized Serbian rule-of-law failures and its refusal to join sanctions on Russia, while Belgrade bristles at EU pressure and the slow pace of rewards. Other countries such as North Macedonia, which even changed its name to satisfy a Greek objection, feel betrayed by endless delays. This has bred public disillusionment. Polls show support for EU membership has decreased in Serbia, dipping near 35% in 2022 and 40% in 2024 compared to 76% in 2009. Many Serbian protesters pointedly do not wave EU flags, seeing Brussels as complicit in propping up Vučić for the sake of stability. This is a stark contrast to pro-EU protests in places such as Georgia and Ukraine.

Indeed, the international reaction to Serbian unrest has been muted. The United States and the EU, typically vocal in supporting pro-democracy movements, have offered almost no public support to Serbian protesters, prioritising ongoing negotiations

between Belgrade and Kosovo, access to lithium in Serbia and regional stability over principled stands. In contrast, Russia and China have openly backed Vučić, politically and through state media narratives, framing the protests as illegitimate or chaotic. Building on its historic role in the Non-Aligned Movement, Belgrade has long played a delicate balancing act between the East and the West. It seeks EU investment but maintains close ties with Moscow and Beijing (from purchasing weapons to joint infrastructure projects). This balancing act is now under strain. External powers are effectively tugging at Serbia, with Moscow cheering Vučić's hard-line stance, while Western actors quietly urge calm and dialogue but stop short of endorsing regime change or mass mobilisation.

At the same time, regional tensions simmer, threatening to intertwine with the domestic crisis in Serbia. The most acute is the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Talks mediated by the EU (the Brussels Dialogue) have hit one impasse after another and the situation in northern Kosovo remains volatile. In late 2023, a deadly incident in north Kosovo – an armed attack by Serbian paramilitaries on Kosovo police in the village of Banjska – underscored the risk of conflict. Kosovo indicted dozens of Serb participants, including a politically connected figure but Serbia refused to hand suspects over. That episode exacerbated mistrust: Pristina suspects a Belgrade hand in stirring unrest, while Belgrade accuses Pristina of oppressing Kosovo Serbs. As Vučić faces pressure at home, there are fears he might inflame either nationalism or the Kosovo issue to rally support, a time-worn tactic in the Balkans. Thus far, he has made only veiled references. Any flare-up between Serbia and Kosovo could not only derail the protest movement but also plunge the region into crisis.

Elsewhere, old wounds and new political shifts keep the Balkans in flux. In Bosnia, secessionist rhetoric from Serb leaders and calls for Croatian autonomy test the 1995 Dayton Peace framework. In Montenegro, debates over identity and church influence cause turbulence. Even where there is relative calm, young people across the region share common grievances: unemployment, corruption, emigration and a sense that an entrenched political elite (often war-era figures) is failing their future. This has led to grassroots mobilisations beyond Serbia – from environmental protests in Bosnia and Montenegro against destructive hydropower projects, to youth initiatives in Albania fighting corruption. Serbian

diaspora across the globe has also come together in solidarity with students, organising support protests, collecting and channelling donations to students, and mediating conversations across divides. All this, accompanied with the fact Western media has been hesitant to report on the protests, suggests that the student movement in Serbia is not just about local corruption but is pointing to the need

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The upheaval in Serbia and the wider Balkans reveals a tug-of-war between futures envisioned in the RESPACE scenarios. On one side, elements of a Walls world are clearly visible: President Aleksandar Vučić's government has centralised power, vilified protesters as foreign backed and shown a willingness to use intimidation in the name of stability. This hardened nationalist stance, even hinting at a crackdown or stirring tensions with Kosovo, is straight out of the Walls playbook, in which authoritarian regimes double down on repression and rally people around old ethnic divisions. Indeed, leaders such as Vučić and his allies in Republika Srpska or the pro-Russia camp in Montenegro form a kind of illiberal bloc propping up one another, mirroring how Walls scenarios see authoritarian rulers reinforcing one another. Great-power meddling amplifies this effect. Russia (and to a degree China) openly backs Vučić's defiance, while Western governments tread carefully, resulting in a fractured international response that echoes the fragmented world of competing influence in the Walls scenario.

Against this backdrop, the massive Serbian protest movement embodies the opposite impulse, offering a glimpse of a Bridges scenario. Tens of thousands of citizens across social, generational and even ethnic lines have united in a bottom-up push for accountability and democratic change. Moreover, students are making all decisions through plenums, which are direct democracy assemblies. This grassroots energy – students, farmers, professionals, diaspora and even some government officials quietly joining in spirit, along with the way decisions are made – reflects Bridges dynamics of empowered civil society linking people with strong agency across traditional divides. Their disciplined nonviolence and creativity (such as silent vigils in towns nationwide) show the power of civic networks to challenge an authoritarian status quo.

Importantly, this spirit is also starting to transcend borders. Activists and independent journalists across

for a more fundamental system change. Hence, the Serbian uprising is both a product of this regional malaise and a potential catalyst. If the protests succeed in bringing change, this could inspire similar movements in neighbouring societies. If the protests are crushed, this may discourage dissent elsewhere. may discourage dissent elsewhere.

the Balkans are sharing support and information, hinting at a regional solidarity that Bridges fosters. Beyond the region, students are now cycling to Strasbourg to submit letters to the EU parliament and European Court for Human Rights. Along the way, they are calling on people to stand united for the shared cause of transparency and accountability. If this civic awakening can bring tangible reforms in Serbia, it might spark a broader demo effect, inspiring citizens in neighbouring countries and planting seeds for a more connected and just future.

The Serbian crisis also highlights the absence of the robust institutional support expected in a Maze scenario. Maze envisions international actors actively stepping in to uphold democracy and mediate conflicts. In reality, however, the EU and other global institutions have been largely passive. European leaders issue cautious statements and prioritise keeping the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue and lithium negotiations on track over openly backing protester demands. In a true Maze world, the EU might seize this moment to push through a peace deal between Belgrade and Pristina, or deploy election monitors and fast-track integration incentives to encourage reforms. Instead, Serbian EU accession progress remains stalled and there is no high-profile envoy shuttling in to resolve the standoff. This gap between Maze ideals and the on-the-ground response has left the protesters essentially on their own in terms of an international response.

This void is partially filled by competing power dynamics more akin to a Towers scenario. With EU influence divided and hesitant, other towers are pulling Serbia in different directions. Russia and China provide political cover and economic deals to Belgrade, reinforcing a counterweight to EU pressure. Yet again turning Serbia into a geopolitical battlefield, Trump family members have also recently met with Vučić to negotiate investments. At the EU, there is an internal split. Some members such as Hungary champion Vučić, while others push back. This means

Europe acts less like a single supportive tower and more like a set of fragmented ones. Regionally, initiatives such as the Open Balkan project suggest that Balkan states could cooperate as their own mini-tower for mutual stability. So far, however, these forums have not been leveraged to address the democratic crisis. The net effect is a multi-player chessboard reminiscent of Towers: no unified front, just a contest of influences shaping Serbian choices.

Serbian turmoil sits at a crossroads of these scenarios. The dark gravity of Walls – authoritarianism, nationalism and old rivalries – is pulling one way,

while the hopeful momentum of Bridges – grassroots unity and cross-border civic action – pulls another. Maze-like international engagement is either missing or driven by self-interest. As a result, a disjointed Towers-style struggle for influence has filled that space. The coming months will determine which trajectory prevails. On the one hand, the Balkans may remain locked behind walls of division. On the other, its people may build lasting bridges toward a more collaborative democratic future. The outcome will not only decide the fate of Serbia but will also shape the regional trajectory and test the support of the international community for peaceful change.

Discussion Questions

- **For Serbian Civic Activists and Youth:** How can activists sustain momentum under pressure and broaden their support so the movement stays unified and truly (inter)national? What strategies will translate the street protests into lasting change? For example, should they form a civic platform or prepare to monitor snap elections to ensure a fair outcome?
- **For Serbian Opposition Parties and Institutions:** How can opposition politicians constructively support the goals of this non-partisan protest movement without co-opting its agenda? If a transition or unity government becomes possible, what steps would ensure it addresses protester demands and upholds institutional integrity? For example, involving respected non-partisan figures or safeguarding key bodies such as the electoral commission and courts. How can political decisions include voices from student plenums even if students are not willing to take part in politics?
- **For EU and Western Policymakers:** Why is the coverage of and support for protests in Serbia, Turkey and Georgia so strikingly different? Should the EU take a stronger stand in support of the pro-democracy movement in Serbia? What forms of engagement (public diplomacy, incentives or sanctions) could help without destabilising the situation? How can they balance immediate priorities such as the Kosovo dialogue with the longer-term goal of a democratic Balkan region? How is Serbian autonomy perceived in relation to the global fight for critical resources? Could offering Serbia clearer EU membership incentives or conditioning aid on reforms encourage positive change, or would this risk driving Belgrade closer to rival powers?
- **For Regional Neighbours and Civil Society:** Could a breakthrough in Serbia spark a demo effect in other countries? How might activists and civil society across the Balkans coordinate their efforts – through shared tactics, secure communication or joint campaigns – to push for region-wide democratic reforms? How should neighbouring governments react – by quietly offering mediation or by speaking out against any repression? Could regional initiatives such as the Open Balkan project or the Berlin Process be leveraged to collectively promote good governance as a foundation for stability?
- **For International Donors, Media and Watchdogs:** How can external supporters of democracy bolster civic space in Serbia without validating government claims of foreign interference? For example, by safely funding independent media, providing legal aid to activists or deploying election monitors to deter fraud and violence. What longer-term investments would help the Western Balkans build a Bridges future?

Geopolitical Dynamics in Asia: South & East China Seas, Taiwan & Regional Tensions

May 2025

Summary & Context

Over the past year, the geopolitical landscape in Asia has been marked by heightened territorial tensions and military posturing. In the South China Sea, Chinese assertiveness reached new levels. Beijing expanded artificial islands and militarised outposts (now 20 in the Paracels and 7 in the Spratlys) with ports, airstrips and missile systems. Confrontations surged: Chinese coast guard and maritime militia vessels routinely harassed Philippine resupply missions to disputed shoals, even using water cannons and lasers. In 2024, there were near collisions as the Philippines defied Chinese blockades to reach its troops at Second Thomas Shoal. Each flare-up tested a fragile unofficial truce. While a temporary arrangement was discussed to avoid clashes, distrust runs deep.

In the East China Sea, Japan and China tangled over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The Japanese military budget has risen consistently in recent years, deploying missiles and radar in south-western islands as Chinese jets probe its airspace. Taiwan remains the flashpoint. Post-election fury was on display in Beijing just days after the Taiwanese pro-independence-leaning candidate won the presidency. The Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted large-scale air and naval exercises. China also stepped up grey zone pressure: almost daily PLA aircraft incursions into the Taiwan Air Defense Identification Zone and live-fire drills in the Taiwan Strait following any pro-Taiwan statements by the United States or its allies.

Despite continued tensions, a diplomatic opening recently emerged: On 22 March 2025, the foreign ministers of China, Japan and South Korea held a rare trilateral meeting in Seoul, pledging mutual understanding and cooperation. They agreed to revive annual trilateral summits and restart dialogues on historical grievances, trade and regional security concerns. This move represents a significant diplomatic thaw after years of strained relations. In particular, it reflects shared regional interests in stability and economic cooperation amidst global uncertainty and a trade war with the United States.

While tensions persist in India–China relations over their disputed Himalayan border, there are recent signs of improvement. In late 2024 and early 2025, both countries agreed on a partial disengagement deal, allowing phased withdrawals and resumption of patrolling in some border sectors. Despite these positive steps, however, a comprehensive resolution of the long-standing border dispute remains distant. Thousands of troops also remain forward deployed in Ladakh and Tibet. At the same time, India has deepened strategic ties with the United States, the Quad partners (Australia, India, Japan and the United States) and even Vietnam (for South China Sea cooperation). North Korea has continued testing missiles, possibly including advanced technology, while United States–South Korea joint military drills have escalated in the region.

Meanwhile, South Asia saw a dangerous flare-up. In April 2025, a militant attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed 26 civilians prompted India to launch cross-border strikes on alleged militant camps in Pakistan. By early May, the nuclear-armed rivals were embroiled in their worst confrontation in decades – heavy shelling and missile attacks across the Line of Control killed an estimated 50 people as both sides traded threats of wider war. U.S. diplomacy helped broker a ceasefire on 10 May, halting the fighting, but the truce remains fragile: each side accused the other of initial violations, and both governments claimed ‘victory’ in the standoff. Islamabad welcomed Washington’s mediation, while New Delhi insisted that Kashmir disputes must be resolved bilaterally, rejecting outside intervention.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The regional trajectory aligns with a Walls scenario of intensified security competition. Nationalist fervour and military build-ups are front and centre – China fortifying islands, Japan rearming, the United States and its allies strengthening alliances. This is reminiscent of Walls futures in which states invest heavily in security and militarisation, and pursue unilateral force. Diplomatic mechanisms (such as ASEAN forums or UN maritime law) are sidelined, contrasting with a Maze scenario in which countries seek conflict resolution through international institutions. There is little sign of a Maze-like cooperative spirit in the South China Sea standoffs. Instead, each claimant doubles down on sovereignty claims. Similarly, the brief but intense India–Pakistan military crisis in May 2025 embodied Walls dynamics: both governments answered violence with force and nationalist rhetoric, leaving scant room for diplomacy. The confrontation was only defused by eleventh-hour external mediation by a major world power – underscoring the absence of Maze-like institutional conflict-resolution tools in South Asia. A Towers dynamic is also visible: Asia Pacific actors are forming tight regional coalitions – for example, the Quad or the AUKUS partnerships – that act somewhat independently of global bodies, resembling the strong regional blocs in the Towers scenario. Notably, China is also trying to build an Asia-centric order via institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and by courting ASEAN. This too reflects

Across Southeast Asia, countries walk a tightrope – boosting defence cooperation with Washington and Tokyo but wary of provoking Beijing. The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) bloc pushed for a binding code of conduct with China on the South China Sea but the continuation of talks seems uncertain at the beginning of 2025. In general, the geopolitical arena in Asia is increasingly a chessboard of power plays: China aggressively pressing its territorial claims, the United States and its allies answering with military presence and partnerships, and regional states seeking new security arrangements. The risk of miscalculation is high but so too are efforts at diplomatic reimagining – for instance, proposals for multilateral maritime patrols or conflict-avoidance hotlines.

a Tower mindset of region-based influence.

The recent trilateral diplomatic initiative between China, Japan and South Korea in March 2025 reinforces this Towers dynamic, as these regional powers show a renewed commitment – based on their immediate interests – to independently address historical grievances, economic cooperation and regional stability. This step toward pragmatic regional collaboration could either solidify regional autonomy (further strengthening the Towers dynamic) or potentially open pathways toward broader institutional cooperation (reminiscent of a Maze scenario). Given persistent geopolitical tensions, however, the exact trajectory remains uncertain.

Bridges elements (bottom–up peace efforts) are the hardest to spot in these interstate disputes. Civil society has limited leverage on issues such as Taiwan or the South China Sea, although there are voices of caution (scholars, activists calling for peace) in all countries. Bridges parallels could be imaginable if scientists or fishing communities from different countries quietly collaborate to manage shared resources despite the tensions. At present, however, such collaboration is rare. Overall, the geopolitical scene in Asia skews heavily toward power politics (Walls), tempered slightly by emerging regional alliances (Towers), with multilateral peacebuilding (Maze) and grassroots peace efforts (Bridges) mostly aspirational right now.

Discussion Questions

- **For Regional Peace Activists and NGOs:** In this climate of military posturing, what role can peace advocates in China, Taiwan, Japan, India or Southeast Asia play? Are there confidence-building measures civil society or Track 2 dialogues could advance? For instance, joint environmental or fisheries projects in disputed waters to keep lines of communication open. How can activists challenge nationalist narratives in their own countries that glorify armed solutions? For example, Japanese and Chinese peace groups campaigning jointly for maritime de-confliction protocols, Indian and Pakistani peace advocates jointly urging restraint and dialogue after the recent Kashmir clashes, or local Indian and Chinese communities advocating for dialogue over border clashes. How can peace-oriented civil society and advocacy groups encourage and support sustained diplomatic initiatives such as the trilateral dialogue between China, Japan and South Korea?
- **For Asian Policymakers and International Diplomats:** How can governments reduce the risk of accidental conflict in Asia? Should they pursue new regional agreements? Perhaps an Asian maritime code of conduct with real teeth. Or should they revive stalled dialogues? Perhaps by re-establishing hotlines and crisis communication between Beijing and Taipei, Delhi and Beijing, and Delhi and Islamabad. What is the responsibility of middle powers (ASEAN states, Australia, South Korea) to mediate between giants? And how might global institutions support regional peace? Is there room for a UN process or even an informal Helsinki-style process for the Indo-Pacific to collectively address security concerns? This would be a very Maze-like solution in a Walls-like context. Given the uncertainty of the trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea, how can regional policymakers proactively shape this initiative to enhance stable regional governance and cooperation without further fragmenting global governance? Could this regional effort become a model for pragmatic regional cooperation (Towers)? Or should there be intentional efforts to link this regional diplomacy to broader global institutional reform and collaboration (Maze)? What steps could help India and Pakistan turn their fragile US-brokered ceasefire into a lasting peace in South Asia? Could confidence-building measures – such as renewed backchannel talks or military hotlines – prevent a relapse into hostilities, or will any third-party mediation remain tenuous given New Delhi's aversion to external involvement?
- **For the Private Sector:** Asian trade and technology sectors are deeply intertwined even as strategic tensions rise. How should businesses navigate this dual reality? For example, can tech companies and trade groups become informal ambassadors for peace by emphasising mutual economic stakes? For example, by highlighting that any war over Taiwan or sea lanes would disrupt global supply chains, hurting all sides. Could the prospect of economic loss galvanise corporate lobbies in China, the United States and across Asia to press their governments for stability? Such as quietly lobbying against escalation during a Taiwan crisis. Conversely, what risks arise if companies simply adapt by securing their own interests (relocating supply chains, etc.) without advocating for conflict prevention?
- **For Local Communities:** How are fisherfolk, farmers and coastal communities experiencing these geopolitical rifts? For instance, Filipino fishing communities at Scarborough Shoal being harassed by the Chinese coast guard or Taiwanese residents regularly hearing air-raid drills, or Kashmiri villagers along the Line of Control taking shelter from cross-border shelling. What coping strategies or local agreements have they developed? Do they avoid particular bodies of water or communicate informally with counterparts across borders? How can their lived experience be incorporated into higher-level negotiations? Empowering local voices – perhaps in establishing a platform for border village representatives from India and China or India and Pakistan to share concerns – might help humanise the territorial disputes. What would it take for policymakers to listen to those living on the frontlines of Asian flashpoints?

Politics, Economy & Civil Society in China, India and the Wider Region

May 2025

Summary & Context

Across major powers and societies in Asia, internal dynamics are evolving in ways that reverberate beyond borders. Since late 2024, the Chinese domestic scene is marked by economic uncertainty and continued authoritarianism. Economic growth has slowed and youth unemployment has hit record highs, challenging government narratives of prosperity. Apparently in response, President Xi Jinping's administration doubled down on nationalist messaging and state control. Crackdowns on dissent remain harsh – from Hong Kong to the mainland – leaving little room for independent civil society. At the same time, subtle forms of pushback persist such as social media sarcasm or local protests over housing and fraud. This suggests undercurrents of dissatisfaction.

After its mid-2024 general election, India remains governed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi but in a somewhat altered landscape. Modi secured a third term amidst strong Hindu nationalist rhetoric but his party had to form a coalition government, indicating a more contested democracy. Nationalism and majoritarian policies continue to rise – from contentious citizenship laws to amplified religious imagery in politics. All this is happening in a context of robust economic growth. Civil society in India is vibrant but under strain. NGOs face restrictive funding laws and activists (from environmental campaigners to journalists) report increasing government pressure.

Japan navigates a different set of internal challenges: a mature democracy grappling with economic adjustments and social change. After decades of deflation, Japan is seeing moderate inflation return,

wages inching up and an openness to reforms such as more women in the workforce and a historic move to recognise same-sex partnerships in some cities. The aging population and low immigration remain key issues, however. There is also a cautious rise in nationalist sentiment tied to security debates.

Elsewhere in Asia, democracy movements and civic activism show mixed fortunes. Southeast Asia presents a patchwork. Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia maintain relatively open politics, with vibrant civil societies and media. In contrast, Myanmar remains under military rule despite a brave grassroots resistance. In 2024, the youth-driven democratic wave in Thailand was stymied by establishment manoeuvres. Following the removal of Bangladesh's long-serving prime minister, the student-led movement responsible for the ouster has established the National Citizen's Party, aiming to reshape the country's political future. Meanwhile, the interim government struggles with entrenched corruption, economic instability, and ensuring fair political competition before the 2025 election.

Across these contexts, one trend stands out. Young people and urban middle classes are increasingly mobilised, whether online or in the streets, for causes ranging from anti-corruption to climate action. They face powerful entrenched interests, however. The role of civil society is also shifting. In some places, it is expanding via digital networks and regional solidarity; for example, pan-Asian advocacy on human rights. In others, civil society is shrinking under state repression. Economically, the Asian engines – China and India – are both actively transforming. China is pivoting to higher-tech and self-reliance, whereas

India is investing in manufacturing and infrastructure. In both countries, these moves could lift millions of people out of poverty but they could also widen inequalities if not managed in inclusive ways. Overall,

the internal landscape of Asia is one of economic change, rising nationalism, contested democracy and resilient civic activism, varying widely by country but collectively impacting the regional trajectory.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

Internally, governance trends in many Asian states reflect a blend of Walls and Towers scenarios. Walls traits are evident where nationalism and authoritarian streaks intensify. For example, suppression of dissent in China and the nationalist shift in India mirror both the democratic backsliding and suspicion of minorities in a Walls world. Shrinking civic space and increased surveillance in several Asian countries also fit the Walls scenario. At the same time, there is a Towers aspect as countries emphasise sovereignty and regional pride. India championing Global South leadership or ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations prioritising non-interference resonate with the focus of Towers on regional identity and reduced Western influence.

In contrast to these trends, elements of the Bridges scenario can be seen in the grassroots domain. Despite crackdowns, Asia hosts dynamic social movements that connect across borders – from the Milk Tea Alliance uniting young activists in Hong Kong, Thailand and Taiwan and quickly spreading further to India, Myanmar, the Philippines, Belarus, and more

countries, to cross-border feminist networks and climate youth strikes. These represent Bridges-like bottom–up solidarity, pushing back against top–down nationalism. A Maze future (global cooperation and reform) finds a limited foothold in current internal trends across Asia. While Asian voices are pushing for reforms in global institutions (such as India advocating UN reform or climate finance reform), on the domestic front many governments are sceptical of external pressure or multilateral norms regarding democracy and human rights.

Arguably, the economic integration of Asia into global markets is a Maze element – requiring rules-based cooperation – but even this is fraught with decoupling risks. Overall, internal evolution in Asia is tilting toward Walls (in governance) and Towers (in regionalism), with vibrant Bridge currents in society trying to broaden civic space and fewer Maze-style systemic fixes in play. How these forces balance out will shape whether Asia leans more toward authoritarianism or inclusive democratic development in coming years.

Discussion Questions

- **For Activists and Civil Society Leaders in Asia:** How can civil society adapt and continue to operate under increasingly nationalistic or authoritarian conditions? For instance, in China where open dissent is dangerous, can activists use indirect methods (cultural activism, business start-ups with social goals, etc.) to advance issues such as environmental protection or labour rights? In India, how can NGOs and social movements build broad alliances that bridge communal divides so that advocacy (on gender equality, minority rights, etc.) is not dismissed as serving only one group? What role can regional solidarity play? Could Asian civil society organisations form coalitions to support one another when governments crack down? For example, establish legal defence funds or develop safe hubs in friendlier countries.
- **For Donors and International Supporters:** What is the best way to support democracy and human rights in Asian contexts that are sensitive to foreign influence? Should donors prioritise quiet capacity building for local civil society, in particular to avoid government accusations of interference? Or should they take a bolder stand by publicly condemning abuses and imposing consequences? For example, sanctions for officials who stifle NGOs. How can international actors empower local voices – such as supporting Asian journalists and fact-checkers to counter disinformation that fuels nationalism – without feeding into the narrative of Western meddling? In more open countries, are there opportunities for joint initiatives that also expand civic space? For example, EU–India funding for grassroots climate adaptation projects.

- **For the Private Sector:** Asian economic transformations offer both challenges and openings for civil society. How might companies operating in Asia contribute to positive social change? For example, could tech companies resist enabling surveillance and instead champion privacy rights for users in authoritarian countries? For example, perhaps through stronger encryption or transparency about data requests. Can domestic businesses in India or China take on more CSR (corporate social responsibility) projects to fill gaps in education, healthcare or environmental protection, effectively supporting civil society aims? On the flip side, if inequality grows – with big winners in tech and industry and many left behind – businesses might face social backlash. What responsibility do they have to ensure inclusive growth (fair wages, community investments) so that economic progress does not come at the cost of social cohesion?
- **For Local Communities:** Amidst national-level shifts, how are everyday communities in Asia responding and innovating? For instance, in villages affected by climate disasters in Bangladesh or Philippines, are local groups taking the lead in building resilience when government support is lacking? In urban neighbourhoods in China or Vietnam, are communities organising (even in apolitical ways) to solve local issues? Could these efforts seed a broader revival of civil society engagement? How can communities hold onto their cultural identities and values in the face of rising nationalist narratives that risk marginalising minorities? For example, preserving indigenous languages and customs in the face of majoritarian policies. In essence, how are local grassroots initiatives forging their own paths to improve lives, and what do they need to flourish in the current context?

New Leaders, Persistent Struggles: Latin America at a Crossroads

May 2025

Summary & Context

Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced significant political and social shifts in recent years, highlighting both transformative change and deep-rooted challenges. Politically, a wave of new leaders has taken the helm in key countries. In Argentina, voters weary of economic crisis turned to outsider Javier Milei, a far-right libertarian, electing him president in October 2023. Milei has promised radical changes – from dollarising the economy to abolishing the central bank – jolting the region with his anti-establishment style. In Central America, Guatemala inaugurated Bernardo Arévalo as president in January 2024 after he won on an anti-corruption platform. This is a rare victory for reformers, although the handover of government was fraught with legal battles by the old guard. Many countries are grappling with instability. Peru continues to face governance turmoil after years of impeachment dramas and protests. In Haiti, the security vacuum has worsened, with gang violence rampant. Several Caribbean nations are navigating political uncertainty. For instance, CARICOM members and neighbouring countries are considering various options for intervention to restore order in Haiti.

On a positive note, there are renewed regional cooperation efforts. Brazilian President Lula is championing Latin American integration – reviving the UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) bloc, hosting an Amazon Summit to unite countries in protecting the rainforest and positioning Latin America as a coherent voice on the global stage. Economic challenges, however, cast a long shadow. Inflation is a top concern. While it eased in some countries in late 2024, others face alarming levels. Although on a slow downward trend, inflation in

Argentina remained in triple digits (117.3%) for 2024, eroding savings and incomes. Debt crises loom as well. Smaller economies such as Suriname and Ecuador have struggled under debt burdens and are seeking to restructure them. Trade patterns are shifting. The role of China as a trade partner and investor in South America grows year by year, as exemplified by Chinese companies investing heavily in Amazon oil and lithium mining. This realignment offers new opportunities (financing infrastructure, commodity exports) but also raises concerns about dependence. Migration trends are another defining issue – millions of people continue to flee the prolonged crisis in Venezuela, straining neighbours Colombia, Brazil and Peru. Many Caribbean people are migrating in search of jobs or fleeing climate impacts. Migration routes north (through Central America and Mexico to the United States) have seen record numbers, putting humanitarian and political pressure on transit countries.

Socially, the region is alive with grassroots movements driving change. Climate activism has reached new heights. Indigenous and youth groups across the Amazon and Andes are protesting oil drilling and deforestation, successfully pushing initiatives such as the referendum in Ecuador to halt oil extraction in Yasuní National Park, a landmark win for indigenous rights and climate protection. Indigenous rights movements are influential from Brazil – where indigenous leaders now have a stronger voice under Lula's government – to Bolivia and Chile, where constitutional debates and land rights protests underscore indigenous demands for respect and autonomy. Citizens have also mobilised for better governance. Corruption scandals in several

countries (Guatemala, Brazil, Honduras) have sparked public outrage and demands for accountability. In places such as Cuba and Nicaragua, courageous if sporadic protests call for greater freedom despite heavy government repression. This mix of economic hardship and activist energy means protests large and small could continue to erupt. Examples include teacher strikes in Puerto Rico (2022), mass

demonstrations in Panama against cost-of-living increases (2023) and recent street pressure in Haiti for security and elections. In essence, the Caribbean and South America are in flux – politically diverse and economically pressured, but with societies increasingly vocal in claiming their rights and shaping their future.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

Regional developments present a vivid blend of all four scenarios. The rise of leaders such as Milei – nationalist, anti-system, willing to break norms – and the turns in countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador to see presidents being emboldened to rule by and increase executive powers reflect Walls scenario tendencies. In Walls futures, popular individual leaders and anti-establishment sentiments gain ground, which is evident in Latin American political swings. Policies favouring security crackdowns (for example, President Nayib Bukele's mass incarceration of gang members in El Salvador) and reduced civic freedoms align with the isolationist hard-line governance in Walls. Conversely, the strong regional cooperation impulses evoke a Towers scenario. Latin American nations banding together, whether to protect the Amazon or to assert diplomatic autonomy (such as CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) presenting a united Latin American front globally), mirrors the Towers theme of powerful regional blocs addressing challenges as a united front. The Amazon Summit and renewed South–South partnerships (even engagement with BRICS, which Argentina was invited to join) show a move away from reliance on Western-led institutions toward regional solutions – classic Towers behaviour.

Grassroots movements in the region are emblematic of the Bridges scenario. From indigenous alliances

spanning countries to feminist movements (the Green Wave for legal abortion swept Argentina, then influenced Chile and Mexico), Latin American civil society often works across borders and issues, forming networks that demand justice and environmental protection. These bottom–up forces correspond to the empowered civic actors and interconnected struggles in the Bridges scenario. In some cases, Bridges and Towers even intersect; for example, regional coalitions of NGOs influencing the agenda of intergovernmental bodies on climate and indigenous rights. Finally, aspects of the Maze scenario are present in Latin American engagement with global systems. Many countries still work within the UN, IMF and other multilateral frameworks to solve problems; for example, seeking support from IMF programmes to stabilise economies or advocating globally for climate finance and drug policy reform. Latin American patience with the global Maze is mixed, however. Frustration with inequitable global rules (trade, finance) is leading some countries to chart their own course (more Towers) or to seek systemic change (somewhat in the spirit of Maze). In summary, Latin America and the Caribbean encapsulate a struggle between Walls-style authoritarian populism and Bridges-style people power, all within a context that is increasingly Towers-oriented in regional unity, while still navigating (and sometimes challenging) the Maze of global institutions.

Discussion Questions

- **For Activists and Community Leaders:** How can social movements in Latin America maintain momentum and protect their wins in the face of political shifts? For example, with a conservative such as Milei in power in Argentina, how will climate activists and women's rights groups strategise to defend policies (such as environmental regulations or reproductive rights) they achieved under previous governments? Conversely, in countries where reformist leaders have won (Arévalo in Guatemala), how can activists transition from protest to constructive partnership to ensure that popular energy translates into lasting institutional changes (such as anti-corruption measures or indigenous autonomy statutes)? Also, as many of the struggles across the region – climate change, indigenous rights, anti-extractivism – transcend borders, how can activists enhance their cross-country networks? Think of Amazonian indigenous communities forming an alliance spanning Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, etc. to present a united front against deforestation.

- **For Donors, International Agencies and Policymakers:** What forms of support are most critical for Latin American countries facing economic and social strain? Should international financial institutions adjust their approach? For instance, offering more flexible debt relief or climate-related funding to countries such as those in the Caribbean hit by hurricanes and debt (aligning with Maze ideals of global cooperation). How can regional bodies such as the OAS (Organisation of American States) or new forums such as the proposed Amazon alliance be bolstered to handle conflicts and democratic crises, in lieu of external (US or European) intervention? How should (or can) migration be collaboratively addressed? What responsibilities do destination countries (United States, Canada, Europe) have to provide development aid or humanitarian visas? How can Latin American states coordinate to protect migrant rights and manage flows humanely?
- **For the Private Sector:** Businesses in Latin America are operating amidst both opportunity and turmoil. What role can domestic and multinational companies play in stabilising economies and supporting social needs? For instance, in hyper-inflationary Argentina, can the private sector be part of the solution (through wage agreements, price stabilisation pacts or investment commitments) to restore confidence and avoid deeper crisis? In the resource-rich countries, how might mining and agribusiness companies respond to the powerful indigenous and environmental movements? Could they proactively adopt stricter environmental safeguards, benefit-sharing with local communities and consultation practices to reduce conflict? There is also an emerging market angle in terms of the Latin American push for green energy and digital expansion. Can private investors seize this in a way that also empowers local entrepreneurs and addresses inequality? For example, investing in community solar projects or tech training programmes.
- **For Local Communities:** Latin American communities often bear the brunt of both economic hardship and political instability. How are they innovating to improve their situation? In places with weak governance, are we seeing local self-governance or mutual aid filling the void? For example, neighbourhood security patrols in areas where police are absent or community kitchens (ollas comunes) in Peru that emerged during pandemic and economic crisis. How can local initiatives such as these be scaled up or supported without co-opting their grassroots nature? Moreover, in indigenous territories and Afro-descendant communities, traditional knowledge and organisation have proven effective in managing land and resolving disputes. What can national societies learn from these local practices of consensus and sustainability? As climate change intensifies (Amazon droughts, Caribbean storms), how are local communities adapting? What do they need – in terms of resources or rights – to lead adaptation efforts on their own terms?